

7. BREAKING DOWN STEREOTYPES



What to Do

Read the introduction and excerpt below, then write your thoughts on the facing page.

A stereotype is a belief about an individual or a group based on the idea that everyone in a particular group will act the same way. For example, if someone says all Americans are rich, all mothers bake cookies, or people who look a certain way are dangerous, that person is using a stereotype. All stereotypes are harmful, because they judge an individual based solely on his or her being part of a particular group, regardless of his or her unique identity. It's important to understand stereotypes and why people resent them.

In her novel *The House on Mango Street*, author Sandra Cisneros recounts life in a Latino neighborhood of Chicago. The book is told through the eyes of a young girl, Esperanza, who lives in that community. In the following excerpt, Esperanza describes how people can react toward others when they are in a new and unfamiliar environment.

Excerpt from *The House on Mango Street*

By Sandra Cisneros

Those who don't know any better come into our neighborhood 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.

But we aren't afraid. We know the guy with the crooked eye is Davey the Baby's brother, and the tall one next to him in the straw brim, that's Rosa's Eddie V., and the big one that looks like a dumb grown man, he's Fat Boy, though he's not fat anymore nor a boy.

All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood 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.

Excerpt from *The House on Mango Street*. Copyright © 1984 by Sandra Cisneros.

Quotation sources, page 15: 1. Washington University, St. Louis, course on "Latino/a Identity in the United States," www.artsci.wustl.edu/~bmlouis/StudentPapers.html. 2. American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, Lesson Plan, "Anti-Arab Stereotypes, Discrimination and Hate Crimes," www.adc.org/Lesson_plan1.pdf. 3. Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, "Making the Grade" series, www.jrn.columbia.edu/events/race/makinggrade3.html.

EXPLORE YOUR IDEAS

1. What stereotype does Esperanza say people "who don't know any better" have of her community?
2. What stereotype does Esperanza and her own community have when they visit a "neighborhood of another color"?
3. Why is Esperanza not afraid in her own neighborhood?
4. The excerpt ends with the phrase "that is how it goes and goes." Think of a different ending, in which the speaker talks about a way to break down the stereotypes.



YOUR VIEW

Identify stereotypes in the quotations below, and write about why the stereotypes are incorrect. Also, write about the harm that stereotypes cause for individuals and groups.

"If I were to tell you that I was Puerto Rican, would you assume...that I dance well and listen to salsa music, that I love to eat rice and beans and come from a poor neighborhood in the inner city? Perhaps not, but many still would—and none of it is true."
—Puerto Rican college student¹

"A popular stereotype is that 'All Arabs are Muslims.' But not all Arabs are Muslims, and most Muslims are not Arabs. Interestingly, the vast majority of Arab Americans are Christian."
—American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee²

"I think the stereotype of most black males, especially in school, is that they slack off and take the easy way out. They're expected to drop out after high school graduation. To live with that stereotype every day is demeaning."
—African American college student³