

# National Post

## Cinderella of magic realism: Isabel Allende says time, not critics, will determine the value of her best-selling novels

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Illustrations: Black & White Photo: Nick Procajlo, National Post / Isabel Allende: Her "Latin American lite" is read by millions.

When Isabel Allende was at the beginning of her career, writing for a magazine in Chile more than 30 years ago, she used to read the romantic short stories in a competing publication. "They were all Cinderella stories," she said in a recent interview in Vancouver. "And I realized this is easy, I could do this." But her efforts proved fruitless. She couldn't write that kind of story, she says, because "it has no echo in my own experience."

Instead, from political exile in Venezuela, she began to write novels. From the best-selling *House of Spirits* to *Paula*, a memoir of her daughter's death, and now her latest novel, *Daughter of Fortune*, Allende has written eight books. But she has been dogged all her literary life by critics who accuse her of writing something very like that Cinderella story. "Latin American lite," they have called her work; melodramatic soap operas of little value or substance.

The criticism began with the publication of her first book, *The House of Spirits*, in 1985. A story that spans generations of a Chilean family -- from the turn of the century to the 1973 military coup-- it is about fierce love, political passion and the paranormal. Allende, the niece of Salvador Allende, the Marxist president toppled and killed in the coup, paints a very moving

portrait of pre-coup Chile.

But, despite reviews that complimented Allende for "turning the Latin American novel on its head" and for "presenting an original feminist argument," the book was tainted by critics who called it a ripoff of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the original master of magic realism. Now, with the publication of *Daughter of Fortune*, which she was in Vancouver to promote, her critics' voices have gotten louder than ever.

But Allende dismisses them. "I never read my critics," she says. "Why should I care what a certain 50-year-old man at *The New York Times* says? I write from my own life what I feel is true and there are millions of people who like what I do."

Her books are translated into 30 languages and anywhere she goes she has a full house. Vancouver is no exception. The only Canadian stop on her book tour, Allende fills the Christ Church Cathedral in downtown Vancouver to standing room.

She tells her rapt audience that *Daughter of Fortune*, a historical novel about the gold rush in California, where Allende has lived for the last 10 years with her second husband, is about freedom. Eliza, the protagonist, leaves Chile in the hold of a ship, following her lover north to the gold

rush. "In the journey," says Allende, "which is really a journey of the soul, she loses everything and gains something as precious as love itself and obviously more precious than gold. She obtains a freedom unthinkable for a woman at that time and she discovers she's much stronger than she ever thought she could be."

Allende points to a passage in the book that best illustrates that: "In those last months of riding across the gold landscape of California she felt she was flying free, like a condor. She was awakened one morning by the whinnying of her horse ... at that moment she was filled with an atavistic happiness that was entirely new. She realized that she had lost the feeling of panic that had lain curled in the pit of her stomach like a rat, threatening to gnaw her entrails. Her fear had dissipated in the awesome grandeur of this landscape."

The search for freedom, she says, has been the theme of her own life. "To get out of the patriarchy, to get out of my hierarchical, conservative, Catholic family." Allende belonged to the first generation of organized feminists in Chile. "Now, I'm in my 50s," she says, "and I look back and realize all my life has been about feeling self-sufficient, independent, paying my own bills."

Allende calls critics who claim her work is populist and of questionable literary merit arrogant and pretentious. "They say that of any book that sells," she says. "It is assuming that the readers are stupid and if they read your book, it's because it's trash."

On stage, an anecdotal Allende has her audience doubled over in laughter. She's telling them about her dreams, one in which she rolled Antonio Banderas into a

tortilla and ate him. She's telling them about the vibrating couch in the porn shops of San Francisco that she learned to enjoy while researching her book. She explains in detail how she always starts a new book on Jan. 8, a lifetime superstition, and her elaborate meditation ritual that precedes her work. The crowd loves her.

"The only thing that can determine if a work of art is valuable or not is time, not critics," she says. "The fact that my books sell by the millions today doesn't mean they are good. They may be responding to a need in society or to the market. In 20 years, we'll be able to tell."

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