





GLOBAL SOUL

Best-selling Chilean author Isabel Allende, now at home in the San Francisco Bay Area, transcended tragedy to touch the hearts of millions of readers worldwide.

BY MICHAEL SHAPIRO

THE STORY OF ISABEL ALLENDE

Best-selling author Isabel Allende fled Chile and moved to Venezuela in 1975 and finally found home in the San Francisco Bay area in 1987.



Halfway through an hourlong talk to a group of aspiring writers last August, Chilean author Isabel Allende was asked, “If you were a character in an Isabel Allende novel, where would you put yourself?”

Without missing a beat the petite writer said: “First of all, I would have long legs, I would be beautiful, I would be stunning, and smart, very strong and independent. What was the question?”

“Location—where would you be?”

“In bed with someone,” she shot back. “It doesn’t matter the town.”

Hanging on the beloved author’s every word, the audience in Marin County (just north of San Francisco) erupted in laughter. And just about everyone who asked her a question that day at Book Passage, a bookstore in Corte Madera, addressed her simply as “Isabel,” as if they were talking to an old friend.

The arc of Allende’s life could be the story of one of her novels. Born into a family of Chilean diplomats, she spent her first years in Peru. As a young child she returned to Chile, grew up in her grandfather’s spectral home, became a journalist, married young and had two kids. Then her world fell apart.

Her father’s cousin, Salvador Allende, had been elected president of Chile in 1970, but on Sept. 11, 1973, during a brutal right-wing coup, he shot himself, choosing to die rather than be captured. The dictator Augusto Pinochet

seized power, and, in 1975, after several people she knew disappeared, Isabel fled Chile with her husband and two young children and settled in Venezuela (most of the rest of her family also left the country; her mother, who is still alive, has since returned to Chile).

Yet Allende’s most difficult days were years ahead. In her immediate future was fantastic success. As her grandfather neared death, she began writing a long letter to him, and kept writing after he died. Allende showed the letter to her mother, and though the matriarch was appalled that her daughter would reveal the family’s secrets, even as fiction, she encouraged her to publish a book.

That letter was the basis for Allende’s first novel, *The House of the Spirits*, published in 1982. Initially rejected by several Spanish-language publishers, the magically realistic book first came out in Spain and fast became an international bestseller. In 1993, it was made into a film starring Meryl Streep and Antonio Banderas.

“I started a letter for my grandfather almost knowing that he would never be able to read it, a spiritual letter—it was a letter to myself, really,” Allende told David Frost in a 2013 televised interview. “I wanted to tell him that I remembered everything he ever told me, and he could go in peace because it would not be lost. I think *The House of the Spirits* was like a crazy attempt to recover everything I had lost—my country,



my family, my past, my friends—and put everything together in these pages. It was something I could carry with me and show to the world and say, ‘This is what was; this is my world.’ It gave me a voice. Incredibly it was a success from the beginning and allowed me to continue as a writer.”

In 1987, Allende came to the San Francisco Bay Area on a book tour and fell in love at first sight, with the place and with an attorney, William Gordon, who’d attended one of her readings (her first marriage had already ended in divorce). Gordon lived in San Rafael, in the heart of Marin County. Allende married Gordon the following year and made a home in the Bay Area.

“I have been living in Marin County for 27 years, and I love it,” she told me last fall. “Who wouldn’t? There is water, hills, trees and trails everywhere and good weather. This is a place of innovation, diversity, young energy and visionary creativity.”

There was a time when Allende, 73, never thought she’d find a place that felt like home. “I have always been a foreigner,” she said, “first as a daughter of diplomats living briefly in different countries, then as a political refugee and now as an immigrant.” In her 2003 memoir, *My Invented Country*, she writes: “Until only a short time ago, if someone had asked me where I’m from, I would have answered, without much thought, ‘Nowhere.’”

But that’s changed. In our recent interview, she said: “I came here as an immigrant with a sense that I didn’t belong

anywhere and somehow here I found space, privacy; I feel very safe. There is nothing extraordinary about being an immigrant here.”

Allende is now an American citizen. “My roots are in Chile, but I have found my home in the Bay Area, where my son, my daughter-in-law, my grandchildren and most of my friends live, and where I have written 18 books,” she said. “I hope to spend the rest of my life in this wonderful place.”

If I write a love story placed in the Bay Area, it will be a different love story from something that I place in Chile. In Chile it would be much crazier: people would just fall in love at first sight. Here [in the U.S.], people are so cautious, nobody wants to suffer. What kind of love is that?

Her time in Marin, however, hasn’t been all sunsets and chardonnay. In the early 1990s, her daughter, Paula, was stricken by a rare disease and spent a year in a coma before dying in her mother’s arms at age 29. Allende says her memoir about that year, titled *Paula*, is her most deeply felt book and has had the greatest resonance with readers. ➔

THE OFFICE WITH SPIRIT

(From left): Allende in her Sausalito, California office, where she always starts new books on January 8; Allende fills her office with memories.

"It forced me to go inside," Allende told me years ago when I interviewed her for my book, *A Sense of Place*, a collection of interviews with writers. "I'm a very out-there person; I'm into the story," she said. "The whole experience of the death of my daughter and writing a book forced me to go on a journey into myself, which in a way was a threshold for me. I left behind my youth with that experience. That was the year that I turned 50. It was like throwing everything overboard in very deep ways."

Paula was "an exercise in memory and love" and cathartic to write, Allende said. "That's the book that was written with tears. It was so raw that people connect to it as a form of honesty." Though she cried while writing every page, *Paula* wasn't painful to write, she said. "It was so healing; it was wonderful."

In an on-stage conversation last November in San Rafael, Allende said: "It seems as though Paula is still touching people throughout the world. She is still present and will always be present, which adds beauty and richness to my life."

Elaine Petrocelli, owner of Book Passage, said Allende's presence, in the store and throughout Marin, has been transformational. "Isabel first came to speak at Book Passage almost 25 years ago. That night, something profound changed in my life and in the life of our store," Petrocelli said. "By example she teaches kindness, forthrightness, commitment, giving and laughter. Each book she writes is so elegantly crafted that the reader is unaware of the work that brought the story to life. Her characters are so real that they remain with us long after we close the book."

I've been all over the world traveling most of my life, and when I say I don't have roots it's because I don't really belong in a place. But the inner roots, the roots that are in the soul, are still Chilean.

Allende's most recent novel, *The Japanese Lover*, is set in the San Francisco Bay Area and was published in the U.S. last fall. It started with a conversation during which Allende's friend said her 81-year-old mother had been close to a Japanese gardener for four decades. "I said, 'Ya, they were probably lovers,'" Allende recalled. Her friend was aghast, but the idea stayed with Allende. It became the tale of a woman displaced by the Holocaust and her relationship with a California-born, Japanese-American man—a U.S. citizen whose life had been upended by forced relocation to an internment camp after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

For Allende, who has sold about 65 million books worldwide and whose work has been translated into more than 30 languages, writing has often been challenging, but she said this book came easily. "It should cost less," she joked.

She starts all her books on January 8—"It was superstition at the beginning, but now I need to organize my life"—and often puts in ten-hour days at her computer. She can become so immersed in the story that she loses track of time. "Writing is like falling in love: full commitment," Allende said during last August's conversation at Book Passage. "Having a day to begin gives me that chunk of time that I need. I show up every day and I try to work, but sometimes nothing happens. For two, three weeks I throw away everything because it doesn't have the tone."

She recalled shopping one day with another best-selling

author, her friend Amy Tan. "We were trying hats, and she was putting on a hat and said, 'It's all about the tone.' And I thought, wow, she's speaking about literature. There's a rhythm, there's a tone, and then you start galloping—then you are in. And then things happen. The characters talk to you, the story develops, you get ideas. You start dreaming about the story. You can't get it out of your head. You wake up in the middle of the night and take notes because it's obsessing you. That's why I say it's like falling in love. So beware."

Allende is enjoying writing in ways she never has before. "I've learned that I can relax," she said. "That I can trust that I have the skill now, finally, after all these years and all these books, and it can be just joy. I don't have to be whipping myself to do it. I always hear in my head the voice of my superego, the voice of my grandfather, that is always demanding more effort, more work [and saying], 'You could be better.'"

Writing *The Japanese Lover* provided solace for Allende last year as her 27-year relationship with Gordon dissolved. "I think that what happened with this book, because it was written at such a painful time for me, I could ignore the voice," she said, "and just enjoy the process. Let it be, let it flow. If I could write all my future books like that, it would be wonderful."

The book explores the theme of love and passion among the elderly. "Can you have passion at any age? Yes, you can," Allende said as the San Rafael audience, many of them seniors, cheered. "I was exploring aging also because I am over 70. I look good," said the impeccably coiffed and stylishly dressed author, "but it's from a distance."

Becoming more serious, Allende spoke last November about the pain of her recent divorce: "When my daughter died years ago, my mother said, 'This grief, this sorrow is like a long, dark tunnel, and you have to go alone with a certainty that there is light at the end. Just keep walking, one day at a time, step after step, tear after tear.' And I walked the tunnel, writing for a year, and really at the end there is light. So when this awful year started to unravel, I thought, OK, this [divorce] is a minor tunnel compared to the other one [Paula's death]. It's a shorter tunnel. Let's walk, one day at a time. Suddenly I was on the other side, and I feel great. So I think that I am facing a luminous time in my life."

Don George, the book review columnist for *National Geographic Traveler* magazine, calls Allende "a lusty saint who makes the world a better place with her personality and her prose." Although she's a "best-selling author and global icon, Isabel remains astonishingly, inspiringly grounded, humble, open-hearted and empathetic," he said.

Allende has long had an irreverent streak: In a 2007 TED Talk she said, "By age 5 I was a raging feminist—although the term had not reached Chile yet, so nobody knew what the heck was wrong with me." When she was a teenager she asked her astonished family why her brothers could have sex with the maids but she couldn't have sex with the gardener. And not long ago she met an oral surgeon at a party who said that when he retires he's going to write novels. Allende shot back, "And when I retire, I'm going to do root canals!"

Though Allende has written several memoirs, including *The Sum of Our Days* and *My Invented Country*, most of her books are fiction. "When I write memoirs, my family gets very angry," she said. "So it's much easier to write fiction. Fiction gives me a freedom that nonfiction doesn't. With nonfiction you have to be as objective and realistic as possible. I'm not objective in my life as a person, how could I be in my writing?" ➡



A REMARKABLE LIFE

Allende became a U.S. citizen in 1993. In November 2014, President Barack Obama gave her the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country's highest honor bestowed on a civilian.

CORBIS



Where Allende takes visitors in the San Francisco Bay Area

When visitors come for the first time to the Bay Area, I give them a sightseeing tour of the highlights of San Francisco, like the old Victorian houses, the Painted Ladies, in **Alamo Square**. We go to **Chinatown** and have coffee in **North Beach**, then lunch at the **Embarcadero**. We go on the ferry to **Sausalito** and drive to some of the lovely towns of **Marin County**, like **Mill Valley** and **Tiburon**. We have dinner in some Indian restaurant in **Berkeley**. The next day we go to **Mt. Tamalpais** to enjoy the view and to **Muir Woods** to walk and meditate among ancient redwoods.



SHUTTERSTOCK

She sees her openness and honesty as strengths. “When I wrote my first memoir, my mother was horrified. She said, ‘You tell everything, you expose yourself completely, you are so vulnerable.’ And I said, ‘Mom, it’s not the truth I tell that makes me vulnerable, but the secrets I keep.’ By sharing, we all participate in the same experience of life and that’s what storytelling is all about. It’s the oldest, oldest art. So that’s why I love my job. I feel that I can say anything; I can share anything; I can grab any story. Words are free. I can use them all.”

Allende’s passion extends far beyond her writing; her commitment to justice infuses her life. After Paula died, she was traveling in India when a young mother thrust her baby into Allende’s arms, imploring her to keep the infant. Her driver returned the baby and the shaken Allende asked why the mother would do that. “It’s a girl,” said the driver. “Who wants a girl?”

At that point, Allende said, “I knew what my mission would be: to empower women and girls” worldwide. She created the Isabel Allende Foundation because she wanted to invest the proceeds from *Paula* in an endeavor that would have made her daughter proud.

Though she has strong beliefs, Allende doesn’t use her books to preach. “I’m trying to just tell a story,” she said. “When I read a book and see that the author is trying to teach me something or give me a message, I get angry. Let me find between the lines what is useful for me.”

The Japanese Lover examines the right to die on one’s own terms. “The right to be helped to die with dignity should be an option for everybody,” she said in her November talk. “Fortunately it’s starting to be legalized in the United States and by the time I need it, it will be legal everywhere, I hope.”

She doesn’t fear death, only dying without dignity. Allende once had a vision: She saw herself as an eagle in a white

space with a single dark dot that she viewed as death. “I went through it like a bullet,” she said, “with no fear and with such curiosity. Then there was nothing. There was no whiteness, no darkness. There was a void, and I was the void, and absolutely no connection with anything that we know. I think maybe that’s death. And it’s not bad at all.”

Allende has received numerous honors, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, awarded to her by President Obama in 2014, and Chile’s highest literary prize. She was one of eight women to carry the Olympic flag in 2006 in Turin, Italy (she jokes that no one saw her because she walked behind the statuesque Sophia Loren), but what matters most to her is weaving a compelling tale.

Asked why she writes, she said: “It’s automatic. I can’t imagine my life without writing. Without writing to my mother [they’ve been mailing letters daily to one another for most of their lives], without writing what I see, what is important to me, to explore, the only way I can do it is writing. How do you exorcise pain? How do you find out who you are? How do you fight against bad memory to preserve what you want to preserve in life? Memory blurs everything if you don’t write it down.”

But Allende doesn’t keep a journal. “I cannot write to myself—I need to communicate. That’s what writing is all about: telling someone, one reader, ‘This is what I believe; this is who I am. Let’s share the story.’” ❖

Michael Shapiro is the author of *A Sense of Place*, a collection of interviews with writers, and was once among a group of journalists invited to dine at Allende’s Marin County home. When he complimented her on the empanadas she’d cooked, she sent him home with several.

INSPIRATO RECOMMENDS



San Francisco

Settle into a two-bedroom luxury home in Sausalito or a two-bedroom *pied-à-terre* with parking in Ghirardelli Square.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT INSPIRATO’S SAN FRANCISCO BAY RESIDENCES, PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 198.



Nora Mahan’s picks

Sonoma County
Destination
Concierge

GET OUT: Rent a paddle boat, smell the roses, meditate in the Japanese Garden or visit a herd of buffalo at **Golden Gate Park**, a 1,000-acre oasis in the middle of the city.

Hit **Baker Beach** at sunset for a postcard view that includes the Golden Gate Bridge and, if you’re lucky, dolphins swimming offshore.

EAT: Foodies will find the **Ferry Building Marketplace** heaven on Earth, with shops and restaurants of all kinds—think burgers to oysters—and, three days a week, the West Coast’s best farmers market.

Burritos are to San Francisco what pizza is to New York. In the Mission District, home to the highest concentration in the city, try **Taqueria Cancun**, **Taqueria Los Coyotes** and **Papalote Mexican Grill**.

There’s no sign for **Bourbon and Branch** and you need a password to get in, but once inside, you’ve got one of the city’s best selections of single barrel bourbon and Sazeracs to choose from.

April 16–17, 2016

THE CHERRY BLOSSOM FESTIVAL

Celebrate Japanese art and culture with a parade,

food booths, martial arts performances and more in the city’s Japantown.

May 14, 2016

SFMOMA

After a three-year remodel and 235,000-square-foot expansion—doubling its former space—this museum reopens transformed.

June 11–12, 2016

NORTH BEACH FESTIVAL

The city’s Italian North Beach neighborhood hosts one of the country’s oldest street fairs, with food, music and artists painting *en plein air*.