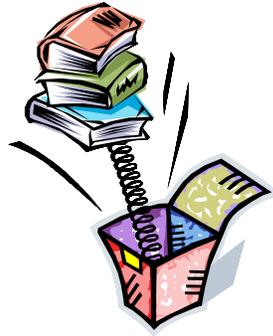


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# Book Club in a Box



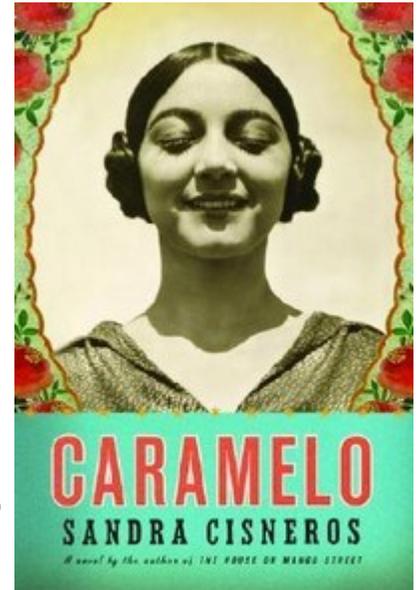
WHITTIER PUBLIC LIBRARY

# CARAMELO

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## About the Book

Every year, Ceyala "Lala" Reyes' family— aunts, uncles, mothers, fathers, and Lala's six older brothers—packs up three cars and, in a wild ride, drive from Chicago to the Little Grandfather and Awful Grandmother's house in Mexico City for the summer. Struggling to find a voice above the boom of her brothers and to understand her place on this side of the border and that, Lala is a shrewd observer of family life. But when she starts telling the Awful Grandmother's life story, seeking clues to how she got to be so awful, grandmother accuses Lala of exaggerating. Soon, a multigenerational family narrative turns into a whirlwind exploration of storytelling, lies, and life. Like the cherished *rebozo*, or shawl, that has been passed down through generations of Reyes women, **Caramelo** is alive with the vibrations of history, family, and love.



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## About the Author



Sandra Cisneros was born in Chicago, Illinois, on December 20, 1954, the only daughter in a family of seven children. Her mother, Elvira Cordero Anguiano, was a self-educated Mexican American who kindled her children's enthusiasm for reading by taking them to libraries. Her father, Alfredo Cisneros Del Moral, was a Mexican upholsterer who regularly moved the family between Chicago and Mexico City.

In Chicago Catholic schools, where expectations for Mexican American girls were low, Cisneros was a below-average student, but she read voraciously and began writ-

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ing early. After graduating from Loyola University in Chicago in 1976, she earned a master's degree at the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she learned "what I didn't want to be, how I didn't want to write."

Upon returning from graduate study to Chicago, she awakened to what she called the "incredible deluge of voices" that has become the hallmark of her writing. Her stories and poems reveal a variety of voices, Mexican American voices mainly, telling their stories in an exuberant mixture of English and Spanish.

Her writing career started slowly. She earned her living as a teacher, college recruiter, arts administrator, writing teacher, and lecturer. Her choice to remain poor in order to write puzzled her father and brothers and often caused her to wonder whether she was betraying her beloved Mexican American culture by choosing a nontraditional life. She wrestled with the problems of how to be a liberated woman and remain a Latina.

Cisneros's fiction and poetry are widely anthologized, and *The House on Mango Street* is frequently taught in schools and colleges. Random House issued a one-volume selection from her fiction and poetry, *Vintage Cisneros*, in 2004. She has won a number of honors, including two National Endowment of the Arts Fellowships for fiction and poetry (1988, 1982), a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (1995), and a Texas Medal of the Arts (2003). She has received several grants and guest lectureships, and honorary degrees from Loyola University, Chicago (2002), and the State University of New York at Purchase (1993). *Caramelo* (2002) was named a notable book of the year in several newspapers, including *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *Chicago Tribune*.

Cisneros has a Web site with biographical information and images and links to reviews and interviews. In June, 2003, Cisneros wrote at her

Web site, "I currently earn my living by my pen. I live in San Antonio, Texas, in a violet house filled with many creatures, little and large." In interviews, she reports that in San Antonio she found a rich source of voices for her stories and poems as well as an increasing independence that confirmed her in the choice of a nontraditional life, which she described as being "no one's mother and nobody's wife." Cisneros has come to see a main purpose of her writing as helping people to see their lives more clearly. This help often takes the form of showing that "we can be Latino and still be American."

Heller, Terry, and Heller Terry. "Sandra Cisneros." *Magill's Survey Of American Literature, Revised Edition* (2006): 1. *Biography Reference Center*. Web. 23 July 2014.

## Further Reading

### Other works by Sandra Cisneros:

*The House on Mango Street*

*Loose Women: Poems*

*My Wicked, Wicked Ways*

*Woman Hollering Creek, and Other Stories*

### If you liked *Caramelo*, you might like:

*Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya

*Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat

*The Brief and Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz

*The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini

## Discussion Questions

1. From the novel's opening epigraph—"Tell me a story, even if it's a lie"—to its end, the relationship between truth, lies, history, and storytelling is an important theme. Posits Celaya, "Did I dream it or did someone tell me the story? I can't remember where the truth ends and the talk begins" [p. 20]. And while she is assuring us, "I wish I could tell you about this episode in my family's history, but nobody talks about it, and I refuse to invent what I don't know" [p. 134], she also acknowledges, "The same story becomes a different story depending on who is telling it" [p. 156]. For example, clearly the Awful Grandmother is sugarcoating the truth about her marriage to Narciso [p. 171]. What other aspects of the novel are evidently "untruthful"? Is the reader to believe that **Caramelo** is just a "different kind of lie" [p. 246]?
2. Often elements of one person's life are echoed later in the story, in either the same character's life or in another character's. For example, Cisneros uses the same sentence—"And it was good and joyous and blessed"—to describe Grandmother's first sexual encounter with Narciso [p. 154] and later her death [p. 348]. And the argument between Mother and Celaya [p. 359] echoes the earlier argument between Aunt Light-Skin and the Awful Grandmother [p. 262]. Where are there other examples of this repetition within the novel? What themes does this structural repetition help convey?
3. The family history that forms the central story line of **Caramelo** is structured in part chronologically and in part by the relationships formed by different family members. As our narrator informs us: "Because a life contains a multitude of stories and not a single strand explains precisely the who of who one is, we have to examine the complicated loops that allowed Regina to become la Señora Reyes" [p. 115]. Does this nonlinear plot structure support the assertion that family and history are without beginning, middle, or end, but are, rather, a "pattern" [p. 399]?
4. The theme expressed in the following statement is reemphasized throughout the novel: "We are all born with our destiny. But sometimes we have to help our destiny a little" [p. 106]. For example, Viva tells Celaya: "I believe in destiny as much as you do, but sometimes you've gotta help your destiny along" [p. 345]. What exactly is the nature or power of the "destiny" that the characters seem to revere? Who or what is really in control of the lives and histories portrayed? How is destiny different for Celaya, her grandmother, her parents, and her friend Viva? Celaya says of Ernesto: "He was my destiny, but not my destination" [p. 399]. What is the difference?
5. How does the oft-repeated phrase "just enough, but not too much" [e.g., p. 29] describe the kind of person the Awful Grandmother is? What aspects, if any, of the Awful Grandmother's life story parallel Celaya's life story? Are the Awful Grandmother and Celaya alike in character, and if so, in what ways? How does Celaya, who upon her grandmother's death "can't think of anything to say for my grandmother who is simply my father's mother and nothing to me" [p. 350], ultimately come to feel that she's "turned into her. And [can] see inside her heart" [p. 424]? What does the Awful Grandmother teach Celaya about herself?
6. Celaya writes, "On Sunday mornings other families go to church. We go to Maxwell Street" [p. 294]. Does she relate this cynically or humorously, or both? What religious beliefs does Celaya hold? How is her faith or religion different from Zoila's, who is portrayed as having no faith at all [Chapter 62], or from the faith or religion of the Awful Grandmother [see, for example, p. 191]?
7. What is the role played in the novel by the various Mexican or Mexican-American figures of popular culture who have encounters with members of the Reyes family? How does Cisneros use these characters to convey both the individuality as well as the universality of the Mexican-American immigrant experience?
8. The characters in **Caramelo** make frequent observations about Mexicans. For example, Zoila asserts that "all people from Mexico City are liars" [p. 353], and Celaya comments "We're so Mexican. So much left unsaid" [p. 428]. With what tone do the characters deliver these types of generalizations, and how are they to be interpreted? Why might these characters portray their native countrymen in this way? Do people of other cultures make similarly deprecating comments, and what purpose might making such comments serve for such people?

## Discussion Questions, cont.

9. How does the Reyes family view the United States as compared to Mexico? How are the two countries portrayed in **Caramelo** on both political and social levels? Celaya observes that "[e]veryone in Chicago lived with an idea of being superior to someone else, and they did not, if they could help it, live on the same block without a lot of readjustments, of exceptions made for the people they know by name instead of as 'those so-and so's'" [p. 289–290]. Is this different or similar to how people from different classes or ethnicities (such as the Indians) in Mexico City treat or view each other?
10. For the Reyes family members who immigrate to the United States, which elements of Mexico are preserved in America and which are lost in the process of assimilation? Is it necessary for an immigrant to lose something of his or her original culture in order to assimilate into a new culture and, once assimilated, are the old ways lost for good? Does being "American" mean something different for the first generation of immigrants such as Inocencio than for the American-born Zoila or their daughter, the American-born Celaya? How does Celaya reconcile her Mexican legacy with her American future, and does this reconciliation give meaning to the term "Mexican-American"? How do shifting external border relations between Mexico and the United States reflect or affect the characters' internal conflicts between their Mexican and American identities?
11. Aunt Light-Skin proclaims: "Because that's how *los gringos* are, they don't have any morals. They all have dinner with each other's exes like it was nothing. 'That's because we're civilized,' a *turista* once explained to me. What a barbarity! Civilized? You call that civilized? Like dogs. Worse than dogs. If I caught my ex with his 'other' I'd stab them both with a kitchen fork. I would!" [p. 273]. What system of morality do the Reyes abide by? Does this code of morality reflect a more Mexican, more American, or a Mexican-American way of thinking? What cultural differences between Mexicans and Americans does Aunt Light-Skin's proclamation illustrate?
12. "There is nothing Mexican men revere more than their mamas; they are the most devoted of sons perhaps because their mamas are the most devoted of mamas...when it comes to their boys" [p. 128]. What explains the strength of the relationship between Inocencio and the Awful Grandmother? Is the relationship between Zoila and Toto equally strong? Why or why not? How can mothers and daughters, such as Aunt Light-Skin and the Awful Grandmother, or Celaya and Zoila, successfully relate to each other in the face of such strong mother-son relationships? Is the favoritism these mothers show for their sons unique to Mexican culture? How does the bond between a son and his mother compare to the relationship between Celaya and Inocencio?
13. Celaya says, "Life was cruel. And hilarious all at once" [p. 30]. And when things seem to have reached a low point in her life, she proclaims, "Celaya. I'm still myself. Still Celaya. Still alive. Sentenced to my life for however long God feels like laughing" [p. 357]. What attitude does Celaya have toward her own life? What keeps her going?
14. Inocencio tells Celaya: "Always remember, Lala, the family comes first—*la familia*" [p. 360]. Does her needy call home to Papa after her episode with Ernesto in Mexico City prove her father right [p. 390]? How does Celaya reconcile her father's statement about family with her own vision of her future as an independent woman?
15. The first time the word "caramelo" appears in the book is when it is used to describe Candelaria's skin tone [p. 34]. The second time is to name the color of the Awful Grandmother's uncompleted rebozo [p. 58]. How are the two events connected? Why might Cisneros have chosen **Caramelo** for the title? What does the caramelo rebozo mean to Celaya the storyteller? To Celaya the Reyes family member? [See pp. 426–430.]
16. Cisneros employs elaborate and vivid food metaphors, such as "Regina was like the papaya slices she sold with lemon and a dash of *chile*; you could not help but want to take a little taste" [p. 117] and "Have you ever been that sad? Like a donut dunked in coffee" [p. 274]. Is taste the strongest sense her metaphors invoke? How does she also invoke the senses of smell, sight, and sound? What does Cisneros achieve stylistically or thematically by invoking these senses?
17. Does Celaya betray her father by telling the story? Is Inocencio right that the family portrayed in **Caramelo** appears "shameless," as he cautions Celaya [p. 430]? If not, how might one describe the family portrayed in **Caramelo**?