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Isabel Allende

(1942-)

Verónica Cortínez

Of all Latin American writers, Isabel Allende is arguably the most popular, authoring novels, tales, and nonfictional works that regularly and instantly make it onto the best-seller lists in both the Spanish-speaking world and in translation all over the planet. Her fame is such that, in the United States, she has been featured on Oprah Winfrey's Book Club and television show and was one of the very few Latin American personalities included by ABC anchor Peter Jennings in his turn-of-the-millennium review of the twentieth century. In 1996 the city of Los Angeles named her "Author of the Year" and proclaimed January 16 of that year "Isabel Allende Day." Moreover, several of her stories have been made into Hollywood films—with a wide range of international stars—and turned into plays in the United States, England, and Puerto Rico. Her work has inspired a musical in Iceland, an opera in Germany, and a ballet in the United States. Indeed, for readers around the world, Allende has emerged as the archetypal Latin American author. This lofty, if contested, position is partially due to highly successful marketing strategies and the revolutionary symbolism of her family ties with Chile's deposed socialist president, Salvador Allende, but, most importantly, it is due to the very readable nature of her fiction: skillfully constructed yarns that engage readers in the sentimental lives and endless

vicissitudes of a vast gallery of vividly developed characters, many of whom are strong, memorable women.

Despite—or perhaps because of—Allende's global stardom, the aesthetic value of her writings has often been questioned in certain academic and literary circles. In this, Allende's fortune is inextricably linked with the international rise of Spanish American fiction writers in the 1960s—the so-called Boom. The visibility of that earlier generation of authors, which includes such emblematic figures as Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, and Mario Vargas Llosa, was at first attributed by some to the commercial acumen of the publishing establishment, especially the Barcelona literary agent Carmen Balcells.

After being rejected by several publishers, Allende's first novel, *La casa de los espíritus* (*The House of the Spirits*, 1985), finally came out in 1982, thanks to Balcells's visionary talent: not only did Allende have a politically resonant surname, she could also fill the boom's embarrassing gender gap. But if the older male authors were soon placed at the center of Latin America's literary canon, Allende is often dismissed as just a best-selling writer, a minor talent or, more specifically, a formulaic imitator of García Márquez's magical realism. However, one may view Allende's fiction, as some critics have, in the context of a more recent literary-historical category: the post-boom. This younger, larger

generation of writers is often associated with a series of postmodern trends whereby popular culture and the referential capacity of narrative fiction acquire new worth even as the linguistic experimentation and intellectual elitism, which is arguably at the core of the Boom, are downplayed.

In a sense, Allende's works may be seen as a return to basics; half-jokingly, she herself has said that she should have been born in the nineteenth century. As in much traditional fiction, she spins heartfelt stories that are nothing if not page-turners, thrilling audiences that by 1998 had purchased about thirty million copies of her books in twenty-eight languages.

Isabel Allende was born in Lima, Peru, on 2 August 1942, to Chilean parents. Her father, Tomás Allende, held a position at the Chilean Embassy. Whereas Tomás's first cousin, Salvador Allende, later became president of Chile, Isabel's father was, in his daughter's eyes, an unreliable man. More of a bohemian and a dandy than anything else, he was the prototype for the unsympathetic character of Count Jean de Satigny in *The House of the Spirits*. He later vanished from his family's life, and Isabel would never see him again until, many years later, she was called to identify his body—a body whose face she did not remember—at the morgue in Santiago. Her mother, Francisca Llonca Barros, known as Panchita, is clearly an indelible figure, not only Isabel's best friend but also the first hand—the *tinta roja*, or red ink—to edit all that her daughter writes. Traces of Panchita are apparent in *The House of the Spirits* in the character of Blanca, and she also contributed most of the sophisticated kitchen recipes that constitute a large section of *Afrodita: Cuentos, recetas y otros afrodisíacos* (1997; *Aphrodite: A Memoir of the Senses*, 1998), Isabel's playful, genre- (if not gender-) bending illustrated book.

In many ways, Panchita's biography is not unlike that of an Isabel Allende character. While in Lima, Panchita met and fell in love with Ramón Huidobro, also a Chilean and a career diplomat. He was married and had four children, and because his wife was opposed to having their marriage annulled (there is no divorce law in Chile), he was never able to marry Panchita, although they have lived together for over fifty years. In her nonfictional writings and in real life, Isabel refers to him as Tío (uncle) Ramón, but he never

made it into any of her fiction, at least those written before *Paula* (1994; *Paula*, 1995), where she describes him as too decent and commonsensical to share a novel with her very tormented characters.

Together with her two younger brothers, Francisco and Juan, Isabel was taken to Chile for the first time when she was three years old. They sailed into Valparaíso, the renowned port city on the Pacific that plays an almost mythical role in Allende's later fiction. Because Ramón Huidobro had stayed behind in Lima, Panchita and her three children settled at her parents' home in the well-heeled Providencia district of Santiago. The house, located on Calle Suecia 081, would later be transformed through Allende's imagination into the fictional "house of the spirits," her grandfather Agustín Llonca and grandmother Isabel Barros becoming the novel's Esteban Trueba and his wife Clara del Valle. Allende has revealed that Clara is the most faithful representation of a living character in her first novel—though she is careful to point out that, unlike her tale's heroine, her grandmother never played the piano with the lid down—but she also regrets that her grandfather's memory may always be tainted because of her own corrosive fictional disfigurement of the real-world man. Another important person in Isabel's early childhood is Margara, the children's nanny; in Allende's works, as in many other Chilean works of fiction, nannies play a surprisingly commanding role within the otherwise rigidly patriarchal family structure.

Allende's formal education was somewhat erratic, for she attended several schools in various countries. In Santiago she was first enrolled at Las Ursulinas, a private school run by German nuns from which she was expelled, she says, after her mother's affair with Ramón Huidobro became known. There is, however, another story about the cause of her expulsion, one involving a panty-showing contest organized by little Isabel. She later attended Dunalastair, an upscale English school also for girls, before the family moved to La Paz, Bolivia. In Bolivia the family reunited with Ramón, who held a diplomatic post there. Not much information is available about Isabel's experience at the American coeducational school she attended in La Paz, except that it was her first exposure to Latin American nationalism. As a Chilean, she was blamed by her classmates for Bolivia's landlocked status, which had resulted from

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the nineteenth-century War of the Pacific, a subject of her latest novel. In addition, Allende had her first crush while she was a student there, on a boy that she now remembers only as having large ears.

The family next followed Ramón to a turbulent Middle East, where Allende continued her education at a British school in Beirut, Lebanon. She lived there for three years, imbibing an alien yet alluring culture that would leave its imprint in *Eva Luna* (1987; *Eva Luna*, 1988), *Cuentos de Eva Luna* (1989; *The Stories of Eva Luna*, 1991), and *Aphrodite*. Returning to Santiago in 1958, she next attended La Maisonette, yet another exclusive school for girls.

Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Isabel was a voracious reader, at first out of shyness and loneliness. She loved Emilio Salgari, Jules Verne, Mark Twain, and Jack London, as well as all of Shakespeare, whom she read (as she has confessed) for the pleasure of gossip and tragedy. Later she read in search of the forbidden worlds that adult books opened for her, as in the most erotic sections of *The Arabian Nights*. She especially identified with the villains in the stories, which may help to explain her own fictional insight into characters that society tends to shun. She has also written about her difficulty in keeping life and fiction apart.

Allende's first job, at the early age of seventeen, was as a secretary for the information department of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Santiago. When asked to type a letter as an entrance requirement, she deployed her wild imagination and composed a tumultuous love epistle. She worked for FAO from 1959 to 1965, and this position, which included some work for television, allowed her to meet people connected to the media; broadcast and print journalism would later become her career and a platform to national fame.

During this period she met Miguel Frías, an engineering student, whom she married in 1962. Their first daughter, Paula, was born in 1963, before they moved to Belgium (she studied television there) and Switzerland for a year. Upon their return to Chile, they had a second child, Nicolás, who was born in 1966. One year later, as a young mother, she began to work as a journalist for *Paula*, a women's magazine that had just

been founded by Delia Vergara, a trailblazer in Chile's incipient feminist movement.

Allende's years at *Paula* were crucial in her development as an author and a public figure. Although Allende, as she tells it, had no formal training or experience of any kind as a writer, let alone as a journalist, Vergara had read the engaging, humorous letters that Allende wrote to her mother (who was still living in Beirut and happened to be Vergara's friend) and offered Allende a job. Unlike other members of the magazine staff, Allende was not called to write theoretical or combative essays on feminism, but rather to practice a lightweight kind of journalism that would attract and entertain readers. Despite the trivial nature of her articles, they ultimately emerge, when closely examined, as a liberating forum for Chilean women. In her humorous column, entitled "Los Impertinentes" (The impertinent ones), she resorts to the most egregious stereotypes of men and women in order to expose and dismantle them through the workings of irony and hyperbole. She advises her female readers, for instance, to overplay the cliché of women as dumb and weak in order to succeed in society, as one can read in one of the articles later collected and published in *Civilice a su troglodita* (1974; *Civilize your troglodyte*):

Hay que ponerse a gritar cuando ve una abeja, desmayarse si queda atrapada en el ascensor, ponerse histérica con los incendios, los temblores y las arañas. Finja que no entiende los chistes, parezca inútil, gastadora y chismosa. Eso es lo que los hombres entienden por "feminidad" y es completamente inútil tratar de hacerlos cambiar de opinión.

You should scream when you see a bee, faint if you're trapped in an elevator, become hysterical on account of fires, tremors, and spiders. Pretend you don't get any joke, and make sure to appear useless and gossipy and seem to be a big spender. That's what men understand by "femininity" and it's totally useless to try to change their minds.

Besides "Los Impertinentes," Allende also wrote an advice column entitled "Correo del Amor" (Love mail); her *nom de plume* for this particular endeavor was Francisca Ramón, a name that publicly yet cryptically acknowledged the romantic union and impossible marriage of her mother and stepfather.

At *Paula*, Allende was also responsible for the astrology section. Her forecasts for each sign were based not on any arcane knowledge or supernatural gift, but rather, quite imaginatively, on the adventures and misadventures of her own circle of friends. Her later confession that her practice of journalism did not always distinguish between fact and fiction, or her sense that she was not always taken seriously, then, should come as no surprise. One reader, however, who does seem to have valued her flair for writing was none other than Pablo Neruda, Chile's foremost poet and Nobel Laureate in literature as well as a personal friend of the Allende family. He suggested to Isabel that she compile her humorous pieces in one volume, and this is how Allende became the author of her first, if rather *sui generis*, book, *Civilice a su troglodita* (with illustrations by Ricardo Guiraldes). This may be seen as the beginning of a prolific career—not yet that of a novelist, but certainly an initial step toward defining a voice of her own. Also in 1974, she published two children's books, *Lauchas y lauchones, ratas y ratones* (Mice and rats, small and large) and *La abuela Panchita* (Grandmother Panchita), dedicated to her own children Paula and Nicolás, then eight and five years old respectively. The early 1970s also mark Allende's incursions into the theater; she wrote three plays that were staged in Santiago: *El embajador* (1971; The ambassador); *La balada del medio pelo* (1973; The poor man's ballad); and *Los siete espejos* (1974; The seven mirrors). During this time, she also wrote *La gorda de porcelana* (The porcelain fat woman), a short allegorical tale that would be published (by Madrid's Alfaguara) only in 1984, after the success of *The House of the Spirits*.

On the Chilean national scene, Allende was best known for her television shows, where she created a striking persona that challenged the conventional seriousness of the official media. Wearing the multicolor fashions of the 1960s and 1970s, and driving a very compact Citroën that she had personally decorated with daisies, the ultramodern Allende would interview everyone from politicians and entrepreneurs to prostitutes and drug addicts. Indeed, the female protagonist of *De amor y de sombra* (1984; *Of Love and Shadows*, 1987), written a decade later, closely resembles the Isabel of these years. But the world as she knew it would soon come to a shocking end because of political events

in Chile. The leftist coalition of Unidad Popular (Popular Unity) had resulted in the democratic election of President Salvador Allende in 1970, but his troubled administration collapsed, abruptly and violently, following the military coup of 11 September 1973 and the establishment of General Augusto Pinochet's dictatorial regime. For more than a year, at considerable personal risk, Isabel exerted an incredible effort to help those who were being persecuted by the military, but, after having been fired from her magazine and television jobs, she finally opted for exile and moved with her family to Caracas, Venezuela, in 1975. Only after thirteen years abroad, upon the announcement of a national referendum on the political fate of Pinochet, would she return to her country.

Seeking to continue her work as a journalist and playwright, Allende's initial years in Venezuela were defined by financial and professional hardship. These years were also a turning point in her career as a writer; she embraced fiction and began to write the novel that would catapult her to international fame. Many years later, in her book *Paula*, which is both a tale of her daughter's final year as well as an autobiographical essay of sorts, Allende recalls a conversation with Neruda during which he had playfully questioned her journalistic skills and counseled her to write fiction instead:

Usted debe ser la peor periodista del país, hija. Es incapaz de ser objetiva, se pone al centro de todo, y sospecho que miente bastante y cuando no tiene una noticia, la inventa. ¿Por qué no se dedica a escribir novelas mejor? En la literatura esos defectos son virtudes.

My dear child, you must be the worst journalist in the country. You are incapable of being objective, you place yourself at the center of everything you do, I suspect you're not beyond fibbing, and when you don't have news, you invent it. Why don't you write novels instead? In literature, those defects are virtues.

Despite Neruda's clearcut advice, it must be pointed out that Allende herself describes the textual origin of *The House of the Spirits* not as a novel but as a letter to her grandfather (who was dying in Chile), begun in

1981 and eventually mushrooming into an almost five-hundred page manuscript dealing with family and national lore.

Most of what Allende has written in the two decades that followed the publication of *The House of the Spirits* has been narrative fiction. Her second novel, *Of Love and Shadows*, also deals indirectly with Chile's twentieth-century history, with a focus on the brutal repercussions of the military coup. The next two books, *Eva Luna* and *The Stories of Eva Luna*, shift their setting to the tropical regions of Latin America, signaling what seems to be a constant in Allende's fiction: subjects and locales that correspond directly to phases in her own biography.

If Venezuela's physical and cultural makeup filter into the *Eva Luna* cycle, her next three novels follow her to California. Having divorced Miguel Frías in 1987, she married an American lawyer, William Gordon, in 1988 after a single meeting and moved to the San Francisco Bay area. Indeed, the first of the California novels, *El plan infinito* (1991; *The Infinite Plan*, 1993), retrieves numerous aspects of her second husband's life in the Golden State, from his childhood in East Los Angeles through their life together in San Rafael.

Allende's next two novels, *Hija de la fortuna* (1999; *Daughter of Fortune*, 1999) and *Retrato en sepia* (2000; *Portrait in Sepia*, 2001), go back to the period from the 1840s to 1910, uncovering the half-forgotten ties that bind the histories of California and Chile together. Her two nonfiction books of the 1990s are *Paula* (1994), published after her daughter's death from porphyria in 1992, and, after a long interval of silence, *Aphrodite* (1997), a joyful celebration of the present and life's sensual pleasures—an antidote to suffering, as it were. *Paula* is an unusual text, for it openly delves into a mother's pain even as it explores an author's salvation through storytelling. If Allende's novels had already afforded her a large readership, this long essay reached even more people, especially those who had gone through similar experiences in their own lives, and many wrote to the author with their own stories. Presently a resident of Sausalito, California, Allende lives with her husband not far from where her daughter's ashes were scattered, in a house with a sign that reads "the house of the spirits."

Although Allende has written both fiction and nonfiction, the truth of the matter is that both modes are more closely intertwined than they may first appear. Her first and still best-known work is *The House of the Spirits*, a work of fiction, but the text's origin in the letter that Allende wrote to her grandfather upon learning of his stroke cannot be underestimated. She started writing that letter on 8 January 1981. By the end of the following year, the novel had been translated into every major European language.

Much has been written about the seemingly fortuitous composition of *The House of the Spirits*, and some critics have taken this as proof that Allende is nothing more than an accidental author, yet there is much evidence also to suggest that she is a laborious artisan of her works. That she chooses to start every new book on 8 January suggests a certain degree of superstition, but it is at the same time the sign of a disciplined talent. Moreover, in more ways than one, it is possible to view Allende's craft as the destination of a long, if winding, road. Beyond her extensive and varied work as a journalist, one may also recall her first clerical job at the FAO in Santiago. There she at times amused herself by translating romances from English into Spanish, a task that contributed to the sense of genre that one clearly perceives in her works. Even when creating many of her characters, Allende has rendered them conscious of the different literary forms—poetry, romance, opera, erotic fiction, even aphrodisiac recipes—that men and women can appeal to when engaged in the act of creation. It is true that when Allende's letter to her grandfather became something much bigger, she was not yet able to wield absolute control over certain narrative matters; in fact, there is an anecdote that it was her engineer husband, Miguel Frías, who detected a number of chronological inconsistencies in Isabel's first manuscript and had to reconstruct, as it were, *The House of the Spirits* by sketching a blueprint of the final text on the walls of their own dining room. Given the numerous forking paths that pervade all of Allende's novels, her technical mastery over the art of fiction—her deft control over the numerous, and always interesting, twists and turns of characters and events—is nothing short of remarkable.

At a first reading, *The House of the Spirits* may be viewed as the chronicle of one family through several

decades of the twentieth century in an unnamed Latin American country. The novel's setting is never explicitly acknowledged to be Chile, and there are no obviously Chilean words or phrases in the novel, yet there are several signs in the text that seem to hint at the author's homeland. This is not a regionalist text, like those written by previous generations, yet readers familiar with Chile's imagined community may, for instance, recognize Neruda in the figure of the Poet, Salvador Allende in that of the Candidate and later President, or singer Víctor Jara in the character of Pedro Tercero. Moreover, the story's social and political background fits well within a general history of Chile. (With the publication of *Daughter of Fortune* and *Portrait in Sepia*, the Chilean specificity of *The House of the Spirits* has become retroactively explicit.)

Similarly, the characters in the novel resemble those of Allende's extended family. One can trace, for example, clear parallels between Alba and the author herself; the del Valle brothers recall Allende's uncles; and Blanca, Clara, and Esteban Trueba seem to correspond to Allende's mother, grandmother, and grandfather respectively. Even the dog's name, Barrabás, which is the very first word in this vast saga, is the name of the Allende family dog in Chile. In many interviews, Allende has admitted to the autobiographical beginnings of all of her works, even saying that she does not need to "invent" anything, yet the relationship between historical truth and fictional representation is clearly more complex. When the novel first appeared, some of her relatives were aghast at the author's "indiscretions," on the one hand, and "falsifications," on the other; interestingly, the family has since adopted *The House of the Spirits* as their official story.

Critics of the novel have faulted Allende as a mere imitator of Gabriel García Márquez, whose status at the very pinnacle of Latin American literary culture is widely acknowledged. Like García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which chronicles several generations of the Buendía family, *The House of the Spirits* is an ambitious saga of the del Valle family; and, like García Márquez's Macondo, a fictional place that is usually viewed as the archetypal Latin American town, the places in Allende's text also seek to have continental resonances. Indeed, certain aspects of Allende's work may be taken as conscious tokens of appreciation for

García Márquez's universe; the first chapter of *The House of the Spirits*, for instance, is named Rosa, la Bella (Rosa the Beautiful), an homage of sorts to the character Remedios la Bella in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Moreover, Allende's masterful use of such narrative devices as prolepsis (the allusion to an event that will take place in the future) recalls the essence of García Márquez's narrative art, as displayed in the memorable first line of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

The most controversial link between Allende and her predecessor concerns the issue of magical realism, the narration of strange or even supernatural events calmly through the codes of literary realism. Instances of magical realism appear throughout *The House of the Spirits*, from Clara's clairvoyance to Alba's naturally green hair (featured on the cover of some editions), all told without much ado. If many readers around the world relish the exotic undertones of magical realism, others, especially in Latin America, reject this narrative mode for its often formulaic deployment and its clichéd simplification of the continent's cultures. The debate surrounding Allende's works and García Márquez's legacy is ongoing. Whereas Alberto Fuguet, a younger Chilean novelist, has proclaimed that he would like to write a novel like *The House of the Spirits*, but without the spirits, the critic Patricia Hart has provocatively explored "The Influence of Isabel Allende on Gabriel García Márquez" (*Narrative Magic in the Fiction of Isabel Allende*, 1989).

The House of the Spirits clearly belongs within the Latin American version of literature about exile, and its greatest value may well be its retrieval of the homeland not through dour or lachrymose nostalgia but by means of an obsessive search for the past. Whereas in Marcel Proust time is regained through metaphors and images, Allende's investigation relies on the seductive power of storytelling—an old-fashioned virtue—and a complex web of voices and documents that reminds one of Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Indeed, the novel's main subject may be not so much politics or the female condition but, rather, the intricacies of telling a story, especially as it concerns memory. How can one tell the whole story if one does not know, or remember, everything? The overwhelming nature of the storytelling process is suggested by the sporadic emergence of a first-person pronoun within

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the third-person omniscient narrative, an apparent inconsistency that is resolved only in the epilogue, when it is revealed that Alba is the novel's true narrator, including those passages where she is referred to in the third person as well as the intermittent sections told by Esteban Trueba in the first person. These narrative labyrinths are neither a self-reflexive game nor cerebral experimentation, but a device that underscores the novel's political moral: only by having access to a character's full story can one understand the feelings and actions of others.

The characters of *The House of the Spirits* and, for that matter, all of Allende's other novels as well, are prone to recount their life stories so that they can be truly known. In this regard a memorable episode in the novel is when Colonel García tells Alba about their childhood just before he rapes and mutilates her; for the reader, the Colonel's tale cannot justify his brutality, but it is nevertheless an essential part of a vast tableau in which he, too, must be understood. That a female consciousness should be the one in control over the narrative is significant, for it suggests an alternative to male-centered discourses that appear to be less capable of subtle discernment and reconciliation.

Begun on 8 January 1982, exactly a year after *The House of the Spirits* and before that novel's publication, *Of Love and Shadows* was Allende's response to Balcells's dictum that anyone can write a good first novel, but that only a good second one is proof of an author's talents. Like its predecessor, *Of Love and Shadows* deals with history and politics in a nameless Latin American country, but this time with a specific focus on a coup d'état and the ensuing repression and violence. That the action takes place in Chile is never made explicit, yet, as in *The House of the Spirits*, resemblances to real events and characters in that country are not a mere coincidence. The novel's General closely mimics Pinochet, while another character, Mario, makes Chilean readers think of Luigi, a flamboyant hairdresser in Santiago's fashionable circles.

According to Allende, each of her novels stems from a specific, concrete emotion. *The House of the Spirits* grew out of nostalgia; the impulse behind *Of Love and Shadows* is anger. This novel, then, emerges as a testimony of, and weapon against, tyranny, not just in Chile but across the continent and throughout the

world. In this Allende adopts one of the consecrated stances of Latin American authorship: writers speak for those who do not have a voice, in order to record and preserve what would otherwise remain silenced. Like Neruda in "The Heights of Machu Picchu," the novelist behind *Of Love and Shadows* invokes and revives the memory of those who have unjustly suffered and died.

Specifically, the event that lies at the heart of this text is the 1978 discovery of a mass grave at Lonquén, in central Chile, that contained the bodies of fifteen peasants massacred by the military Right after the 1973 coup. Lonquén (called Los Riscos in the novel) became symbolically important because the Pinochet regime was not able to suppress the news that the mass grave had been discovered. The Catholic Church in Chile, contrary to what happened in other Latin American totalitarian regimes at the time, was instrumental in denouncing human rights violations and impeded official censorship. Indeed, one of the novel's characters is "the Cardinal," whose actions mirror those of Santiago's archbishop Raúl Silva Henríquez, founder of the Vicaría de la Solidaridad (Vicary of Solidarity). The novel's central heroes are two journalists, Irene Beltrán and Francisco Leal (played by Jennifer Connelly and Antonio Banderas in the film version), whose love story is intertwined with a political thriller that closely follows historical events. Likewise, the character of Irene is directly modeled on Isabel herself; she works for a magazine just like *Paula* (where a sense of normalcy must be maintained at all costs), helps the dictatorship's victims, and ends up by leaving the country. Curiously for a fictional work, it is journalism, not literature, that ultimately is praised for its detailed and truthful recording of reality by means of historical documents, personal notebooks, and even photography.

If the work of journalism is, to a large extent, the theme of *Of Love and Shadows*, storytelling emerges as the most powerful tool of survival in *Eva Luna*, Allende's third novel and the one during whose composition she first felt secure enough to start describing herself officially as a full-fledged writer. Whereas *The House of the Spirits* was written in a haphazard way, *Eva Luna* was carefully designed beforehand.

The tale of *Eva Luna*, the female character that Allende says she cherishes the most, is a story of empowerment. *Eva*, the illegitimate daughter of an

indigenous gardener and a maid, becomes an orphan as a child, yet grows up to be a popular writer of *telenovelas* (television soap operas). Critics have underscored the parallels between *Eva Luna* and the picaresque romance, but, unlike Lázaro de Tormes, the original *pícaro* of Spanish literature, Eva is never corrupted by the class-conscious society into which she is born. In a sense, there are innumerable social and cultural differences between Allende and her new protagonist; Eva lives in a world that Alba and Irene, Isabel's previous literary alter egos, would find quite foreign, yet they all share the talent of forging their own unique destinies through the power of words.

Having already recovered and documented her own past in Chile, as well as the country's recent history, Allende seems liberated to invent a new fictional reality. Abandoning the landscapes of her two previous novels, the writer now sets the scene in the multiethnic tropics, peopled by mestizos, Europeans, Arabs, and indigenous people. This setting, however, is not a realistic copy of Venezuela but an exotic, more ardent version thereof, a region whose passionate exuberance somehow matches the melodramatic tenor of both the novel *Eva Luna* and the television scripts, such as "Bolero," that its protagonist creates. In this regard, this new text emerges as a kind of *ars poetica*, one in which women can improve, even save, their lives through the stories they know how to imagine and tell.

The novel's epigraph is taken from *The Arabian Nights* and retrieves the special magic of Scheherazade's art: "Hermana, por Alá sobre ti, cuéntanos una historia que nos haga pasar la noche" (Sister, for the sake of Allah, tell us a story that will help pass the night). In this ancient lineage of real-world and imaginary female storytellers, Allende makes sure that *Eva Luna* has stories she can call her own. With a fictional preface by Rolf Carlé, an Austrian photographer who is her true love in the novel, *The Stories of Eva Luna* are presented to the reader as the stories that the heroine composes to fulfill her lover's most intimate plea: "Cuéntame un cuento que no le hayas contado a nadie" (Tell me a story you have never told anyone before). Indeed, the twenty-three short stories that make up this collection, as varied as they are, are all tales of love. Some of these texts are highly erotic, and one of them, "Boca de sapo"

("Toad's Mouth"), has been blacklisted by some religious groups in the United States. Written when she went to live at William Gordon's rather chaotic household in San Rafael, Allende now claims that it was easier for her to write short fiction at the time, since writing an entire novel would have been virtually impossible in such an environment. Beyond these circumstances, however, Allende's first incursion into the short story denotes a new self-assurance regarding the forms of her craft: an author's mastery over each and every element of the text is a necessity imposed by the genre's brevity and, as Poe would have it, its demand for a "single effect."

The Infinite Plan introduces two noticeable changes in Allende's fiction. It is the first novel set outside of Latin America, and the only one, so far, to have a male protagonist. It is the story of Gregory Reeves, whose biography closely follows that of Isabel's second husband, from his early childhood traveling with an itinerant family (Gregory's father preaches "the infinite plan," his personal philosophy) to the couple's shared life together, the novel's narrative present, when Reeves speaks to his unnamed lover, who is a novelist. The text is framed by this oral confession—the female narrator asks Reeves to tell her the story of his life—but most of the novel is told in a conventional third-person form that, as always with Allende, easily captivates readers. At the text's beginning and end, not unlike the device used in *The House of the Spirits*, there is a first-person voice closely linked to Allende's own. Similarly, in a manner reminiscent of Esteban Trueba's memories, Reeves tells part of his own story in his own voice.

In this, her first novel about California, Allende begins to explore the United States as a multicultural society through the various episodes of Reeves's life: his childhood in the Hispanic neighborhood of East Los Angeles; his college years at Berkeley; the Vietnam War; and, finally, his work as a lawyer in San Francisco, helping members of different ethnic minorities. Although Reeves is a white Anglo-American male, his story may be read as a survivor's tale very much in the tradition of Allende's female protagonists.

As in *The House of the Spirits* and *Of Love and Shadows*, *The Infinite Plan* combines fact with fiction. The Vietnam episode did not actually happen to Allende's husband (it is inspired by a veteran's tale),

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but the rest of the novel is based on Allende's thorough research of her husband's life; rather than inventing, she describes her task as editing. Just as Isabel's Chilean relatives now view *The House of the Spirits* as a family album of sorts, Gordon has stated that not until reading *The Infinite Plan*, an experience he has called the happiest moment of his life, did he fully understand "the plan" underlying his own biography.

On 6 December 1991, while Allende was in Madrid to launch *The Infinite Plan*, she received the news that her only daughter, Paula, had been taken ill and was in a coma. Paula lived in Madrid, with her husband, Ernesto, so Isabel was able to rush immediately to the hospital. This was the beginning of a painful process that resulted in Paula's untimely death exactly a year later, at Isabel and William's home in California, a personal tragedy that Allende survived only through writing. It was Carmen Balcells, Allende's literary agent, who early on gave Isabel a yellow pad and urged her to record her feelings so that she could ease her nightmarish pain: "Toma, escribe y desahógate, si no lo haces morirás de angustia, pobrecita mía" (*Paula*; My poor Isabel. Here, take this and write. Unburden your heart; if you don't you are going to die of anguish).

In a gesture reminiscent of the origins of *The House of the Spirits*, Isabel began to write a letter to somebody who is dying—not her very old grandfather this time, but even more poignantly, a twenty-eight-year-old woman who was simply too young to die. The initial impulse behind the letter, besides assuaging her own suffering, is Isabel's need to recount Paula's experience, so that when she wakes from her coma she will have a record of this dark episode. But Paula never regained consciousness and, after her death, Isabel reshaped the original letter into a book based not only on Isabel's notes but also on the letters she had written to her mother, Panchita, during that year, and including as well the love letters that Paula and Ernesto had exchanged during their life together.

What surprised reviewers when *Paula* first came out was the extent to which the book does not deal with Isabel's child, but rather with the author's own biography—so much so that some suggested, rather critically, that the book ought to be entitled *Isabel*. Indeed, much of the text is Allende's recounting of her own life with utmost honesty, down to her most intimate secrets. Her

florid loquacity stands out as a radical contrast to Paula's profound silence, and one wonders whether there is not a certain measure of exhibitionism in Isabel's torrent of words. A careful reading of *Paula*, however, reveals a deeper function for Allende's act.

As in the Eva Luna novel and stories, one key may be found in the figure of Scheherazade, whose desperate attempt to postpone her own execution by means of storytelling is invoked obliquely in the text: "Mi abuela escribía en sus cuadernos para salvar los fragmentos evasivos de los días y engañar a la mala memoria. Yo intento distraer a la muerte" (*Paula*; My grandmother wrote in her notebooks to safeguard the fleeting fragments of the days and outwit loss of memory. I am trying to distract death). In the original Spanish, the verb *distraer* means not only to *distract*, but also to *amuse*, thus recalling the delightful nature of Scheherazade's stories as well as Allende's own, in the sense that her grandmother's practice of writing may be equated with Clara's "cuadernos de anotar la vida" (notebooks for recording life) in *The House of the Spirits*. In fact, readers of *Paula* may have recognized in this autobiographical narrative many of the events that had been previously integrated into the fabric of the author's first novel, yet there is a fundamental difference between both tellings of the same story that explains and justifies the title *Paula*.

Allende's book is divided into three parts. The first covers the period from December 1991 to May 1992, the second runs from May 1992 to December 1992, and the third consists of an epilogue. The turning point in the story is Isabel's loss of hope that her daughter would ever wake up again. If the first part resorts to a second-person narrative directly addressed to Paula, the second part shifts to a third-person tale in which it is made clear that Paula will never read what has been composed for her: Paula is written about, not to. Death will no longer be distracted, so one wonders to what extent Paula's mortality can be reconciled with the second meaning of *distraer*, to *amuse*, a trait so much at the heart of Allende's imaginings and practice of writing.

There is no doubt that *Paula* is as engaging a text as any other written by the author, but here Allende opens up her bag of tricks and exposes its contents. In a sense, this work may be read as a kind of reflection on

her previous fiction, especially the novel that consecrated her fame. If, in *The House of the Spirits*, Alba's green hair is presented to the reader as a token of reality's magic, in *Paula* one learns of a much more prosaic truth: "una vez que quise pintarme los pelos de amarillo y por un error del peluquero terminé con la cabeza verde" (once when I wanted to dye my hair yellow and the beautician bungled the job and it turned green). One could argue that Allende uncovers her magical realism and other aspects of her wild adornment of reality—her fiction's poetics—in order to make Paula's own view of the world stand out in contrast and, more important, be preserved.

Throughout the text, Allende underscores her daughter's maturity and simplicity, traits that she herself claims to lack. Seeking somehow to safeguard Paula's gaze and voice, Isabel tries to denude her account of anything that may be superfluous and lavish, what she calls "the beasts of imagination," which are therefore not entirely honest. Suspending disbelief, aiming at something higher than even memory, writing's illusion is to secure a scriptural reunion of mother and daughter: "No es recordarte lo que pretendo, sino vivir tu vida, ser tú, que ames, sientas y palpites en mí, que cada gesto mío sea un gesto tuyo, que mi voz sea tu voz" (I don't mean remember you, but live your life, be you, let you love and feel and breathe in me, let my gestures be yours, my voice your voice). In this regard, *Paula* is not only a fitting title for this book, but also, in a sense, a faithful signature.

After *Paula*, Allende's years of silence were followed not by a return to fiction but to a heterogeneous kind of writing that recalls her beginnings as a journalist in Chile. Indeed, the tone of *Aphrodite* is lighthearted, like "Los Impertinentes," the humorous column that she wrote for the women's magazine, *Paula*, before she became a famous author. The book was born half in jest when she and her friend Robert Shekter, an illustrator, came up with the idea of collaborating on a volume about aphrodisiacs that would include stories, images, and, last but not least, kitchen recipes, provided by Allende's mother (except one, a "soup for orgies," that was concocted by Carmen Balcells). To dismiss this book as a trivial pursuit would be unjust, because its apology for sensuality and the pleasures of life—sex, food, drink—is part and parcel of a long tradition in

literature that includes not only such recent phenomena as Laura Esquivel's novel, *Como agua para chocolate* (1989) and a number of international films, but goes back to such canonical works as Pablo Neruda's poetry, *The Arabian Nights*, and the *Kama Sutra*. Allende's research on the subject seems rather thorough, but, the book's objective being pleasure, she decided not to spend any time preparing a bibliography. What we find, instead, amidst the recipes, illustrations, and quotes from world literature and sex manuals, is a new collection of short stories that continues what the author had initiated in *The Stories of Eva Luna*. If Allende's manner here is lighter and more playfully sexual than in that earlier collection, what both sets of stories share is an unconditional defense of love, hailed in *Aphrodite* as the most powerful of aphrodisiacs. Pervading the entire book is the author's intimate dialogue with the reader, who, as in "Los Impertinentes," is addressed in the second person and given instructions to be acted upon or, very much in keeping with Allende's spirit, subverted or rebelled against.

The author's long-awaited return to fiction occurred in 1999, with the publication of *Daughter of Fortune*, followed a year later by that of *Portrait in Sepia*. These two novels should be read as a diptych, in the sense that the latter continues the threads left loose in the former. They are a patiently composed and carefully crafted tableau of numerous characters whom we follow through several decades and various places around the world. The story traces the multiethnic origins of Valparaíso and San Francisco, and takes the reader to the point where *The House of the Spirits* begins. Aurora, the narrator of *Portrait in Sepia*, happens to be Clara del Valle's cousin, a turn of events through which Allende's first novel reconstitutes itself. By means of the retroactive effect of these "prequels," one sees the del Valle clan living not in a mythical Latin American republic, but in a specific geographic and historical milieu: Chile is no longer hidden, and even regional words, such as *fundo* (country estate), are now confidently used. Moreover, the aristocratic del Valles acquire a new attribute: some characters are now more complex, as in the case of Severo del Valle, whose war mutilation is an added element, or Nivea, whose sexuality is graphically depicted. There is also a new transcultural filiation, in that the later novels

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embrace the racial and linguistic plurality of the Pacific Rim. Born in San Francisco of English, Chilean, and Chinese ancestors, Aurora boasts another name, Lai-Ming, also meaning sunrise. These two names reflect her mixed origin even as they continue the long lineage of del Valle women, Nívea, Clara, Blanca, and Alba, whose names suggest light and purity.

In their vertiginous spatial and temporal journeys across several cultures, traversing East and West as well as North and South, *Daughter of Fortune* and *Portrait in Sepia* reinscribe the supernatural theme not as a regional, or even Latin American, eccentricity, but as an ancient human condition that unites all peoples. In the novels, the most visible spirit is Lin, who died in Hong Kong and whose beneficent influence convinces her widowed husband, Tao Chi'en, a wise doctor who ends up in San Francisco, to marry Eliza Sommers, the Anglo-Chilean heroine of *Daughter of Fortune* and maternal grandmother of Aurora. In the end, love triumphs over all ethnic differences and prejudices. Indeed, the erotic in its multiple varieties emerges as a central concern in these works. Citing the principle, from *Aphrodite*, that love is the best aphrodisiac, Tao Chi'en discovers the virtues of sexuality in the spiritual meeting of souls. It is interesting that Tao Chi'en sails out of slavery on a ship named *Liberty*, for freedom and liberation are arguably the central themes in these novels. Eliza Sommers follows a similar path; arriving in California wearing men's clothes and calling herself Elías Andieta, she eventually stops viewing her gender as a burden, and realizes that she can also be truly free as a woman.

These novels may be read as historical fiction: *Daughter of Fortune* deals with the California Gold Rush, *Portrait in Sepia* with South America's War of the Pacific, among other topics. However, they are very different from other historical novels in the Latin American traditions, such as those by Alejo Carpentier and Carlos Fuentes. As in her previous works, Allende embraces melodrama, but this time with a newfound maturity and sense of freedom. Both novels abound in characters that practice one form or another of representation, such as journalism, diaries, letters, poetry, opera, photography, romances, erotic literature, and even sex manuals. Specifically, Rose Sommers ends up being the most successful author of formulaic love

stories in the English language, while Aurora del Valle becomes the best photographer in Chile, taking pictures of peasants, indigenous peoples, and third-class passengers.

In a sense, the art of these two women may be interpreted as Allende's proud survey of her own practice of writing. That a writer of melodrama can be named by Queen Victoria as a Dame of the British Empire, and that a photographer can portray a reality in sepia that others ignore, may well be fictional signs that speak of the author's art. Perhaps as a composite of these two female characters, Allende confidently inhabits a room of her own, where a sentimental vision of reality does not need apologies. Her books are not just best-sellers, but "long-sellers," and the unconditional love of her readers around the world has allowed her to build an empire of her own.

It is still too early to tell what Isabel Allende's ultimate status in the canons of literature will be, but as one evaluates her writings, it may be wise to recall Pablo Neruda's words in a little-known manifesto, "Sobre una poesía sin pureza" (On an impure poetry):

Y no olvidemos nunca la melancolía, el gastado sentimentalismo, perfectos frutos impuros de maravillosa calidad olvidada, dejados atrás por el frenético libresco; la luz de la luna, el cisne en el anochecer, "corazón mío" son sin duda lo poético elemental e imprescindible. Quien huye del mal gusto cae en el hielo.

(*Caballo verde para la poesía*, October 1935)

And let us never forget melancholy, worn-out sentimentality, perfect impure fruits of a fabulous but forgotten quality, left behind by bookish frenzy: moonlight, the swan at dusk, "my love": surely this is the elemental and essential poetry. For he who shuns bad taste falls into iciness.

From the start of her career as a journalist and through her various volumes of fiction and nonfiction, Allende continues to privilege a writer's intimate and heartfelt connection with her reader. Regardless of the strict and narrow guidelines of some official definitions of art, the legends of Isabel Allende have moved readers of Latin American literature in ways that few other authors have.

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