



Isabel Allende

by Logan Ramsay



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School Publishers

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Printed in China

ISBN-13: 978-0-547-01671-9

ISBN-10: 0-547-01671-9

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 0940 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11

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A Woman and Her Art

 *“I have been an outsider nearly all my life, a circumstance I accept because I have no alternative.”*

—*Isabel Allende*

 Isabel Allende was born in 1942, in Peru. By the time she was sixteen, she had lived in four different countries, with a variety of relatives. She was used to being the “new girl,” the foreigner at school, the one who didn’t fit in. Abandonment, political turmoil, love, tragedy—these were all part of everyday life during her childhood. With a **background** such as this, it is not surprising that she felt like an outsider. She had no place where she could feel completely at home.

 For Allende, writing has always been a way to observe life from the outside. She is most famous for her novels. These long works of fiction are filled with colorful characters and events. The act of writing releases an avalanche of words from her pen. Allende says, “When I start, I am in a total limbo. I don’t have any idea where the story is going or what is going to happen or why I am writing it.” As she writes, the characters tell her who they are and what they are doing. Most of her main characters are females who have great inner strength and spirit—much like the author who created them.

An Unusual Childhood

Isabel Allende suffered her first great loss early in life. At the time, she lived in Peru. Her father, Tomás Allende, was a diplomat there. A diplomat represents his or her government in a foreign country. Tomás Allende and his wife Francisca (called Panchita) were from Chile. They moved to Peru so that Tomás could work at the Chilean embassy there. Isabel's parents' marriage had been troubled from the start. When Isabel was four, her father abandoned the family.

 In an instant, Isabel lost both a father and a country. Panchita and her three children got on a boat and sailed to Chile. Isabel never saw or spoke to her father again. All traces of him were erased from their lives—even his pictures were burned. His disappearance affected Isabel deeply. To this day, she is unable to write about fathers.

 Panchita took Isabel and her brothers to Santiago, Chile, to live at her parents' home. It was a large house, filled with dark rooms, heavy furniture, and unusual relatives. Isabel says that living with them gave her a lifetime's worth of stories: "With relatives as weird as mine there is no need to invent anything, they alone provide all the material...."

 *Isabel was born in Peru.*



It *was* a strange household, full of eccentric characters. Isabel's grandmother, Memé, claimed to be telepathic. She refused to use a telephone, preferring to send messages by "thought waves."

Isabel's grandfather, Tata, was a wealthy businessman. Like many Chilean men of that time, he dominated the household. Although he was harsh, Isabel learned much from him, including the importance of self-discipline and setting goals. Tata also gave her a love of language and of nature. He wanted Isabel to love the mountains, valleys, and long coastline of Chile as much as he did.

Two of Isabel's uncles also lived in her grandparents' home. One of her uncles, Pablo, had a wonderful library; as soon as Isabel learned to read, she began devouring every book her uncle owned.

When Isabel's grandmother died, Tata was consumed by grief. He ordered everyone in the household to wear black all the time; he even had the furniture painted black. He forbade parties, music, and anything cheerful. Life became very grim for Isabel and her brothers. Isabel escaped by disappearing into the cellar for hours, where she read, built forts out of books, and played make-believe.



 Isabel's mother did her best to keep her children happy. Isabel was very creative, and her mother encouraged this. She allowed Isabel to paint murals all over her bedroom walls. After working in the city all day, Panchita would come home and entertain Isabel and her brothers with colorful stories about her ancestors. Many of these stories later reappeared in Isabel's writings.

 Isabel was ten when her mother remarried. Ramón Huidobro, her new husband, was a Chilean diplomat like Isabel's father. He was sent to Bolivia, and Isabel's family went with him. Leaving Tata's house was heartbreaking. When Isabel waved goodbye to her grandfather, she felt as if she were waving goodbye to her childhood. On the trip to Bolivia, Panchita gave Isabel a notebook to use as a travel journal. Isabel wrote in the notebook every day. It was the beginning of a lifelong habit.

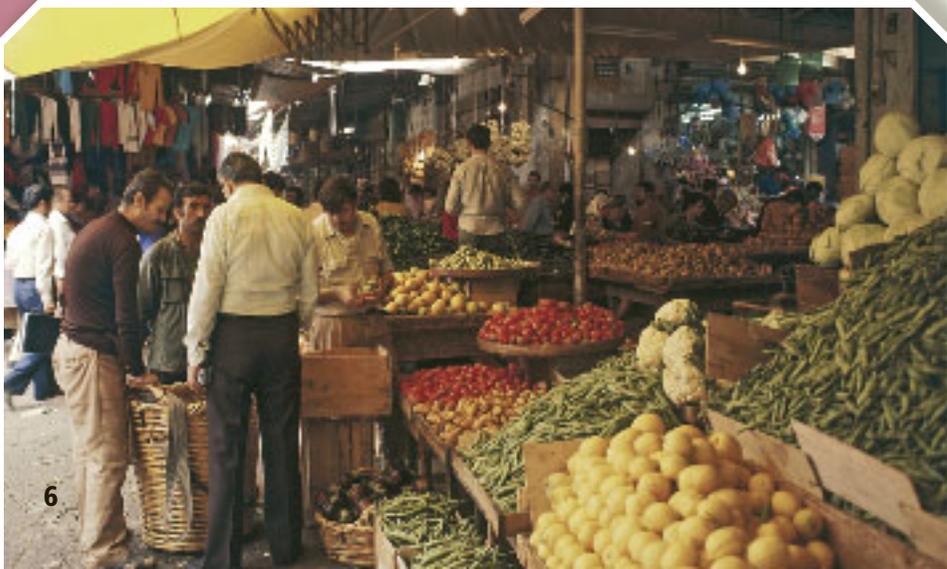
 In Bolivia, Isabel was once again an outsider. She had to get used to a new home, school, country, and stepfather. Tío Ramón, as Isabel and her brothers called him, was very strict. He was also very thoughtful. As a gift, he gave Isabel the complete works of William Shakespeare. Isabel was delighted.

 Over time, Isabel came to love Tío Ramón as a father. That was a good thing, since she and her family would follow him around the world. Isabel had only lived in Bolivia for a few years when Tío Ramón got a new assignment, this time in Beirut, Lebanon.

Beirut was known as the “Paris of the Middle East.” It was a bustling, exciting culture. Isabel loved to wander the narrow alleyways of the *souks*, or open-air markets, with her mother. In Beirut, Isabel attended an English school for girls. There, discipline was extremely strict. Once again Isabel was “the foreigner.” Some girls even confused Chile with China. Still, she made friends, and her English improved.

In 1958, political unrest brought violence to the Middle East. Fighting broke out in Beirut. Gun battles raged in the streets below the family’s apartment. Living there was so dangerous that the government ordered diplomats to send their families home. Isabel and her brothers flew home to Chile, leaving their mother and stepfather behind. During the long, **uneventful** flight, Isabel wrote a letter to her mother. Writing daily letters to her mother also became a lifelong writing habit.

Souks were filled with exotic foods, fabrics, and antiques. They were a treat for Isabel.



A Writer in Training

Back home again with Tata, Isabel finished high school. Because she had moved so many times, she had gaps in her learning. Spanish was her first language, and she could speak English and some French. Her reading and writing skills were excellent. But she had to be tutored in math, history, and geography. Tata was her history and geography tutor.

 Tata had a new wife, and every Sunday evening she entertained relatives. One of Isabel's cousins, and a regular Sunday visitor, was Salvador Allende. Later, he would be elected president of Chile.

 Isabel graduated from high school when she was sixteen. She didn't go to college, though. In those days, most Chilean women didn't. Instead, she fell in love with an engineering student named Miguel Frías. Miguel and Isabel decided to wait until Miguel finished college to marry. Meanwhile, Isabel got a job. She worked as a secretary at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), a part of the United Nations (UN). Isabel was bored by her job, so she took a side job translating English romance novels into Spanish. She developed her writing skills a little *too* freely in this job. When she didn't like how the characters spoke and behaved—especially the females—she changed things. She made the heroines smarter and more independent. She altered the endings. Although she had been hired as a translator, Isabel had become a writer. It is no wonder that she was fired from this job.

 Isabel and Miguel were married in 1962. After her marriage, Isabel continued to work with the FAO. She had a new position, in the Department of Information. Here, Isabel met some journalists who taught her how to write news articles. Isabel became a journalist. She learned how to draw readers into a story and keep them interested to the end.

 Writing for the Department of Information led to a new **career** in television. Isabel went on the air one day to explain the UN's Campaign Against World Hunger. She was so popular that she was given her own weekly show. Isabel interviewed celebrities. She discussed politics and news. She promoted women's rights—an issue always of great importance to her. At the time, many Chileans did not believe in equality for women.

 In 1963, Isabel took time off from work for the birth of her daughter, Paula. After that, the family traveled to Europe to study and explore. They returned to Chile in 1966, where Paula's little brother Nicolás was born.

 The following year, Isabel went back to work. This time, she tried a new kind of writing: magazine writing. By coincidence, the magazine she wrote for was called *Paula*. Isabel wrote articles and columns about women's issues. She would often use humor to write about serious topics such as divorce and equal rights for women. Humor allowed her to say things that might otherwise have angered her readers. Isabel worked for *Paula* for seven years. The experience made her an even better writer.



▶ **Salvador Allende was the world's first democratically-elected socialist president.**

▶ ***A Government in Upheaval***

The 1960s were a time of political change in Chile. Isabel's cousin Salvador Allende became an important politician. He was a socialist. Socialists generally believe that the government should manage major businesses and industries. Many Chileans agreed with Salvador Allende's views. Isabel didn't have a lot of time to think about them, however. She was very busy at this time, writing for *Paula*. She also had two TV shows of her own.

▶ In 1970, Salvador Allende was elected president. Among those who elected him were the majority of Chile's workers. Among those opposing him were many wealthy businessmen like Tata.

▶ The military in Chile sided with the businessmen. On the morning of September 11, 1973, military forces took over the government in a violent coup. They stormed the presidential palace. In a few hours, Salvador Allende was dead, and a group of military leaders ruled in his place.

Isabel learned about the coup and her cousin's death that afternoon. She was devastated by the news. She later said that part of her life ended on that day.

After the coup, thousands of Salvador Allende's supporters disappeared. Many were thrown into prison, tortured, and killed. Isabel did what she could. She joined a secret group that provided food and shelter for those hiding. She also passed names of the "disappeared" to human rights organizations around the world.

At *Paula*, Isabel found there were new rules about what she could write. The military government had to approve everything before it could be printed. Some of Isabel's friends from the magazine were among the "disappeared." Eventually she was fired, possibly because the new government disliked women's rights as much as it disliked socialism.

General Augusto Pinochet led the 1973 coup in Chile.



Into Exile

By 1975, Isabel Allende realized that staying in Chile was very dangerous. Thousands of Chileans had already gone into exile, leaving Chile to live in other countries. Many of them moved to Venezuela, and that's where Allende's family headed. Her grandfather chose to stay home in Chile. By this time, Tata was very old. Leaving him was such a wrenching experience that Allende could not bring herself to say good-bye. She knew she would probably never see him again.

 The next few years were very difficult for Allende. She tried to write but wasn't satisfied with the results. She couldn't work as a journalist because Venezuela would not accept her Chilean credentials. Her husband found work that **required** him to live away from the family. He traveled home on the weekends to see his family. Allende once said that in Venezuela she felt "like a tree without roots." Exiled from Chile, she was again an outsider.

 In letters to her grandfather, Allende often quoted Pablo Neruda. He was a great Chilean poet whose poems she read over and over. Neruda, too, had lived in exile for years. Before the coup, Neruda had invited Allende to visit him. During their conversation, he told her that she was a terrible journalist—always inserting her own views and making things up when there was little to say. He said that with her fantastic imagination she should become a novelist—a storyteller. Allende would come to appreciate his **insight**.

 Early in 1981, Allende learned that her grandfather was dying. Because she was in exile, Allende couldn't visit him. Tata had always told her that people only died if others forgot about them. So on January 8, Allende began her last letter to him. From the beginning, she knew that this letter would be different. It was more than a letter; it was a story. It was a story of her ancestors, and of her beloved homeland. It was a story that included the colorful tales that Tata had told her all through the years. The story grew and grew. Allende kept writing the letter, even when she realized that her grandfather would never read it. At the end of the year, a manuscript of more than 500 pages sat on her kitchen table.

 Allende's husband, Miguel Frías, read the manuscript. It was an amazing, vivid story. It was also very confusing, because Allende had not used any kind of organizational **formula** when she wrote it. The story jumped forward and backward in time. It introduced and reintroduced characters. It picked up threads of stories without weaving them into the whole. Frías created a chart for Allende. She used it to put the story characters and events in a logical sequence.

 The next person to read the manuscript was Panchita. At first, she was horrified about having so many family secrets revealed. But she was very helpful once she got used to the idea. She even helped pick the title for the novel—*The House of the Spirits*.

A Successful Novelist

The House of the Spirits was first published in Spain, in 1982. Before long, the exciting story of the Trueba and del Valle families was thrilling readers around the world. The book was an immediate success across Europe. In 1983, it was named Book of the Year in Chile. The English **edition** of *The House of the Spirits* was published in the United States in 1984. It hit the bestseller list almost immediately.

 Isabel Allende dedicated *The House of the Spirits* “to my mother, my grandmother, and all the other extraordinary women of this story.” In this way, she honored the women in her life—the real women who were the models for her story characters. The women in her novel, like the real women they are based on, are strong, creative, and intelligent. These traits carry them through military coups, family tragedies, and the hardships of everyday life.



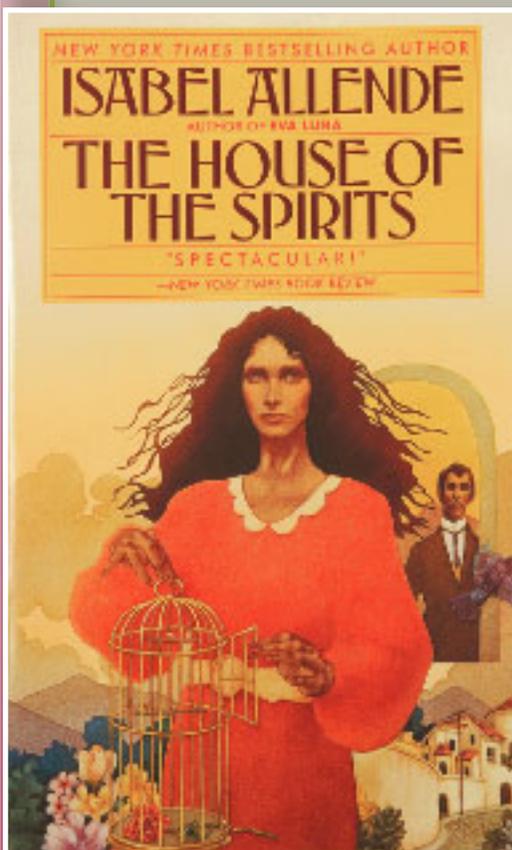
Magical Realism

*Isabel Allende wrote *The House of the Spirits* in a style called magical realism. Magical realism began in the mid-1900s and is associated with Latin American writers. Magical realism weaves magic and myth into stories that are otherwise realistic.*

It has been said that the true measure of an author's ability is the successful **publication** of a second novel. Allende's second novel came out in 1984. It was titled *Of Love and Shadows*. The idea for the novel came from some disturbing news reports from Chile. Many bodies of men who had disappeared during the 1973 military coup had been discovered. Allende imagined the lives of the women who had spent years searching for those men. Although the novel was about violent events, it was also about how people come together in times of crisis.

After this book came out, Allende decided to devote all her time to her literary career. Her first two novels had been very different from each other. One was a big, colorful tale with myth and magic mixed into it. The other was a journalistic story about a terrible political crime. In her third novel, *Eva Luna*, she created a storyteller as the heroine.

Isabel Allende's first novel made her a bestselling author around the world.



A New Home

With three successful novels out, Isabel Allende's career was thriving. Her marriage, however, was not. In 1987, after twenty-five years of marriage, she and Miguel Frías divorced. After the divorce, Allende traveled to many different countries promoting her books.

 One of her book tours took her to northern California. There, she met William Gordon, an American lawyer. After getting “Willie” to tell her about himself, Allende realized that his life read like a novel. She decided she'd better marry him so she could write it. The two married in 1988 and settled into a home in Marin County, just north of San Francisco. Once more, Allende was a foreigner living in a new country.

 In Chile that year, there were signs of political change. The military dictator, General Pinochet, allowed Chileans to vote about whether they wanted him to continue ruling. Determined to vote, Allende returned to Chile after thirteen years of exile. The city of Santiago had changed; she almost didn't recognize it. In her words, “The dictatorship had done everything possible to erase recent history and the name of Salvador Allende.” Isabel Allende, along with the majority of Chileans, voted against Pinochet. She went back to Chile a year later to vote in another election. In 1990, democracy was restored.

Life in California was filled with new experiences. Allende taught creative writing at the University of California, Berkeley. Her books began to receive prestigious awards. And she did write the story of Willie's life, *The Infinite Plan*.

In December 1991, Allende was in Spain for the publication of *The Infinite Plan*. Her daughter, who lived in Spain, fell into a coma due to complications from a rare disease called porphyria. Isabel rushed to be with her daughter. Day after day she sat by her side in the hospital.

On January 8, 1992, Allende began a letter to her daughter, "Listen, Paula, I am going to tell you a story, so that when you wake up you will not feel so lost." Sadly, Paula did not survive. Allende's book *Paula* is a love letter to her daughter.

Isabel Allende



Into the Future

After *Paula* was published, Allende felt as if all her writing ideas had dried up. She kept herself busy, though. She created the Isabel Allende Foundation in Paula's honor. The foundation helped people in need, especially women and children. Meanwhile, two of her novels were made into movies, and she received several more awards.

 When Allende began writing again, books seemed to pour from her soul, one after another. Her first new book was a combination cookbook and memoir. Next, she wrote a book that took place in Chile and California during the California Gold Rush. After that, she wrote a book that once again featured the del Valle family. In all of Allende's books, her superb gift for storytelling shines through.

 By this time, Isabel Allende had grandchildren. When they asked her to write a story for them, she decided to try a new kind of writing—a novel for young people. In 2002, *City of the Beast* was published. With magical realism, it tells the tale of Alexander Cold, a boy who travels to the Amazonian rain forest to search for a legendary nine-foot-tall “Beast.” Allende wrote about Alex Cold's continuing adventures in *Kingdom of the Dragon* and *Forest of the Pygmies*. What had begun as a tale for her grandchildren had become a trilogy for young readers everywhere.

 Although she continues to write book after book, Allende says that her family is her greatest achievement. Her son and his family live nearby, as do Paula's husband and Willie's children.

 Today Isabel Allende is an outsider no more. Her home, family, and career are all based in California. She is an American citizen. In some ways, the coup in Chile that killed her cousin on September 11, 1973, made her feel as if she had lost a country. After the **destruction** by terrorists of the Twin Towers in New York City on September 11, 2001, she felt she had gained a country—the United States. On that date, she mourned with all other Americans. On that date, she says, she became an American in her heart.

Isabel Allende



- 1942** *Born in Lima, Peru.*
- 1945** *Moves to grandparents' home in Santiago, Chile.*
- 1952** *Moves to La Paz, Bolivia.*
- 1955** *Moves to Beirut, Lebanon.*
- 1958** *Returns to Santiago, Chile.*
- 1962** *Begins career in television.*
- 1967** *Begins writing for magazine Paula.*
- 1973** *Military coup ousts Chile's president Salvador Allende.*
- 1975** *Goes into exile in Caracas, Venezuela.*
- 1981** *Begins writing The House of the Spirits.*
- 1988** *Moves to California.*
- 1993** *Becomes a U.S. citizen.*
- 2002** *Publishes first novel for young adults.*
- 2004** *Named to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.*

Responding



TARGET SKILL

Fact and Opinion

Think about the facts and opinions the author gives about Isabel Allende. Then copy the chart below. Add several more facts and opinions from the story to complete the chart.

Fact	Opinion
Isabel Allende had lived in four different countries by the time she was sixteen.	?



Write About It

Text to Self Isabel Allende uses adventures from her own life to help inspire some of her books. Think of a fun adventure from your life that would make an interesting book. Write several paragraphs telling the story of that adventure.



TARGET VOCABULARY

background
career
destruction
edition
formula

household
insights
publication
required
uneventful



EXPAND YOUR VOCABULARY

coup
diplomat
embassy

exile
journalists
socialist



TARGET SKILL

Fact and Opinion Decide whether an idea can be proved or is a feeling or belief.



TARGET STRATEGY

Analyze/Evaluate Think carefully about the text and form an opinion about it.



GENRE Biography tells about events in a person's life, written by another person.

Level: X

DRA: 60

Genre:
Biography

Strategy:
Analyze/Evaluate

Skill:
Fact and Opinion

Word Count: 3,430

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ISBN-13:978-0-547-01671-9

ISBN-10:0-547-01671-9



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