

SANDRA CISNEROS ANSWERS QUESTIONS ABOUT "ELEVEN" FROM SIXTH-GRADE STUDENTS AT HOGAN MIDDLE SCHOOL, VALLEJO CALIFORNIA:

1. IS "ELEVEN" BASED ON A TRUE STORY?

YES, IT'S A STORY BASED ON SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED TO ME WHEN I WAS IN THIRD GRADE, WHICH WOULD MAKE ME AROUND NINE YEARS OLD. BUT I CHANGED THE AGE SO THAT THE CHARACTER WOULD BE A LITTLE OLDER, A BIT MORE ARTICULATE.

2. ARE YOU MARRIED? DO YOU HAVE CHILDREN?

I AM NOT MARRIED. I DO NOT HAVE CHILDREN. I AM NOT AGAINST MARRIAGE, BUT I NEVER MET ANYONE WHO I THOUGHT WOULD STICK AROUND FOR SIXTY OR MORE YEARS, AND I NEVER WANTED TO GET DIVORCED. I COULD NOT AFFORD TO HAVE CHILDREN ALONE. AND MY HEART WOULD BREAK IF I HAD TO GET DIVORCED.

3. WHICH IS MY FAVORITE BOOK OF ALL THAT I'VE WRITTEN? AND WHAT WAS YOUR FAVORITE STORY WHEN YOU WERE A KID?

I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED MY NOVEL CAMELO, BEST OF ALL, BECAUSE IT GAVE ME THE MOST TROUBLE. AS A KID, MY FAVORITE BOOK WAS ALICE IN WONDERLAND, BY LEWIS CARROLL. IT'S STILL A FAVORITE.

4. WHAT DID YOU GET AS A PRESENT ON YOUR ELEVENTH BIRTHDAY? WHAT WAS YOUR FAVORITE GIFT?

I DON'T REMEMBER WHAT I GOT ON MY ELEVENTH BIRTHDAY. FOR SURE I HAD A CANNOLI CAKE FROM FERRARA'S BAKERY ON TAYLOR STREET IN CHICAGO. I ALWAYS HAD NICE BIRTHDAYS AND PRESENTS, EVEN THOUGH WE DIDN'T HAVE A LOT OF MONEY, AND MY BIRTHDAY FALLS NEAR CHRISTMAS, DECEMBER 20TH. MY MEMORIES OF MY BIRTHDAYS AS A CHILD ARE PLEASANT, BECAUSE MY MOTHER AND FATHER ALWAYS MADE SURE I HAD A CELEBRATION, EVEN IF IT WAS JUST OUR FAMILY. I WAS WELL-LOVED, AND MY FATHER'S FAVORITE CHILD.

5. DID YOU PLAY WITH YOUR BROTHERS? WHAT ARE THEIR NAMES?

I DID PLAY WITH MY BROTHERS AT HOME, BOARD GAMES AND SUCH, BUT OUTSIDE, THEY PREFERRED THEIR MALE FRIENDS AND SPORTS SUCH AS BASEBALL. MY BROTHERS NAMES ARE AL JR., HENRY (KIKI), CARLOS, ARTHUR (LOLO), MARIO (MAYO) AND ARMANDO (MANDO). I LIKE THEM ONE AT A TIME. ALL TOGETHER THEY ARE NOISY AND OVERWHELMING, THEN AND NOW.

6. DID YOU HAVE ANY STUDENTS LIKE THE ONES IN "ELEVEN" WHEN YOU WERE A TEACHER?

I TAUGHT HIGH SCHOOL, AND MY STUDENTS WERE SMART AND WONDERFUL. THEY WON CITY-WIDE POETRY PRIZES FOR ME THREE YEARS IN A ROW. THIS WAS AT LATINO YOUTH ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL IN THE PILSEN NEIGHBORHOOD OF CHICAGO. I REMEMBER THEM FONDLY TO THIS DAY. I TAUGHT THEM BACK IN 1976-1980 OR SO.

7. HOW COME IN "ELEVEN" YOU DIDN'T SHOW RACHEL'S PARENTS?

BECAUSE THE STORY WAS ABOUT RACHEL. AND IT WAS A SHORT STORY, NOT A NOVEL.

8. DO YOU HAVE ANY DOGS? CATS? DO YOU LIKE ANIMALS?

I AM GLAD YOU ASKED. I HAVE FIVE DOGS. WHEN I LIVED IN TEXAS, I HAD SIX DOGS, THREE CATS, AND A PARROT. I MOVED TWO YEARS AGO TO MEXICO, WHERE I NOW LIVE. I AM RENTING, BUT ONE DAY WHEN I HAVE MY OWN HOUSE AGAIN WITH A GARDEN, I HOPE TO HAVE MANY MANY ANIMALS. MAYBE EVEN DONKEYS AND DUCKS.

9. WHY ARE YOU INTERESTED IN WRITING?

BECAUSE WRITING ALLOWS ME TO HEAR THE THINGS GOING ON INSIDE MY HEART. I NEVER KNOW WHAT I AM FEELING TILL I WRITE ABOUT IT. WRITING MAKES ME FEEL BETTER WHEN LIFE OVERWHELMS ME.

10. WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO MAKE A NEW BOOK?

I AM ALWAYS WRITING. MY NEXT BOOK WILL APPEAR IN OCTOBER OF 2015. IT'S CALLED A HOUSE OF MY OWN: STORIES FROM MY LIFE.

11. HOW WAS YOUR CHILDHOOD? DID YOU MEET A FRIEND AFTER MOVING AGAIN AND AGAIN?

MY CHILDHOOD WAS HAPPY AT HOME, BUT DIFFICULT IN SCHOOL FOR THE FIRST SIX YEARS OF MY EDUCATION, SINCE I WAS VERY SHY. I NEVER HAD A REAL BEST FRIEND, NOT THE KIND ONE KEEPS FOR LIFE. I THINK THAT'S WHY I BEGAN WRITING. IT WAS A WAY TO FEEL I WAS NOT ALONE, SOME PLACE I COULD LET GO ALL THE SECRETS AND FEELINGS I KEPT INSIDE THAT SOMETIMES FELT LIKE A LIVE THING GNAWING AWAY AT MY HEART. I HAD TO WRITE, SO THAT THE GNAWING WOULD STOP.

12. YOUR WRITINGS ARE AMAZING! I GIVE IT 4.5 STARS OUT OF 5. -WAYNE

THANK YOU, WAYNE. THAT'S THE BEST THING I'VE HEARD IN A LONG TIME. SC

13. HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE YOU TO WRITE YOUR STORIES?

MY STORIES ARE EACH DIFFERENT. SOMETIMES THEY TAKE THREE MONTHS, SOMETIMES THREE DAYS. THE STORY "ELEVEN" WAS BORN IN THREE DAYS, BELIEVE IT OR NOT, ALL IN ONE WEEKEND. WHILE I WAS WORKING AS A NANNY (SEE NUMBER 16 BELOW.)

14. WHAT IS YOUR FULL NAME?

SANDRA CISNEROS

15. DO YOU PREFER TO PAINT WITH DARK PAINT OR PASTEL PAINT?

I LIKE TO DRAW WITH THE SAME PEN I WRITE WITH. I USUALLY SKETCH MY PETS.

16. HOW OLD WERE YOU WHEN YOU WROTE THE STORY "ELEVEN?"

I WAS 29 YEARS OLD, LIVING IN ELBURN, ILLINOIS, OUTSIDE CHICAGO, IN MY BROTHER AND SISTER-IN-LAW'S HOUSE IN THE COUNTRY, WHERE I WORKED AS THE NANNY TO THEIR FIRST-BORN. SHE WAS ONE MONTH OLD WHEN I TOOK THE JOB AND FOUR MONTHS OLD WHEN I LEFT. I DECIDED AFTER BEING A NANNY, I DIDN'T NEED TO BE A MOTHER EVER. IT WAS TOO MUCH MONEY AND WORK FOR A SINGLE WOMAN TRYING TO MAKE HER WAY AS A WRITER.

17. WHAT IS THE STORY "THREE WISE GUYS" BASED ON?

MY BOYFRIEND WHEN I WAS 31-32 YEARS OLD TOLD ME THE STORY OF HOW BOOKS CHANGED HIS LIFE. HE GREW UP IN A FARMING COMMUNITY IN SOUTH TEXAS.

18. ARE YOU STILL IN CHICAGO?

NO, I HAVEN'T LIVED IN CHICAGO SINCE I WAS 30. I LIVED IN TEXAS FOR TWENTY-FIVE YEARS, AND NOW LIVE IN CENTRAL MEXICO, IN GUANAJUATO, WHERE MY MATERNAL ANCESTORS LIVED FOR CENTURIES.

19. WHY DO YOU LIKE WRITING?

I DON'T LIKE WRITING AS MUCH AS I DID WHEN I WAS YOUNGER. NOW IT'S HARDER THAN EVER AND GETS HARDER WITH EVERY YEAR. BUT I DO WRITE, MUST WRITE, AND ENJOY HAVING WRITTEN. HAVING WRITTEN IS MORE FUN THAN WRITING.

20. BONUS: I SOMETIMES USE THE NAMES OF FRIENDS IN MY STORIES. "PHYLLIS LOPEZ" IS REALLY MY COUSIN, AND "SONIA SALDIVAR" IS MY FRIEND. I LOVE THEM BOTH VERY MUCH IN REAL LIFE. THEY ARE NEITHER MEAN NOR STUPID, BUT BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL BEINGS.

21. I WONDER IF YOU CAN VISIT HOGAN MIDDLE SCHOOL.

I WISH I COULD. THANKS FOR THE INVITE, BUT IT'S NOT LIKELY AS I AM NOW IN SANCTUARY. THAT MEANS I AM TRAVELING LESS, AND WRITING MORE, BUT YOU CAN VISIT ME. SEE MY WEBSITE CALENDAR FOR WHEN I COME AND LECTURE NEAR YOU. I WILL BE READING IN DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES THIS FALL WHEN THE NEW BOOK IS OUT.

22. I'M NICE. ARE YOU NICE?

WHAT A LOVELY QUESTION. I'M SO GLAD YOU ASKED. NOT ONE JOURNALIST IN THE WORLD HAS EVER THOUGHT TO ASK ME THIS. AM I NICE? SOME DAYS IF I'VE BEEN ALLOWED TO SLEEP AT LEAST NINE HOURS. IF I'VE EATEN. IF I DON'T HAVE TO GO INSIDE A SUPERMARKET. IF THE WORLD AROUND ME IS QUIET. IF I CAN SEE CLOUDS AND TREES AND PLENTY OF SKY. IF I CAN SIT NEXT TO A WHITE FLOWER AND MY DOGS. IF YOU LET ME READ. IF THERE IS NO ONE AROUND ME BUT ME. IF I CAN EAT POTATO CHIPS AND SIT IN THE SUN. I AM THE NICEST WHEN I HAVE THESE THINGS.

fb/sc – 2015

Read with a Purpose Read this story to discover how a misunderstanding at school affects the eleventh birthday of a girl named Rachel.

Eleven

by **Sandra Cisneros**

What they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don't. You open your eyes and everything's just like yesterday, only it's today. And you don't feel eleven at all. You feel like you're still ten. And you are—underneath the year that makes you eleven.

Like some days you might say something stupid, and that's the part of you that's still ten. Or maybe some days you might need to sit on your mama's lap because you're scared, and that's the part of you that's five. And maybe one day when you're all grown up maybe you will need to cry like if you're three, and that's okay. That's what I tell Mama when she's sad and needs to cry. Maybe she's feeling three.

Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one. That's how being eleven years old is.

You don't feel eleven. Not right away. It takes a few days, weeks even, sometimes even months before you say Eleven when they ask you. And you don't feel smart eleven, not until you're almost twelve. That's the way it is.

Only today I wish I didn't have only eleven years rattling inside me like pennies in a tin Band-Aid box. Today I wish I was one hundred and two instead of eleven because if I was one hundred and two I'd have known what to say when Mrs. Price put the red sweater on my desk. I would've known how to tell her it wasn't mine instead of just sitting there with that look on my face and nothing coming out of my mouth.

A Literary Focus **Characterization** What do you learn about the narrator's personality from the thoughts and feelings she shares in this paragraph?

B Read and Discuss The author has given us a lot of information about what it means to be eleven. What point is she trying to make?

C Read and Discuss Why does the narrator wish she were 102 years old?

Vocabulary **rattling** (RAI l-ing) *v.*: shaking and hitting together.