What You Should Learn about Memoir from *Mango Street*: What I Expect to See in Your Mini-Memoirs about “The Oldest Person You Know”

*The House on Mango Street* is a book that is read from kindergarten to post graduate level. We will not have enough time to discuss it in its entirety, with the depth that I’d like you to uncover; however, what I list below will give you a clear idea of what I expect you to glean from it as you write your chapters in your mini-memoir. My hope is that you will someday finish the book, and these chapters will be your inspiration.

Memoir is a combination of fact and “fiction.” Though it should not be fiction in the truest sense, it is “fiction” because memoir is, in part, based on other people’s memories in addition to yours. Your audio book about the oldest person you know is a mini-memoir. It is also a tribute. The facts should be explicit and verifiable – especially the historical data. The fiction can be whatever you don’t remember but wish you could…or whatever your parents remember…you get the point.

Due: February 22nd (audio + interview notes…would be wise to start on vignettes while fresh in your mind)

Final Recording & Hardcopy: April 4th (final audio + written vignette + dedication page + afterword due)

Purpose:

* to integrate quotes and mix genres into a multi-genre book and audiobook, using expository text (historical elements) with narrative
* to practice rhetorical style devices
* to explore the historical decades of a person’s life in an in-depth, personal way
* to explore regional and local histories (…Turlock then and now, etc.)
* to imitate Sandra Cisneros’s style in The House of Mango Street
* to share the gift of writing with an elder (It is my hope that you will share your writing in print form with the elder – not just an audiobook.)

Assignment:

Write a mini-memoir – a book of vignettes that mirrors the writing in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street.* Interview your family members (as necessary…most likely, you will need to confirm or add memories to your grandparent’s (or the memory of the oldest person you know if not your grandparent). Get their memories of the person you will interview. Interview one elderly family member (or the oldest person you know). Write a series of vignettes that chronicles an elderly person’s life as it connects to four periods of time: (1) birth/childhood – (2) teenage/young adult – (3) adulthood – (4) current age. Focus on *historical* events within each decade. Focus on *work* within each decade, but also tell the stories as they connect to any topic where the conversation leads. Try to get at the heart of who the person was and is. And though, the focus of these vignettes is not on work, necessarily, try to get a sense of who the person was as a worker. What were the expectations of workers during those times? Leave the interview open-ended enough for the interviewee to feel comfortable speaking freely about any topic, but try to involve the concept of work – no matter where the conversation goes. And, of course, ask questions that target particular areas of inquiry (based on the five chapters you chose to replicate in *Mango*). Write your own questions (which you must email with your hardcopy of the vignette), but include the following as well. Include research about the four historical periods of the person’s life. Include *some* of the Informational Interview Questions from four-page interview questions.

Format and Structure:

* Typed, five chapters single-spaced (at least one full page per chapter…start ¾ of the way down the page – see *Mango*) – no more than three pages
* Artwork on each page; pages begin on bottom quarter of page – just as *in Mango Street* – and continues for two “full” pages (no more than three pages)
* Book must be bound, decorated, and include a table of contents, and an original title
* Pages must be numbered in lower right hand corner
* 12 point font (exactly 12) – select fonts that appropriately match chapter content – but must be legible
* Include a *dedication* page (…I dedicate this to my grandfather, the bravest man I know)
* Include a one-page *afterword* that tells of your experience gathering the contents and conducting the interview (…When I first sat down to interview my grandmother, I was afraid that she would think my questions were…)

# Materials

* *The House on Mango Street* – **Google, *The House on Mango Street* pdf**…save to your computer…you will get some class time to read – but not much.

*ART NOT MANDATORY – BUT ENCOURAGED IF YOU PLAN TO GIVE YOUR WRITING AS A GIFT TO THE ELDER YOU INTERVIEWED. THE ELDER WILL CHERISH IT, TRUST ME.*

* Any materials needed to make beautiful presentations – markers, colored pencils, artwork, graphics, original designs, pictures of the person, pictures of the period
* glue sticks, yarn, or staples – something to bind book
* colored photos – no actual photos
* …………or you can produce a graphic novel

Page Options:

Select five topics to develop vignettes for your audiobook. The five topics will be the five chapters. The order of pages does not matter. All books must have basic biographical data: full name, age, birthplace, married, kids, worker title, years worked, etc. Answer at least ten of the questions below. Submit them when you turn in your vignette on April 4th. **You must answer #5 and #11 – then select eight others (in addition to some of the Informational Interview questions about the person’s job).**

* (1) Write about her/his name. Is there a connection to your name? How did she/he speak your name? Was there a naming ceremony or christening service of some sort for the elder, for you? What is the elder’s memory of how you got your name?
* (2) Write about something you did regularly with this person or that the person did regularly with someone else.
* (3) Write about a significant event that happened to the person.
* (4) Write about how the person was seen in his/her family. Cake baker? Fixer of machines? Outcast? Carrier of News? Historian? Counselor for advice? Include something that happened to him/her as a way of illustrating how people viewed the person.
* (5) **Write about significant historical events within the person’s lifetime and his/her reaction to or involvement with the event (1930’s, 1940’s, 1950’s, etc.)…*Do your research (which you must attach to your interview – then include the research in your questioning of the elder.)***
* (6) What was the most memorable national or global event within certain time periods?
* (7) Write about a room or place in or around the person’s house that was significant to you as a child and how you played in those places or behaved in those places. If not your childhood, someone else’s.
* (8) Write about how the person was frightened or embarrassed. Consider what was behind it. What did he/she learn from it? Look for the good intention. Do the same for yourself. Compare notes.
* (9) Write about something that the person found amazing, frightening, or awful. Do the same for yourself. Let it show the difference in how the generations viewed sentimentality and pragmatism.
* (10) Write about how the person cared for her/his home. Choose a specific subject such as canning food, ironing sheets, or pulling weeds. Look for the relationship between these activities and her/his beliefs, values, upbringing, and work ethic.
* (11) ***Write about the person as a worker. How did work help shape the person’s character? How did the person’s character help shape the work? Ask the person to define himself/herself as a worker then – and now. What was the value in working? Why?***
* (12) Write a funny story about something you and the person did or about how the person “got you.” Is there a private joke you share with the person?
* (13) What was the person’s relationship with food or gadgets? How did she/he tie you to her/him with food or objects? Describe cooking together or fixing something together.
* (14) Write about a talent this person had that made her/him “bigger than life.” Write about yours. Compare notes.
* (15) What do you remember about how the person smelled, looked, or occupied space in a room?
* (16) How was life with this person slower, more connected to nature?
* (17) Write about her/his peculiar speech pattern or colloquialisms?
* (18) What is the person’s own special brand of advice? Write a vignette about these special words.
* (19) What did the person feel strongly about? What were her/his political, moral, or spiritual views and how did these influence you? Write about them with humor.
* (20) What were the miracles that happened to this person? What miracle did you share with her/him?
* (21) Write about her/his membership in groups. What were important experiences, vivid memories?
* (22) What lessons or gifts do you continue to receive from the person – even if the person has passed on? Do you dream of her/him? Do you feel her/his spirit? Do you see her/his hands in yours as you work?
* (23) Write about a box, purse, drawer, or the like, that contained her/his things. What was the meaning of this to you? What did you learn about her/him from the contents?
* (24) How is/was her/his life an example of “appreciating the simple things?” Discuss how the pace of her/his life was different from yours.
* (25) What were the most profound gifts you received from her/him?
* (26) Write about her/his death. How did you participate in this? What was its meaning to you? What do you wish? How would you make it different?
* (27) Write a letter to her/him. Tell her/him what you never said. Tell her/him what you remember. Tell her/him what she/he gave you that was of value. Tell her/him what was not given to you that you wish you had. Tell her/him what you wish for her/him, for you, for her/his great-grandchildren.
* (28) What do you think was her/his last wish? Did she get it or not? What do you feel about this?
* (29) Write about her hands, eyes, face, feet, nose, or one particular body part.
* (30) Write about what you did not like about her/him. Write about what she/he did not like about you.
* (31) Write about how this person is/was different from your idea of what an elderly person should be.
* (32) Write about the relationship you did not have with her/him but wish you could have.
* (33) Write about her marriage or child-rearing practices and how you would do it differently when you get a family or grandchildren.
* (34) Write about how you were special (or not) to her/him.
* (35) Write about the person’s friends and/or pet. How, why were they special?
* (36) Write about this person’s opinions of technology. Describe the ways in which you use technology today. Ask opinions of it. Ask the person about her/his opinion (and use) of technology in her/his day: typewriters, hair dryers, cassette players, in-door toilets vs. outhouses, cars, televisions, radios, washer/dryers, any modern technology of their times.

**I expect judicious use of diction, detail, imagery, and syntax to create tone. As you write your vignettes, include these in your writing. These are the items on which I will base your grades. Use your most creative thinking as you write.**

1. Subtlety

Notice how Cisneros’ tone is woven based on what is said in slithers – small snippets. We know her attitude based on small things. “Out back is a small garage for the car **we don’t own yet**.” “. . .and that’s why we moved into the house on Mango Street, **far away,** on the other side of town.” “But the house on Mango Street is **not the way they told it at all**.” “But I know **how things go**.” She is disappointed, but she never tells the reader she is disappointed.

1. Symbolism

Why write about a house? What does a house symbolize? Where are all of the women in relation to their houses? Looking out of windows? Locked inside of them? Trying to get out of them? Boarded up in them? What do windows symbolize? What do you notice about the windows in these houses? Cisneros speaks of the dream house as a “white house,” but her real house is a “red house.” Her “white” house is in the dream world. In the real world, what double meaning does the white house have for Americans? How does the white house represent her dream? How does the red house represent her dream? Has her family achieved the American dream or some odd – different – other version of it? What is Cisneros’ view of “otherness,” “*differentness*”? Also, consider the mango. What are the characteristics of a mango? Why is her street called ***Mango***? Why do her parents have no names, yet she has an entire chapter on her name, and all of the other family members have names? What purpose, function, or effect is the symbolism?

1. Sound

Good writers describe enormous amounts with sound. Notice the sound of the chapter called, “Cathy Queen of Cats.” When we hear these sounds, on an unconscious level, do we already know something about Cathy’s personality – even before we read the chapter? In Esperanza’s family, the boys’ names have only two syllables and have hard sounds, “Carlos,” “Kiki,” but the girls’ names have four syllables and soft sounds, “Magdalena,” “Esperanza.” What message does the sound send about women and men? Are some chapters softer sounding than others? For what purpose, function, or effect on the reader? How does this convey meaning?

1. Punctuation

Good writers use sophisticated punctuation – the dash to indicate an appositive or an interruption of thought perhaps, or they use semicolons; some writers believe the comma works just as well, but not all. The colon is an effective way to emphasize a point: note its use in the “No Speak English” chapter. “She knows to say: He not here for when the landlord comes. . .” Why the colon at this point? What can the colon do that a comma could not have done? Notice how she uses the colon sparingly. Why use the colon in the chapters with adult characters, such as that of “Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays”? Why does she mix a sophisticated dash with the unsophisticated period?

1. Thesis

Every chapter must have a thesis – **a main idea** – a controlling impression. When I read each chapter, I must walk away knowing exactly what you intended to prove. I must walk away knowing what the chapter was mostly about. I must be convinced of the message you intended to send about life. Good writers have a purpose…always. Better writers will have a purpose, function, and effect on the reader.

1. Syntax

Good writers know when to use fragments. Well placed ones. Stylistic fragments enhance writing. Use them sparingly, but use them. Does Cisneros’ use of short, medium, and long sentences tell you anything about the people or issue of which she speaks? Her main character is a child. The child uses simple sentences. Simple sentences set tone. Tone describes character. This is good. Yes, it is good, but have you noticed when the sentence lengths change? Do you notice why? Do the chapters with children have shorter sentences than those with adults? “Rafaela who drinks and drinks coconut and papaya juice on Tuesdays and wishes there were sweeter drinks, not bitter like an empty room, but sweet sweet like the island, like the dance hall down the street where women much older than her throw green eyes easily like dice and open homes with keys.” A fifty-three-word sentence? Esperanza speaks a fifty-three-word sentence. Has Esperanza changed in some way? Her sentences are much shorter in earlier chapters. Has she matured – aged in some way? Why the change from simple to compound-complex sentences? Are words inverted? Are words repeated? Why? How does this advance the message? How are sentence patterns used? Subject-verb-object? Or do objects come first sometimes? Are the sentences periodic (main idea coming at the end of the sentence), or are they loose (main idea first)? Why? How does this convey the message?

7. Chapters

Why did you select the five chapters you selected? What are they? Food? Hair? Music? Yard work? Tools? Stories? Cars? **What special meaning do the chapters convey about the person?** Is there any tension in the chapter? Any conflict? If it is merely description, what is the purpose? What is the point? Why is it important? What am I to learn? Is your purpose to teach, entertain, inform, persuade? Will the reader clearly know? Be sure to answer this question: what message are you sending about life as you relay this story? …and “so what” – why does it matter? Why should anyone care about this chapter in your book about the elderly person’s life?

8. Others

The other things you should learn from Cisneros are these: figurative language, imagery, dialog (When is she using dialog? Why?), repetition, rhetorical devices, her emphasis on specific subjects, patterns (Does the passage move from whole to part or part to whole? Is the passage moving from past to present to future?), and methods (classification, definition, cause/effect, comparison/contrast, illustration, process analysis, description…). What method does she use to convey each chapter? Perhaps one of your chapters could define or describe a process or classify something.