

# How Did Sandra Cisneros Overcome Challenges to Become a Writer?

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*Adapted by Fishtank Staff*



U.S. President Barack Obama awarded author Sandra Cisneros the National Medal of Arts.

- 1 On September 22, 2016, Sandra Cisneros stood in the East Room of the White House. President Barack Obama was about to award her the National Medal of Arts, the most prestigious award the United States government can bestow upon an artist. She had sold millions of books, including her groundbreaking novel *The House on Mango Street*. Despite all this success, she had considered skipping the ceremony and staying home. Why? "I just started a new book and I wanted to be home writing," she said in an interview with Texas Public Radio.

## Wanting to Be a Writer

- 2 Cisneros was born in Chicago, Illinois, on December 20, 1954, to Mexican immigrant parents. They had seven children—six boys and one girl. Being the only daughter meant Cisneros spent a lot of time alone, and she used that time to read, think, and use her imagination. She considered this to be good preparation for becoming a writer, like sharpening a pencil before putting it to paper. Cisneros showed a love of writing from an early age. In elementary school, she started writing stories and poems, and in high school, she was an editor of the school's literary magazine.

- 3 As she pursued her studies, Cisneros realized that being a writer would also allow her to serve others by giving a voice to the underrepresented people she grew up with. They were often working-class immigrants. "My intent was to write stories that don't get told—my mother's stories, my students' stories, the stories of women in the neighborhood, the stories of all of those people who don't have the ability to document their lives," she explained in an interview with *Southwest Review*.
- 4 Her mother's life also inspired Cisneros to become a writer. Elvira—Cisneros's mother—had always dreamed of being an artist. She enjoyed being creative and would often draw, sing, and dance. However, she was born in a time and culture when women were expected to prioritize marriage and children, which she did. The expectations placed on Elvira as a wife and mother left her little opportunity to pursue her artistic dreams. Inspired by her mother's aspirations, but determined to avoid her fate, Cisneros chose a different path.

### **Overcoming Obstacles**

- 5 Achieving her dream of becoming a writer was challenging. Cisneros lived at home during college, and when she wanted to move away to attend a graduate-level writing program, she faced resistance from her father because he wanted her to get married. At the time, many families—including some Mexican-American families—often expected their daughters to marry rather than pursue careers. Her father eventually gave his approval, though, and she moved away from home to study at the famous Iowa Writers' Workshop.
- 6 That program presented its own obstacles. Cisneros was one of the few women of color there; many of her classmates and professors were white men. As a working-class, Mexican-American woman, she had some experiences and perspectives that were unique. This meant that sometimes she felt like she didn't fit in.
- 7 Cisneros also felt that the classes she took didn't represent her and the stories she hoped to tell, making her feel different and ashamed. This affected her so deeply that she rarely spoke during her time in the program.

### **Supporting a Writer's Life**

- 8 After graduating from the writing program, Cisneros remained determined to achieve her lifelong dream of becoming a professional writer. To accomplish this goal, Cisneros took jobs that allowed her to write in her spare time, such as teaching and student counseling. After publishing *The House on Mango Street*—but before it became popular—she moved from city to city, taking jobs that supported her writing. She lived this way for a decade.
- 9 Her ambition to become a writer led Cisneros to prioritize her writing over everything else. Relationships, pets, and even having a houseplant would have to wait. Writing was more important to her than all of those things. "I made those sacrifices from my heart [...]" she told AARP.

- 10 Cisneros's dedication paid off. After *The House on Mango Street* became popular, she no longer had to work during the day and write at night. Her pen had become a key, unlocking the life she had long dreamed of—a life where she could write full time and support herself through her words. In the following four decades, she has gone on to write several other books and poetry collections and win numerous awards. Readers have also affirmed her success as a trailblazing writer. "And there are the letters from readers of all ages and colors," Cisneros explained, "who write to say I have written their story."
- 11 Next to President Obama on that September day in 2016, awaiting her medal, Cisneros stood out from the other attendees, most of whom were dressed in suits and ties and formal dresses. She was wearing a traditional Mexican huipil (pronounced wee-peel), a dress with vibrant colors and floral designs. As Cisneros explained in an interview with Texas Public Radio, "When you look at me you can see that I'm a Mexican—the daughter of an immigrant and the granddaughter of immigrants that couldn't read or write their names." Her presence that day was not just a personal triumph—it was a powerful symbol of cultural pride, resilience, and representation.