



Isabel Allende

to detail and penchant for colorful anecdotes made her feature stories, weekly column and TV show immensely popular in Chile. But popularity in the Chile of 1973, particularly for a niece of democratically elected President Salvador Allende, whose government was being subverted by a CIA-orchestrated coup, proved ephemeral. In 1975, along with her husband and two children (Paula, age 12, and Nicolas, age 7), Allende moved to Venezuela. Unable to find work as a journalist, she took an assortment of odd jobs.

"For many years I was just paralyzed," she says, "which is a very common feeling among exiles. When you lose your roots, somehow you don't nourish yourself. You block yourself to the world. You don't want to belong to that new place and are always looking back to the place you left, thinking that you'll go back.... And it doesn't happen that way."

Exiles on Pain Street: The often-exiled Guatemalan poet, Otto René Castillo, who was ultimately burned at the stake by the national guard, once wrote: "*Mi exilio era de llanto*" (My exile was made of weeping). For Allende, exile brought not only tears, but also writer's block. On Jan. 8, 1981, however, when she received a phone call from Chile saying that her grandfather was dying, she suddenly began to write again.

"I started to write a letter," she says. "I was not thinking of publishing it. I was not thinking that I was writing a novel. It was just that absolute necessity of survival—I *had* to write, because if I didn't I would die. And I wrote about the things I cared for, or the things that I missed the most. That was the main impulse to write *The House of the Spirits*—nostalgia, homesickness, the need to recover a lost world, a past that was gone forever. I felt that my memory was blurred, and by writing I could bring back all that I had lost and that way have it with me again."

"I started writing in a very automatic way with no previous structure, not thinking where I was going or what I was doing or what I wanted to say. I knew I wanted to tell about the military coup."

Given the circumstances under which Allende wrote *The House of the Spirits*, it's amazing she ever completed it. Her family was having severe financial problems, and she was working 12 hours a day in a school. Yet every night, after she had showered and eaten dinner, she sat at the dining room table and wrote; after a year she had a 500-page manuscript, which she showed to her mother who was visiting from Chile.

"My mother was very critical," Allende says. "We have a wonderful relationship, a very nourishing relationship. Nobody had ever seen me as a novelist. It didn't look like a novel, anyhow. My mother helped me with parts of it.... We edited it together."

Avoiding the eraser: When the book was published, it became a critically acclaimed bestseller in the U.S. and Europe. Although it was initially banned in Chile, it circulated in photocopies until the Pinochet government, intent on polishing its image, lifted its censorship on books. Though happy the

By David Volpendesta

A MONTH BEFORE HE DIED IN 1973, Nobel Prize-winning poet Pablo Neruda called a young journalist at Santiago, Chile's *Paula Magazine*. Her subsequent excitement created a flurry in the newsroom. "Me!" she exclaimed to her colleagues. "The Nobel Prize wants me.... I must be the best journalist in this country. And he wants me to interview him."

As she recently recalled the details of her "interview" with Neruda, Isabel Allende slipped off her shoes and put her feet on the living room sofa of her home in San Rafael, Calif. In a mocking but gentle aside, she chided herself for the ego of her journalistic youth.

Neruda, it seems, was enchanted with Allende's weekly humor column. Many people had told her that the poet would photocopy her pieces and send them to friends. As a child Allende had met the

poet ("dressed like a poet with a black cape and a black hat") at one of the weekly salons her grandmother held in her home for Chilean painters, intellectuals and writers.

So, armed with her tape recorder and a buoyant mood, Allende traveled the hour and a half between her office and the poet's home in Isla Negra. Her gracious host served her lunch and showed her his treasured collection of seashells and bottles. But at 2 p.m., when she indicated that she was ready to begin the interview, the poet was perplexed.

"Which interview?" he asked.

"The interview," Allende responded.

"My child," he blushed, "I would never allow you to interview me. You are the worst journalist in this country. You can never be objective. You always put yourself in the middle of a story. Why don't you just change to literature, because all those faults in journalism are virtues in literature?"

Although at the time Allende couldn't accept Neruda's judgment, he intuited what would prove to be an important literary career, launched by the publication of Allende's internationally acclaimed novel *The House of the Spirits*, and followed with *Of Love and Shadows* and, most recently, *Eva Luna*. Her approach to journalism was unconventional: she didn't merely try to dream up a new spin on a story; instead she threw herself into it and was willing to take the chance of being spun around herself.

Spinning the New Journalism: For example, she was once assigned a feature on Chilean prostitutes. Instead of simply taking to the streets and gathering quotes from the women she was writing about and telephoning the requisite university sociologists and vice-squad officials to solicit their "expert" opinions, Allende went to live in the red-light district, posing as a prostitute.

Her flair for the dramatic, attention

book is now available in her native country, Allende laments that books are so expensive there that only the elite can afford them.

Recently, on her first trip back to Chile since 1975, she met Chileans who were inspired by her books. "I had a lot of feedback," she says, "the feeling that a lot of people had read these books for other reasons than literary purposes. It was part of their history being erased or prohibited, part of their feelings that had been denied."

The inward, emotional life is as woven into the textures of Allende's writing as is her ability to evoke a sensorial panorama around characters and objects. Scrupulously attentive to the emotional power of nuance and detail, she seems to effortlessly understand what she's writing about.

Work details: One key to Allende's work is her disciplined creative process. When she's working on a book, Allende rises at 6:30 a.m., puts on her makeup and dresses, in her words, "as though I were going to a cocktail party." She also takes her purse with her when she goes to write in her study "because if I don't do that I don't have the feeling I'm going to work. I have the feeling that I'm in a hobby or something." For the next seven hours she does nothing but write.

She keeps the obsessive component of her creative process from becoming self-indulgent by staying attuned to loved ones and observing the machinations of sociopolitical oppression. In each of her books there are characters who embody her social consciousness. The characters she seems most enamored of are the social outcasts.

"I'm always very distrustful of authority. I'm against the rules, and I'm always trying to bend the rules. And in a way maybe these marginal characters, these people who stand unsheltered by the system, have to find their own ways for survival. And that makes them very genuine, very strong and very honest, because they have no protection from the system.

"And that's why I love them so much. In all my books, it's the prostitute or a homosexual or a priest or a transvestite or a thief or a guerrilla—people who are outsiders—who are the saviors. And usually the main characters become main characters because even though they are all under this big umbrella of the system, at a certain point in their lives they have to step out. Then they become the main character."

Allende's sympathy for society's marginal members and her intolerance of injustice gave her the initial impetus to begin her second novel, *Of Love and Shadows*, which she said was written out of "anger and pain" and based upon the massacre of members of several peasant families committed by the Pinochet government in 1973.

The women of the Maurella family searched for their loved ones for five years before the remains were found in a cave in 1978. The Maurellas became an almost tangible presence in Allende's imagination as she followed the story in the Caracas papers. "I was obsessed with the women of the family," she says. "I heard their voices constantly. I was driving the car, and all of a sudden I

would feel. I would start sweating, just like when you put on the brakes and you have this adrenalin coming all over your body. That sensation. Because I heard the voices. I dreamt a lot about them."

Beyond anger: Allende knew that her dreams of a horrific crime had to be translated into literary reality. "I wanted to denounce this crime," she says. "I was angry and furious, the impunity of the murders, all the abuse, everything that happened."

"And in the process of writing the book, it became a love story, because I realized it was not a horror story. The crime was terrible, but around that terrible event there was a lot of love: love of the families who looked for their men, love for freedom and the truth of the people who risked their lives to bring out the news, many ways of solidarity, of friendship, incredible acts of courage.... I realized that I couldn't afford my anger, because people who had suffered directly didn't have that anger. They were forgiving, and they were loving. So I was cured of my anger."

The transformation of her anger amplified her inner facilities of perception. Confessing that like her grand-

mother and mother she has always been psychic, and that many strange, inexplicable things have happened to her in her life, Allende recently discovered that many of the incidents she thought she had invented in *Of Love and Shadows* had actually occurred almost exactly as she described them.

Perhaps the eeriest revolves around the discovery of the decomposed body of a "disappeared" person named Evangelina Ranquileo in the Los Riscos Mine by the book's two main characters, Irene and Francisco. Aware that if they advised the authorities of their discovery they will also be disappeared, Irene and Francisco entrust their secret to Francisco's brother, José, a priest and political activist who lives among the poor. Given photographs Francisco had taken in the mine as proof of the massacre, José brings them to the cardinal, who is an opponent of the government. When the cardinal inquires how the photographs came to be in José's possession, the priest says it is a secret of the confessional.

Allende maintains that when she wrote it, the scene was pure invention. But on her recent trip back to Chile, she met a man who had been a priest until 1979. He told her that when he read the novel he was amazed at some of the information in it. Not only had he received confession from a man who had provided him with proof of the government atrocities Allende described, but all the information was known only to him and the cardinal.

"Days later somebody else came with another, similar story that was also in the book," Allende said. "Then I realized that it is as if all of a sudden

your mind is plugged into certain things, and the information flows in a very mysterious way.... In a way, you become a medium for things that are in the air."

Contours of personality: Allende maintains that she writes "with the best of my feminine faculties: intuition, instinct, emotion, imagination." Characteristically open, Allende is quite clear about where the contours of her personality overlap with those of her characters. "With Eva Luna I had a very strange experience," she says. "I wanted to write about being a woman and being a writer.... I have accepted myself as a woman late in my life. I always wanted to be a man. It's a lot easier to be a man. A woman has to make double the effort to get half the recognition."

"I decided that not only was I glad to be a woman, but I was glad to be myself.... I want to be myself for the first time in 46 years.... Eva Luna is a person who, since she was born, loves herself. She accepts herself. She's absolutely woman. She accepts her sensuality, her sentimentality, her instincts, her intuition. She's somehow harmonious, integrated. Everything in her works simultaneously."

"Maybe I could have written about myself. I could have written an autobiography about what my life has been. But I cannot do that, because I don't think I'm an interesting character. And I don't like to be so close to the character. I chose someone who would be absolutely different from myself. She's an orphan, illiterate, from a very poor background. She's part-Indian, part-black, part-white. She doesn't have anything. I come from a very protected environment, from an upper-middle-class family. I received everything. I had culture. I had languages. I had trips."

Despite the differences between the character and the author, when Allende finished the novel she realized that not only had she given Eva Luna her voice, but "in a very camouflaged way my autobiography and all the thing that I had wanted to say." Moreover, she admits that because of an emotional resemblance, she feels very close to the character.

"She's naive, but I'm not naive," Allende added. "I'm not cynical, but I'm not naive. She has a naive approach to life, which is very fresh. I don't have it, because I've had too much pain, too many failures in my life."

The never-ending story: Eva Luna, a modern-day Scheherazade, has her origins in a very rich period of Allende's life, that portion of her childhood spent in Lebanon. Taken there by her stepfather, who was a diplomat, she distinctly recalls her escapades around the book that "marked my childhood," *A Thousand and One Nights*.

"My stepfather had the four volumes hidden in a closet because it was supposed to be erotic, and young girls

couldn't read that sort of thing," she laughed. "Whenever he went out, I'd sneak in and read the stories. I would only read fragments, because I was so afraid that he would come back. I never finished a story. That made it even more fascinating, because the stories would just come alive. All the time you would have a different story, because you would put this fragment together with a lot of fragments, and then you'd have an edited story, a never-ending book."

On one level, the character of Eva Luna is the symbolic embodiment of what had been forbidden in the author's youth. But Eva Luna is also an image of transformation actualized by women's acquisition of the power of language, the power to articulate that which is forbidden.

Eva Luna can be read as a reinterpretation of the mythic paradigm of male/female relationships. In this context, the forbidden fruit that Eva Luna offers is the knowledge of power of language in its lunar connotations and denotations. The men in the novel who integrate these aspects of their personalities emerge as heroes.

Allende excels at melding such lofty themes with the everyday emotionalism of soap operas, producing works of art that amplify their latent significance. Indeed, it might seem that Allende's own tale has some telling similarities to the soaps. The long-suffering author has achieved international success and recently moved to suburban Marin County near San Francisco, a locale often associated with the self-indulgent, hedonistic California lifestyle. Has she become the triumphant underdog in her own soap opera, someone no longer able to define her destiny because she is defined by her status and the objects of the material world?

When the question is put to Allende, she smiles, then grows serious. "I can leave everything behind, close the door and never remember again," she said. "When I left Chile, I left with a small suitcase. I don't have any love for objects.... I can get rid of them in one minute with no regrets."

Given her imaginative resources, perhaps the only material objects she really needs are the tools of the trade she uses to fashion the alphabet into stories that sparkle with clarity. Yet even that joy can be ephemeral for the author. "Writing is a solitary pursuit," she says. "The book leaves, and then it doesn't belong to you anymore."

What Allende retains, however, is a steady contact with the spirit that animates her characters. No doubt, when she was a young journalist Pablo Neruda's refusal to grant her an interview cost her an important story. But in a roundabout way, it may have helped nudge her toward bigger things. Instead of a nice little story about a big-time poet, she has come to write big-time stories about the little people who are often disappeared from the margins of history. And any way you look at it, that's a good assignment. ■

David Volpendedesta, co-editor of both a collection of Central American short stories, *Clamor of Innocence* (City Lights), and the forthcoming *Homeless, Not Helpless* (Canterbury Press), is currently co-producing a record of San Francisco's foremost political poets.

Chilean writer Isabel Allende works her magic from the inside out.

EDITORIAL

IN THESE TIMES

"...with liberty and justice for all"

Editor: James Weinstein
 Managing Editor: Sheryl Larson
 Senior Editors: Patricia Aufderheide, John B. Judis, David Moberg, Salim Muwakkil
 Assistant Managing Editors: Miles Harvey, Peter Karman
 Culture Editor: Jeff Reid
 European Editor: Diana Johnstone
 New York Editor: Daniel Lazare
 In Short Editor: Joel Bleifuss
 Copy Editor: Mary Nick-Bisgaard
 Editorial Promotions: Maggie Garb
 Researcher: Joan McGrath
 Interns: Paul Engman, Kira Jones, Michele Mozelsio, William Siegel, Ray Walsh

Art Director: Miles DeCoster
 Associate Art Director: Peter Hannan
 Assistant Art Director: Lisa Weinstein
 Photo Editor: Paul Comstock
 Typesetter: Jim Rinnert

Publisher: James Weinstein
 Associate Publisher: Bill Finley
 Co-Business Managers:
 Louis Hirsch, Finance
 Kevin O'Donnell, Data Processing/Accounting
 Advertising Director: Bruce Embrey
 Office Manager: Theresa Nutall

Circulation Director: Chris D'Arpa
 Assistant Director: Greg Kilbane

In These Times believes that to guarantee our life, liberty and pursuit of happiness, Americans must take greater control over our nation's basic economic and foreign policy decisions. We believe in a socialism that fulfills rather than subverts the promise of American democracy, where social needs and rationality, not corporate profit and greed, are the operative principles. Our pages are open to a wide range of views, socialist and non-socialist, liberal and conservative. Except for editorial statements appearing on the editorial page, opinions expressed in columns and in feature or news stories are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the editors. We welcome comments and opinion pieces from our readers.

(ISSN 0160-5992)

Published 41 times a year: weekly except the first week of January, first week of March, last week of November, last week of December; bi-weekly in June through the first week in September by the Institute for Public Affairs, 1300 W. Belmont, Chicago, IL 60657, (312) 472-5700.

Member: Alternative Press Syndicate

The entire contents of *In These Times* are copyright © 1989 by Institute for Public Affairs, and may not be reproduced in any manner, either in whole or in part, without permission of the publisher. Copies of *In These Times* contract with the National Writers Union are available upon request. Complete issues of *In These Times* are available from University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, MI. Selected articles are available on 4-track cassette from Freedom Ideas International, 640 Bayside, Detroit, MI 48217. All rights reserved. *In These Times* is indexed in the Alternative Press Index. Publisher does not assume liability for unsolicited manuscripts or material. Manuscripts or material unaccompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope will not be returned. All correspondence should be sent to: *In These Times*, 1300 W. Belmont Ave., Chicago, IL 60657. Subscriptions are \$34.95 a year (\$59 for institutions; \$47.95 outside the U.S. and its possessions). Advertising rates sent on request. Back issues \$3; specify volume and number. All letters received by *In These Times* become property of the newspaper. We reserve the right to print letters in condensed form. Second-class postage paid at Chicago, IL and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to *In These Times*, 1912 Debs. Ave., Mt. Morris, IL 61054. This issue (Vol. 13, No. 20) published April 12, 1989, for newsstand sales April 12-18, 1989.

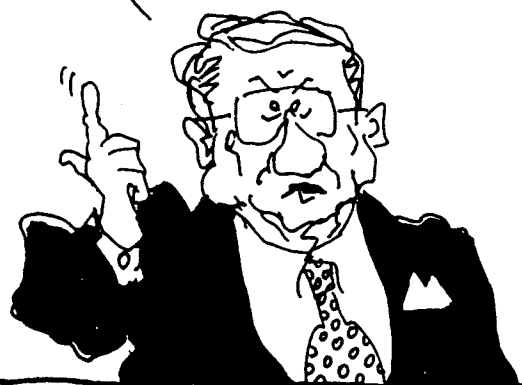
SURE, WE'VE HAD SOME FAILURES—
IN SHIP DESIGN...



... PERSONNEL, CLEANUP PLANS, AND
RESPONSE TIME



BUT LET'S NOT LOSE SIGHT OF THE
SUCCESSSES—



OIL PRICES ARE
LOOKING UP!



WASSERMAN
© '89 THE BOSTON GLOBE
DIST. BY L.A. TIMES SYND.

L.A. Times Syndicate

Today's robber barons despoil the environment

The March 24 Alaska oil spill is an ecological and human catastrophe. The largest spill ever in the United States, it is the second major oil mishap since December, when 300,000 gallons were accidentally spilled into Gray's Harbor, Washington. And because the tanker *Exxon Valdez* ran aground in a protected harbor, it may well cause more enduring damage to wildlife and human livelihood than any previous industrial accident in American history.

Some 150,000 of Prince William Sound's 250,000 square miles are now covered with crude oil that is expected to take an unprecedented toll in fish, marine mammals, birds and land animals. An unknown number of the 15,000 sea otters in the area have already frozen or drowned. Thousands of contaminated ducks, loons, cormorants and grebes have also died, and countless other birds and millions of newly hatched herring and salmon are at risk. This is an area through which millions of migrating birds of 181 species will pass in the next few weeks, and in which 5,000 bald eagles—the largest remaining group of these birds in the world—are concentrated. By feasting on the oil-soaked carcasses of shore birds, thereby coating their intestines with oil so that they can no longer absorb water or nutrients, the eagles may have doomed themselves to dehydration and starvation.

And the people of Valdez and the surrounding area are also suffering. It's not just that the natural beauty of the area has been defiled, but also that the livelihoods of herring, salmon, shrimp and king crab fishermen are severely threatened for an unknown number of years.

Exxon's safety net: But for Exxon, the country's second-largest corporation—after General Motors—the spill is nothing more than an embarrassment. Wall Street views Exxon's handling of the accident simply as an aberration, as reflected in the fact that since the oil spill its stock—in the words of the *New York Times*—has "barely fluttered." One reason for this is that under the law that established the Alaska pipeline, Exxon's liability would be limited to \$100 million, and that this would be reduced to \$14 million by an industry-wide fund set up to protect participating companies.

Wall Street, of course, is concerned only with the bottom line, and Exxon's cash flow is such that no one there expects even very high liabilities to hurt the company, which last year had a profit of \$5.3 billion. (There could be higher liabilities if the company is found to have been criminally negligent, but Exxon's profits are so high that even an award of \$500 million could easily be absorbed.)

In the light of these gigantic profits, you might think that the company would have been willing to guarantee that all possible precautions were taken to protect against an accident such as the one at Valdez. If so, you would be dead wrong. True, as far back as the '70s—and as recently as a month ago—Exxon and the other companies that own the Alaska pipeline assured environmentalists that they had a cleanup plan that could contain a major spill within five hours of a rupture. But in 1981 the industry disbanded a 20-member emergency team prepared for round-the-clock responses to oil spills in the Valdez Harbor and sound, and after that it allowed maintenance on cleanup equipment to lapse. And in 1985-86, in a move to save a few dollars, Exxon retired nine of its oil-spill experts, including the corporation's senior environmental officer. In those years, of course, administration policy followed industry in insisting that concern for the environment was an unnecessary luxury—that it was not cost-effective—so federal ship safety programs were also hampered by cutbacks in the Coast Guard budget.

These policies of neglect coalesced with the *Exxon Valdez* disaster. The Coast Guard stopped following the ship on radar, alleging at first that it was out of range. Exxon's cleanup equipment was totally inadequate, giving the leaking oil two full days to spread before anything significant was done. When the cleanup finally got under way, the situation was out of control. And now, while Exxon spends a few dollars on a public relations campaign to clean up its image, the American people will pay the high costs to clean up Valdez and the surrounding area.

Primitive accumulation revisited: In the early years of capitalism, capital was often accumulated through piracy, the forcing of peasants off their land and other methods of despoilation. Now, in our advanced stage of corporate capitalism, the environment is despoiled in order to maintain profits at a high level. This is seen by conservative economists as cost-free. But the costs are great in two ways. First, the dollar costs of cleaning up after accidents and other forms of chemical and nuclear pollution are increasingly high, and they are borne by the public, not by the polluters. Second, the cost both to the environment and to human health and well-being are enormous and, in many cases, irreversible.

There is something profoundly wrong with a society that accepts corporate values—in which the bottom line is the only one that counts—as the guiding tenets of its public policy. For the American people to continue subsidizing the destruction of our environment, and ultimately our own health and safety, merely to insure that the Exxons of this world can continue to enjoy billions of dollars in profit makes little sense. To have a government that does everything in its power to protect these corporations, while giving only lip service to environmental protection, makes even less sense.