

Cisneros weaves vibrant tale of family, history

10/06/2002

By TONY BECKWITH / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

Caramelo starts out as a road trip that builds into a journey of classical proportions.

This is the novel that Sandra Cisneros has been cooking up for the last nine years, a rich stew of family memories and historic events all the more satisfying for having simmered for so long. Right from the very first page she sweeps us up with her trademark vivid style and takes us on the road from Chicago to Mexico City, "the white Caddy whooshing past noisy and happy as a thousand flags."

Ms. Cisneros is best known for her 1984 novel, *The House on Mango Street*, which established her as a major Latina literary voice. *Caramelo* is her longest work to date and is at heart the story of the Reyes family and their travels, told through a colorful collection of anecdotes and vignettes: "What a *telenovela* our lives are!"

Family relationships are profoundly explored, especially the painful ones, because in many ways this book is about how we become who we are: "It is true we are but an extension of our ancestors, our several fathers and many mothers."

Caramelo By Sandra Cisneros
ISBN 0-679-43554-9 (Alfred A. Knopf, \$24.00 hardback)

The portrait of the Awful Grandmother is a remarkable study in cultural taboos, and the narrator's transition from hate through understanding to compassion is one of the ingredients that helps make this a novel of substance.

But there's much more to it than that. As the author spins her tales, her *cuentos*, she journeys back further and further, creating a magnificent backdrop of history that reveals how "the universe is a cloth, and all humanity interwoven ... like the strands of a *rebozo*," the traditional Mexican candy-striped shawl – *caramelo* – that gives the book its name. These stories help us understand the relationship between Mexico and the United States, and how the lives of their people have been intertwined for generations.

This sensual, earthy saga engages the senses and captivates the imagination. Ms. Cisneros skillfully uses the syntax and double-barreled speech patterns of bilingual Mexican-Americans, seasoning her stories with just enough but not too many Spanish words to give her spirited narrative and dialogue an authentic sound and rhythm: "That's how we are, we *mexicanas*, *puro coraje y pasión*."

Her writing, blissfully unencumbered by traditional rules of grammar, has a stream-of-consciousness quality that is cinematic and muralistic in scope and style. She is a poet, and her lyrical images are a constant joy: "*rebozos* so light and thin they can be pulled through a wedding ring."

All these nuances are also available in Spanish, thanks to Liliana Valenzuela's inspired translation, published simultaneously with the original. Translations into other languages will surely follow since this exuberant new novel deals with themes close to the hearts of people all over the world.

Writer and translator Tony Beckwith lives in Austin.