

(Music)

Sarika: Good morning! Thanks for listening to Between the Covers on KBOO, 90.7FM. I'm guest producer Sarika Mehta.

Sandra Cisneros is a novelist, poet, short story writer, and essayist. Her work includes the collection of vignettes, "The House on Mango Street." She has won numerous awards for her work including the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. Born and raised in Chicago, Sandra Cisneros carved her way as a powerful Latina writer in the 1980s. While her writing has been described with interesting terms such as "poetic yet accessible", Sandra simply claims that she is writing from the experience of growing with equal parts Spanish and English in her life.

This year, she published her latest short novel entitled "Have You Seen Marie?" This novel was illustrated by San Francisco-based artist, Ester Hernandez. This is the literal story of searching for a lost cat, but the metaphorical story of Sandra coping with the loss of her mother, managing grief, and serves as a farewell letter to her 20-year residence in San Antonio, Texas.

Sandra Cisneros and I began our conversation with the story behind her book.

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Sandra: Well, this really wasn't a book, it was a story that I wrote based on real Marie that came for a visit from Tacoma and she got lost. The owner obliged me to help her find it. It was a few months after my mother died, so I have to ... when you're dealing with a death, you really don't want to see anybody. Part of the reason why you don't want to see anyone is because you feel like a glass of water, filled all the way to the top. Any little motion or any wind can cause it to overflow. So you're always afraid that you're going to cry in front of someone and you won't be able to stop. They won't just be a little tears, it will be a tsunami of tears and to the point where you can't even utter a syllable.

I lived with that kind of fear. So, I didn't want to come out of my house. Yet, in real life, someone came to visit with their cat. Cat got lost, and from that experience of searching for this cat and coming out to the neighborhood and talking to people at a time when I was extremely sensitive and vulnerable, extremely agoraphobic, extremely frightened that I would burst into tears, I realized that I wasn't living in a state of grace, is that a way to call it when you have your heart broken wide open and yes, you're vulnerable to sorrow, but you're also vulnerable to immense joy, to immense communication with things of the spirit, and that was something I didn't realize until it was happening to me.

So this wasn't a book. It was an experience that happened to me that I wrote about as a short story. When I went away to my desk, I started embroidering people that were neighbors into the story because I'd lived in my house for 20 years. When you live one place for that long, you start realizing that death has visited not just you, but every house on the block. I started knitting their stories into this long scarf of people in the neighborhood.

I didn't realize when I was writing the story that it was going to be a little book. It was just a story. I took it on the road with me on my last book tour which was for the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of "House on Mango Street." When I go out on the road with a book that's 25-years old, I don't just want to read old work, I want to read something fresh. I would take out the story and close my reading with the story, "Have You Seen Marie?"

Something was happening when I read this story. The audience would get very quiet which to me is that sacred circle. It's doing its medicine. People would come up to me afterwards, just with their hearts broken open and thank me for the story. That's when I realized that it's needed to be its own little book. Something for someone who had their heart broken open and from a death, from a loss, and this would be the right medicine for them.

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Sarika: This story includes Sandra's friendship with San Francisco-based artist, Ester Hernandez who also lost her mother.

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Sandra: My friend Ester Hernandez who is a very famous painter, she is not a book illustrator. She lives in San Francisco and is very famous for her work. I just thought that she might want to join me on this project, collaborate. She'd lost her mother too. I thought we can make a little book that would help people that are in that time of mourning because sometimes, when someone is grieving, you don't know what to do. You just ... you say, "Give me a call, or if you need anything, I'm here," but they're not going to call you.

But they do need just the right words. They need just the right story. They need some direction of how to transform that heartbreak into a light. That's what this book is about, so that's why we made it into a little book instead of just a short story and a collection.

Sarika: Shifting gears a little bit, and talking again about your illustrator, Ester Hernandez, tell us about collaborating with her on this book, and how did this process work?

Sandra: You're not supposed to come to your publisher with your artist. You're supposed to say, "I want to do this book and propose it," and if you have a good agent, they'll sell the book and they arrange, they match, kind of like an arranged marriage. I've been doing books for a long time, over quarter of a century, and I have good batting average for selling my books. So they made an exception and allowed me to bring along this artist even though that's not how things are done.

Working with her, I had her come to San Antonio, Texas, where I currently live and she lives in San Francisco. I would walk the neighborhood with her. We just walked around and I was very bossy. I was like say, "Take a picture of that. See that plant? That's a Texas plant. We need that bird in here. How about that little girl across the street? Let's go run after her and see if she'll pose for us," so like that. Sometimes I'd have a grocery list of people that existed in this story that I wanted to photograph. Sometimes we would just chance on someone riding by in their motor scooter and I will hail them, and say, "That's my friend, Renee, the cook. Let's ask if he'll pose."

Sometimes it was just by chance we would see the reverend coming out of his house and I dash up to him and say, "I'm writing this story about the neighborhood. Could we possibly ask you if we could photograph you and possibly could I weave you into the story?" Some people, by chance, happen to come out at their house, and some people I knocked on their doors because I had written about them, and some people during the real search for the cat, we happen to meet.

In real life, you don't have the shape of a story. Sometimes you have the middle and sometimes you have the end or you only have the beginning. I had to work on shaping the story based on a real event and then I had to go back to my office and change it, like that. By the time Ester came to visit me, I had a great list of things I saw visually in my head. I made her get in the river and wade in the river with me, (laughs). The water comes up to our thigh. We went walking with my dogs, we photograph my dogs.

As Ester said, everyone was very cooperative - except for the cats. They were the only models that didn't want to be photographed and would run away. If we did photograph them, they looked spooked. (Laughs)

Sarika: Speaking of San Antonio, Texas, your current residence and as I understand it, this book is also your farewell letter to San Antonio and its community which is a substantial part of your book.

Sandra: Yes.

Sarika: Talk about that and the experience of moving to San Antonio.

Sandra: It was a detour that turned out to be my destiny. I think we have lots of detours that turn up to be our destiny. We think, "Oh no, I don't want to live there," and sure enough, you get the job and there you are living there. "Well, I'm only going to stay here for one year. I'm going to live in one year. I'm not staying here." Then 25 years later, you're still there. That's kind of what happened to me. I stayed there because of affordable housing as an artist and as a single woman, I had to think about that.

I rented houses or I rented garage apartments. I lived in little back apartments for \$200 a month from most of my life and then suddenly this house that I was looking at became available for friends of friends, and lo and behold, I could actually afford it which was something most astonishing, I never thought I'd own a house in my lifetime, not on a poet's salary. It was just the right time and so I bought that house, the house that I live in now for 20 years.

Sarika: There's a famous story about this house.

Sandra: Yes.

Sarika: Your wish of painting it purple...

Sandra: I didn't merely painted purple, I painted it periwinkle which was very different from purple.

Sarika: That is very different.

Sandra: People just don't know how to say periwinkle. They don't know so they just say purple and then people think it's this horrible shade of a giant grape, but it's not. It was a very beautiful shade and it just created a public uproar because I live in a historic area.

But you know, for me, I'm not a Native Texan. I'm from Chicago like you.

Sarika: Mm-hmm. (Agreement)

Sandra: I travel to Mexico often, very much enamored with Mexican architecture and Mexican colors. I thought that living in Texas, that I finally found the sky from my childhood light. I thought I was doing something that would be very Mexican, very much appreciated in a town that has restaurants, painted Mexican colors, and has the river walk with lots of Mexican colors.

But there's a difference that the city had about colors when they were selected by architects and then colors when the natives themselves painted their homes. This discrepancy was brought to their attention when I had my issues with the house. Of course, it created this big public dialogue and an international dialogue with communities as far away as Australia looking at what happens when the natives get restless and start

claiming their own historical legacy because my issue was that we were living in a town named *San Antonio*, not Saint Anthony, that there had been a presence of people of Mexican, and Spanish from Spain and Mexico, descent and our history was not being included when we looked at color palettes for historical homes.

That was what shook everything up. Actually, the color of the people on that panel has since changed. There's a lot more color in my neighborhood and another historical neighboring communities.

Even though I wasn't keen on having a battle, but I do know my history and I know when there's historical exclusion and I didn't intend to open up a can of worms, but I certainly wasn't going to be intimidated about history when it comes to the Mexican presence in a town named San Antonio.

Sarika: At the end of it all, what happened?

Sandra: At the end of it all, the urban planner decided to be King Solomon and to have me resubmit the color of my house because two years had passed and he said, "Please, resubmit the colors of your house, the colors that it has faded to now." I did and that was deemed historically relevant and "Get out of here and I never want to see you again." (Laughs) We said, "Okay, we're out of here." When it was time to repaint the house because it had faded from periwinkle to work-shirt blue, I said, "Well, I think I'm going to paint it a Mexican pink," because that was one of the colors that was documented in my neighborhood from the 1880s, and I did. My house is now Mexican pink.

Sarika: Now that you're leaving San Antonio, how do you feel about leaving the house that caused the uproar? (Laughs)

Sandra: I didn't mean for the house to cause the uproar. I was just painting my house a Mexican color. I didn't think that was a bad thing, but unfortunately, it is in San Antonio. It's a community that's very colonized. I believe, a community that doesn't know its own history cannot defend itself. It has a lot of Texas history imposed on it by people that came in from outside, but the indigenous people and the native people don't know their history. Some people do, that are educated, but not your average schoolchild. So it's important for creating a dialogue about the presence of native people prior to the European discovering us, you see, that was the real battle.

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Sarika: You're listening to Between the Covers on KBOO, 90.7FM. I'm Sarika Mehta and this is an interview with award-winning author, Sandra Cisneros. We were discussing the inspiration behind her latest book,

“Have You See Marie?” In the second half, we talked about her experiences as a pioneer Latina writer.

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Sarika: How do you feel about these different terms (“poetic, yet accessible”)?

Sandra: I don’t have anything to do with those terms. I think my stories are based very much on spoken storytelling and poetic storytelling is very much Mexican way of speaking, a lot of ways of looking at the world and Mexican Spanish is a very much tied into an indigenous worldview. I don’t see my stories as trying to be experimental as much as listening very closely to the spoken word. Sometimes mixing the two languages, or sometimes adapting the syntax of Spanish and imposing that on the English to come up with something new in English letters.

I didn’t do this consciously. I grew up with a mother who spoke English to us and a father who spoke Spanish to us at the same time. So I learned both languages at the same time. But I realize after I wrote my first book, “House on Mango Street,” that if you translate that book into Spanish, it sounds like it was written in Spanish. That’s because the Mexican Spanish, I think perhaps, because of its indigenous roots has a very... spiritual way, a very kind of way of looking at the animated world in a way that English does not.

Every language has its beauty and its gifts. Every language has a way of looking at the world, and of course, the more languages you know, the more you learn about your own. I feel very lucky that I’ve had both. They each illuminate a different worldview. I wish I spoke five languages or all the languages in the world. But I find that each one enriches the other. I think English is a wonderful language for business and that’s why it’s used universally. Spanish is a wonderful language to speak to children or to speak to your lover because it’s a very affectionate and loving language. It works very well with diminutives.

So, you know, every culture has some different way of looking at the world and if we weren’t so intimidated about learning languages we would understand other cultures better. We would understand what they value and why language, maybe in one language, one word exist that doesn’t exist in another. It tells you a lot about that community.

For writers, we love words. We pick up words away like probably the way some people pick up rocks as souvenirs. (Laughs)

Sarika: You’re considered one of the pioneers of Latina writers and you’ve been quoted, “I’ve always thought that my literary antecedents were not writers but weavers,” so who do you look up to for ... who did you look up to for guidance and inspiration and motivation and talk about “the weavers”.

Sandra: My grandmother and grandfather on my mother's side were very humble people that came from a small community outside of a small community in a rural area in Central Mexico, very near to where I'm going to be living, actually, for a year. These were people that fled the violence of the Mexican revolution. They were farmers and they followed the railroad in Mexico and then followed the railroads in the U.S., to Flagstaff and Kansas City, and wound up, of course, in the railroad town Chicago.

They did not learn how to read or write until they were old people, until they were elders. I always think about that when I think about my grandmother and her mother and her mother's mother. I'm always looking when I go to Mexico to the women and the kind of work that indigenous women do, and very complex weaving of baskets or weaving of textiles. I'm especially enamored with textiles and *rebozos*, the shawls.

I always collect Mexican textiles especially, but I think about the complexity of weaving and the threads that one has to pull together to create patterns, and that to me is like writing a novel. You have to keep all these strands together and make sure they don't get knotted up and the more beautiful the work, the more labor-intensive it is. I always go with that sense of looking at what women are doing who are not literate women, women who look like my mother's family, more indigenous-looking women.

I just imagine, "Wow, if I had been born here, imagine if my family had not fled the Mexican Revolution a hundred years ago. I would be here perhaps weaving too." I'm always astonished that the extraordinary migrations that people of the Americas have made across land masses, and of course, it's global migration. This has been happening since the beginning of civilization, that we've been moving around. You only have to do this DNA test to see that everybody is a migrant, and it just breaks your heart when you think about it.

I still don't know where that's going to take me, that realization. But I know that my year of traveling is part of improving my Spanish and finding out more about this side of my family that I know very little about.

Sarika: From all of these stories woven in and out, coming now to students in the classroom. How do you feel knowing that your work, at least for "The House on Mango Street," is a required reading for students across this country?

Sandra: I don't think about that. If I thought about that, I'd never be able to write another word again. (Laughs) If I thought who's going to read it, that's the ... well, that would just filled me with so much fear. I don't think about that when I'm writing a story. In fact, I meditate and make a conscious effort to not be afraid, be as fearless as my ancestors that did the migrations, and

had so many children and worked on the railroad with their hands because they couldn't read or write.

I ask that - their strength and I ask for humility because if you think about, "Well, my book is taught here. My book is taught there," you can get a big, fat head, a big fat head. As my mother would say, "His head is so fat, he can kiss his behind." That's just kind of brilliant if you think about it. A lot of writers' heads are so fat they can kiss their behinds.

I have to remind myself, "Well, so what?" If you can remain humble, then your writing will be good and serve a purpose. As soon as you start thinking that you're great, you've won all these awards, you'll lose it.

Sarika: In the afterword on page 89, I'll read from the book itself, it says, "In Mexico, they say when someone you love dies, a part of you dies with them. But they forget to mention that a part of them is born in you, not immediately, I've learned, but eventually and gradually. It's an opportunity to be reborn. When you are in between birth, there should be some way to indicate to all, 'Beware, I am not as I was before. Handle me with care.'"

Can you discuss, or can you describe what this is talking about and your experiences with this?

Sandra: When my father died, I really did feel like a part of me died with him. Eventually, I found that he was born in me. There's a kind of in-between state when you're like a snake without a skin that's very uncomfortable, but so wonderful when you come back and are reborn and you realize that your departed is alive in you. Maybe alive in the sense that you've learned to develop some part of their personality, of their strength, and maybe also alive if you're lucky enough and have the abilities that you are sensitive enough to ... sensitive enough to feel their presence. Not everyone has that ability to feel when a spirit comes and some people are gifted to have that presence.

It's hard to talk about it with people who have never had the experience of a spirit visiting them. I was very lucky to experience both my father's love and my mother's spirit after they departed to calm me and to know that love doesn't die when someone dies. You can continue to give and receive love after they have departed. It's such a wonderful thing. It takes away some of the pain of their not being there in the physical presence.

Sarika: What you are experiencing, you also wrote in the afterword that a doctor wanted to prescribe antidepressants for you to cope with grief, and you are choosing to take writing and this experience instead of numbing the pain.

Sandra: Yes. I didn't need to be numb. I always need to feel all my emotions, good and bad. That's how I write, and I write my way through them. That's why



we need art because art is the process of transforming all emotions, whether good or bad, negative or positive, destructive or creative to transform them, to compost them, until you get an illumination, until you understand things in a different way than you did from the beginning. You have to write and write and sometimes you're writing a poem or story or a journal note, the same one over months and years until you come to a new way of looking at it.

That's the wonderful gift that art gives us and it's the real reason why we create art, not necessarily to sell or become famous, just after the fact if you're lucky. The real reason why we need art is so that we won't have to take the pills or we don't have to numb ourselves with alcohol or violence. We can transform an experience that is very debilitating and grow spiritually so that we can graduate to the next spiritual grade.

Sarika: Sandra Cisneros, thank you so much for chatting with me on KBOO and thank you for coming all the way to Portland.

Sandra: Oh, I love it. I love Portland. There's good chocolate here.

Sarika: That's true. (Laughs)

Sandra: There's beautiful trees, and I love dogs and this is a very dog-friendly, tree-friendly town.

Sarika: Thank you so much.

Sandra: Thank you.

(Music)

Sarika: That was award-winning Latina writer, Sandra Cisneros. Her book is called "Have You Seen Marie?" and is a gift to those coping with the loss of a loved one. Sandra's accolades include the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, the National Endowment for the Arts and the American Book Awards to name a few. You can learn more about her work at [sandracisneros.com](http://sandracisneros.com). I'm Sarika Mehta and this has been Between the Covers on KBOO. Thanks for listening.