Sandra Cisneros with Martha Satz

[In the following interview, Cisneros discusses her childhood, the female perspective in her work, and her experience as a Latina writer.]

SATZ: Your book House on Mango Street has been marketed as a book for young people, but it isn't the sort of book that is usually produced for children. Would you talk about that?

CISNEROS: I'd like to comment on that. It seems to be marketed as a young people's book, but my readers range anywhere from second graders to university students to housewives. I like the fact that it has such a range. It's written, I suppose, with the intent that it can be read as single stories or as a novel. It does have one general theme.

SATZ: I suppose the book is being marketed that way because the story is told from a child's point of view; the work is written in simple but very powerful language. It deals with an experience that's not usual for a young person's book.

CISNEROS: It always surprises me when children like the story. When I have read it to children there are certain stories they understand and enjoy. 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. One of the reasons I dedicated the book to women was that there were so many people to whom I was indebted because I stole their stories. That's how I put the book together. It's a young girl's diary in a sense. All the stories are told from the point of view of a woman—girl who is in that nebulous age between childhood and adulthood. Some days she's a child and for a few days she might be an adult. That always struck me as a kind of mysterious time, so I chose her as the persona for these stories.

SATZ: I wanted to talk a little bit about the selection "Hips," just because it contains unusual material.

CISNEROS: It's fun to read that one out loud. I think the book has a wide range because some of the stories are very playful, and some are very sad and serious, and I guess "Hips" is a little bit of both. If I had to summarize the book, I guess I'd say it's a book about a young girl's discovery of her sexuality. I like to read it because I get to sing, which I don't get to do very often.

SATZ: There are so many things in "Hips" that don't usually appear in stories—all the jump rope rhymes, all the minutiae of the girl experience.

CISNEROS: I especially relish writing about all those little things no one ever writes about. I included all of the girl knowledge that you get. I had this storehouse of information—little nursery rhymes and jump rope songs—and I thought what can I do with these things? And finally, when I was writing this book, I thought I would throw them all into one story, and that's how that story came about.

SATZ: It's unusual, too, in a book that is read sometimes by children, that the sun isn't shining and there's not a dog named Spot. There are rats.

CISNEROS: It's very curious. I went to school at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and everyone was writing about the sun shining and beautiful gardens, but those things weren't in my life. I think it was important for me to have the cultural shock I experienced at Iowa, for me to experience my otherness, in order for me to choose my subject intentionally.

SATZ: I wanted to ask you about the girlhood that probably inspired Mango Street. Tell me about what you were like as a small girl.
CISNEROS: We never owned books in my house, not because my mother didn't want us to have books. She loved books very much. We couldn't afford them, so I never knew you could own a book until I was about twelve. We did go to the public library, though, and our house was always filled with borrowed books. I think that was very important in nurturing me as a writer. My mother, of course, was instrumental in taking me there and bringing me back and making sure we had books and telling us stories.

SATZ: What was your father's attitude toward the girl who had her head in a book?

CISNEROS: I think in a way it's fortunate that I was a girl because my father thought it was all right that I was interested in writing and literature. He thought I was only a girl and therefore what harm could come of it? I would eventually get married and if I wanted to go to college and major in creative writing or literature, that was okay because I'd get married anyway. So he ignored it, whereas my mother, I think, lived through me vicariously, and she has supported me and is supporting me now. She is very happy about the choices I've made.

SATZ: That attitude of your father, "she's only a girl . . ."

CISNEROS: Well it's funny, I'm thirty−one and I've had quite a bit of success with my writing now. But my father never acknowledged my success until very recently—until last summer, in fact. Because he is from Mexico City, he reads in Spanish. Last summer I read at the Colegio de Mexico and several of my pieces, especially pieces from House on Mango Street, had been translated. It was the first time he read anything I wrote. He had a funny response. He kind of looked at it and said "mmm," and in Spanish he said, "Who wrote this?" I said, "I did." And he looked at it and said "Mmm, who helped you?" I think he's secretly been very pleased to see my name on books. And I'm very proud of it because I'm the only daughter of a family of six sons—very traditional sons at that—who always made me feel as if I was not a Cisneros because I was a girl and would forfeit my name at marriage. I'm very pleased to see that I'm the one who put the name on that book cover.

SATZ: I read in an interview that you said men often write in a romanticized way about the barrio because they had a different experience from women.

CISNEROS: That's true. I have lived in the barrio, but I discovered later on in looking at works by my contemporaries that they write about the barrio as a colorful, Sesame Street−like, funky neighborhood. To me the barrio was a repressive community. I found it frightening and very terrifying for women. The future for women in the barrio is not a wonderful one. You don't wander around "these mean streets." You stay at home. If you do have to get somewhere, you take your life in your hands. So I wanted to counter those colorful viewpoints, which I'm sure are true to some extent but were not true for me.

SATZ: Tell me about your college experience.

CISNEROS: It's very curious. I want to mention how fortunate it was for me to have gone the route that I did. I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to attend a university, unlike many young writers I've met in the barrio and in the communities who work in isolation. I was born at a time when there were government grants that allowed me to pursue higher education. I was able to attend an undergraduate program that had a writer in residence, and he, of course, took great interest in my work and recommended me to the University of Iowa. At the time I entered rather naively; I had no idea that it was a prestigious workshop or that it was quite unusual that I got there. I was the only Chicano writer, and I believe the only Latina that has graduated from the program. But at the time I didn't have that consciousness. I just went there directly from undergraduate school, which may have been detrimental—to go so young in my life without having developed a voice of my own first. It was a bit of a shock to be in a program like the one at Iowa. It's a disciplined and rigorous program. I think I entered quite a different person from the one who left. I became very rebellious there. I never liked the work that my classmates were doing, and as an attempt to move far away from their style, I stumbled upon the voice that predominates in the House on Mango Street, which is a street child's voice.
SATZ: What didn't you like about your classmates' work?

CISNEROS: Well, theirs was a very distilled writing. I suppose it was a true voice for my classmates, but my attempt to try to imitate an esoteric style of writing was untrue to my experiences. I think everyone has to stumble around to find her voice. Coming from a working class background, an ethnic community, an urban community, a family that did not have books in the house, I just didn't have the same frames of reference as my classmates. It wasn't until I realized and accepted that fact that I came upon the subjects I wanted to write about.

SATZ: So it was at Iowa that you understood you had a legitimate thing to write about and a legitimate way to write about it.

CISNEROS: Right. I'm grateful for Iowa. If anything, it stirred me up, and that's good.

SATZ: What did your classmates think when you began to produce this sort of material?

CISNEROS: It's very funny. I think a workshop should not intimidate its students into not writing. Anything that silences you is dangerous. I didn't find it a supportive community, at first, and didn't write anything for a year. It wasn't until the second year that I decided I would write something no one else in the class could write about. I think it's an important thing to ask yourself: What can I write about that no one else can write about? For myself, since I was going through some traumatic experiences at the time, I chose to write about my past—my childhood experiences, my mother, and especially women in the community. So a great number of the stories in here are girl stories or women stories.

SATZ: You write of women who are very powerful, in their own way—power disapproved of, but power nonetheless.


SATZ: What do you make of your experience of woman and power? How do you use that material?

CISNEROS: I think that growing up Mexican and feminist is almost a contradiction in terms. For a long time—and it's true for many writers and women like myself who have grown up in a patriarchal culture, like the Mexican culture—I felt great guilt betraying that culture. Your culture tells you that if you step out of line, if you break these norms, you are becoming anglicized, you're becoming the malinche— Influenced and contaminated by these foreign influences and ideas. But I'm very pleased to be alive among the current generation of women. Many writers are redefining our Mexicanness and it's important if we're going to come to terms with our Mexican culture and our American one as well. So it's a dilemma. I think many of my stories come from dealing with straddling two cultures, and certainly it's something I'm going to deal with in future stories.

SATZ: You spoke of your mother's pride in your work. What is her attitude, though, toward your strength and independence?

CISNEROS: My mother is a very feisty, strong, and independent woman. It's too bad she was born when she was, because I think women were nurtured so much they were made helpless. She's very much the mother that is described in the story "A Smart Cookie"—a woman who can speak two languages and fix the TV and draw, but doesn't know how to get downtown because she doesn't know which train to take. She's a woman of contradictions. On the other hand, I'm sure if it weren't for her, my brothers and I would not be the creative individuals we are. So in a sense, we're living her dreams for her. I know she's very pleased with my stories, though she gets a little embarrassed about my writing about her. But so long as I read them in public when she's out of the room it's okay.
SATZ: Do you feel that by writing her stories and other women's stories, you are redeeming her experience and giving her some strength?

CISNEROS: Yes, very much so. I think my mother is always going to be a voice in my stories. She's very much the persona I use in these stories and in the poems. It's her voice I hear when I sit down and begin a piece.

SATZ: Fifteen years have passed, and I must say I have been teaching House on Mango Street for a number of years now, very happily too. And in the section called "My Name," the protagonist ends by saying she'd like to baptize herself under a new name—ZeeZee the X. For me her chosen name seems to indicate a variable to be expressed, indicative of an identity to be shaped. Do you think the name may be seen as a metaphor for your life too, shaping the identity of a Latina, a feminist writer?

CISNEROS: Yes, I think so. Much of Mango Street I wrote on the blind, intuitively, and now when I read it out loud, it so much echoes my life that it's frightening. I did not intend it as autobiographical or as a mask for my own life, but it turns out that I'm living the fiction I created. ZeeZee the X came from my own love affair with the Autobiography of Malcolm X. I loved the X in Malcolm X and the idea of his choosing that as a name. I am and always have been enamored with exotic names and names that begin with letters of the alphabet like X or Y or Z, those strange letters. And so the name came out intuitively. But yes, you are right. I've had to be filling in that blank. And for Esperanza it's so nice to have a name with a Z in it because it lends a sense of flair. There's a zest to it. It sounds exotic and wild. So it's not just X. There's a wildness to Z.

SATZ: And speaking of wildness, sex for women in House on Mango Street is dangerous. In the section of Mango called "The Family of Little Feet," when the little girls find high heels and try them on, the grocer Mr. Benny comments that the shoes are dangerous. And they prove to be so, because the shoes make the little girls objects of male sexual desire. Sexuality in the environment you describe brings oppression and confinement. But in your poetry, and especially in Loose Woman, you write female erotic poetry. Have you found this liberating?

CISNEROS: Well, you know what? I think House on Mango Street intimated that wherever there is a source of power for women, it is forbidden. Sex is forbidden by male society because men know that's where our nuclear reactors are, so to speak. These are Chernobyls in the making. And, of course, women venture into this dangerous space and then feel bad because patriarchy dictates they are dangerous. With Loose Woman, I entered a realm where I am writing from a dangerous fountainhead. But that book was never meant to be published. It was not even a book. It was what I call a box of poems. They were "poems I threw under the bed," metaphorically, thinking of Emily Dickinson, poems too dangerous to publish in my lifetime. And I had a very adverse reaction when Loose Woman came out in Texas. It received almost no reviews. The one or two reviews it received were so negative and so hurtful to me that I thought, why am I writing poetry for anyone? The reason I write it is not to publish it but to get the thorn out of the soul of my heart.

SATZ: Do you think the negative reviews were a result of your being a daring woman writing about female sexuality?

CISNEROS: Maybe that was true. I shouldn't imply there were that many reviews. They were just so vitriolic. I think the fact that I wandered into Texas with my awards rattling in my pocket threatened a lot of male poets—"How dare I?" So now in retrospect, I can see that it really wasn't about me, but about someone else's unhappiness, which is what a lot of bad reviews are about, I think.

SATZ: Was publishing that book frightening for you because it was so personal?

CISNEROS: Yes. I can go out and read the fiction and I'm on my little soap box, doing my politics, brandishing my sword. But poetry is not like that. Poetry doesn't have anything to do with the public. I can't even direct what I'm going to write about, it comes of its own accord. It's a little periscope that goes inside my psyche, and it's a
frightening thing to have someone looking at your nightmares and dreams. Poetry has nothing to do with publishing. The idea that poetry must be published reminds me of the fallacy that because women have a uterus they must have children. That's how I felt about poetry when I saw my first book. I think Emily Dickinson was absolutely lucid to write so freely without thinking of the public or what the neighbors would say. She knew that the true reason one writes poetry and works at the craft is simply to write that poem. I learned this even before that bad review or before anybody said anything. All I needed was to see the picture on the cover of the small press edition with me sitting in a provocative pose, which was never supposed to be on a cover. It was an intimate picture that my photographer boyfriend and I took after we had been doing these traditional, close-cropped head portraits. Then we got wilder and wilder because I kept drinking glasses of wine as this photo session went on. When we saw the contact sheet, Ana Castillo said, "You should use this for the cover." I said, "Oh no, we can't use that." Of course then we did, and the photo is a metaphor for what's inside—seduction, playfulness, sassiness, everything revealed. I didn't like the idea of myself being exposed to that extent. I looked at it and realized that I don't have to publish. After that I decided to publish only my fiction and keep the poems private. A lot of my private life was being gobbled up by the public, and I wanted something for myself, and no one seemed to care about poetry anyway. It wasn't as if people were banging down the door for my poems.

SATZ: So this is your decision as of now, not to publish your poetry?

CISNEROS: No, that was then. What happened, though, was when Random House saw how successful I was (it wasn't that they loved poetry so much), they thought "Hey, we can sell this girl's books of poetry, too." And suddenly I was offered a deal. I didn't want them to have my book of poetry, but I wanted a small press, Third Woman Press, to benefit from my success. So the way we did it was give the paperback rights to Third Woman Press, which continues to this day, but sell the hardcover rights to Random House; therefore if someone wanted the book after the hardcover sold out they'd have to buy the paperback. In this way, the little press could piggyback on the big one. I'm very loyal to the editor of Third Woman and wanted to help her out. She's very loyal to me—a very, very dear friend. She didn't want to say no to this deal and keep me from having more success and distribution of my books. As for me, I didn't care if the book went out of print and no one ever saw the poems again. So what happens? I'm forced to go on a book tour to promote a book I wrote in my twenties.

SATZ: Which is My Wicked, Wicked Ways?

CISNEROS: Yes, and I don't even write like that anymore. I'm embarrassed because the poems are just my juvenilia. I don't like to read them. I tell the audiences this is akin to publishing your high school yearbook. What am I going to do? So what I do is this. I read the introduction, which is a poem. That is the only new thing in the book and a wonderful way to get out of reading the older poems. I read the introduction that talks about my position now and say, "Well, you can buy the book and read the rest of the poems. I'll read you some new poems." So that's how I pulled those poems out from under the bed. People used to come up to me after readings and say, "Where can I get that poem you just read?" And I'd say, "Oh that's not published." And so many people were asking for copies, it got to be a nuisance photocopying poems for friends and strangers. Eventually I gave them to Susan, my agent, thinking if we published them in a magazine, at least I could refer my audience to such and such journal, and they'd leave me alone and I wouldn't have to keep running to Kinko's, right? But as it turns out, Susan called me back immediately after I sent her the manuscript. It's really funny because the collection was in these different typefaces that kind of documented my poverty and my rise out of it. Some poems were composed on my junky little typewriter—the one that made little holes with the o; there were some on my little typewriter that was a step up, an electronic one; all the way finally to computers. So you could see these different typefaces over the years. Susan had counted the poems and said, "You have something like fifty-seven poems, and if you would write just a few more, you'd have a collection." I didn't want to publish a collection, but by then the poems were far enough removed from me that I said yes and I think the success of that book is partly because I wrote it as if it could not be published. It's looser in form. It's loose in every which way you can think of and I like that book of poetry. I don't read from the other one anymore.
SATZ: There is an unusual poem in that collection called "Down There," which deals in part with menstruation.

CISNEROS: Yes. I wrote that for two of my male students when I was teaching at California State University. I had two freshmen in an introduction to creative writing class, and I couldn't make them understand. They would write these poems every class period to try to gross each other out. They were in a competition of picking gross subjects. You know, kind of locker room material.

SATZ: Adolescent humor.

CISNEROS: Right. My criticism was that these weren't poems. They thought I was being fastidious about subject matter and of course I was not. I was just saying that if you're going to use this, it has to be a poem. So when the class ended, I wrote that poem overnight as a gift to them, to show them what I meant. We had a class reunion at the end of the semester, which I always do with my workshops, and I read that poem to them as my response to their gross poems and I said, "Okay, I'm going to show you guys what I mean and I'll gross you guys out and yet at the same time make it a poem." That's why that poem is there.

SATZ: I admire that kind of boldness in you. I've looked at your Ms. Magazine article about Guadalupe the Sex Goddess.

CISNEROS: Yes. That's in the collection called Goddess of the Americas.

SATZ: Yes. You talk quite explicitly about your sexuality.

CISNEROS: I try to talk about the things that make me a little uncomfortable. Then I know I'm on the right track.

SATZ: Do you mean uncomfortable for you, for your students, for your audience?

CISNEROS: I make it an assignment to my students and myself to write about the things we don't talk about, because those are the things that are real gold mines.

SATZ: Emotional gold mines? Poetic gold mines?

CISNEROS: Both. Why would I want to write the same old thing about the Virgin of Guadalupe? I'm writing a novel. I don't have time to stop. If I'm going to stop my writing, it might as well be to discover something I've always wanted to say, something vital and necessary to the community. That piece for me is very important, and I wish it were in every sixth grader's textbook. Of course it never will be.

SATZ: I read it for the first time a couple of days ago to prepare for this interview and I think I would like to make it part of my women's studies class curriculum.

CISNEROS: Oh, I wish you would. There's so much that goes unspoken that I think the mainstream community needs to understand. For example, the whole idea of not having a bedroom with a door or not even having a separate bedroom makes the whole idea of yourself, your sexuality, and your awareness different. It is something that really needs to be taken into account. I don't see this in stories. I don't see this in children's books. These are the things I want to write about. There are kids that sleep on couches and how can you explore your body if you don't have privacy? How do you expect a girl to be a woman in the sixth grade and to know anything about her body—whether it's for pleasure, or to make choices about reproduction?

SATZ: And no one has spoken about this?
CISNEROS: That's right. Nobody talks about that. When I had the opportunity to write about the Virgin of Guadalupe, I said I'm not going to write anything unless it's something I've never said and no one else has written about. I do see the Virgin of Guadalupe as a very powerful, sexual goddess, a symbol of creative destructiveness.

SATZ: As long as we are talking about powerful women, talk to me a little bit about the witch, the bruja, in your story “Eyes of Zapata.”

CISNEROS: Oh, I like that story.

SATZ: I love it too.

CISNEROS: I never get to read it because it's just as she says—her story's a thread and if you pull one string the whole plot comes undone. I have tried to read that, but you cannot pull out one part without the audience understanding the whole piece. But I was just talking to my friend who has a theater here in Dallas. I said that the story is meant as a play. He is going to take a look at it and think about performing it.

SATZ: Where do you see this witch figure—in folklore, in women's lives?

CISNEROS: In the mirror. When I see someone who is really wise and in her power and really writing from her vulva, that's a witch.

SATZ: What does writing from the vulva mean to you?

CISNEROS: Well, you know how they say you have to write with balls. I really think that's not right, because for men, everything happens from the balls. Writing with balls is easy for men, and something I think they have to overcome. It's some sort of low-level shop work for them, and they've got to go beyond that. Women have to move away from the heart and go down just a little bit farther, don't you think? We have to go "down there." Writing from "down there" is difficult, again because there are all these restrictions. There are all these lead walls and vaults with doors—again I'm thinking of Chernobyl. We've got that nuclear power plant down there. It's very powerful.

SATZ: And how does one get there? How have you gotten there?

CISNEROS: I think one of the ways I've gotten there is the way I did Loose Woman—to pretend that what I'm writing is so dangerous that no one can see it in my lifetime. That's the way I could write from that place. I would be like Emily Dickinson. No one could see my writing in my lifetime. It allowed me, for the first time, to be absolutely free, to even say things that were not politically correct, things that I would be ashamed of saying.

SATZ: When you say things that are not politically correct, you mean . . . ?

CISNEROS: Oh, things that are unsisterly or mean. I have written mean poems—vengeful, jealous, and ugly.

SATZ: I wanted to ask you about your use of language. For example, in one of the poems you use the word cunt. Many women see that word as a very negative, derogatory, male term. Do you think in your poem you have changed the usage of that word?

CISNEROS: I didn't even realize that book had so many bad words in it until one day . . .

SATZ: I'm not offended by the dirty words.
CISNEROS: I didn't even realize they were there until I had to read on the radio and they said, now you cannot use any of these words. I said, "My God, they're all in that book." But when I was writing it, I wasn't thinking in a sinister way. I was simply using the truest words I could to determine what I wanted to say with all of its richness and smells. It was what I wanted to say. There were no words that would say what I meant that didn't sound like I was in a doctor's office.

SATZ: I understand and that's part of the progress we've made, isn't it? Women writing from the vulva are going to create those words and those stories and that language.

CISNEROS: Right. I've had to use the bad words in Spanish, too. Like panocha is a very bad word and I put it in my essay on the Goddess, and a lot of people were freaked out.

SATZ: What does the word mean?

CISNEROS: It would be like cunt. And people were freaked out when they heard that. In fact that essay could not find a home because people were so freaked out by it. The New Yorker wanted it but they cut out all of the goddess part. They just wanted the parts about going to high school. One of those bold, brassy magazines wanted it, but they wanted to clean it up. And then Susan, my agent, said no. This piece is exactly about fighting against all that. So we've got to leave it. Ms. was the only magazine that would take it just as it is. And they were brave enough to run it.

SATZ: What has the MacArthur meant to you?

CISNEROS: The MacArthur's meant some wonderful things, good and bad. The bad has been that I was in the middle of trying to still my life and settle it so that I could concentrate on my novel and it has stirred things up now. Everybody keeps bothering me and knocking on the door.

SATZ: Now you're a certified genius.

CISNEROS: I can imagine what it's like for someone like Toni Morrison or anyone who's gotten the bigger prizes. Man! It gets in the way of writing, which is a very solitary act. So it gets to the point where I was struggling with trying to quiet my life down and go underground when this MacArthur comes and stirs everything up again. On the other hand, it has allowed me something that I did not have without a great expense to myself, which is health insurance, because I'm an independent. I'm not associated with any university. It's given me five years in which I have security. I liken my job to a seamstress who sews a wedding dress before the wedding and has spent all the money already but still has to sew the dress. That's what my job is. So it's given me peace of mind. One of the other great things that it's done for me is give me my green card. Those who still had doubts about whether I was a real writer or not must be silent.

SATZ: It's given you certification.

CISNEROS: Right. I don't need the university anymore. Now I am a certified person. I am the real thing now as a writer. It has also meant that I don't need to work for awards anymore. The awards were important for me, for that credibility. When I was younger, they were important certainly for money to write with. Now awards for me are redundant. After this one, I don't need any more, psychologically.

SATZ: Was it important for your confidence level, psychologically, or had you arrived at a place where you didn't need that external reinforcement?

CISNEROS: No. There's something I needed. Dorothy Allison and I have talked about this. If you've been poor, you never get over the fear of being poor again. I've only had money for the last six years. People don't realize that
I had a hard time paying my bills six years ago, and even though I earn more and more each year, much to my surprise, I'm always afraid there's going to be a time when I'll be poor again and won't be able to make the mortgage payment. All of these things are there, now. I think the MacArthur has given me a kind of security. Even after the money runs out, I can do lectures. It's built my self-confidence about all the ways I can make money to meet that mortgage. Like writing articles. I was very insecure about that when I was younger. I always thought about getting married to a university so that I could have the benefits, the security. Now I don't need that. The MacArthur has given me carte blanche to do whatever I want. The MacArthur is there for life, even if the money's not there. If I want to go teach anywhere or need reassurance that I have made it, there it is. And any other award now would just be redundant. It would just bring more fame, which I don't need. I need solitude to write.

SATZ: When you say "get married to a university" . . . ?

CISNEROS: Yes, because I think a university, academic life, for me has been like marriage. It's like giving up freedom.

SATZ: You've always used this kind of language in talking about yourself as a poet. You've said that you've chosen a love of poetry over other kinds of love. You have insisted in your writing that you are not the wife of anyone, you are not the mother of anyone. Do you still think of writing and marriage as alternative paths?

CISNEROS: Yes. It's still hard. I think as a writer I did things the reverse of the way some other writers have. I've been married to my writing and now I'm in a place where there's some security. So if I wanted to get married now I could. It's not my goal in life, but it's certainly feasible now. Children, too, that's something I think of. I think, oh my God, will there be a day when my bio note will say she is someone's mother?

SATZ: So it now becomes an option for you?

CISNEROS: Well, it becomes an option as long as I earn the money. So in a way I wouldn't really be the mother, I'd be the father. And if I wanted to be the father, I'd have to invent that.

SATZ: You've been inventing a lot of things.

CISNEROS: I think so. That's why I have faith that I will come to something in the next ten years. If I want to have a child or if I want to have a partner, I'm confident that it's not going to be a traditional relationship or a traditional family life. At first I felt the pressure that it was something I had to do before I was forty-five. But now I know if I want a child I can adopt. There are lots of things I can do.

SATZ: I have to tell you I've adopted two children, one when I was forty-three. I adopted my first child when I was in my twenties, he grew up, and then I adopted another one—a daughter.

CISNEROS: I need to talk to you about that because it's something I've been thinking about. I don't want to have all these people coming to me and giving me their opinions. I don't think it's something other people can tell you, not even your partner because inevitably your partner's not going to be there when it comes to being the parent. I think women invariably, whether they're married or not, wind up being single parents. All mothers are single parents.

SATZ: I adopted my children as a single person.

CISNEROS: But even if you are married, you are still a single parent. Isn't that true? I know men who are the most politically correct, and they say I will be there and that's not true. They're not there.

SATZ: They "babysit" their children.
CISNEROS: I think in order to have a child, you have to have the father—the provider—and two mothers. Two nanas. I would be the father and I'd have to support two nanas. That I think is the way to do it. I would have to continue doing my writing to earn the money to support two nanas.

SATZ: Would you find that a loss to yourself—the primary bond with the child?

CISNEROS: I don't know because I've never been the mother. Maybe I would find that I would want to be the mother and the nanas would have to be the nanas. I still think it would take three women. I really think you have to hire the two and not take advantage of your family. I think I could earn enough money now so that I could have two nanas. My friend said you need a nana and enano—that's a midget. He was just being silly, but wouldn't that be funny if you had them like in the court of Velasquez? A nana, enano, and the mamma?

SATZ: But this is part of you, you invent life.

CISNEROS: Yes. I think it's like all the poems, and as I once said in a lecture, "Your life is like a rough draft." People see the final draft, which is the books, and so they expect you to be perfect. We, all of us, are just rough drafts.

SATZ: Would you say of yourself that you inhabit the borderlands?

CISNEROS: Yes, definitely, because there really isn't any other place for me to go. When I lived in the other world it was killing me. It killed my spirit.

SATZ: The other world meaning . . . ?

CISNEROS: The world that other men and women live in kills my spirit. It's so wonderful now, at this age, to get confirmation that living against the grain has taken me exactly where I wanted to go. I'm less fearful or maybe not less fearful, but fear is part of it and I expect it now. I know that I can get past it.

SATZ: Have there been other women that you have looked to living in the borderlands, say Gloria Anzaldua?

CISNEROS: Well I can't look at Gloria because Gloria's situation is a little bit different from mine. She's a lesbiana writer. We look at each other's work. But to live I find myself reading autobiographies and biographies to guide and inspire me at times when I'm really lost. The other women writers that I meet like Dorothy Allison, or film makers, people that come into my life as I meet them—we try to put our heads together. Very powerful women in film help me. In a sense, I think biographies help me a lot because I can know the end of the story.

SATZ: So who, for example, strikes you in terms of biographies?

CISNEROS: I like Maria Callas a lot. Of course I don't like her ending. I think she made some mistakes. Tina Modotti the photographer. I just finished reading her autobiography.

SATZ: Powerful women always seem to be inventing their lives. In her book, Writing a Woman's Life, Carolyn Heilbrun writes about how we don't have enough stories about women leading lives with alternative scripts.

CISNEROS: Yes. I look at the stories—Emily Dickinson, all of these biographies—and of course, I'm always reading between the lines. Jean Rhys, for example—a woman I love and adore. I love looking at her life and wonder how you can suffer so much and still make something wonderful by saying maybe you weren't great at living your life, but you were great at obsessing over it and coming out with a piece of fiction that is perfect even if your life is not. That kind of vindicates life. So I look at artists, at different movie stars ... I'm always reading
CISNEROS: really bizarre people like Jean Harlow. I just finished reading her biography. It's really fascinating because people come to my house and they'll say "I don't have these books." It looks like a rather eclectic list but I read them because I must, I have to, I need a home.

SATZ: And can you go back home?

CISNEROS: You mean to my home?

SATZ: I mean to your community, to your family? How does that work for you?

CISNEROS: Well I have been going home because right now my father is very ill. So I am living half the time in my mother and father's home in my old bedroom. I say old even though it wasn't that old because we moved into the house when I was in college.

SATZ: What is that like for you?

CISNEROS: It's been really hard. I moved there thinking I was going to stay the whole time my father was ill. My father has been diagnosed with a terminal illness. It's been too much, and yet I realize this is the household that created the writer. It's overwhelming to me to go back to the house where to be alone or to seek privacy is evil or anti-social, anti-family. A high school teacher recently told me her Latina students couldn't understand why Esperanza wanted to go off by herself, why she wanted to be alone. According to their perspective, to be alone, to be exiled from the family is so anti-Mexican. My family still finds my behavior rather strange. I'm pulled to be with them, and yet to be with them requires an inordinate amount of time in front of a television screen. So at the end of the day I feel bloated and sick, as if I've eaten a box of jelly donuts or something. To be with my father means to lie on the bed next to him and watch bad actresses weeping on telenovela.

SATZ: Are you attempting to understand each other better now?

CISNEROS: I understand them. I think my mother understands the tenor of my life. My father, I understand; I really feel I've made my peace with him in the last couple of years. One of the most wonderful things about the MacArthur has been that my father has recognized me as a writer.

SATZ: When I interviewed you fifteen years ago, we talked about your relationship to your father. And I remember your telling a little story about your father reading House on Mango Street for the first time and saying, "Who wrote this?"

CISNEROS: What he read was "Tepeyac"; he only read House recently because it came out in Spanish, which is also how he was able to read "Tepeyac"; it was translated. That one story came out in Mexico. He read House only because he is on dialysis, and he had to do something. He said, "This is all very fine, Sandra (he told me in Spanish), but couldn't you write something for adults?" I immediately thought of what I had written for adults, but there's nothing my father could see. Woman Hollering Creek just came out in Spanish, and I gave it to him. My father can't read because he's too sick. And even if he were well enough, he wouldn't read. He's not a reader. But my father understands what I do now, even if he doesn't read my stories. The novel I'm writing is about him. My agent asked me, when she found out my father was sick, if I was going to be reading chapters of the novel to him. No, he doesn't need to hear the book. He knows he's in the story. He has no curiosity about it. He doesn't have to read. Like Curie said about her own family, they don't need to read the book—they have me. I feel like that with my father.

SATZ: So you have peace, you think, with each other?
CISNEROS: Oh yes, That's the one blessing of my life, right now, with my father's illness. My father has lived long enough to understand what I do, without reading my work. He understands the level of my success, and he understands why I did it. It's so wonderful that he's lived long enough so that now he says la novela, the novel, instead of when are you going to get married? That's what he used to say. Now it's "Don't get married because they only want your money." That's what he advised recently.

SATZ: That's a marvelous resolution.

CISNEROS: I know. There's a bitter sweetness to it. I just finished writing a letter to the MacArthur people saying that was the best gift the MacArthur gave me—my father. He's dying but this is what I always prayed for—that he would live long enough to see what I was doing, instead of introducing me like a high school teacher. When I won the MacArthur I had this horrible feeling that my father was going to die.

SATZ: Now that all your wishes had been granted?

CISNEROS: Yes. My father got sick last autumn and he had a quadruple bypass, and I was sure he was not going to survive it. It was a few months after the MacArthur, and I said well, here it comes. It didn't quite come then; it's coming now. Still, it was expected. His health has been failing. I believe there's something bigger, that a much more incredible Author than I'll ever be arranged all these things in an incredible pattern. I knew when the MacArthur came that my father was going to be taken. It was just time.

SATZ: And there's no more anger from you?

CISNEROS: No. Actually, my anger hasn't been directed to my father in a long time. I think I was angry when I was an undergraduate. I had to tell my father everything, even if it hurt him. I insisted on being absolutely honest. I haven't had a relationship like that with my father in a long time. Now he has just let me go. It was more a frustration with my father not understanding what I was doing with my life. But not anger.

SATZ: You were not angry that the men in your family were protecting you from yourself and keeping you from your own power and sexuality?

CISNEROS: They were. I also understood that part of the reason my father trapped me and kept my brothers protecting me, all of them telling me I was a princess, was that he loved me so much. He wanted me to be in a little bubble. But his overprotectiveness also allowed me to be who I am, so in a way he helped me to do things. You know how you always have this child that rebels against his parents and does the extreme opposite. So I don't think anger is the right word. There was that anger, I think, in my teens. I pretty much have done what I wanted. It was necessary that he be so protective because it allowed me to develop into who I am.

SATZ: As you said in the selection "Eleven" in Woman Hollering Creek, "what they never tell you when yo 're eleven, you 're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. " All of those contribute to the end.

CISNEROS: Yes. I think so.


(interview date 1997)