

A GUIDE TO

The House on Mango Street

Sandra Cisneros

... what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house,
the house I belong but do not belong to.

THE BOOK AT A GLANCE

A collection of forty-four vignettes (short literary sketches) written from the point of view of a girl who describes life in a poor Latino neighborhood over the course of a year.

Setting: Mango Street, part of a *barrio*, or Latino neighborhood, in Chicago, in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Protagonist: Esperanza Cordero, a Mexican American girl who has recently moved to Mango Street with her parents. Esperanza, whose name means “hope,” is the narrator of each vignette.

Conflicts: Esperanza’s conflicts are psychological and emotional. They center on her ambivalent feelings about Mango Street, its people, sexism, poverty, and desperation. She wants to leave, but she feels guilty about her desire to escape her background and the people she has grown up with. Many conflicts also arise in the lives of the people around Esperanza, especially other young women.

Resolution: In the final vignette, Esperanza still has not left Mango Street. However, she has resolved to move away some time in the future and now knows she can do so without denying her past and the influence of Mango Street. Esperanza has discovered that she can always return to Mango Street through her imagination and in her writing.

Themes: Culture, personal history, and the physical conditions under which we grow up help make us who we are. Only by accepting our backgrounds can we actually leave a place and still keep its people and memories alive in our hearts. Writing (and hence literature) helps us establish our sense of identity, our sense of what is valuable in life and where we want life to take us.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Cisneros writes in a lyrical and poetic, sometimes ungrammatical, style, that suggests the thoughts of a young person. The significance of each vignette is often

implied rather than stated, and some students may need help to understand it fully. However, once they become accustomed to Cisneros’ style, most readers enjoy the poetry of her writing and remember its emotional impact.

Teachers should be aware that some of the vignettes—which are, after all, pictures of real life—contain violence and sexual situations.

BACKGROUND

Barrios in Chicago. *Barrio* literally means “district.” Many of the barrios in Chicago developed as Latinos migrated north in search of work.

Recent Chicano/Chicana Writing. Since the 1960s, Chicano/Chicana (or Mexican American) literature has achieved a distinct identity that is a blend of Mexican and American cultures. Chicano writers have created an awareness of the experience of Mexican Americans—their arts, history, and culture. The *barrio* became a central feature of Chicano and Chicana writing in the 1970s. More recently, Mexican American writers, especially women such as Sandra Cisneros, have used stories of their personal lives to explore questions of identity, language, and politics.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Esperanza Cordero, a Mexican American girl who feels isolated from the people around her and who dreams of leaving her *barrio*.

Mama, a woman of talent and intelligence, who regrets having dropped out of school.

Papa, who tends gardens for people in the wealthy neighborhoods in the hills.

Nenny (Magdalena), Esperanza’s younger sister, whom Esperanza has to look after and with whom Esperanza spends most of her time.

Cathy, Esperanza’s first friend on Mango Street.

Rachel and Lucy Guerrero, sisters and early friends of Esperanza.

Sally, a friend from school.

SUMMARY

The House on Mango Street . . . The Family of Little Feet. The first eighteen vignettes introduce the **narrator**, Esperanza Cordero, who lives with her mother, father, and siblings: Carlos, Kiki, and Nenny. Through Esperanza's eyes, we see the **setting**—Mango Street and the family home. In the first vignette, “The House on Mango Street,” Esperanza explains that their house is supposed to be the ideal home that her family dreamed of, but it is too small and is run down. Already, Esperanza is dreaming of escape.

In “Boys & Girls” Esperanza explains an important difference between the boys and the girls in her family. Carlos and Kiki, her brothers, are best friends, but she and Nenny are too far apart in age to be best friends, so Esperanza feels alone and unable to share her experiences with anyone. In “My Name” she explains that she was named after her great-grandmother, a strong woman who tried to resist a traditional role.

Through Esperanza's eyes readers get a strong sense of the neighborhood and its inhabitants. Some of the vignettes deal with racism sensed by the inhabitants. In “Those Who Don't” people who go to Mango Street by mistake are scared by the people who live there. In another vignette a neighbor's cousin visits in a Cadillac and takes the children for a drive. The police chase them, and the cousin crashes the car and is arrested.

The neighborhood is dotted with decrepit houses that have black tar roofs and dirt yards. The lives of those who live there are often bleak. An older woman, Rosa Vargas, has many children and cannot care for them, so her children have no respect for others. “Darius & the Clouds,” a brief description of a boy who lives on the street, reveals that the neighborhood is without natural beauty, except for the sky. However, moments of **epiphany** are possible—shining a ray of hope into a sad, gray world. For example, Darius points to a cloud and says it is God, making everybody stop and think, at least for a moment. In “The Family of Little Feet” Esperanza describes a family—three generations living in one apartment—known for their small size and little feet. The mother gives Esperanza and her friends Lucy and Rachel some high-heeled shoes. They walk around the neighborhood, feeling grown-up.

A Rice Sandwich . . . The Earl of Tennessee. In these ten vignettes, Esperanza describes the world beyond Mango Street. In “A Rice Sandwich” she wishes that she could stay at school for lunch, and when she finally persuades her mother to allow it, she sets off with a rice sandwich because there is no lunch meat. Despite disappointments, it is clear that Esperanza enjoys life. She goes to a baptism party and dances with her uncle. Everyone is impressed by her dancing, and her mother is very proud. In “The First Job” Esperanza has to get a job to pay for Catholic school. Her aunt helps her, and she gets a job at a photo lab. Esperanza prospers, but her family experiences a time of sadness. Her grandfather

dies, and her father has to return to Mexico for the funeral. Esperanza comforts her father, imagining what it would be like for her if he died.

In one vignette the girls make a game of imitating people they know, including Aunt Lupe, who is very ill and who actually dies the day they imitate her. Before she dies, Aunt Lupe, who has always listened to her poems and encouraged her writing, tells Esperanza to keep on writing because it will give her freedom. In another vignette that continues the theme of searching for a home, Esperanza goes to a tarot-card reader who tells her that she will find her home in her heart. Other stories describe life outside the family, including one that laments the anonymity and insignificance of the life of a boy named Geraldo, who is injured in a hit-and-run accident and who bleeds to death in a hospital. Another, “Edna's Ruthie,” is about a neighbor who is mentally disabled. Esperanza likes her because she sees and reacts to the world around her in a very original way. “The Earl of Tennessee” is about a man with a Southern accent who repairs jukeboxes and gives records away.

Sire . . . Minerva Writes Poems. Many of the vignettes in this group focus on Esperanza and the people around her. In “Sire” she is starting to notice boys and she exchanges glances with one—called Sire—and then sees him go off with a girl. In “Four Skinny Trees” she associates herself with the four trees that grow among the brick and concrete of Mango Street, because they have the strength to maintain hope and to reach upward. They teach Esperanza that she too must send tenacious roots beneath the ground.

Portraits of other women begin to emerge. “No Speak English” tells of a woman across the street who was brought to the United States from Mexico by her husband and who is still homesick. Spanish reminds her of Mexico, and so she refuses to speak English. Another story describes Rafaela, a young wife locked in her house by her jealous husband. Like Esperanza, she dreams of escaping. “Sally” is about a girl whose comings and goings are carefully monitored by her father. Esperanza imagines a house and a world away from Mango Street where Sally could be free. “Minerva Writes Poems” is about an older friend whose husband physically abuses her. She writes poems on little pieces of paper late at night when her children are asleep.

Bums in the Attic . . . A Smart Cookie. In these three vignettes Esperanza describes her family and her interactions with them. She remembers weekends when they all used to go to the neighborhoods in the hills where her father works as a gardener. She doesn't go with them anymore because she feels ashamed of the family's jealousy of the people who live there. She dreams that she will live in such a place one day, but she is determined not to forget who she is and where she comes from. She will let anyone in and let them stay “in the attic” because she knows what it is like to be without a home. In “Beautiful & Cruel” Esperanza has decided she will

not go the way of many of the young women she knows—that is, simply wait for a man to come and claim her. She has decided her power should be her own. In “A Smart Cookie” Esperanza’s mother talks about her own life—how talented and intelligent she used to be (“A smart cookie,” she remarks ironically). The mother dropped out of school because she was poor and wanted fine clothes, not knowledge. Now she wants a better life. We get the feeling that Esperanza will not repeat her mother’s mistakes.

What Sally Said . . . Linoleum Roses. In these four vignettes Esperanza continues to dream—and to mature. In “What Sally Said” her schoolmate Sally is physically abused by her own father but says he never hits her hard. She comes to stay with Esperanza’s family but eventually returns home to more abuse. In “The Monkey Garden” Esperanza remembers the magical garden where she used to play with her sister and friends. Things change when her friend Sally no longer wants to play in the garden but prefers talking to boys. In “Red Clowns” Esperanza waits near the red clowns at a carnival for her friend Sally who has left with a boy. Eventually Sally gets married and is kept isolated from her friends by her new husband. In “Linoleum Roses” Sally is seen sitting at home alone, looking at the walls and at linoleum roses on the floor.

The Three Sisters . . . Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes. The final four vignettes return to Mango Street and home as the subject of Esperanza’s thoughts. In “The Three Sisters” Esperanza meets three of her neighbor’s aunts. They seem psychic and notice that Esperanza is special—different somehow. They ask her to make a wish, which she does. Then one of them takes Esperanza aside and makes her promise she will return to the neighborhood, to Mango Street. Esperanza is amazed that the woman knows that her wish is to leave. In another vignette she talks about home with her friend Alicia. Esperanza says that Mango Street is not her home. Alicia corrects her and says it is her home and she will come back to it some day. The book ends with “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes” and with Esperanza still living on Mango Street. She knows that she will go away some day but that she will return by writing the story of Mango Street and its inhabitants, rescuing them by giving their lives a story the world can read and understand.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Cisneros’ writing offers exciting possibilities for thinking about setting and characters. The short, impressionistic style of the vignettes lends itself to creative classroom activities. Students will enjoy imitating Cisneros’ techniques to explore their own environment and experiences. You may wish to have students complete one or more of the following activities.

1. Everyone Has a Mango Street

The physical characteristics of Mango Street are very important in Esperanza’s life. Have students develop descriptions of their own important places. In groups, students can help one another choose a special place, and then develop descriptions by asking the following questions:

- What does it look like? What colors stand out? How big or small are buildings, plants, fields, or yards? How wide are the streets? What are the houses like inside? What landmarks make the place unique?
- What sounds does the place call to mind? Who or what makes these sounds? How do they make you feel?

Using these questions students can make a list of details—people, objects, sounds—to include in their vignettes. Encourage them to focus on the importance of their details—the feelings they evoke, the stories associated with them, and their history. Once students are satisfied with their lists, they’ll be ready to write their vignettes. You may want to suggest they follow this model:

- An introduction that focuses on one or two special features of the place
- Three or four paragraphs that focus on specific details and their significance
- A conclusion that reflects on the importance of the place and the writer’s feelings about it

2. Masque on Mango Street

A masque is a short play traditionally performed for a royal court. Have students choose a vignette and reenact it in masque form for the class, a “court” of peers. Students can borrow dialogue from Cisneros and create some of their own. They can even improvise costumes and scenery. The important thing is to capture the feeling of Cisneros’ stories through live action.

3. A Character Study

Readers never know when one of Cisneros’ characters will appear in a vignette. Characters often disappear and then reappear—developing, learning, and changing. Have students choose a character to follow through the book. They could make a chart like the one shown here, listing at least three vignettes in which the character appears and noting important details about him or her.

Character’s Name	
Vignette	Important Details

Then each student can write a short narrative telling the story of a single character—personality, circumstances, feelings, and accomplishments—paying careful attention to what’s consistent and what changes.

MEET THE WRITER

Sandra Cisneros (1954–) was born in Chicago. Her family moved many times when she was young, finally settling in a small building in a Latino section on the north side of Chicago. This became the setting for *The House on Mango Street*. After attending college, Cisneros went to graduate school at the University of Iowa where she received a Master of Fine Arts in Writing in 1978. Since then she has published short stories, poems, and nonfiction, and has traveled the lecture circuit reading from her work in libraries, bookstores, and classrooms across the country. Cisneros now lives in San Antonio, Texas. *The House on Mango Street* is her most popular and celebrated book.

READ ON

Sandra Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. Set in dusty Texas towns, this collection of twenty-two short stories celebrates the lives of Latinos and Latinas from the point of view of a mature narrator.

Cynthia Rylant, *But I’ll Be Back Again*. A popular Los Angeles writer describes the home and people that launched her.

Gary Soto, *Living up the Street: Narrative Recollections*. A collection of autobiographical essays that describe Gary Soto’s growing up in the streets of Fresno, California.

Langston Hughes, “Thank You, M’am.” A boy learns a lesson about right and wrong from the generosity of a woman he tries to rob.

Judith Ortiz Cofer, “American History.” A coming-of-age story about a Puerto Rican girl who falls in love with a boy from another culture.

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