

>> From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

>> This is Francisco Macias [phonetic] at the Library of Congress. Late September will mark the 12th year that booklovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, DC, to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. The festival, which is free and open to the public, will last two days this year, Saturday, September 22nd and Sunday, September 23rd, 2012. The festival will take place between 9th and 14th Streets on the National Mall, rain or shine. Hours will be from 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. on Saturday, the 22nd, and from noon to 5:30 p.m. on Sunday, the 23rd. For more details, visit [www.loc.gov/bookfest](http://www.loc.gov/bookfest). And now, it is my pleasure to introduce the award-winning American writer, Sandra Cisneros whose forthcoming book, "Have You Seen Marie" is a moving frame story of sorts that is lovingly embroidered and features a visual and textual montage of portraits that, as Sandra puts it so well, tell another story about the people of San Antonio, of cultures colliding and creating something new, folks with blonde hair, a German last name, a Spanish first name inherited from a Mexican grandmother several generations back, Tex-Mexicans with Arab and indigenous features and a Scottish surname, ultra-devout Catholics with Sephardic roots, stories the Alamo forgets to remember. Her book, "Have You Seen Marie" will be available for purchase on October 2nd. Sandra Cisneros is best known for her first novel, "The House on Mango Street," which has become an essential work of the ever-evolving American literary cannon in middle schools, high schools, universities, and other institutions of higher learning throughout the United States. She has received many awards for her work, some of which include National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships for both fiction and poetry, the Lannan Literary Award, the American Book Award, The Texas Medal of the Arts, and MacArthur Fellowship. Her work has been translated into more than 20 languages. Her second novel, "Caramelo" has been awarded the Premio Napoli and has been nominated for other awards numerous times throughout the world. She is the founder of the Alfredo Cisneros del Moral and the Macondo Foundations, which serve creative writers. Truly, it is impossible to do justice and capture the depth and breadth of an author with such an extensive literary presence. So without further ado, Sandra, thank you so much for joining us.

>> Thank you for inviting me.

>> All right, so let's get on with the first question. Tell us a bit about your forthcoming work, "Have You Seen Marie?" I just have to say that I found it very moving. It spoke to me, although I may be biased because I am a blue-eyed Mexican of Sephardic ancestry who grew up in South Texas and the parent of two tuxedo cats.

>> Well, I guess my story turned into a book. It really was a story that I wrote when I had my heart broken open by my mother's death and it was a story that was a spoken story. I was writing it and shaping it as I told it out loud. I was on a book tour for the 25th anniversary of "The House on Mango Street," but my heart was broken up from the recent death of my mother, so I started reading while I was on the road, a story still in progress. And reading it out loud was helpful for me to move from that place of sadness to light and it was also helpful for people in the

audience who were grieving for whatever heartbreak they had. So I thought that the story had a resonance and a purpose and it could be useful to people. So I considered it as being a story that could turn into a book. And I thought of my friend Ester Hernandez is the artist. She had lost her mother and shared the story with her and she was moved. So I thought well maybe Ester would like to do the pictures, which was totally the reverse way you're supposed to do a book. You're supposed to take the book to your publisher and they match you with an arranged illustrator, kind of like an arranged marriage, but Ester and I have been friends for a long time. I'm a big admirer of her work. She says that I asked her five times to do the illustrations. I don't know if I asked her five times but probably I did. Eventually she said okay, without knowing what she was getting into because she's not a book illustrator. She's a fine artist. A lot of work and several years later, now we have this book based on this story I was telling several times and, you know, the story changed from when I originally wrote it. I started incorporating people into the story, either visually or in the text. Sometimes I would include neighbors. Ester would come to visit, I'd say, well, let's photograph Helen across the street or let's go catch the-- there's the reverend, he's about to get in his car, let's go ask him if he would be photographed for this project. And people were very willing. The only unwilling models were the cats. You know how cats are.

>> Yes.

>> And everybody else was very amiable and, you know, they didn't know what we were doing. They were like, oh yeah, okay, fine. They trusted me and, you know, and eventually as it turns out, the Reverend Giovanni [phonetic] passed away and his family is very grateful that we were able to document him in the photograph and include him in both the story and the epilogue. So I feel as if the book served many purposes. Most important, it helped me to move from a place where I was feeling very depressed and coming to terms with my mother's presence in my life, her spiritual presence, as opposed to simply her absence.

>> That's beautiful, the way that you make a connection between, you know, the healing aspect and memorializing someone in this work and I think that is what comes through in it. My next question is, beyond a nostalgic and thematic connection to Mexico and to Mexican-American spaces, do you feel connected to the literature of Mexico and Latin America ? How so or why not?

>> Well, you know, I can't say that I'm an expert on anybody's literature, not even the US. I read an eclectic mix of genres and books and, of course, I am very much influenced by some writers in Latin America but I don't think of myself as a scholar or knowing everything. I don't try to read everything that comes out. I generally move the opposite direction from what everyone's reading. If everyone's reading it, then I don't to read it and I'm kind of [inaudible], you know, stubborn that way. If it's on a best sellers' list, I can't possibly want to read that and I miss out because of this prejudice. I miss out on some good books but they come to me eventually. I just don't read them when everyone else is reading them. So, you know, I have my biases like that. I feel as if the books I'm looking for will come to me and all books are

medicine. The books I write are medicine and, you know, I will draw near me the books that I need for this time in my life that that prescription will find me. So I don't say a scholar of Latin American literature but I love world literature a great deal. I'm always looking for writers that might speak to whatever it is I'm dealing with at that time in my life.

>> Well, that's very good and I'm certain that the world appreciates that perspective. You're hailed as one of the leading voices of Chicano literature but in addition to seeing your work as part of a literary tradition that is tied to a particular culture and geography, is there a movement that further defines your work?

>> Well, I guess that would be a question you would have to ask some literary scholar, you know. I am what I am but I don't study my own work. I write my own work to try to examine and navigate my way through my life. But I think perhaps at this time in my life at 57, I'm finding my bearing, reading a lot of work that has spoken roots, a lot of indigenous cultures or cultures that may not be indigenous but that were transformed from the spoken onto the written page, you know, fairytales, mythology, stories like that, that were spoken and then recorded and passed down from generation. I'm very intrigued by spoken literatures and probably because so much of my own culture's background, you know, we have in our roots the spoken text and spoken literatures and I'm fascinated with that right now, but I've always been to some degree. I think if you're fascinated with fairytales and mythology, you are looking at words that were preserved and handed down by word of mouth.

>> And I think that that plant of the oral tradition and fairytales, I think is a great segue for our next question. Looking back at yourself as a young writer, what were some of your earliest wishes for your work and have these come true?

>> Oh, well, my earliest wishes, since I was a poet, primarily was that I would be able to continue writing for the rest of my life, that I'd make my living, of course, by a day job but that I wouldn't lose my path and that I would write in the evening or on weekends or whenever I could and that the most I aspired to was to get the respect from writers I admired. If I could be blurb'd and recognized by, you know, my heroes, that was a wonderful thing. I dreamed of getting blurb'd by Studs Terkel, there's a documenter of spoken word, and Elena Poniatowska and Dorothy Allison, you know, just many writers that I admired and I thought, [inaudible], wouldn't it be cool to be blurb'd by Guadalupe [inaudible]. There's so many people that I admired, Gary Soto, you know, just on and on. So those writers that to me, you know, had more illustrious career, I thought that's the best I could get, if I could get a blurb from writers whose work I admired.

>> Thank you for your candor on that. And now to our last question. Based on my reading of "Have You Seen Marie," I think I know the answer to this question. When literary critics enter the realm of literary analysis, some shy away from biographical criticism, now if we consider Oscar Wilde's adage, "life imitates art far more than art imitates life," tell us about your creative experience as a writer and to what extent your works are autobiographical.

>> Well, I think that people presume so much of what I write is my life and that's true. I take stands but I have to say that I take liberties too. So there's a great confusion as to what has happened to me and what is fiction and what's poetry and what's nonfiction. I'm pretty clear about saying, okay, this is based on my real life and then I added characters from my childhood and then I started manipulating the setting to say this is a novel, and the new book is based on a real incident but it's not precisely as it happened. I think the people who were with me that the real [inaudible] would tell you it didn't happen like the book except in my imagination. You know, I truly allowed myself to be illustrated in the book and to talk about it as a story based on something that happened to me but then I had to take my literary imagination and go deeper into the story and make the story transcend reality. I had to use my imagination and wanted the story to speak to my own personal grief about my mother and her death and I say it's based on my life there but I also allowed myself to start including people in my neighborhood who weren't there the day that we looked for the cat or the weeks that we looked for the cat, and I also, you know, wanted to be able to do something that I liked so much and the stories that I admire and I wanted to have the river speak. Allowing the river to speak made the story move into a spiritual realm and to a magical place, so I was very happy with that. That happened in my office, not on the riverbank, but it happens every time I sit under a tree or sit under the sky, you know, so, you know, I think those moments of, I don't want to say magic because people think of magic as being something extraordinary but everyday magic happens when, you know, when you look deeply into a flower or into the eyes of the beloved or when you're with your child or with an animal, just everyday extraordinary moments when you're just filled with love and light. That's ordinary and extraordinary at the same time. And I think when you're grieving, you're in that state of having your heart open, open, broken in pain but also open to receive the things of beauty in the world. And that's how we can connect with the spirit world, so that's something I know now from being on the planet many years and something I wanted to document and explore.

>> That's very nice and I think there's something really resounding in one of the passages that you have in there, where you talk about, you know, being able to realize that with time, the person, the loved one that has parted becomes an integral part of the living being to sort of become partly that person. I definitely saw that.

>> Yes, that's true, you know, that's that saying. [Inaudible] told me that saying in Mexico that they say that when someone dies, a part of you dies with them, and I wanted to add though that a part of them is born in you, and that part takes a little while to grow and to develop, and it doesn't happen unless you grieve. You need to mourn so that person can be born in you and you can be reborn.

>> Yeah. Thank you very much and it is a lovely book. You see it and initially there's the misguidedness to think that it's a children's book but it's definitely an adult book and--

>> I tried to tell people, it's not for kids and I would tell children, this is not a children's book and when they would be in the audience-- actually before it was a book, I would have to correct that. It's not a children's story, is what I would say, and get very upset if people would say, oh that kids' story you read. I would get upset but now after I've been reading it so many times I realize well everything you write, kids like too even though it's not for them and that's a compliment, that's a compliment. My favorite writers are writers that speak to adults and children and that's a high compliment that all audiences, all ages can understand at that level where they are at spiritually or emotionally.

>> Thank you, Sandra. We've been hearing from American writer, Sandra Cisneros, who will appear at the Library of Congress National Book Festival on Saturday, September 22nd for a presentation from 3:30 to 4:15 p.m., followed by a book signing from 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. at the Fiction and Mystery Pavilion. Sandra, thank you.

>> Thank you.

>> This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at [loc.gov](http://loc.gov).