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Isabel Allende

The bestselling author, 77, on finding late-life love

THE MAGAZINE INTERVIEW
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PHOTOGRAPH
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On the day I meet Isabel Allende, violence is escalating on the streets of Chile, her home country. I arrive at her office in Sausalito, northern California, to find her and her son, Nicolas Frias, fulminating about the stupidity of the government in handling the mass protests for social reform. “They don’t get it,” Allende exclaims, pacing around the room holding a cup of steaming tea, which is jumping out at the rim as she gesticulates furiously. “They are waiting for people to get tired. But people don’t get tired, they get more enraged.”

A tiny 5ft powerhouse of fury, Allende, 77, is a force to be reckoned with. As the world’s most widely read Spanish-language author, her 24 books, including the international bestseller The House of the Spirits, have been translated into 42 languages, with more than 74m copies sold worldwide. Her latest novel, A Long Petal of the Sea, is about the troubled Chile of yesteryear, but she could almost be writing about Chile today. In the book she quotes the poet and politician Pablo Neruda: “In the middle of the night I ask myself: what will happen to Chile, what will become of my poor, dark country?”

It is a question Allende also asks. “Something is shifting,” she says, now sitting calmly in an armchair. “I see these outbreaks of massive popular discontent — not just in Chile but in other countries, too — and I think the economic and political system is no longer viable. We cannot have a system that accumulates indecent wealth in the hands of the few. Chile appears as a stable, prosperous country, and then suddenly, in 24 hours, you have a million people on the streets. If the establishment listens, things might change smoothly. If they don’t listen, it will be a terrible, violent time. But I have lived long enough to see that humanity evolves for the better.”

The unrest — which has seen at least 27 people killed and thousands injured, with the UN accusing the police and armed forces of serious human rights violations — are an eerie reminder of the violence that saw her father’s cousin, Salvador Allende, president of Chile, toppled in 1973 during a military coup led by General Augusto Pinochet. Allende apparently shot himself — or was shot — as the military closed in. Shortly afterwards Isabel Allende was forced into exile in Venezuela.

A Long Petal of the Sea (the title comes from Neruda’s description of Chile as a “long petal of sea and wine and snow”) springs from the true story of the 2,200 Spanish Civil War refugees who were exiled to Chile in 1939 on a ship chartered by Neruda. Like many of Allende’s books, it features strong women, displaced people and a powerful love story spanning generations. She has moved away from the magical realism that defined her early career and acknowledges a strong autobiographical element. “I think I write fiction, but I don’t.”

Allende identifies closely with the experience of upheaval that her characters endure. As she writes in the foreword: “I have been a foreigner all my life, first as the child of diplomats [she was born in Peru and also lived in Lebanon and Bolivia], then as a political refugee and now as an immigrant in the US. Maybe that’s why a sense of place is so important in my writing. Where do I belong?”

“I speak with an accent,” she says today. “I feel like a foreigner here, I go back to Chile and within two weeks I feel like a foreigner there as well.” Yet she is well aware that her lot is easier than most. “I’m a privileged immigrant, I don’t have to be scrubbing bathrooms.”

However, the theme of belonging runs deeper than just a sense of nationality. It is also a sense of belonging to a family, a spouse, a group of friends. “What my mother longs for is a tribe,” says Nicolas, her son, a software developer who now works as her assistant. “She’s always trying to create one.” Allende has seen her own family shattered many times. First, her father left when she was three: “He went to a party and never came back.” Her first two marriages broke down. Her daughter, Paula, and two stepchildren died (Paula in 1992, aged 29, due to a medical error after developing porphyria; and her ⋙→

JESSICA CHOU FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

two stepchildren from drug overdoses). Later, her son's wife — and mother of her three grandchildren — walked out on him. "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."

Allende's life reads like the plot of one of her most extravagant novels. I first interviewed her five years ago and when I knew I had the opportunity to meet her again I wondered whether — apart from her latest book — there would be anything new to talk about. I need not have worried. "My life is another life," she says simply. "Everything has changed."

Back then she was (apparently) happily married to Willie Gordon, an American lawyer. I met them together at their large ocean-view home in San Rafael, California, and they seemed devoted to each other after nearly three decades of marriage. "Things looked good from the outside," Allende chuckles today.

Within a few months they had divorced, and since then Gordon has died. Allende has remarried and moved to a tiny one-bedroom home overlooking a lagoon. Her mother — the backbone of her life, to whom she used to write every day without fail — died in 2018. She continued the letters, regardless. "For a few months I wrote to my mother as if she was there. But it doesn't work, it seemed very artificial."

Shortly after we last met she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom — from Barack Obama, she quickly points out, not "totally amoral, profoundly corrupt" Trump. "I represented immigrants at a time when there was this backlash against immigration." Through the Isabel Allende Foundation (which she set up in 1996 in memory of her daughter, and which helps organisations provide women with healthcare, education and protection from violence and discrimination), she works with migrants at the border. "The things we see are appalling. There is a detention centre for babies. It's a warehouse with cages. It's a real human rights crisis. The women are threatened constantly."

On the whole, she says, women's lives have improved. "Women have achieved a lot in my lifetime. But there is a terrible backlash of male chauvinism, misogyny, violence — because the male establishment feels threatened. We need a critical number of women in power so we can really change the values in the world. It will happen, it's unavoidable and unstoppable. There is this new wave of young feminists that is shaking the patriarchy and I hope that my granddaughter will be able to see the end of the patriarchy."

Allende grew up in a firmly patriarchal conservative Catholic household. After her father vanished, her mother moved with her three children to her parents' house in Santiago. Her grandmother died soon after and her grandfather imposed a never-ending state of mourning on the house: even the furniture was painted black. He controlled the purse strings. "My mother did not even have the cash to buy us an ice cream," she told me when we last met. "I wanted to be like my grandfather. He had all the privileges and the power and the freedom and the car — that was the moment I started to rebel against all male authority."

> **"Very few people are remembered. It's a male fantasy, this thing about legacy"**

Not that her grandfather was a bad man, just a product of his time. The House of the Spirits, Allende's first book, started as a letter to him as he lay dying in 1981. It established her as a feminist force in Latin America's male-dominated literary world. "I was a feminist before the word was invented," she says. "My mother would try to hush me, saying I should be a feminist quietly and discreetly. I explained to her that feminism has to be noisy."

Aged 19, she married "the first boy who looked at me", an Anglo-Chilean engineer, and worked as a translator of romance novels, then a columnist and a TV personality, becoming relatively well known in a country where independent women were a rarity. Settling later in Venezuela, she worked as a columnist on El Nacional newspaper and raised her children. "She was not overly involved in our lives," says Nicolas affectionately. "She never came to my school for anything. It made us very independent."

There is an impressive fearlessness about Allende — "I don't care what other people think of me" — coupled with a beguiling warmth and willingness to share some of the most intimate details of her life. At a recent book reading, she surprised the conservative audience when she advocated secret love affairs. "I totally recommend lovers," she said as a ripple of shocked laughter went round the room. "For enduring love, marriage doesn't work. Much better to see someone in secret and you get together to share the best of yourself and the other person. And you don't have to do the laundry."

"I think everything is possible," she says today. "Unfortunately we're stuck with one idea, which is the legal idea. And which everybody expects. But things change, evolve."

Not that she has lovers herself, at least not any more. "I am very loyal and I don't have the energy or time to keep secrets or to meet someone in clandestine hotels, it would get so confusing."

In her thirties she did have a passionate affair with an Argentine musician, leaving her family and moving to Europe with him for two months. "It was a very traumatic thing and my children did not forgive me for a very long time," she says. Paula was 15 and Nico was 13. "I knew what I was doing, I was not a kid, I knew that I was hurting my children and I still did it. My husband was heartbroken and when I came back he was totally willing to start with me again." They hung on for several more years, then split amicably. "We separated in 24 hours without calling a lawyer. Paula cried. Nico didn't."

Three months later she met Willie, who became her second husband. When I met the couple in 2014, Willie introduced himself to me as "*la sombra de* Isabel Allende" — her shadow. "It was particularly hard for him because he wanted to be a writer, so he was pushing his books [he gave me a copy of one of his books and briefly tried to hijack the interview], and nobody paid any attention. I think that was part of his disappointment with me and the marriage. He stopped trying. The only thing I wanted was kindness, I wasn't asking for anything else."

They tried therapy: "But he wasn't even participating. He was just looking at his phone. The therapist said, 'Write on a piece of paper what you want from each other,' and I wrote 'Kindness' and Willie didn't write anything. He read it and he looked at me and said, 'I know what you want but, I'm sorry, I can't give it,' and I said, 'OK, then that's done.'"

WOMAN OF WORDS Above: Allende with her beloved daughter, Paula, who died aged 29 in 1992; with her husband, Roger Cukras. Below: accepting a Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama, 2014

GETTY; ALAMY

Her only regret was that she hadn't extricated herself sooner. "I felt that I had waited too long, not because I wanted to remarry, but I thought it's very hard for me at 72 to have another life, I would have to start from scratch."

By a strange coincidence both her marriages lasted 28 years. "My theory is that all my relationships last 20 years and then it takes eight years to undo them. Because to leave a marriage is much harder than to get into it."

Suddenly alone for almost the first time in her life, Allende contemplated placing an ad on Match.com. "'Short, bossy, Latin American grandmother seeks love,' [I was looking for] someone loyal with kindness and a good smell and good manners," she says. "It's not much when you think about it. But I realised nobody in the world would answer."

Roger Cukras, a grandfather who had recently been widowed, was driving from Boston to New York when he heard Allende on a radio show saying that she was going to live alone in a small house with her dog as her companion. "I thought, 'How can this extremely bright woman want this as a goal in life?'" he tells me. "I decided to email her. Someone in her office responded and I wrote back — and somewhere along the line she jumped in and we emailed each other twice a day for five months."

She had her doubts. "The guy could have been a serial killer," points out Allende, who has experienced her fair share of stalkers, including a man who, when rebuffed, had a box delivered to her office. "It was full of live animals," she says. "Lizards and insects that flew all over the place."

Yet Cukras seemed genuine and they eventually met for a meal in New York. "He brought me figs from his house; we were having dinner and I said, 'Look, what are your intentions, because I don't have any time to waste. I'm almost 72 years old.' He literally choked on the ravioli… he never expected to be attacked in the first meeting." Was she already sure that she wanted to be with him? "No, but I wanted to know what the game was. Maybe it was too blunt on my part. But three days later he had a ring and said that his intentions were to marry me." Then it was Allende's turn to be taken aback. "I was, like, 'Look, chill.' I thought, 'This guy is so needy, he wants a nurse.'"

They struck up a bicoastal relationship. "He sold his house, gave away everything it contained and moved in to my little house. The kindness I was looking for, for so long, is what I get in abundance now and sometimes I can't even receive it because I'm not used to it."

At first she had no intention of marrying again. "I didn't see the point. But Roger is a very formal person, very traditional. It was really important for him."

Earlier I had asked her if Cukras might speak to me. "Of course, I'll tell him," she said, scribbling down his number on a piece of paper. Nicolas, who had just walked into the room, laughed: "He does as he's told — like everybody else. This is an empire."

"She's bossy," jokes Cukras, 76, when I ring him. "Sometimes I say, 'Look, you're not my mother.'" But he also sounds completely lovestruck. Being married to her is, he says, "like being a kid waking up each morning and knowing you're going to the circus".

The only difference between falling in love in your twenties and your seventies is, says Allende, the sense of urgency. "You have no time to waste. How many years do we have before we get demented or sick?" Not that she fears death. "I fear decrepitude, I fear dependency, but not death… it will happen anyhow."

When I ask her how she would like to be remembered, she replies briskly. "I will not be remembered. Very few people are remembered in this world." But your work will be remembered? "No, it won't. It's a totally male fantasy, this thing about legacy."

Although a depressive streak runs through her family — "in the Allende family there are many suicides" — she cannot recall ever being depressed. "It has been an intense life with moments of great happiness, but in general, joy and happiness are moments, like light in a painting. I've been desperate, with a mixture of sadness and loss and rage about everything that happened with Paula… But depressed? No."

As Allende recounts in her memoir Paula, her most moving book, her daughter had a premonition of her early death. While on honeymoon with her husband, Ernesto, the previous year, she had woken from a bad dream and written a farewell letter, although completely healthy at the time. "Ernesto: I have loved you deeply and still do," she writes. "You are an extraordinary man and I don't doubt that you can be happy after I have gone. Mama, papa, Nico: you are the best family I could ever have had. Don't forget me, I love you dearly. Paula."

Allende was 50 when her daughter died — after lingering in a coma for a year — and she sees it as the dividing point of her life. "It changed me completely. I am not the same person." She no longer tries to control her destiny. "I just need to be ready to float… My life is about surprises. The really important things that determine my journey, I have no control over them — the abandonment of my father, my mother marrying a diplomat, the military coup in Chile, the divorces, my daughter dying."

And so she lives fiercely in the moment. The best part of every day, she says, is when she wakes up, usually well before sunrise. "It's dark and the dogs are in bed and Roger is there, and I feel so happy that I am in the middle, squeezed between them. I don't move because I don't want to wake them up and for a while I can invoke my mother or Paula. Or if I am writing a book, my mind is already preparing for the joy of getting to the computer."

She no longer feels consumed by a need to belong. "I'm not as attached as I was before to anything. Or anyone." Or indeed any place. Although her latest book is a lyrical love letter to Chile, she does not feel her sense of identity is defined by her homeland. "I don't have to choose. I have a foot in Chile and one in California. My heart is not divided, it just grew bigger." ■

A Long Petal of the Sea by Isabel Allende is published on January 21 (Bloomsbury £16.99)