

An interview with Liliana Valenzuela

– translator of *Caramelo*, the new novel by Sandra Cisneros

By Tony Beckwith

SANDRA CISNEROS FINISHED her tuna, sprouts and jalapeño sandwich, and was gone. On the eve of a book tour promoting her new novel, *Caramelo*, she had a million things to do.

I turned to my other lunch companion and said, “Now that we’ve talked about the English version, please tell me what it was like to translate *Caramelo* into Spanish.”

Liliana Valenzuela is slight of build, soft-spoken and serene, yet her finely chiseled profile bespeaks the patience and determination needed to translate the hundreds of pages of this complex literary work. Her eyes brightened. “It was a huge project. And the deadline...!” She shook her head and smiled. Acknowledging that the Latino market is closely intertwined with the mainstream book-reading public, the publisher took the increasingly common step of orchestrating a virtually simultaneous launch of both the original work and the translation. “I was racing against the clock,” said Valenzuela.

What were the challenges of translating a text that is already so heavily seasoned with Spanish?

“First of all, I refuse to accept that a so-called ‘neutral Spanish’ could be used to translate a literary work, especially such a multilingual and multicultural creation as *Caramelo*. Language always has a point of reference and implies a certain interpretation. An attempt to ‘neutralize’ the language in a novel such as this would deprive it of its flavor and all its distinguishing characteristics. It would also deny the particular dynamics and even the clash of languages and cultures that are embodied in the text. I tried to reproduce, for the Spanish reader, the book’s world of dual cultural refer-

ences, choosing Mexican Spanish in particular for the dialogue, and inserting a few English words and expressions that even the monolingual reader will, with the help of other clues, be



able to understand.”

Was translating the dialogue particularly hard?

“In the dialogue especially, I used regionalisms, archaisms, non-standard expressions, common mistakes in the spoken language, as well as the so-called “pocho” dialect of Chicanos in the United States. Cisneros emphasizes not only differences between English and Spanish, but also the differences and prejudices that exist between those who speak Mexican Spanish and those who speak the Spanish/English blend of the border or of the interior of the United States. I have tried to be faithful to all those nuances.”

And how about capturing the author’s voice in translation?

Valenzuela nodded. “I was a poet before I was a translator, and that helped,” she said. “I tried to convey Sandra’s poetic voice by recreating her elegant cadences, her use of alliteration and assonance, and the intricate and spectacular structure of her sentences that range from only one word to a whole paragraph. She gave me poetic

license to use my imagination and re-interpret her work. When I couldn’t reproduce a particular effect exactly, I explored alternative solutions and found other places where I could echo the original poetic elements.”

Were you in close communication with the author during this process?

“Sandra is a night owl, and we had dozens of after-hours phone conversations that were so fascinating but that kept me up way past my bedtime!”

How did this translation project land on your desk?

Sandra and I have been friends for years. Back in 1987, when she lived in Austin, she had already published *House on Mango Street* but had yet to become wildly famous. I took my first writing workshop from her, so she is also a literary mentor to me. When I started doing literary translation I asked her if I could translate whatever she wrote next. As it happened, she was just looking for someone to translate *Eleven*. The timing was perfect. That was about ten years ago. Then I translated two other books of hers, *Hairs/Pelitos* and *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. She was very happy with the results. She thought that my background as an anthropologist, poet, and translator helped me understand her work on several levels. So it was pretty well understood that when *Caramelo* was finally ready, I would translate it into Spanish.

Liliana Valenzuela is a freelance translator, writer and poet living in Austin. Recent translation publications include: Caramelo, The Magic of Remedios Varo, Cuando los ángeles hablan, Bugs for Lunch/Insectos para el almuerzo, and Latin Jazz.

Tony Beckwith is a writer and translator living in Austin. ★