



How Living Icon Sandra Cisneros Became a Woman Without Shame

In this intimate conversation, the iconic writer shares how she chose to treat her art as her life partner, the "wobbling and wavering" around her decision to not have children, and how she limits distractions in the service of deep work.

Alicia Menendez: When I ask our guests to name their hero or their inspiration, there is a name that I hear over and over again, Sandra Cisneros. The poet, author and advocate came into each of our lives with her book, *The House on Mango Street* and has continued to dazzle us with her poetry, her fiction, and her activism. Her newest book, *Woman Without Shame*, is a collection of her poetry, packed with messages about liberation and living life on your own terms. We talk about everything from the preciousness of time and how she tunes out distractions, to her decision not to have children and the complexity of her bond with her own mother. I'm not exaggerating when I say this conversation was life-changing for me. I hope it is for you as well.

Menendez: Sandra Cisneros, I cannot believe that you're on our podcast. Thank you for doing this.

Sandra Cisneros: You're very welcome. Thank you for talking to me and promoting my work. I'm the one that's grateful to you.

Menendez: There are so many poems that I loved in *Woman Without Shame*, but if I had to pick a favorite, "Poem Written At Midnight" would be among them. Would you be willing to read that for me?

Cisneros: Sure. "Poem Written At Midnight."

I felt so alone. In my marriage with my husband who was not my husband. And so I let him go. I feel so alone in my city. That is not my city. And so I hope to flee. I feel so alone. In my life. That is not my life. Suéltame, mi vida. Ya no soy tuya. Deja de hacerme infeliz.

Menendez: I think so many of us recognize that sense of loneliness, of a life that is not our life, of a partner that is not our partner, of a city that is not our city. Which period of your own life does that echo?

Cisneros: Oh wow. This poem was written probably when I was visiting my family in Chicago. My mother died in 2007 and I think this happens when we lose someone very close to us, as has happened with many people during the pandemic, we realize how ephemeral and tenuous our life is and that we can't waste time. And my mother's death caused me to do some house cleaning.

Cisneros: So I would say around 2007, perhaps I was in her house. And I didn't know that this was a finished poem. I write things and, what I call, throw them under the bed, but that's metaphorical. I mean, I write them and file them away and don't look at them again. So I had no idea that this was done, because I feel as if my poems are never done. And it wasn't

until I was rummaging in my, what I call the dead end, or poetry process file. And I brought them out to light to show them to my agent and my poetry editor. And they liked this one. They said, "it's done." I said, "really?" They said, "yeah." I said, "oh", it was so personal for me that I didn't know.

Menendez: Sixth grade, you have a teacher, you call her Miss Something in the acknowledgements of her book. She sees something special in you. And from that moment, you start manifesting this, you see your name on the spine of a book. You have a vision for yourself. You're moving in the direction of that vision. *House on Mango Street*, published in 1984. I think something that gets lost in your story is that, that was not an overnight success, it took two decades. How were you sustaining yourself during that 20 year period?

Cisneros: Well, I never expected to make money, one. I expected that I would be a high school teacher and I would write on the weekends and maybe on the weekends and for summertime and the best I could hope for was getting the blurbs, those beautiful quotes on the back cover from the writers I admired. That was my highest aspiration. I just thought, okay, got to be able to make a living, so I don't have to move back to my father's house. I don't need a big fancy place. I need to lower my overhead. And that's why I moved to Texas. And when you're an artist, you've got to find those towns where maybe it's not your favorite place on the planet to live, but the rent is cheap. All the apartments I lived in were \$200 a month for decades. I made sacrifices the way women make sacrifices to follow their husband's career. You pack up, your husband got a job in Ohio, "we're going to Ohio." That's what I did for my husband, which was writing.

Menendez: It's funny to hear you talk about your career, about your art as your partner. I've also heard you talk about how one of the most important decisions a person can make, particularly creative is controlling their own fertility. You said you made that decision for yourself at 30. What did that decision look like?

Cisneros: I made it at 30 and I have to be very honest that I wavered and made regrets when I would fall in love with somebody, because I knew my relationships were temporal and were not going to last. So sometimes I would think, oh, maybe I should have this person's child because they won't be here. But I will have their child, which is a bad excuse for having a child out there. Women do not think you should have a child as a souvenir. That is not a good idea. But fortunately I did not have children with these men. And when I was lucid and thinking with my feet on the ground, I just said, how are we going to afford this? If I have a child I'm going to have to move back to Chicago. I will have to depend on my family. I'll have to move back in my mother and father's house. It just will ruin my brilliant career. So I did make that choice. Although I wobbled and wavered when I was in love.

Menendez: I want to talk about some of the wobbling and the wavering that you write about. Would you read this section for me "In Year of My Near Death"?

Cisneros: *Six months after my mother died, a ribbon unspooled from my uterus, like a stillborn child. At 53, the womb awoke exhaled and spoke one last time. For my mother's sake, my own I will birth no one in life, birth grief, thin red line on a roadmap, guiding my escape from servant to master, from daughter to adult ever after.*

And it goes on, but that's an excerpt.

Menendez: Tell me about that moment. That feeling. Is it a feeling of completion? Of questioning? Where do you land?

Cisneros: I think Latinas have a very complicated relationship with our mothers. I mean every daughter does, but for Latinas it's especially hard because we come from a matriarchal

society, even though it's very misogynistic. I think matriarchal societies create misogynistic society as well. That's kind of a contradiction, but it seems to me that's the way it is. So you're not supposed to have difficulties with your mother, your mother's is like la Virgen de Guadalupe, she's a goddess, you can't. And of course all the children are taught to adore her and she especially adores the sons. And I felt for my mom that my mom's unhappiness, that in a way I was her rival. She saw me as a rival sometimes, she would forget.

Cisneros: And it especially came up after my father died. She would say things like, "you always do what you want." She was very bitter because I did what I wanted and it was more about, "I've never done what I wanted." That's what she really wanted to say. "I made all these sacrifices."

Cisneros: So there's a lot of unhappiness there, but I was in the death room and this time I was helping her to cross, to die. And that experience was so sacred because I could feel my mother's spirit without her body. And it was like I was meeting another person. I was meeting my mother without all the sorrow and disappointment and anger that had created a shell around her. And it was like I was meeting the woman she was meant to be, the potential she could have been. She hadn't had all of the disappointments in her life. And it allowed me to forgive her. If I hadn't been in that room, I would still be working on forgiving my mother. But it all happened in an instant, and I was so overwhelmed and excited and astonished by the experience of my mother's spirit, leaving the body, being able to perceive it. And I realized, "wow, I never knew you. And I'm sorry that I hurt you. And I forgive you for not being there for me."

Cisneros: It was something like that I could do in an instant that might have taken me another lifetime. So that's how I wrote that poem with that in mind. And I think for other women, they've got to write a book of poetry, or make paintings, or create something on their mothers, or make an altar. Because all of the above also are channels for us to dialogue with our deceased ones and transform our sorrow to illumination.

Menendez: Tell me how do you take all of that life experience and put it in a poem? What's your process?

Cisneros: I like writing poetry in bed. I feel that the bed is my life wrapped. It's a place I'm most private. And it's where babies are born, it's where babies are created, it's where we cry, it's where we dream. And for me it's like command central in my house during the pandemic, everything shrunk to my bedroom. I ate all my meals there, my dogs liked playing on the bed and I just need to be by myself. There can be somebody else in the house, because I do have an assistant and his wife that help me, but I just need to be not interrupted. I can't answer the door. I can't be chatting on emails. I don't want to talk on the phone. I just need to be by myself so that I have three hours or more to coast.

Cisneros: Because writing's like going all the thousands of leagues under the sea. I need to go to the sea bottom and not be yanked up. You've got to feel your lungs expanding and about to burst and go to really scary places. And that requires courage and time. Your writing has to take you to another world and it can't be interrupted by an email or an Instagram post. I got rid of that, even though I have an Instagram, I just got the app off my phone. I can't be looking at other people because that's like the top of the ocean.

Menendez: I want to know what it has required of you to become a woman without shame, specifically around sex. I've heard you tell a story before about going to a health clinic as a young person, they hand you a mirror. So you can look at your own vagina, and your response is sort of like "that's a thing that white girls do", which made me laugh. So then how did you

become a person who was comfortable with your own body who was comfortable with sex, who was comfortable with pleasure, and then who was able to write about that? Was that a natural evolution, or was that work?

Cisneros: It requires a lot of work. Like now I want to be able to say words about my sexual parts without being ashamed in our society. Why? Because society's afraid of women's sexual parts. We don't even have a word that's loving, it's all slander or it's medical. And then you have people giving nicknames to their sexual parts. Why can't we say uterus and vagina and not cringe. And it's so humiliating and childish. We shouldn't have to be afraid of the parts that are creative and give birth and give pleasure because giving birth and giving pleasure and creating, they're often the same place. And it's the part that makes us most female. And I just think we're like volcanoes. And I think society's afraid of our power and disempowers us by making us afraid of our power.

Cisneros: And to me, it's taken me 67 years to come to some place where I feel very proud about my sexuality and my female anatomy, and to talk about it and to write about it and to claim a sexuality at 67 because our society makes us feel like you don't have sexual desire at 67. And that if you're over a certain age, you're just like out in the dust heap. You're not thought of as beautiful, but I really like myself now, better than when I was young. When I see photos of myself, I think, "oh my God, she's so beautiful and she didn't know it." But I'm older now. And I have a different kind of beauty, but I like myself in a way I didn't when I was 25.

Menendez: When I was interviewing Maria Hinojosa she said that you gave her one of the most critical pieces of advice that she got when she was writing her own book which was, "don't write about the things you remember, write about the things you can't forget." I don't know if you remember telling her that?

Cisneros: You *wish* you could forget, the things you wish you could forget, because they hold a knife to our throats, they make us ashamed, they belittle us, they destroy us, they make us ill, they make us angry, they make us run to drugs and alcohol and all kinds of evils. If you don't transform the demons that are in your heart, they will transform you. And that's the power of art that you can be your own curandera, you can heal yourself from these memories. Sometimes you cannot do it all by yourself and you do need a quote on that and you got to go to a therapist or the wise neighbor lady or somebody who is a professional to help you walk through these memories and exorcise them... But not exercise exorcize like exorcist.

Cisneros: For me, there have been times when I can do it myself with my art, and there have been times when the art isn't enough and I've had to go see a therapist to help heal me. And some demons we can't ever exile from our heart. Sometimes we have to learn how to live alongside them. The death of your mother is one of them. The death of your father is one of them. You can never release yourself from that wound. It's like having a molar that's missing, that your tongue taps every day, but you learn how to live alongside it and you learn how to use that pain to help others. And that's a great power.

Menendez: When I ask my guests who their heroes, who their icons are, your name comes up over and over again. So what is it like to be Sandra Cisneros?

Cisneros: That's a good question. I think that my greatest trait and fatal flaw is the same, but I think that's true for everyone. Your greatest trait ...

Menendez: Your generosity.

Cisneros: Yes, I'm very generous. And everyone, if you think about your great trait, that's also your fatal flaw. I think that's true for every single person. So my father was very generous to a fault, and I have inherited his generous spirit. I really like rescuing and helping everyone. But it also is my fatal flaw because sometimes you forget to be generous to yourself, or you feel guilty.

Cisneros: I always feel guilty, because my passion is... I don't smoke, I don't do drugs, I don't do anything that's destructive, but I love fashion. So if I buy myself something, I feel very guilty. Like, "okay, now that same amount of that shoes, I got to go help someone in Go Fund Me" or "okay, you bought this piece of art, now you got to donate one." It's always like that. I always have this complete sense of like, "oh man, you're so lucky you bought that for you? Who else are you going to help now?"

Menendez: Sandra, your best advice to a Latina who is listening, who is still living her life with shame?

Cisneros: Oh wow. I think it's good to surround yourself, educate yourself with Latinas that are going to change you. And I mean painters like Nahui Olin and photographers like Flor Garduño. Learn your own history. Frida Kahlo is just one of a whole generation of post revolutionary women that are more liberated, and lived without shame, more than women now. So if you don't know your history, you're not going to get it at school, especially if you live in Texas. So you better go dig around and find out who you are. Find out who your ancestors are in the cultural sense. Get empowered. And once you know that these women lived with no resources or very little or difficult times and did extraordinary work, it'll give you animo, encouragement to find "what is it that makes me different from all these other women? And what is it that makes me, me? Okay. How can I put that out there in the work that I do?"

Menendez: Sandra, this was such a gift. Thank you so much for doing it.

Cisneros: You're very welcome, Alicia, thank you for listening and my gratitude for giving me this time to promote my new book. Gracias.

Menendez: Thank you as always for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer, and mixed this episode. We love hearing from you, it makes our day. Email us at ola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMS on Instagram, tweet us at *LatinatoLatina*. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, Latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember, please subscribe or follow us on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Good Pods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you share an episode, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

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