



# Isabel Allende

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*In Chile I realize I'm a foreigner, even though I understand the codes and can speak with my own accent, and it's very sad for me to confront that I'm a foreigner in the U.S. , too, and always will be. But my roots are more in my books now than in a place; my home will be in my writing.*

””

## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1942 in Chile
- \* Raised in Bolivia and Lebanon
- \* Protagonists of her novels are always "marginal"

## Biography

Life before and life after the 1973 military coup-d'état in Chile marks the stark divide in Isabel Allende's life. Allende is a world-renowned Latin American writer, known for the passion and folk-tale eloquence with which she shares her country with the world. She uses the power of the word as a tool to express her pain, anger, and love.

Isabelle Allende was born in Lima, Peru on August 2, 1942. Her father, Tomas Allende, was a Chilean ambassador to Peru, and cousin of Salvador Allende, the first democratically elected socialist candidate in the world. Her mother was Francisca Llona, daughter of Isabel Barros Moreira and Augustin Llona Cuevas.

Allende spent her early childhood in Peru and did not see Chile, her homeland, until she was four years old. Her father had abandoned the family and her mother was forced to move back to Chile with her three children. They lived in her maternal grandparents' house in Santiago, Chile. With divorce illegal in Chile at the time, Allende's mother obtained a legal separation only after Allende's grandfather utilized his political status. Allende's mother married a man named Ramón Huidobro, also a diplomat, but could never legalize the union because of her previous marriage. Much of her childhood was spent in Bolivia and Lebanon.

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# Isabel Allende

## Biography continued

Not until her teens did Isabel Allende develop her love for Chile. She was sent back to Chile in 1958 when she was 16 because of the civil war that broke out in Beirut and the conflict over the Suez Canal. Upon her return to Chile, she again lived with her maternal grandparents. Her grandfather took Isabel on all of his travels through Chile and greatly expanded her love and knowledge of the country. He influenced her deeply.

In 1962 Allende married Miguel Frias, an engineering student she had met during preparatory school. In her own words, she “served as his geisha.” She gave birth to their first child, Paula, in 1963.

Influenced by her grandfather who told her, “The one that pays the bills, rules the house,” Allende took a job as a journalist in 1964. “Until very recently, I hadn’t trusted men,” she says. “I thought they weren’t reliable; if you wanted something done, you had to do it yourself - including raising the kids. I never allowed anyone else to pay the bills because I understood that economic independence created the rest; I started working early and I’ve worked all my life. I never surrendered to a relationship with a man the way I did to my children and my mother.” She worked as a journalist for ten years for a women’s magazine called *Paula*, a children’s magazine called *Mampato*, television shows, and movie documentaries. When asked about her work as a journalist she says, “I was a lousy journalist. I had no problem exaggerating or making up quotes. My colleagues thought they were being objective, but I never thought they were and I didn’t even pretend.”

In 1966 she gave birth to her second child, Nicholas. Allende continued her work as a journalist while raising her children. Four years later, in the year 1970, Salvador Allende, the second cousin and godfather of Isabel, was elected the first socialist president of Chile. Her stepfather, Ramon Huidobro, was appointed ambassador.

During the years of the socialist government, Allende worked for a television station. On Chilean station 13 and 7 she hosted two talk shows, one humorous program and one based on interviews. Her programs were very popular. She was not as politically active as the rest of her family. She did, however, challenge the machismo of Chile during the time: “I’d wanted to be a man since I was five.” She was involved in women’s issues and feminism but not politics.



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## Biography continued

In Santiago, Chile, on September 11, 1973, a military coup was led by General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte. President Salvador Allende was assassinated. The military government reported that his death was a suicide. Allende, along with members of her extended family, fled to Venezuela. She suspected that the coup would not last long. “We thought--my husband and I--that I could spend a couple of months away and then return quietly. “ Allende found, however, that this was not to be. “Once you’re on a list then they can get you anytime. So eventually my husband left, too, with the two kids, and we reunited in Venezuela. Never thinking that we would spend 13 years in Venezuela. We always thought that a dictatorship would not last [in] a country that had such a long and strong democratic tradition, so we thought, ‘This can’t happen.’ But it lasted for 17 years.”

Allende worked for a number of different newspapers and literary magazines during the 1970’s. She got a job as an administrator at Marrocco College, a secondary school in Caracas. Then in 1979 she received word that her grandfather was dying. She began to write him a letter. It was this letter that later became *La Casa de los Espiritos (House of Spirits)*. She was 38 years old when she began the literary career for which she is now famous. Allende won best novel of the year from Chile, Germany, and Switzerland for *La Casa de los Espiritos*.

Allende decisively states that a recurring theme in all of her books is the estranged main protagonist. “I would say that my protagonists and most of my characters are always marginal. Even if they’re not exiles in the sense that they have to leave the country. They are exiled from the big umbrella of the establishment. I like people who stand on the edge and therefore are not sheltered. And that is when you have to bring out all the strength that you have inside and if you live sheltered you never use it, because you don’t need it. But when you go to a situation that is extreme -- like a war or whatever or when you’re a martyr -- then you need all of that strength and you realize that you have this incredible source of energy inside. That it’s there when we reach for it.”

In 1987 Allende divorced Miguel Frias. In 1988 she married an American, Willie Gordon. She settled down in San Francisco, USA. Allende continues to publish books branching off from her native Chile in her novels, exploring the California gold rush, alternative medicine, and much more.



# Isabel Allende

## Biography continued

In 1989, Isabel Allende published *Of Love and Shadows*, a novel that explores politics and love in a Latin American country. Allende does an excellent job of mixing politics and love and demonstrating how the heart and soul can evoke emotions that enable people to go above and beyond in order to help their nation.

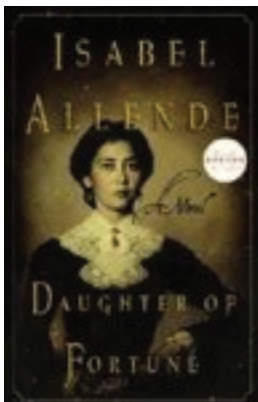
In 1990, democracy returned to Chile. Patricio Aylwin was elected president. After 15 years Allende and Chile were reunited when she returned to receive the Gabriela Mistral award, granted to “one who has contributed to the beauty of the world.”

In 1991, while Allende was promoting *The Infinite Plan* in Spain, her daughter Paula fell ill with porphyria, a hormonal disorder that is rarely fatal, but left her in a coma. “She started breathing on her own, so we took her home to California and then Western medicine gave up on her. For the six months till she died we tried everything: acupuncture, herbs, psychics, magnets, Shamanism, anything that might make her comfortable and that was not invasive. She’d already had enough pain.” Allende was by Paula’s side throughout the coma. She began to tell her a story, which soon grew into her own memoir: “Listen, Paula, I am going to tell you a story, so that when you wake up you will not feel so lost” (*Paula* 3). As Paula sunk deeper into her coma Allende tells of her childhood, growth as a writer, and political and feminist awakenings. It is a powerfully moving memoir; A personal and honest account of death that grips the reader from the first pages. Though covering subjects of grief, death, and dying there are lighthearted moments and funny anecdotes woven throughout the story. This book is very readable.

When Paula died in 1992, Allende found the strength to let her go as she wrote down the stories she shared with her, exploring the importance of memory for survivors in a book named after her daughter. “[*Paula* is] the most important book I will ever write, which has the greatest truth. Writing is exorcism. It deals with the demons of the past, sorts out the confusion. Life happens so fast there’s no time to see the connections or consequences; there’s too much noise everywhere. But in my work, there is no noise. Everything has a ripple effect in a book; in the years of introspection, I grow. For me, it’s like meditation or prayer.”



## Biography continued



At the time of Paula's illness, Allende was working on a book called *Daughter of Fortune*, which explores alternative medicine through the character of the Chinese physician Tao Chi'en, with whom Eliza (the protagonist) slowly falls in love. But the book was halted by Paula's illness and subsequent death. "I thought I was never going to write again," Allende said. "I had to pull myself out of a writer's block and very dark depression. I just went to hell; it's a moment of grief you can't avoid and can't make better. I tried Prozac; it didn't work - I'd rather be in pain. Nothing helps except time, but you start drawing from an inside strength, a resilience you didn't know you had." After *Paula*, Allende was not able to return to fiction, for "the world had lost its color and that a universal greyness had spread inexorably over every surface."

*Portrait in Sepia* was published in November, 2001. In this novel, Allende follows Aurora del Valle on her transcontinental journeys of her childhood, observing the arrays of emotions and memories that life creates. Allende has once again created a masterpiece.

By the time Chile returned to democracy, Allende was settled comfortably in the United States with her new family. When asked about Pinochet, "I no longer hate Pinochet," she said, "I realized 20 years ago that hatred is a very heavy burden. I'd still fight for what's truthful, but this is not about him but about grief that needs to be acknowledged for true reconciliation to take place."



# Isabel Allende

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