

# The House on Mango Street - Discussion Group Notes

There are several different editions of this book, which was written by Sandra Cisneros and originally published in 1984. Most versions don't have chapter numbers, so chapter names have been used to indicate quote locations. All page numbers are taken from the following version: *The House on Mango Street*, published by Vintage Books, New York (1991).



## Empowerment and Hope

- Some characters in the book seem to be 'victims' of their circumstances, who feel powerless to change their own lives or escape their current situation. Others (like Esperanza) can see another way of living and are determined to fight for a better life. There are some who see their dreams as nothing more than fairy tales, and others who see them as blue prints for a different reality.
- As a child, Esperanza seems frustrated at the lack of change that she sees in her life and the lives of those around her. She feels as though she doesn't belong and is determined that one day things will be different. She describes herself as '...a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor' (Chp: Boys & Girls, p9) and she is determined not to follow the example of her grandmother (who she was named after).
- Although Esperanza longs for a different/better future, at the same time she is also able to take great joy in the small details in life. The smell of her mother's hair, the trees in her neighbourhood, bike rides, clouds, dancing shoes, the monkey garden (Chp: The Monkey Garden).
- There are examples in the book of people wanting/waiting to be rescued from their own lives, which contrasts with characters (like Esperanza) who are determined/willing to build their own escape routes.
- Do we think that the key to contentment in life is 'making the best with what we get', or fighting to build the life that we want? Or is it a balance between the two – learning to see both the richness in what we have, and the potential for change and growth?

## Quotes

Chp: *The House on Mango Street*. 'I knew then that I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go.' (p5)

Chp: *My Name*. Esperanza describing her grand-mother: 'She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window.' (p11)

Chp: *Darius & the Clouds*. 'Here there is too much sadness and not enough sky. Butterflies too are few and so are flowers and most things that are beautiful. Still, we take what we can get and make the best of it.' (p33)

**Hopes of being rescued:** Papa's lottery ticket (Chp: *The House on Mango Street*, p4), Cathy's father's hopes of inheriting land from a distant relative (Chp: *Cathy Queen of Cats*, p13), Marin's dreams of meeting '...someone in the subway who might marry you and take you to live in a big house far away' (Chp: *Marin*, p27) 'Marin, under the streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know. Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life' (p27), fortune telling/spirituality (Chp: *Elenita, Cards, Palm, Water*).

**Building an escape:** Alicia (Chp: *Alicia Who Sees Mice*, p31) 'Alicia, who inherited her mama's rolling pin and slepiness, is young and smart and studies for the first time at the university. Two trains and a bus, because she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin.'

## Identity

- *The House on Mango Street* can be seen as a 'coming of age' story, in that throughout the book Esperanza grapples with issues of identity as she moves through her teenage years.
- Esperanza often feels misunderstood and out of place. At times she wants to escape her life/who she is, but her identity is bound up with her history and part of her will forever be connected to Mango Street. Towards the end of the book, Esperanza eventually comes to terms with this.
- How much control do we have over our own identities? To what extent are our identities bound up with our backgrounds and our past?

## Quotes

*'I want to be  
like the waves on the sea,  
like the clouds in the wind,  
but I'm me.  
One day I'll jump  
out of my skin.  
I'll shake the sky  
like a hundred violins.'* (Chp: *Born Bad*, p60)

*Chp: Four Skinny Trees. 'They are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointed elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here...Their strength is their secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and they grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger....Four who reach and do not forget to reach.'* (p74-75)

*Chp: Bums in the Attic. 'One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I come from.'* (p87)

*Chp: The Three Sisters. 'You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are.'* (p105)

## Power

- There are many different power relationships in the book and many different ways of exercising power over others. The author is especially keen to describe the power that men have over women in the community that Esperanza grows up in and the limited options that women have to claim back some control – e.g. knowledge or sexuality.
- **Knowledge**
  - Chp: Marin – Esperanza looks up to Marin because 'She is older and knows lots of things.'
  - Chp: Hips. Esperanza feels superior because she is able to show her knowledge of 'science'.
  - Chp: The Monkey Garden – Esperanza feels vulnerable/ashamed because she is lacking in the 'worldly' knowledge that her peers have.
- **Marriage**
  - Chp: Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays – Rafaela
  - Chp: Linoleum Roses - Sally compromises herself because she cannot see any other way to escape.
- **Physical Strength**
  - Chp: What Sally Said – Sally
  - Chp: Red Clowns – Esperanza
- **Religion**
  - Chp: Sally - Sally



## • Sexuality

- Chp: Marin
- Sexuality is described as dangerous/costly – e.g. risks of pregnancy, sexual assault. In many cases it isn't 'real' power, as it rarely leads to freedom (with the exception of the 'cruel and beautiful' woman that Esperanza envisions in Chp: Beautiful & Cruel).
- Various characters are trapped in situations where they have no power. Institutions like marriage and religion have the potential to be prisons (Chp: Sally and Chp: Minerva Writes Poems), despite often being perceived as opportunities for freedom.
- Esperanza refuses to be trapped in this way and other characters in the book encourage her in this aim. Writing eventually becomes Esperanza's freedom, as well as the way that she reconciles her dreams with the reality of who she is and where she has come from.

## Quotes

Chp: *The Family of Little Feet*. 'It's Rachel who learns to walk the best all strutted in those magic high heels. She teaches us to cross and uncross our legs, and to run like a double-dutch rope, and how to walk down to the corner so that the shoes talk back to you with every step. Lucy, Rachel, me tottering like so. Down to the corner where the men can't take their eyes off us. We must be Christmas.' (p40)

Esperanza refusing to be 'trapped': Chp: *Beautiful & Cruel*. '...I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain. In the movies there is always one with red red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away.' (p89)

Esperanza receiving encouragement from other female characters:

Her Aunt - Chp: *Born Bad* 'You must remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at the time I didn't know what she meant.' (p61)

Her Mama - Chp: *A Smart Cookie*.

Chp: *The Three Sisters*. They encourage Esperanza to find her freedom and then use this to help 'the ones who cannot leave so easily.'

Chp: *Alicia & I Talking on Edna's Steps*. Echoes the message of the three sisters in the previous chapter.

Chp: *Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes*. Esperanza's writing - 'I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free.' (p110)

## **Broken Dreams**

- How do we respond when the decisions we make don't lead to the life that we had envisaged for ourselves and/or our families? How do we deal with the disappointment of broken dreams? Do we let it overwhelm us and break our spirit, or do we continue to struggle on?
- Esperanza's parents refuse to let go of their dream of a better life for their family, although Esperanza's mother regrets the opportunities that she never took and the dreams that she gave up on (Chp: *A Smart Cookie*).
- Mamacita's dreams of a new life are broken by the reality of loneliness and homesickness. Mamacita feels that she does not belong because she is away from where she grew up, which is in contrast to Esperanza—who feels that she belongs to somewhere other than where she grew up (Chp: *No Speak English*).

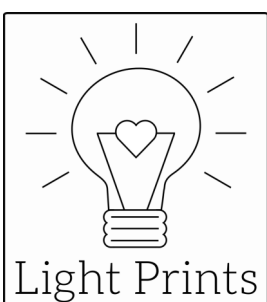
## Quotes

Chp: *The House on Mango Street*. 'Our house would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence. This was the house Papa talked about when he held a lottery ticket and this was the house Mama dreamed up in the stories she told us before we went to bed. But the house on Mango Street is not the way they told it at all.' (p4)

Chp: *No Speak English*. 'Mamacita, who does not belong, every once in a while lets out a cry, hysterical, high, as if he had torn the only skinny thread that kept her alive, the only road out to that country.' (p78)

## Dealing With Those Who Are 'Different'

- *The House on Mango Street* also explores some of the different ways that people respond to those who are not 'like them'.
- **Disdain**
  - Chp: Cathy Queen of Cats. '*...they'll just have to move a little farther north from Mango Street, a little farther away every time people like us keep moving in.*' (p13)
- **Apathy**
  - Chp: Geraldo No Last Name. '*Just another brazer who didn't speak English. Just another wet-back. You know the kind. The ones who always look ashamed...What does it matter?*'
  - Chp: Bums in the Attic. '*People who live on hills sleep so close to the stars they forget those of us who live too much on earth. They don't look down at all except to be content to live on hills.*' (p87)
- **Fear**
  - Chp: Those Who Don't. '*Those who don't know any better come into our neighbourhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake.....All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighbourhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes.*' (p28)
- **Refusing to abide by the boundaries/divisions set by others.**
  - Chp: Our Good Day. '*Don't talk to them, says Cathy. Can't you see they smell like a broom. But I like them. Their clothes are crooked and old. They are wearing shiny Sunday shoes without socks. It makes their bald ankles all red, but I like them.*' (p15)
- **Putting things in boxes: same/different, rich/poor, us/them, black/white.**
  - Chp: And Some More. '*There ain't thirty different kinds of snow, Lucy says. There are two kinds. The clean kind and the dirty kind, clean and dirty. Only two.*' (p35)



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