



Caramelo

Sandra Cisneros

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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.

Caramelo Details

Date : Published April 30th 2013 by Vintage (first published 2002)

ISBN :

Author : Sandra Cisneros

Format : Kindle Edition 464 pages

Genre : Fiction, Novels, Historical, Historical Fiction



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From Reader Review *Caramelo* for online ebook

Elizabeth Pinborough says

Through the main storyteller Celaya, Cisneros has created an epic Chicana novel that deals with issues of language, class, race, gender, family, and being on the border of two cultures. She also brings into consideration the issue of truth-telling versus story-telling. Are they mutually exclusive? If the story is a lie should it matter? These issues only make the story more thought provoking.

My favorite aspect of the book is that it deals with the formation of the young female identity. "How before my body wasn't my body. I didn't have a body. I was a being as close to a spirit as a spirit. I was a ball of light floating across the planet. I mean the me I was before puberty, that red Rio Bravo you have to carry yourself over. I don't know how it is with boys. I've never been a boy. But girls somewhere between the ages of, say, eight and puberty, girls forget they have bodies. It's the time she has trouble keeping herself clean, socks always drooping, knees pocked and bloody, hair crooked as a broom. She doesn't look in mirrors. She isn't aware of being watched. . . . There isn't the sense of the female body's volatility, its rude weight, the nuisance of dragging it about. There isn't the world to bully you with it, bludgeon you, condemn you to a life sentence of fear. It's the time when you look at a young girl and notice she is her ugliest, but at the same time, at her happiest. She is a being as close to a spirit as a spirit" (433-34).

Although the hybrid Spanish/English language Cisneros uses is alienating to her Anglo readers (as it is intended to be), everyone can relate to the humanness of this story--its depth and breadth, its messyness, and its triumphant moments.

April says

Just what you'd expect from Cisneros--vivid language that leaves you with fragments of flavors, colors, sounds, and sensations. You travel to and from Chicago, Mexico, and San Antonio with the characters and you grow to love them along the way. What I didn't like was the ongoing metafictional conversation between the narrator and the grandmother about memory and facts, and how they are altered for the greater truth of the story. Why do authors writing autobiographical novels feel the need to justify this? It's one thing to call a book non-fiction if it isn't. But this is a novel--a beautiful and memorable story.

Gina Gwen says

I really enjoyed this book. It took me a long time to read it because I would get through a chapter (all chapters are very short) and have to reminisce about my own personal experiences. Cisneros brings to the forefront issues that many Latinas face. Annoyance of metiche family members and crazy tales they tell, but also a deep love for family. She sprinkled in Spanish words I hadn't heard in years, that I grew up with but I just don't hear in Austin. I did realize I am a "Texican" . . . ha ha, I'm not quite Mexican, but I'm not really a full American either (and I mean culture-wise, not citizen/legality-wise). This is just about the only book I have read that really hit home to my own experiences, to my life. If you enjoyed this book, I would recommend "How to be a Chicana Role Model" and "Chicana Falsa" by Michele Serros.

Ana Ovejero says

A significant feature in Sandra Cisneros's novels is the colourful language, the unforgettable characters and the unique settings. Her stories are narratives about strong women, the ones who struggle their whole lives to make the people they love happy.

In this book we find the protagonist 'Lala' Reyes and her family crossing the border between their homes in USA to Mexico, where Little grandfather and Awful grandmother wait for them.

During those summers, we see the relationship between the children and the adults, the tales the latter told the little ones when they ask questions about their family history. When Lala tries to understand the story of Awful grandmother, she enters into the land of unbelievable stories, unreliable fantasies, sophisticated lies and intriguing lives.

A multigenerational narrative that makes the reader question their own past and how the identity of their family and, at the same time, their own selves was created.

Misha says

"Tell me a story, even if it's a lie." Simple words standing alone on an otherwise empty page. I like this beginning.

Pg. 21 -- I just finished the part about the father giving away Lala's Bobby doll while she watches, horrified. How is it that parents never understand the attachment that children form to that one special toy? The one that's battered and broken and torn, but is loved intensely not despite of its flaws, but because of them. Mine was "Ellie," a gray corduroy elephant my mother made for my 5th birthday. Ellie had black flannel patches for eyes and on his ears, and a wind up music box in his back. Ellie was my constant companion. I slept with him hugged to my chest at night for years. Ellie was the one toy I carried all the way through childhood, through my teen years, into college -- despite my mother's best efforts to rip him from me.

When I was 13 or so, she wanted to give Ellie to the little boy who lived next door. I refused, so she made him his own Ellie using the same pattern, but a green floral print fabric -- far inferior to the original. But behind my back, she cannibalized Ellie's music box, ripped it from his back, leaving behind a gaping wound I lovingly sewed. There were other rips and tears over the years. I sewed them all.

My mother tried to throw Ellie away a few times, but I always rescued him. She eventually got the hint and stopped trying. My mother never had any respect for the things I held dear. My emotions were disposable things to her.

Ellie traveled with me to Boston when I left home for the first time at age 17 to go off to college. He came back to Ohio with me a year later. It had been years since I'd hugged him to my chest in my sleep, but he remained a fixture in my life -- the one true constant. But as so often happens as children become adults, I ended up losing him through my own neglect. Somehow he ended up in a box as I was moving out of my very first apartment without roommates. I'm sure I intended to bring him with me, but in the frenzy and

stress of moving, I threw the box out, thinking it contained only junk. It was later I realized I had lost him. I was tinged with sadness, but eventually Ellie faded into the hazy memories of childhood. I hadn't thought of him for years until reading that passage in *Caramelo* tonight. And now I'm filled with regret that my loyal companion met such an ignoble end. I can only hope some child came along and found Ellie in that box I so carelessly threw out, rescued him, and showed him as much love as I once did. I hope he lives in some child's home still.

Jessica says

I borrowed *Caramelo* from the library in order to read it for a book club. I'd read *The House on Mango Street* years ago for a class, but what little I remember is that I wasn't especially impressed - but then I'm not even entirely sure I didn't just skim the book; it was one of those classes where you could get away with that kind of thing.

Caramelo is the chronicle of several generations of the Reyes family, Mexicans recently transplanted to Chicago. The story is narrated by Celaya (Lala), the youngest daughter of the oldest son, and it illustrates the idea that the threads of life are so closely interwoven that every little side story of every member of one's family impacts one's own life. Thus, the novel is told in mini-chapter vignettes, some as short as a single page, which jump backward and forward in time.

I wanted to like *Caramelo*. Sandra Cisneros is a good storyteller, it's just that her story doesn't go anywhere. The book is over 400 pages long but doesn't really start to feel like a coherent story till the last hundred pages or so. There are moments where the book is really ON - when Inocencio is in prison with the ventriloquist, when the Grandmother reappears while her son is dying in the hospital - but they're few and far between. Most of the time it just seemed like little anecdotes that more often than not didn't propel the story toward anything in particular.

Part of the problem is that the book is separated into three sections with very distinct tones. In the first, Lala is a child, remembering her family's trips to Mexico in her youth. In the middle, the focus shifts to Lala's grandmother, who interrupts the narrative repeatedly to point out all the ways Lala is being untrue to the story. I found the addition of the grandmother's voice to be distracting and unnecessary; I know Cisneros wants to make it clear that the art of storytelling involves lies and fabrications, but I didn't need to be bludgeoned with it for a third of the book.

The final third focuses on Lala's teenage years, and this is the part of the book I found most engaging. Lala has a distinct voice and she focuses on a coherent stream of events, finally making me able to understand and sympathize not only with her character, but with other characters in the story as well. I feel like I didn't begin to get to know the characters until this last stretch, and I kept being surprised with revelations at the last minute ("oh, Lala and her mother don't get along with each other?") that really weren't made clear in the first three hundred pages of the book.

It was useful for me to read this book at this particular point in my life, because I've just begun taking Spanish classes, and Cisneros uses a lot of Spanish words and phrases in her text. I also enjoyed that part of the book was set in Chicago - I could recognize street names and locales, which made the book feel a little more personal. However, those are little details that make the book more interesting for me - on the whole, the book is too long and meandering (with no ultimate sense of satisfaction or purpose) that I wouldn't recommend it very strongly.

Jez says

If i could give it 10 stars I would. I loved it. Felt like home. Like hot cocoa and a tamal at Cafe Tacuba. I agree with another reviewer here, that the format will make or break it for you. But there is something about that pace, the long and the short, the truth and the better-than-the-truth, that is embedded in not only her writing, but the chicana/mexican culture as well. It doesn't straddle the border--the long road between Chicago and D.F., it is the border. That spot where things come together but never meet.

Edith says

This book is simply stunning. It's the most real book I have ever read, with exquisite lines and important truths that need to be told.

It's divided into 3 parts, and I will not lie, the 2nd part read a little slow, but it was an overall beautiful and captivating novel, and the 3rd part made up for this slowness.

This should honestly be mandatory reading for all.

Sonja says

One of my top favorite books of all times. And not because Latina discourse is The Thing right now; I think most people never really get past the first 50 pages (including those academics who should know better) because it's challenging and -- I believe -- helpfully marginalizing to the Anglophone reader. The plot is circuitous, anti-teleological, and thoroughly rasquache in the political sense of the term. This could be the best Chicana novel, defining the new Chicano experience, a perspective refreshingly divergent from the old-school Chicano machismo and looking instead toward a new identity, a new narrative.

Jennifer says

This book is beautifully written and it's no surprise since Cisneros is a poet. It's worth reading for the descriptions alone. I always enjoy exploring other cultures through literature and really appreciate the way she lets us see into the lives of Mexican immigrants in the US and the 2nd generation children born here. There is an overarching storyline and some great storytelling moments though this is fairly loose as a novel. There are a lot of tangents and stories within stories. It holds together but if you prefer plot driven fiction this isn't for you. The central image is a finely woven shaw of many strands that was left incomplete when the great-grandmother making it died. It was so complex that no one was ever able to finish it. While I appreciate this image and the way in which the novel is braided out of many stories and experiences there are ways in which the book is not quite as satisfying as it might be. Nevertheless it's a fascinating read.

Dominic says

Caramelo is a most unusual book. It is part-memoir, part-fiction, part-retelling of *The House on Mango Street*, and part-dream. Knowing very well what I do of Sandra Cisneros and her generally small body of work, I can never quite tell where the line between *Caramelo*'s main character (Lala Reyes) and Cisneros herself actually is. Several incidents in this novel even mirror Esperanza's tale and those of her poems, muddying even more the line between fact and fiction and more fiction.

When I heard Cisneros speak back in 2003, she insisted that Lala was a fictional rendering, but she left me wondering about memory itself and how it works. Aren't we all fictional characters in the novels of our own memories? At the end of *Caramelo*, she writes, "La Divina Providencia is the most imaginative writer. Plot lines convolute and spiral, lives intertwine, coincidences collide, seemingly random happenings are laced with knots, figure eights, and double loops, designs more intricate than the fringe of a silk *rebozo*. No, I couldn't make this up. Nobody could make up our lives." God, I love that--don't you? But at the same time, Cisneros proves that we can, in fact, make up/revise/fictionalize our own histories. We can tell, what she calls, "healthy lies" because even in our wildest literary inventions, we find truth.

That said, *Caramelo* is a challenging novel to get through. There is no driving, single narrative to propel the reader, and as a result I usually end up reading it in chunks and then setting it down because I get sucked into another book. Her bold use of Spanish diction/bilingualism doesn't bother me, but I've heard that this has alienated other Anglo readers. I love the characters, but I feel at a distance from them at certain points in the novel. For example, Lala is at times the main character and at times merely an observer.

Sandra Cisneros, though, is one of my favorite writers. Her prose is so musical, forever rhythmic, and always a surprise. Her way of describing even the most mundane things makes everything seem fresh and remarkable. She has probably had one of the biggest impacts on my own writing style, and for this reason, I will read *Caramelo* again and again to hear the musicality of the written word and wonder if I could ever create something from the shards of my life so utterly beautiful.

Lauren says

I really loved this book, and I was completely surprised that I did. When I'm handed a book and the summary from the person giving it to me is prefaced by "well, it's really slow at first...", let's just say I don't have high expectations. I can be a lazy reader, but this book was completely worth the investment. I happened to read it on a quiet weekend and I think that's exactly what you need. A few hours to delve into it and I was hooked. Cisneros' writing is vivid and spare, but never pretentious or obvious. I really liked the short chapters that didn't necessarily flow chronologically. It made me pay attention and get my bearings at the beginning of each little story, and then sink into the vignettes that so happened to all connect together. All I can say is - give yourself a vacation or a rainy day to start this book, and you won't be disappointed. I've really never read anything like it.

Jan says

Reading this book is like gulping a shot of high octane espresso. The writing is incredibly vivid and full of energy, sometimes it leaves you almost breathless. Caramelo is the story of a large Mexican-American family, covering several generations. Told from the point of view of Lala, the youngest daughter, we travel from Mexico City to Chicago and then to San Antonio, Texas. Along the way, we learn the story of Lala's grandparents, parents, and finally Lala herself. This book bursts with life, sometimes requiring the reader to slow down in order to fully appreciate the crowded canvas.

E says

This book was definitely worthwhile, but Cisneros seems to have been a bit overwhelmed by the task of composing an entire novel. She has many, many gorgeous lines strewn about the book tied to swift dialogue and gripping mini-stories, interrupted by simply cute moments, but the plot and her point are rather blurry if not craggy. She seems to be able to create enough momentum for a certain scene, but she doesn't give much reason for what all the scenes have in common. And while it is an obvious tribute to her own coming of age in a fascinating family, the end is unbearably schmaltzy - especially the last line. It is disjointed and directionless in all the ways "The House on Mango Street" is not.

Since I absolutely loved said novella and "Woman Hollering Creek," I can't help but wonder if her greatest talent lies in shortstories.

Andrea Poulain says

<http://divagaciones-de-una-poulain.bl...>

Nunca me había encontrado con un libro que hablara de manera tan sencilla de mi cultura, la mexicana, y no fuera de alguien de aquí. Sandra Cisneros es descendiente de Mexicanos nacida en Estados Unidos, chicana, como quien dice. Hay mucha gente que cree que la cultura es la misma o muy parecida, que al fin y al cabo es latina, pero hay algo que cambia. Los hijos de mexicanos nacidos del otro lado de la frontera no conocen México muchas veces y hablan español con acento. La diferencia cultural es brutal, porque no comen la misma comida, aunque sea parecida, no conocen el picante de verdad, no festejan el 15 y el 16 de Septiembre, sino en Cinco de Mayo, tradición puramente chicana. Este libro es sobre eso: sobre estar al borde de dos culturas y ver como Lala trata de entender sus raíces.

La primera parte de la historia nos cuenta las aventuras de Lala en los veranos en México, en la casa de Awful Grandmother y un viaje a Acapulco. El reparto lo acaban de completar Aunty Light-Skin, Uncle Baby y Uncle Fat-Face, además de todos sus primos y sus seis hermanos. Por la época, imagino que estamos en los cincuentas o en los setentas. Todo el libro Awful Grandmother no ha parado de recordarme a las historias que he leído de mi propia abuela. Por eso, quizá, aunque es un personaje que no está hecho para agradar del todo, me ha parecido muy cercano. Reconozco ese clasismo Mexicano de querer parecer más español, esa celebración a las raíces indígenas que empieza después de la Revolución, pero en la que los indios siguen siendo discriminados, apartados y tratados, como diría Lala: like shit. Lo reconozco todo. Los tamales, el mole, los rebozos de bolita de Santa María del Río, San Luis Potosi, Acapulco. Lala lo pinta como un mundo

extraño, pero a mí todas las descripciones aún en inglés con muchísimas palabras en español y expresiones derivadas del español me recuerdan algo que ya conozco: es el mundo en el que vivo: hace 50 años.

Después, la historia retrocede y nos cuenta cómo se conocieron Little Grandfather y Awful Grandmother. Hay quien dice que es un recurso para poder empatizar con los dos personajes, en especial con la desagradable abuela. En esa historia son sólo Soledad Reyes y Narciso Reyes. Primos demasiado lejanos que ni siquiera lo saben. Narciso es hijo de un sevillano que da clases de música y una mujer que vive sumida en sus propias ínfulas, convencida de que pertenece a la alta sociedad. Nos narra los días de la Revolución y la Guerra en la ciudad de México. La Décena Trágica en la que Narciso perdió tres costillas y la entrada de los Zapatistas y de los Villistas a la ciudad.

Después volvemos al futuro, donde Lala ya no es una niña que ve a sus papás y a su abuela pelear en Acapulco. Estamos en Chicago y la abuela se ha mudado con ellos, ella está apunto de entrar en High School y está intentando entender su adolescencia. Es demasiado grande para su edad, no demasiado bonita y demasiado tímida. Está rodeada de hombres y su madre no es alguien de confianza. Vive en un departamento con otras ocho personas donde es imposible tener privacidad. Es la parte que más lejana me sonó de toda la historia, pero aún así soy capaz de reconocer lo mexicano en toda la historia.

Me encantó el libro porque, además, Sandra Cisneros escribe de una manera muy poética, sin sonar rebuscada o forzada. La historia es simple y la narradora, Lala, sabe como llegar al corazón de los lectores. Pienso que este libro traducido pierde mucho. Muchas de las expresiones están en español, así que hay partes escritas con mucho mucho spanglish y traducido no se aprecia ese detalle. Otro detallazo es que nada viene traducido en los pies de página, sino que los pies de página, que no son muchos ni exagerados, traen detalles de la historia, geografía y cultura en general de México.

Hay una cita, en especial, que quiero dedicarle a todos aquellos que creen conocer el estereotipo físico latino. A todas esas personas que dicen que alguien rubio y de ojos claros no es latina, o que alguien de piel demasiado oscura tampoco lo es. Sólo en México tenemos una variedad impresionante:

— Hey, hippie girl, you Mexican? On both sides?

— Front & back, I say.

— You sure don't look Mexican.

A part of me wants to kick their ass. A part of me feels sorry for their stupid ignorant selves.

But if you've never been farther south than Nuevo Laredo, how the hell would you know what Mexicans are supposed to look like, right?

There are the green-eyed Mexicans. The rich blond Mexicans. The Mexicans w/the faces of Arab sheiks. The Jewish Mexicans. The big-footed-as-a-German Mexicans. The leftover-French Mexicans. The chaparrito compact Mexicans. The Tarahumara tall-as-a-desert-saguaro Mexicans. The Mediterranean Mexicans. The Mexicans w/Tunisian eyebrows. The negrito Mexicans of the double coasts. The Chinese Mexicans. The curly-haired, freckled-faced, red-headed Mexicans. The Lebanese Mexicans. Look, I don't know what you're talking about when you say I don't look Mexican. I am Mexican. Even though I was born on the U.S. side of the border.

En fin, esta reseña ya me esta quedando demasiado larga, así que simplemente me queda decirles ya que el libro es muy recomendable y que a mí me encantó. Realmente es un libro que vale muchísimo la pena y Sandra Cisneros ha resultado ser todo un diamante en bruto.

