



Texas Papers on Latin America

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After Paula: An Interview with Isabel Allende

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Introduction

On April 11, 1995, the date on which the English edition of Paula was officially published by HarperCollins in a first print run of one hundred thousand. Isabel Allende kicked off her twelve-city American promotional book tour with a visit to the University of Texas at Austin.

Dates are important to Allende. Above all, January 8, the date on which she began to write her first novel, *The House of the Spirits*, and on which she started all her other books. But after publication of *The Infinite Plan* in 1991, Allende unexpectedly found herself at a hospital bedside in Madrid on January 8, 1992. She had gotten word just a few weeks before at

a Barcelona book reception to launch *The Infinite Plan*.that her daughter, Paula Frías had been rushed to intensive care.

Allende would soon find out that Paula's influenza had taken a disastrous turn. Suffering from a rare, hereditary enzyme deficiency known as porphyria, Paula underwent complications, was misdiagnosed by Spanish physicians, and sustained severe brain damage. "I love you too, Mama," Paula murmured, just before she lapsed into a coma from which she never recovered. Allende began jotting notes to her daughter. As she would later record in her memoir: "On this January 8, 1992, I am writing you, Paula, to bring you back to life."¹

But the prognoses were dark and Paula's condition deteriorated. Still hoping for a miraculous recovery, Isabel Allende took her daughter to her San Rafael, California, home in mid-1992, whereupon the ironies of dates and fates again intertwined for the Allende family: Paula died precisely one year.to the day.after falling into the coma: December 8, 1992.

Although *Paula* is Allende's sixth book, it is her first work of nonfiction. "Listen, Paula," the memoir opens. "I am going to tell you a story, so that when you wake up you will not feel so lost." Originally entitled *Para Paula* [For Paula], the story that Allende tells her daughter is the story of the Allendes' life and the family's history. Written "for Paula".the Spanish edition featured a heart-rending photograph of Paula on its jacket cover.Paula tells the story of the Allende family rather than just that of Paula herself. Indeed, Paula introduces the extraordinary family members who inspired Isabel Allende's fiction, especially *The House of the Spirits*. And like *The House of the Spirits*, the memoir begins as a letter to a family member. But that first letter of January

8, 1981, began as a goodbye note to a one-hundred-year-old grandfather who wanted to die, whereas Paula represents a farewell letter and an anguished love letter to a twenty-eight-year-old daughter who had everything to live for.

And Fate would soon intervene in Allende's life in yet another unforeseen way via the publishing success of Paula. A fortuneteller had once told Allende that Paula would become known in many parts of the world. Throughout the tortuous year of Paula's illness, Allende had derived hope from this prediction, originally believing that it meant that Paula would recover and go on to great accomplishments. But the prophecy like so much in Allende's life was to come ironically true in another way: By the end of April 1995, Paula was #8 on the New York Times best-seller list, after having already become a best-seller throughout Europe.

Petite and vivacious, Isabel Allende, fifty-two, is down to earth and forthcoming. Although she carries the pain of her daughter's death with fortitude and dignity, she acknowledges that the pain is always there and she looks forward, after the book tour, to a less public life that will grant her the solitude to grieve: even though writing Paula partly served this very purpose, Allende has only just begun, she says, to mourn the loss of her daughter.

"Children, like books, are voyages into one's inner self," writes Allende in Paula, "during which body, mind, and soul shift course and turn toward the very center of existence."² In the following interview, conducted shortly before her lecture to a campus crowd of more than a thousand at the University of Texas, Allende speaks with remarkable directness and openness about her books and her inner self

and her shifting fortunes: about her writing habits, her family's involvement in her work, and above all the changes in her outlook on life and death after Paula and Paula.

You are known for starting to write all your books on January 8, including your recent nonfiction book, Paula. You've said that you do this because The House of the Spirits was begun on that date. January 8 also just happens to be the birthday of Elvis Presley. Is this your "lucky date"? Is the practice of beginning on that date superstition?

January 8, 1981, is a sacred date for me. But there's nothing in the stars about January 8th, though I've heard that it was Elvis's birthday. I was never a great Presley fan when I was growing up. The significance is not astrological but very personal. Even though the personal dimension does include a superstitious element.

To understand all this, you must understand my life. I stayed in Venezuela thirteen years. I went into exile from Chile [in 1975] and ended up in a school with four hundred kids, teaching every day. I did that four and a half years. I hated it!

On January 8, 1981, I received a phone call that my grandfather was dying. And I decided to write a letter about all the things he told us when we were young. I was working two shifts, twelve hours per day, and I wrote at night. I had five hundred pages by the end of the year. And it was *The House of the Spirits*.

My mother sent it to the publishers. I heard nothing, and finally a receptionist called. She had read it and liked it. She gave me the name of an agent in Barcelona. She was interested in my name and in politics: in Chile and Allende. I sent her two envelopes, the first with pages 1\ -250 and a cover letter, and the second with pages 251\ -500. But she only got the second one. It took a while to figure out what was wrong. Finally, I sent her another copy of pages 1\ -250, and in less than a month, I got a contract. And less than a year after that, the novel was translated into every European language.

I began my second novel also on that date. So, for me, the date has a superstitious significance, because it's the date on which I began my first novel and it is the date on which my career as a fiction writer began.

Today, I start all my books on January 8. not just out of superstition but also discipline!

Discipline? Do you mean that the ritual of starting to write on January 8 imposes discipline on your writing habits?

Yes. If I didn't have this date, I might never begin! I would always want to be pushing the beginning further and further off. I would always have some excuse or rationale to think about just waiting a few more weeks or months. And it would stretch out even further.

I suppose that urge to delay is because of the anxiety about beginning a new book. About beginning anything that is going to be so large and demanding as writing a book. I know it is going to be painful and take a great deal out of me. But at the same time, I'm excited about it.

So, in a sense, January 8th launches me. It's something that I have that points me forward and lets me begin. Once I've begun, then I'm into it. And I can respond to the demands and begin to feel excited and enjoy the process. So this bit of "superstition" actually has very realistic and practical aspects to it. It lets me get down to working. Without it, getting started would be much more difficult. I only work on one project at a time. If I finish a book in October, I'll take a four-month vacation!

So you look forward to January 8, and also fear it.

Can you imagine what every January 7 is like?! I'm hysterical! The whole family goes crazy! I get locked in a room and prepare for the next day.

On January 8, I try to write a first sentence that comes from the heart. I have no outline, just a plan. I try to write a first sentence that comes from the womb, and it becomes a door that opens to a different place. It may not remain the first sentence in the book, but I keep it somewhere in the book. When I began writing *The House of the Spirits* and wrote "Barrabás came from the sea" [the first sentence of *The House of the Spirits*], I didn't know who or what "Barrabás" meant. Most dogs in my grandfather's house had biblical names. That sentence just sounded good. In *Of Love and Shadows*, the first sentence that I wrote wound up in the second chapter. Sometimes the first sentences remain the openers, and sometimes they wind up elsewhere, but I always keep them in the work. "My name is Eva, which means "life. . . ." I left that in *Eva Luna* [as the opening sentence]. "Listen, Paula. I'm going to tell you a story, so that when you wake up you will not

feel so lost." That [first sentence in Paula] came to me in the hospital, and I kept it because I wanted to tell Paula all that she had been missing.

In general, though, I usually wind up writing something different than planned. I proceed from what the first sentence suggested and then it's a continual process of discovering and uncovering, of peeling away just as it is for a sculptor. The statue exists already in the stone; the story exists already in me.

So it's just a matter of sculpting or unveiling it.

Right. I just let the first draft emerge. It's just a storytelling draft. When I'm writing that draft, it is about anything and everything. Then I print it out and read it, and only then do I really know what it's about. But it's still so messy at that stage. The second draft is to straighten out the story. And the third draft is stylistic, to get the language right.

Then it's done, and I give it to my mother to read.

Your mother has always been a valuable critic of your work in progress.

My mother is actually my only critic: she is my first and most serious critic. We have had some real knock-down battles about what to include and exclude from my books! She is the first person to read my work and she is a very sensitive and intelligent reader. But most important: she feels free to tell me anything and everything! She is especially concerned with my use of language, not just with the development of plot or the portrayal of different characters.

So we fight over the draft. In a six-hundred-page manuscript, maybe fifteen pages will survive unscathed. She fights over characters, telling me I'm too closely identified with a character. She tells me to go deeper into a character. And although I don't, by any means, follow all her suggestions or preferences, I pay great attention to her comments.

After we fight, I rewrite the book. And I finish it. The first draft takes me about four months. The whole process takes about two years. I don't show her the last draft. She feels she's worked so hard that she can't take any more. She's seventy-four, after all.

So she focuses on your use of language. Does she have any

characteristic criticisms?

My explicitness! She doesn't like sex scenes! I censor all those scenes when I show her the early draft. I take them all out. I also cut out all passages about the Pope and the church in that draft. Then I put some of them back in. She never reads the final version or the published book itself, so she never encounters the sex scenes or the anti-Catholic criticism.

Do you also share your work in progress with friends or colleagues?

My husband also reads Spanish and he is a very valuable critic of my work too. But his Spanish is not at a level at which he can help with questions of literary style. He doesn't have a native speaker's ear for the precise use of language. I also used to share my work in progress with my daughter. Now I share it with my daughter-in-law.

After it's published, neither my mother nor I read it again. We have been through so much up until the moment of finally completing it that it's over for us. It's no longer the world that I have inside me. I've moved on.

Apart from the fact that Paula deals with the tragedy of your daughter's illness and death, it is an autobiographical memoir and quite self-disclosing, one might almost say self-exposing, about your own private life and your past. How did you feel writing about yourself and other family members in Paula?

I talked with everybody in the family mentioned in Paula. We had many family discussions. And everyone accepted to be in the book. My mother wanted some changes, but I didn't make them. She wanted me not to reveal so much. But I didn't feel comfortable taking anything out.

Yes, I felt exposed all the time. I expose facts of my life in Paula. For example, facts about my lovers. I also expose the influence of religion and politics on our family.

And there was also an even deeper level of exposure: of my sentiments. I took the risk of appearing sentimental. A writer uses emotions in an artful way to provoke a reaction in a reader. A melodramatic action, exile, the death of a child, will usually provoke a strong reader response. And some readers will find the exposure too great and react defensively. But what I wrote is true, the raw truth.

But, you see, my candor and expression of strong emotions in Paula.that also felt like exposure.

And yet, you felt that you had to go through this exposure as a way of confronting and expressing the "raw truth." And after going through this ordeal, which is also, given that you are now on a book tour, a quite public event, where do you find yourself? Has the experience of writing a book about your daughter's death altered you greatly, as a writer, a woman, a human being?

I've asked myself countless times: Why her? Why her and not me? If I pray, maybe it will happen to me and not her.that's sometimes what I thought. I asked, Why didn't she die at the beginning? Why did she stay for a year in a coma?

It was tragic, but I learned a lot in that time. It would have been much easier if she hadn't fallen into the coma. The pain was much greater because she stayed a year.

Because Paula stayed, I learned a lesson. My destiny was to lose a child. I believe in destiny! I did all that I could to save Paula, and I could not protect her from her condition and from the world. I believe that we are not just body and mind. We are spiritual too. We come from some place and go to some place, and this world is just a stage. So this disease and death were Paula's destiny. Some people leave the stage in just twenty-eight years, like Paula.

What do I do now? I can be angry, I can try to make it a transcendent experience, I can write a book. What do I do with these cards? She was given the card of porphyria.and her life lasted just twenty-eight years. But it is not less valuable because it was brief.

I'm less passionate now than I used to be. I held Paula for many hours until she died. She died on December 8, 1992. And just seven months later, a girl who was a drug addict and HIV-positive had a premature, seven-month baby in the same room in which Paula died. I thought at first that this is Paula come back! There was a stillness, a sacred space there.

Yes, there was a strange air in that room; it was a sacred moment. Paula's spirit was still in that room. I wanted to ask the baby: "Tell me where you

come from, before it's too late!" I felt her mother was a door! The baby was from another world, I thought.

Jennifer [the baby's mother, daughter of Allende's husband, William Gordon] lived in Oakland, in the poorest neighborhood. If she had given birth there, it would have been a dead baby. In Santa Rosa, a rich neighborhood, she was taken care of. The baby couldn't be taken out of the hospital. It was kept in an incubator. She is an adorable, HIV-positive baby and will die. But more important is this: she is alive. Her name is Sabrina.

I still ask myself: What if this is the soul of Paula in this baby? I hope this is another soul that will have its own, different destiny.

I feel I was training to learn to love.

All this is behind Paula. When I was writing it, I had the feeling that I'd trained all my life to write this book. Now I can't find the passion to do anything else. Maybe I'll get the passion back to write again.

I hope that the book is useful for people who have had losses.

Does the loss of Paula affect your attitude toward your writing and your identity as a writer?

I started another book on January 8. I'll soon see if I'm a changed woman.

But I know that I've already changed a great deal. I'm letting things happen more, not forcing them. I'm not as goal-oriented as before. And not only because of Paula's death, but also because of my own aging. I've learned a great deal more about myself and about living than I once knew or was able to accept.

Now I realize that life is really a process. Perhaps my grandchildren have taught me some of this. Now I enjoy the present moment more. I used to live a great deal in the future, with plans and dreams and goals. But I came to realize that life is now. Life is this moment.

Before, I always wanted things to get done. Fast and well. I always wanted a finished book. I wanted to come to the end and to have something. Now I enjoy the process far more. I've discovered in a much deeper way the joys of writing itself. I've really learned to enjoy writing, which means to enjoy living and being present to it. This is especially true of my feelings about

storytelling. Sometimes I have readers who say: "I'm reading the ending very slowly because I don't want the book to end! I want simply to dwell in the story a little longer."

And I have come to feel the same way when I'm writing. Sometimes I simply like it to last a little while longer, because I'm so enjoying it. Rather than focus on the finished product, I'm enjoying each moment in the process.

So I'm less concerned with achieving a certain product than I am with valuing and entering fully into the process of what I'm doing: in this case, the activity of writing. Just letting go and enjoying it. That is the most difficult task for most writers. Most of us have a goal-oriented attitude because, finally, the book is a product. It gets delivered into the hands of publishers, editors, and readers. And we are concerned about their opinion of it.

The experience of writing, however, is a process. What gets shaped from that experience is in the form of a product, but the experience is fundamental. Remembering that is the difficulty.

And reading is also an experience, and it is often related to the writing experience: the sharing, during the reading, is also an experience. A reader knows if a writer has enjoyed the act of writing. Partly what gets shared between reader and writer is the experience of what has happened in the act of creation. That is somehow bound up in the world that the writer has created and which the reader enters.

Yes, I enjoy the process of writing more now, and maybe that also has something to do with the fact that I also appreciate my grandchildren more. I simply enjoy seeing them growing.

Yes, I find my life purposes altering. After Paula, everything is different.

Nothing will ever be more significant than this loss. And now I know: I could die tomorrow.

You mean that you now know that in a visceral way, not merely in an intellectual or abstract sense?

I know it as a mother who has lost a child knows it. As a mother, I feel the

instinct to protect my child. And I couldn't do it. I couldn't. During that year, I loved her more than ever before. She went back to being a newborn baby. there was even a tube in her stomach to feed her.

Paula was the genius of the family. But in the hospital, I just hoped she was comfortable. I re-learned to love with the unconditional love of a mother for a newborn. And even more than that. because I had no expectations of even a smile from her. And yet, she left me with a wonderful gift! If I could just love everyone. with a joyful love and no attachments. everything would be all right.

It's so hard to do that! I still tend to keep an accounting of what my husband and I owe each other!

That must be stressful.

Yes! And so I hope reincarnation is not true! I don't want to come back! It's too stressful! Who wants a body again? I dream that my daughter is free, like a drop of water in the ocean, free of all attachment.

Paula's death reminded me that we think we are immortal. but we are not. But there's nothing awful or unnatural about death. even the stars and the trees die. We need to remember all that.

What feelings does that insight evoke?

Strength, courage, peace. When Paula died, I lost the fear of death completely. It was as if life and death were not opposites but complements.

I had written about death since *The House of the Spirits*, but not experienced it. Only in my imagination. But now I see it's a wonderful feeling of liberation and detachment. Now I can love freely. I can now be the perfect grandmother, with no desire to control anyone's life!

So this feeling of fearlessness in the face of death has remained with you.

Yes, in the sense that I know I'm not immortal. that's the deception by which most of us live. We think that nothing will ever change. But I've discovered that there is nothing awful or unnatural about death. It's part of life. It's part of creation and dissolution. It is all a process.

And so it isn't to be feared. It's to be understood as something that comes in its own time. So what I finally learned was acceptance. I lost fear and I gained acceptance and understanding.

You mentioned a moment ago that the fact of your aging had contributed to these feelings of acceptance and understanding. Could you elaborate on what you've learned?

The greatest lesson is simply that life is lived in the present. The value of life is chiefly in the present. It's not in all the plans and strategies one has about what might happen in the future. I've lived so much of my life in the future, hoping to realize certain plans, hoping to be successful in certain ways!

Many of my plans have been realized. I've had some success in realizing my career ambitions.

But with aging I've come to see that life never quite turns out as you plan it. That gives me less of an urgency to control or direct it and more of a willingness to accept it and understand it and enjoy it for what it is in the present moment.

Politics and social justice have been major concerns in your work. Have you found that your politics has changed? Are you less interested in politics, now that your concerns have become more otherworldly?

I'm still concerned about social justice, just as much as ever. The spiritual insights have added to, not taken away from, my political concerns. Paula's death, or the fact that I now reside here in the U.S.A. with my family, doesn't mean I've changed my attitudes toward American foreign policy or toward immigration, Proposition 13, and America's responsibilities in the world.

My views on social justice have not changed. I'm still angry about many aspects of American foreign policy and the US role in the world. I've simply come to know America better, and so I understand why American politicians and many American people believe what they do. I've had my understanding of America deepened but not changed.

Notes

1. Paula (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 10.
2. Ibid., 231.

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