Allende, Isabel (1942– )

Definition: Allende, Isabel from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Peruvian-born Chilean-US novelist. She is one of the leading exponents of magic realism. After the 1973 military coup in Chile, during which her father’s cousin, socialist president Salvador Allende lost his life, she lived in exile in Venezuela. Her first novel *La casa de los espíritus/The House of the Spirits* (1982; filmed 1993) is a detailed account of family life during the preceding tumultuous years. In 2010 she was awarded the Chilean National Prize for Literature.


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Allende, Isabel

**Summary Article:** Allende, Isabel

From *Encyclopedia of Motherhood*

Isabel Allende, a Chilean American novelist/memoirist now residing in San Rafael, California, merges feminist political-social commentary with family sagas, myth, and personal history. Born in Lima, Peru in 1942, she says her mother Francisca is her greatest supporter. The caption of a photo of her mother and herself, viewable in Allende’s current online album, reads: “My mother is the longest love affair of my life. We have never cut the umbilical cord.” Letters to her mother form the basis of the memoir *The Sum of Our Days* (2008), and she frequently visits her in Chile. Earlier, while working for the United Nations in Santiago, Isabel married Miguel Frías. In 1963 she gave birth to her daughter Paula, and in 1966 to her son Nicolás.

**Reflections in Allende Literature**

One of her first publications was *Grandmother Panchita*, a story she told her own children. In 1973 the assassination of her cousin Salvador Allende sent her into exile in Venezuela. When she got word her grandfather was dying, she began a letter for him that became her first novel, *The House of the Spirits* (1982). Her grandparents were the models for the two characters in the book, Esteban Trueba and Clara del Valle. Susan Dobrian notes: this novel established “a political stake in motherhood” and “a feminine genealogy that stands against patriarchal repression.” Then came *Eva Luna* (1987) and *The Stories of Eva Luna* (1989). Her sensuous style and lyrical storytelling have been called magical realism, but Allende sees her novels “as just being realistic literature,” imposing fictional order on chaos by a long, trance-like process like “an elephant’s pregnancy.”

The illness and death of her daughter led the author to reflect on her own childhood in her first openly autobiographical writing, *Paula* (1994). It begins: “Listen, Paula. I am going to tell you a story so that

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when you wake up you will not feel so lost.” Allende paints herself as the character of Demeter and her daughter as Persephone. Pregnancy and parturition play a large role in her fiction, where bellies swell like watermelons, bodies are ruined by births and miscarriages, and a dead boy’s ghost haunts his mother. The major maternal theme in these writings is mother-daughter relationships, but with significant attention to mother-son relationships as well. In Tosca, an opera-mad young wife leaves her newborn son at home while she follows a honey-voiced medical student out into the South American oilfields, yet she never loses the sense of visceral connection to her child: “the animal pain that sank its claws in her every time she thought of her son.” Years later she wants to reconcile—but cannot—with husband and son.

In her short story “The Judge's Wife” in her book The Stories of Eva Luna, the evocatively named Juana la Triste hangs herself in shame because her outlaw son has abandoned her to the judge’s public cruelties, thus indirectly bringing about her son’s own death. In The Sum of Our Days (2009) Isabel recounts how she sought and found a second wife for her son Nico, a woman so perfect for him that the two fell in love at first sight. Daughters, stepdaughters, foster daughters, and daughters-in-law abound in these stories. Eliza in Daughter of Fortune (1999) is reared by two devoted foster mothers: the shrewd Victorian spinster Miss Rose, who educates her as a proper young lady, and the cook/housekeeper Mama Fresia, who gives the girl the physical affection and Indian wisdom that nurture her spirit. In contrast, Elena in Wicked Girl is neglected by her biological mother who, “exhausted by heat and the grind of running her boardinghouse, had no energy for tenderness or time to devote to her daughter.” The heroine of Inés of My Soul (2006), however, becomes the founding mother of the whole nation of Chile. The mother knot, for joy or woe, ties each woman to her children.

See Also:
Autobiographies, Chicana Mothering, Chile, Literature, Mothers in

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