



## ‘I think I write fiction but I don’t’

Absence, exile, the devastating loss of a daughter – these three things have overshadowed Isabel Allende’s life and shaped her work. Her answer? To keep writing – and counting her blessings. After ‘another hellish year’, she talks to *Helena de Bertodano*

Photograph by **Todd Hido**

Isabel Allende hands me a tiny scuffed white shoe. “This was Paula’s shoe when she was a baby.” There are tears in her eyes but she is smiling. Her daughter died more than two decades ago at the age of 28 and Allende’s *casita* in Northern California, where she writes all of her books, doubles as a shrine to her.

The day before we meet, Allende lit a candle to her daughter and asked her for help with her new book. “Yesterday was my sacred day: 8 January – it is the only day I ever start a new book. [It is the same day she sat down to write to her dying grandfather in 1982, a letter that metamorphosed into the manuscript of her first novel, *The House of the Spirits*, which became an international bestseller, translated into nearly 40 languages and setting Allende on a path to become the world’s most widely read

Spanish-language author.] I said, ‘Paula, Paula, please help me’ – I know she’s not here but she’s somewhere. It’s a constant exercise in memory and imagination.”

The candle sits beside a photograph of her daughter, signing her wedding certificate in 1991, shortly before she fell ill with porphyria and slipped into a coma. On her honeymoon, although completely healthy at the time, Paula had foreseen that she would die soon and had written a letter urging her husband Ernesto and family to move on without her and to be happy. For Allende, the effort is occasionally too much: “Sometimes, still, it hits me like a rock and then it’s a bad day. I wake up with that feeling of terrible loss and anything can make me cry. But most of the time I’m doing fine.”

It is a tribute to Allende’s warm personality that Ernesto is now her

neighbour in San Rafael. On a shelf in the *casita* – which is in the garden of her large house overlooking San Francisco Bay – is a picture of him with his second wife, Giulia, with whom he has twin 11-year-old girls. I ask Allende if his new wife was nervous of meeting her. “I don’t think so – I think Paula chose her for Ernesto. They were even born on the same day. She is a wonderful woman.”

Allende – whose 20 books have sold more than 60 million copies and have garnered 50 awards – is remarkable. Exuberant and funny, she seems to relish life even though it has often been far from easy. She greets me at the door of her house like an old friend, her two dogs cavorting round her heels, and urges me to have a glass of wine, even though it is before 10am. When I decline, she pours

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herself a glass anyway and although she only drinks a sip, she is soon divulging the most intimate details of her life, inviting me to read letters from her mother, all of which start, “*Hija muy querida*” – “My beloved daughter”, and unwrapping a package of dried flowers labelled “*Rosas de Paula*”. “We scattered Paula’s ashes in a pond in a forest and threw roses in. Ten days later I went back and the roses were still there, intact. So I picked them up and kept them.”

It is this willingness to share her life that has been the foundation of her writing career. One of her most successful books is *Paula*, which she wrote as her daughter lay dying – it is both a tribute to her daughter and an account of her own life. But she draws on her life in all her work. “I think I write fiction but I don’t.”

Describing her childhood as “absolutely miserable”, she adds, “Thank God – because what are you going to write about

if you don’t struggle as a child? I don’t think that you become creative because you have struggled, no, but creative people are fuelled by anger and passion, and haunted by demons and memories.”

As an adult she endured the 1973 military coup in Chile – when Salvador Allende, president of Chile and her father’s cousin, was overthrown and Augusto Pinochet came to power. Following a series of death threats, Allende herself went into exile in

state, there is no way that you can escape the black cloud over the house.”

Gordon, whom she married in 1988, appears in the kitchen wearing a trilby, leather jacket and jeans, and carrying groceries. He starts unpacking cartons of orange juice. “We have so much orange juice we can bathe in it,” sighs Allende.

Gordon, a lawyer and crime writer, introduces himself. “*Soy la sombra de Isabel Allende*,” he says in Spanish – “I am her shadow.” I ask him what it’s like being



**Above Allende at her home in Caracas in 1985. Left With her children, Nicolás and Paula, in the 1970s**

her shadow. “Oh, it’s wonderful,” he says distractedly, wandering out of the room. “She’s my love, she’s my love.”

Allende, who is wearing a sparkling silver top, black skirt and wedge-heeled boots, smiles. “He is doing much better now. We have somehow survived.”

Originally, she had planned to write her latest book, *Ripper*, her first crime novel, with Gordon. “But it was never going to work,” she jokes as she sits in an armchair, a dog in her lap. “He writes in English, I write in Spanish. His attention span is 11 minutes, mine is 11 hours. I was going to do all the work and he was going to get half the credit. No way.”

*Ripper*, like all her other books, draws on the people she knows. “I keep writing about the same characters: weak or absent fathers, frail mothers and then a very strong female protagonist who overcomes all the odds to succeed.”

Allende’s own father, a diplomat, left the family when Isabel was just two. “My father left my mother stranded in Peru with two babies and pregnant, full of

Venezuela. Her first marriage to Miguel Frías, the father of her two children, failed. And her second marriage to William Gordon, although happy, has been fraught with tragedy. Between them, they have lost three children. “We have just been through another hellish year,” she says matter-of-factly. “My husband’s youngest son died last year of an overdose. It is his second child to die [from an overdose]. My husband just collapsed – he is a very strong man but he went into a dark, dark depression and would not take any medication and accepted very little help. I think people who are depressed fall in love with the darkness and start spiralling down – and when you live with somebody in that

debts." Did he say anything? "No, he went out to a party and never came back." Allende saw her father only once again – decades later, dead. "He died in the street of a heart attack and the morgue called me – I thought it was my brother so I ran there but I didn't recognise this naked fat man. My stepfather came too and he said, 'It's your father.' I just felt relief."

Her mother took her three children back to her parents' house in Chile. "We lived in an affluent house – with no money. My grandfather would pay for what was necessary but my mother did not even have the cash to buy us an ice cream. I wanted to be like my grandfather because my mother had a terrible life and he had all the privileges and the power and the freedom and the car – I think that was the moment I started to rebel against all male authority: the police, the church, everything. I was so angry and my mother was very worried

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because she thought I was never going to catch a husband. I wasn't particularly good looking and I was just this brat. Who was going to marry me, for God's sake?"

In fact, she met her first husband as a teenager. "He was the first boy who looked at me, and I clung to him like a crab." Paula was born in 1963, and a son, Nicolás, three years later. Unlike her mother, Allende was determined to work. "I am a complete feminist. I think it was a reaction against seeing my mother as a victim." She became a strident journalist, writing shocking – sometimes invented – articles ("I had no problem exaggerating or making up quotes," she told one interviewer). "If the coup hadn't happened I would probably still be a journalist, a lousy one."

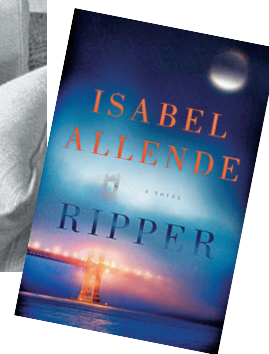
As we talk, the telephone rings and Allende calls out, "I'm not available unless my mother has died." Turning to me, she adds, "My mother is immortal. She is 93, she lives in Chile and we still write to each other every day."

In the early days Allende's work incorporated elements of magic realism and drew comparisons with Gabriel García Márquez – which irritated her. "It happens less now. Before the success of *The House of the Spirits*, female writers were ignored systematically. Even now my books are classified as books for women. Sometimes men say to me, 'I don't read books by women but I heard you speaking at the university and you were very good.'" She laughs. "Usually, it's older men and I just have to wait until they die off."

She does not know what form her next book will take but will none the less follow her usual routine of locking herself in her *casita* for at least eight hours a day. "At the beginning it is so difficult. I write



Left Allende with her husband, Willie, in 1994. Below Her new book, *Ripper*, a crime novel, is out on Tuesday



and I write and I write, even though I know it will all go in the trash. I consider it like sport: nobody sees the training, but if you don't do it you can't play the game. Then, when the story starts to flow, it is paradise for me. Willie calls me in for dinner and I don't want to come."

Allende describes her two husbands as polar opposites. "I'm always the same bitch," she says with a guffaw. "But these two men could not be more different. Willie is a swaggering American lawyer, loud, my first husband is a very quiet passive man, a very good man and he didn't deserve to marry a person like me. We lived together for 29 years and now we have a wonderful relationship. Every time I go to Chile, he and his wife are there in the first row of any event I do."

Now 71, Allende knows there is more sadness ahead. "I know that probably in

the near future, one of my parents will die [her stepfather is 97] and my dog Olivia. My ageing hit me last year. You can still pretend you're young when you are 69 but not 70, for God's sake. I keep telling my son that when I don't have any control over my bowels or I start looking like s—, he must kill me."

Nicolás, her one remaining child, lives next door. In true Allende fashion, his life sounds like something out of one of her more far-fetched novels. "He and his Venezuelan wife divorced because, after having three babies, she found out she was gay. She fell in love with my stepson's fiancée, whose wedding dress was in my closet. It broke the family in pieces"

Nothing, however, was worse than the death of her daughter, which was due to medical error as much as illness.

"What really happened was neglect in the hospital," says Allende. I ask if she is angry, and she shrugs. "It was nobody's fault. Who could I be angry at? There was a strike at the hospital, it was Christmas-time, the main doctor wasn't there, stuff that had nothing to do with Paula or with me... It is just the mess of life."

Despite everything, Allende still counts herself as lucky. "I have had darkness and tragedy but also a lot of success. I don't think anyone can go through life without anything happening to them. With me, it just seems to be more exaggerated." ● "*Ripper*", by Isabel Allende (4th Estate, £12.99), is available from Telegraph Books (0844 871 1514; books.telegraph.co.uk) at £11.99 plus £1.35 p&p