

Isabel Allende



Book by Book

BY JESSICA TEISCH

On September 11, 1973, the Chilean military, backed by the CIA, overthrew the controversial popular unity government led by Socialist President Salvador Allende. Allende, Isabel Allende's uncle, reportedly committed suicide during this coup d'état, and General Augusto Pinochet established an anti-Communist military dictatorship that lasted until 1990. While Chile had experienced prior political unrest, strikes, and food shortages, under Pinochet's military government and free-market reforms, the economy expanded—as did horrific “disappearances” and human rights abuses.

The brutal events of 1973 forever changed Chilean author Isabel Allende's life. After the coup d'état, Allende—then a 31-year-old journalist—fled to Caracas. Although she and her family had intended to return soon to Chile, Allende spent 13 years in Venezuela. In 1979, six years into Pinochet's reign, she learned that her 99-year-old grandfather had decided to die. Because she couldn't return to Chile, she began a spiritual letter to him. This letter, which eventually reached 500 pages, became the manuscript for *The House of the Spirits* (1982)—a family chronicle, a political testimony, a work of magical realism comparable to that of the great Gabriel García Márquez, and a best-selling novel. “In the process of writing the anecdotes of the past, and recalling emotions and pains of my fate, and telling part of the history of my country, I found life became more comprehensible and the world more tolerable,” she said. “I felt that my roots had been recovered and that during that patient exercise of daily writing I had also recovered my own soul” (William Zinsser, ed., *Paths of Resistance*, 1989).

The House of the Spirits, which recounts three generations of the Trueba family and the events that culminated in the bloodshed of 1973, marked Allende's arrival as a best-selling novelist. Her sagas that followed—from *Of Love and Shadows* (1985) to *Portrait in Sepia* (2000) and a children's trilogy—contain similar elements of magical realism and trademark themes—from estrangement to war, rebellion, and the often toxic mix of love and politics. Memory, a rich oral tradition, and her journalistic outlook heavily influence Allende's fiction. “I grew up in a family of secrets,” she said. “Writing comes from a quest for identity. A quest for memory. I write because I want to know from where I come” (*Washington Post*, 11/24/01). While most of her tales take place in South America and reflect Chile's social complexity or her Venezuelan exile, she sets others, including *The Infinite Plan* (1991), in the United States.

ALLENDE WAS BORN in Lima, Peru, on August 2, 1942. Her father, Salvador Allende's cousin, served as a Chilean ambassador to Peru, where she spent her early childhood. When her

father abandoned the family, her mother and two siblings returned to her maternal grandparents' home in Santiago. Her mother remarried a diplomat, and Allende spent her remaining youth in La Paz, Bolivia, and then in Beirut, before the Suez Canal crisis forced them back to Chile in 1958. In Santiago, Allende worked for the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization. In 1962, she married Miguel Frías and a year later, she gave birth to Paula. She traveled with her family around Europe in the mid-1960s, returning to Chile to give birth to Nicolás in 1966. Allende then started writing for *Paula* magazine, published feminist articles, and contributed to a children's magazine. In 1970, Salvador Allende was elected president, and her stepfather, Ramón Huidobro, was appointed ambassador to Argentina. During these years of Socialist government, Allende hosted two popular television talk shows.

September 11, 1973 changed everything. Exiled to Caracas, Allende pursued her journalism. In 1982, she published *The House of the Spirits. Of Love and Shadows* and *Eva Luna* (1987) followed. In 1987, she divorced her husband. On a lecture tour in San Jose, California, to promote *Of Love and Shadows*, she met Willie Gordon, a lawyer and great admirer of her work. She married Gordon in 1988 and returned to live with him in Marin, California (she adopted American citizenship in 2003). In 1991, while Allende was in Spain promoting *The Infinite Plan*, her daughter Paula fell ill and into a coma; her death inspired *Paula* (1995), an account of her daughter's life and her own political and feminist awakenings.

Chile continues to haunt Allende's work and soul. *My Invented Country* (★★★ Sept/Oct 2003), for example, reflects her attempt to recapture a “lost country” and the childhood memories that continue to shape her existence. Yet Allende has returned only once, in 1990, to a now democratic Chile, to receive the Gabriela Mistral Award, which honors her work in support of her country.

The Critical Reception

Allende's highly emotional tales—best sellers in many languages—appeal to readers around the world. She is one of the most recognized Latin American writers, along with Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes, and other Latin American “Boom” writers that preceded her.

Critically accepted and commercially successful, Allende nonetheless comes under some fire for her broad popular appeal, particularly to her female readership. *Vogue* serialized some of the chapters in *The House of the Spirits*, and Oprah Winfrey selected *Daughter of Fortune* as an Oprah Book Club

Where to Start

THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS, which fictionalizes Chile's 20th-century political turmoil, is Allende's classic multigenerational saga and a magical realist masterpiece. **THE STORIES OF EVA LUNA**, which follows **EVA LUNA**, offers powerful modern folktales that exhibit the range of human behavior—good and bad. **PAULA**, Allende's first memoir, exposes the author's own personal history as she comes to terms with her daughter's illness.

pick. Because of these distinctions, some scholars describe Allende as a middlebrow and bodice ripper writer who targets female readers who enjoy roller-coaster tales driven by strong feminist characters. Still others criticize Allende's old-fashioned family sagas, hackneyed plots, and lack of literary experimentation. When *The House of the Spirits* debuted, critics both favorably and unfavorably compared it with Gabriel García Márquez's classic multigenerational novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Some scholars may not consider Allende a highbrow novelist, but her place in the literary canon was secured with her masterpiece, *House of the Spirits*. Few other authors possess that same rare ability to weave together intricate tapestries of times, peoples, and places and limn detailed worlds where hopes, lusts, and class struggles shape individual destinies and nations.

MAJOR WORKS

The House of the Spirits (1982)

♦ BEST NOVEL OF THE YEAR, CHILE (PANORAMA LITERARO AWARD)



A best seller in Europe and the United States, this magical realist novel takes place in an unnamed Latin American country while implicitly chronicling Chile's political upheavals. Allende based some of the story's events and characters on her own life. Her grandmother inspired the "spirit" Clara; her uncle, Salvador Allende, may be "The President."

THE STORY: In a spirit-ridden Latin American nation, three generations of the Trueba family share their stories as dreams, spiritual yearnings, and love—but political schisms tear them apart. Esteban, a tyrannical patriarch with a lust for land and women, rises as a senator in the Conservative Party. His clairvoyant wife, Clara, dictates the family's fortunes. Their rebellious daughter, Bianca, falls in love with a Socialist revolutionary. Alba, Pedro's and Blanca's green-haired daughter, narrates the ways in which each female "spirit" attempts to break free from Esteban's control.

"Judged by the standards of the mainstream of historical fiction, *The House of the Spirits* has to be considered powerful and original. Just like Esteban Trueba's relationship with the young revolutionary who loves his daughter, I began by wanting to kill the book and ended up with deep respect for it." CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT, NEW YORK TIMES, 5/9/85

"Despite its undeniable debt to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, this is an original and important work; along with García Márquez's masterpiece, it's one of the best novels of the postwar period, and a major contribution to our understanding of societies riddled by ceaseless conflict and violent change. It is a great achievement, and it cries out to be read." BRUCE ALLEN, CHICAGO TRIBUNE, 4/19/85

THE BOTTOM LINE: A classic of magical realism—and a sharp commentary on Chile's turbulent 20th-century politics.

THE MOVIE: 1993, starring Meryl Streep, Glenn Close, Jeremy Irons, Winona Ryder, and Antonio Banderas, and directed by Bille August.

Of Love and Shadows (1985)



Allende's second novel, like her first, is a highly political allegory of postdictatorship Chile, though it adopts a journalistic, rather than a magical realist, style. Based on the political massacres in Chile during the military coup, it addresses how people respond to tyranny.

THE STORY: Engaged journalist Irene Beltrán, the daughter of a wealthy bourgeois playboy who has abandoned his family, meets and falls in love with photographer Francisco Leal, whose activities betray his disloyalty to the military dictatorship. Not surprisingly, they become enemies of the state when they start to investigate a political disappearance together. Caught in web of violence, they risk everything—including their lives—for justice.

"Less an excursion into the quirky world of magic realism than a conventional political thriller, *Of Love and Shadows* still displays Allende's ability to tell a good story. ... But, on the whole, the novel is a much less satisfying work than *The House of the Spirits*, in part because it is so overtly polemical,

In Her Own Words

"I AM A WRITER because I was blessed with an ear for stories, an unhappy childhood, and a strange family. (With relatives as weird as mine there is no need to invent anything, they alone provide all the material for magic realism). Literature has defined me. Word by word, page after page, I have invented this hyperbolic flamboyant me. ...

For me life becomes real when I write it. What I don't write is erased by the winds of oblivion. I forget a lot, my mind betrays me, I can't recall places, names, dates or faces, but I never forget a good story... or a significant dream. Writing is a silent introspection, a journey to the dark caverns of memory and the soul. Fiction, like memory, moves from revelation to revelation.

I write because I need to remember and overcome. It is from memory and a sense of loss that the passion to create emerges. Every book is an act of love, an offering that I prepare with great care, hoping that it will be well received." ■

SOURCE: "SPEECHES & LECTURES" ISABELLENDE.COM

so uncomplicatedly on the side of the angels." DAN CRYER, NEWSDAY,

5/21/87

"The people in *Of Love and Shadows* are so real, their triumphs and defeats are so faithful to the truth of human existence, that we see the world in miniature. This is precisely what fiction should do." JONATHAN YARDLEY, WASHINGTON POST, 5/24/87

THE BOTTOM LINE: A personal look at violence, terror, and individual sacrifice.

THE MOVIE: 1996, starring Jennifer Connelly and Antonio Banderas, and directed by Betty Kaplan.

Eva Luna (1987)



Set in an unnamed Latin American capital, Allende's third novel introduces the diverse inhabitants of a South American nation—guerrillas, immigrants, dictators, the rich and the poor, transsexuals, and artists—living in a time of revolution and repression.

THE STORY: "I came into the world with a breath of jungle in my memory," says Eva, a love child born to a maid and an Indian gardener on the Caribbean coast. From a poor orphan and house servant, Eva, who makes friends through her storytelling, rises to a celebrated writer of television dramas. When she meets filmmaker Carle Rolf, who escaped Nazi Germany and a horrific past to live with relatives in South America, their destinies begin to take shape.

"It is unbelievable that one little girl in one unnamed, hybrid South American country manages to meet a future guerrilla leader, to seduce the future head of the armed forces and to empty a chamberpot over the head of a cabinet minister. That is not to mention the transsexual, the tender Arab shopkeeper, the madam and an unrelentingly colorful cast of other characters. None of that matters." SUSAN BENESCH, ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, 12/11/88

"Fantastic in tone, *Eva Luna* possesses the gravity of social commentary, the excitement of a thriller and, yes, the garrulous aimlessness of a drunken monologue. ... Despite its virtues, *Eva Luna* is indeed an undisciplined mishmash." DAN CRYER, NEWSDAY, 10/9/88

THE BOTTOM LINE: A love story that reflects South America's social diversity and political turmoil.

The Stories of Eva Luna (1989)



In this sequel to *Eva Luna*, which Allende wrote upon first moving to California, Carle Rolf asks for a story. In return, Eva offers 23 modern folktales that tread the line between fantasy and reality. The epigraph from *One Thousand and One Nights* suggests Eva's (and Allende's) consummate skill as a teller of tales about passion, virtue,

cruelty, avarice, love, and lust—in short, the range of human nature.

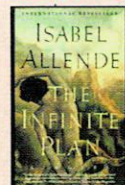
THE STORY: A once-illiterate young woman writes the speech that gets a colonel elected president. A saintly moral activist involved in a church engages in an illicit affair. A pathological politico seduces a young woman and keeps her prisoner for 47 years. Love and revenge lead a respected schoolteacher to dismember the head of a guest in her boardinghouse. A wife confuses her life with opera. And Rolf faces his own demons when he tries to rescue a girl trapped in a mudslide.

"These are bedtime stories for adults. ... Allende ends her book with a searingly raw tale based on the true story of a young girl buried in mud up to her neck. The girl slowly dies as television cameras zoom in on her face, microphones are stretched across quicksand to catch her last comments, and a politician stops by to offer his regards." M. L. LYKE, SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER, 2/7/91

"And as she narrates two dozen tales for her lover, Rolf Carle, a European refugee and television reporter haunted by memories of World War II, she brings to vivid life the history, politics and culture of Latin America. ... The short tales in *The Stories of Eva Luna*, like all of Allende's work, are instantly seductive, richly sensual and unabashedly romantic." HEDY WEISS, CHICAGO SUN-TIMES, 1/13/91

THE BOTTOM LINE: A collection of linked tales powerful in their ability to disturb.

The Infinite Plan (1991)



The Infinite Plan departs from Allende's previous work: not only is it set in the United States; it also features a male protagonist, loosely based on her second husband Willie Gordon, who was raised in an East Los Angeles barrio. Although a best seller, *The Infinite Plan* did not garner the same critical acclaim as her previous novels.

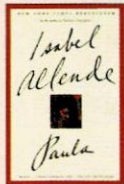
THE STORY: Gregory Reeves and his itinerant parents, Charles Reeves and Nora, a Jewish refugee, travel around the West preaching "The Infinite Plan." Gregory's idyllic childhood ends when his father falls ill and the family moves into the Latino barrio of East Los Angeles and into the home of Pedro Morales, a follower of "The Plan." From his friendship with Carmen Morales to a stay in Berkeley during the 1960s, attendance at law school, service in Vietnam, two failed marriages, and a rise and fall in wealth, Gregory strives to find his own master plan.

"The initial reaction is that perhaps Allende, dazzled by California kitsch, has bitten off a bit too much. ... *The Infinite Plan* can be seen as a curiosity—an experiment in personal discovery by a fine author whose previous masterpieces already have established an enduring reputation." PAUL PINTARICH, OREGONIAN, 4/25/93

"In her attempt to create a panoramic history of this country from the Depression era through the Reagan years—a history infused with a celebration of our multicultural society—she has lost track of the intimate detail and rich dialogue so vital to making a novel spring to life." HEDY WEISS, CHICAGO SUN-TIMES, 5/9/93

THE BOTTOM LINE: Allende's first novel set in the United States, and a mixed success.

Paula (1995)



Allende crafted this memoir, her first nonfiction work, as a tribute to her daughter Paula, who died in 1992, at age 28. A poignant best seller, it reached a wider international audience than her previous works of fiction.

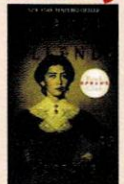
THE STORY: "One day more of waiting, one day less of hope," Allende writes. Suffering from porphyria, a rare genetic metabolic disorder, Allende's daughter Paula fell into a coma in 1991. Allende uses Paula's illness as a springboard to explore her own crowded family history, including her clairvoyant grandmother; her father, who abandoned the family; her loving stepfather; her crazy uncles; her childhood fantasies; and her feminist inspirations. Although a chronicle of tragedy, loss, spirit, and bereavement, *Paula* ultimately celebrates acceptance and life.

"*Paula* constitutes a capstone for Allende's previous novels. Reading it recalls the color, incidents and exoticism of her earlier stories, and we know what we suspected: Her novels are the fabric of Allende's life." GENE SAXE, DENVER POST, 4/23/95

"In the midst of it all, [Allende] returns time and again to the otherworldly figure next to her. ... In her feverish determination to bring it all to life, and Paula along with it, Allende produces some of her best writing." PATRICIA HOLT, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, 4/9/95

THE BOTTOM LINE: As personal as autobiography, a close-up of Allende's—and her daughter's—life.

Daughter of Fortune (1999)



This historical romance featuring Allende's prototypical heroine contains many factual elements—from the life of bandit Joaquin Murrieta to the experiences of Chinese prostitutes. While it received mixed reviews, its selection as an Oprah Book Club pick made it a best seller.

THE STORY: During the California gold rush of the 1850s, Eliza Sommers—a stubborn, passionate, and adventurous orphan raised by Jeremy Sommers, an English importer, and his sister, Rose, in Valparaiso, Chile—falls in love with one of Jeremy's employees, the poor Joaquin Andieta. When he runs off to seek gold in California, a pregnant Eliza follows—and finds independence and freedom.

"*Daughter of Fortune* is one wild ride, chock-full of exotic elements: an outlaw's severed head in a jar of gin; a traveling whorehouse ruled by a madam named Joe Bonecrusher; Eliza's best friend and savior, Tao Chi'en, a Chinese acupuncturist." GREG CHANGNON, ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION, 10/10/99

"The resulting book reads like a bodice-ripper romance crossed with Judith Krantz, with plenty of feminist and multicultural seasoning thrown in to update the mix. ... Throughout the novel Ms. Allende uses Eliza and Tao's adventures as an excuse for hackneyed historical observations about the gold rush madness of the 1850's." MICHIKO KAKUTANI, NEW YORK TIMES, 11/2/99

THE BOTTOM LINE: A fascinating, if structurally unwieldy, exploration of gold rush California. ■

Selected Other Works

APHRODITE: A MEMOIR OF THE SENSES (1998)

In this cookbook of sorts, Allende presents recipes and personal anecdotes about the relationship between food and sexuality.

PORTRAIT IN SEPIA (2000)

In this sequel to *Daughter of Fortune* and prequel to *House of the Spirits*, Aurora del Valle (Eliza's granddaughter) confronts her traumatic past.

MY INVENTED COUNTRY (2003)

In this memoir of Chile, Allende examines Chile's politics, society, women, and her own sense of exclusion when she moved to California. (★★★ Sept/Oct 2003)

ZORRO (2005)

Allende retells the Zorro freedom fighter legend—from the perspective of an undisclosed narrator. (★★★★ July/Aug 2005)

INÉS OF MY SOUL (2006)

Set in 16th-century Spain, Peru, and Chile, this memoir-cum-novel explores the life of Inés Suárez, Chile's founding mother. (★★★ Jan/Feb 2007)

THE ALEXANDER COLD TRILOGY (YOUNG ADULTS)

CITY OF THE BEASTS (2002)

In this surreal, young-adult novel, 15-year-old Alexander Cold accompanies his journalist grandmother to the Amazonian rain forest to search for a legendary "Beast."

KINGDOM OF THE GOLDEN DRAGON (2004)

In the Himalayas with his grandmother, Alexander and his friend Nadia must work with Buddhists and a young heir to the kingdom to conquer impending evil.

FOREST OF THE PYGMIES (2005)

In the Alexander Cold finale, 18-year-old Alexander, his grandmother, and Nadia travel to Africa, where they try to save the Pygmies from an evil tyrant. ■