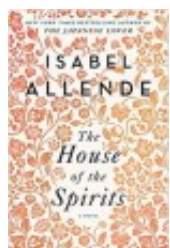


## The House of the Spirits: A Novel by Isabel Allende

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Tuesday, December 20, 2022

<https://curmudgeon-alley.com/the-house-of-the-spirits-a-novel-by-isabel-allende/>



Peru has been in the news frequently as of late. They are on their fifth or sixth president in about as many years. There are riots in the street in which several folks have died. The left wing president who attempted to take “executive” control of the country was impeached and has been sentenced to 18 months in jail. For the first time in its history, Peru has a woman President, but it would surprise me if she stayed in office long. All of which started me thinking about this novel again, which will be clearer as to why if you are brave enough to trudge on.

I actually finished this novel three or four months ago in the Spanish language edition, [\*La casa de los espíritus\*](#). It took me a bit to get through it. First it is 552 pages. Secondly when I read a Spanish novel I read it in *voz alta*, that is to say, out loud. I do this for a couple of reasons. First to practice my pronunciation, and secondly to slow me down. Otherwise I find myself reading a Spanish book as I would a book in English which is generally by blocks of words, unless a passage is particularly difficult or beautiful. I don’t need to be using that method in Spanish at this point in my language learning journey. While the style of writing was not particularly difficult there were still more than a few words that I did not know. They advise you when reading in a different language that you do not need to know every word as long as you get the gist. My problem is that years ago I developed the habit of always looking up English words that I encountered and did not know. It is a hard habit to break even if the language is not English. Plus, looking up words is a good way to expand your vocabulary. However, in novels they tend to use a lot of idioms, and every Spanish speaking country (20 or 21 ) seems to have their own subset of idiomatic expressions. Did you know that across the Spanish speaking world there are at least 12 different words for the English word, straw, as in drinking straw? In summary, it took a while.

The author, Isabel Allende, is interesting in herself. She was born in Peru as her Chilean father, a first cousin to one of the Chilean presidents, was part of the diplomatic mission there. She was also married to a Chilean diplomat for a spell. She and her diplomat husband had to flee the country to Venezuela after a “change” in the government in Chile. *The House of the Spirits* is her first novel and was published while she was residing there. She is now married to an American and lives in California. Reading about her personal life had a bit of a soap opera feel to it. I am sure it has been good fodder for her novels. Wikipedia describes her as “*the world’s most widely read Spanish-language author.*” Her many books are also widely available in other languages including English.

She generally writes in a style known as [magical realism](#) briefly described as:

*“Magic realism is a style of literary fiction and art. It paints a realistic view of the world while also adding magical elements, often blurring the lines between fantasy and reality.”*

I would admit that sometimes I have a hard time getting my head around this style of writing. The best known author working in this genre is [Gabriel García Márquez](#) ([One Hundred Years of Solitude](#), [Love in the Time of Cholera](#) and many other books) Unlike Márquez, Allende’s magical elements are not subtle. They are in your face and very obvious as they weave in and out of the more realistic elements of the story.

I am not going to do a “book review”, but a brief description to maybe tease you in to reading this book. There are several reasons to do so. First, it is a good story, I found it to be a page turner with so much action that, at times, it felt like an action movie. However, it is definitely a novel driven by the characters that inhabit its pages. If you want to start to understand the culture and politics of the west coast of South America this is a very good beginning point. I’m not sure it was a hopeful novel, but it is a novel about how the human spirit can persevere through much hardship. The fact that the book has been translated into 20 languages speaks for itself.

The story follows three generations of women whose lives revolve around the main character, Esteban Trueba. Trueba goes from rags to riches, has a large farm/ranch, *Tres Marias*, in the countryside worked by peasants. He has numerous businesses in the capital city where he builds a huge house that ends up populated by numerous spirits.

His initial impulse for getting rich was to marry the daughter, Rosa, of a wealthy but eccentric family. This woman had green hair(!), and was considered an extraordinary and unapproachable beauty. It came out later that the only reason the family accepted Trueba as a suitor was he was the only man to have enough courage to approach her. The reality was that it was not courage, he could not help himself, it was like an insect being drawn to a flame. So off he went to make his fortune in the gold mines in order to have the money to marry into this family. Rosa ends up dying after accidentally imbibing poisoned schnapps meant for her father. Her death changes the arc of Trueba’s life. Many years later, when she comes of age, Trueba marries Clara, the sister of his first love, Rosa. Clara has had the power of precognition and teleportation of objects since she was a small girl. In the new sprawling mansion of Trueba, Clara is in contact with the many otherworldly beings cohabitating with the family.

Interestingly, Allende never names the country. The only actual place name given is Guayaquil which is a port city of Ecuador. The story could have taken place anywhere along the west coast of South America. It starts out with automobiles being a novelty and ends with the country being a pawn in the cold war.

An alternative title to this book might have been *As You Sow, So Shall Ye Reap*. Esteban is not the calmest of individuals. Early in the novel before his marriage there are several scenes of his taking advantage of the peasant women (rape any way you look at it). I never find such passages easy to read, however these rapes and their aftermath become very germane later in the novel as does his treatment of peasants in general. Being a *patron* in a very patriarchal society with huge class distinctions, there are no immediate consequences for his rapes except the peasants trying to keep their daughters out of his sight. Later repercussions of current actions is an ongoing theme of this novel...*As You Sow, So Shall Ye Reap*.

A big mover in the novel is that Trueba's daughter, Blanca falls in love with her childhood playmate, *Pedro Tercero*, the son of the peasant who oversees operations on *Tres Marias*. When Trueba finds out about the affair, it has severely disastrous results. To compound the problem *Pedro Tercero* is very active in the socialistic movement in the country fighting against the *Patrons*, such as Trueba. Blanca ends up pregnant and is forced into an arranged marriage with a supposed French Count, another disaster.

It is also a story of the political struggles of a country. Trueba is part of the landed class that feels very privileged and entitled to do as they please with the land and "their" peasants. There is a strong socialist/communist movement fighting the excesses of the conservative landed/wealthy in the country. Trueba, to fortify his position and because of his hatred of socialism, enters politics. He becomes a very well known Senator of this imaginary country for much of the book. When the liberals manage to get control of the country, the conservatives use every method, ethical and unethical, to bring down that government. They manage to do so, but the result was not what they envisioned, much to their own horror.

I don't have any real knocks on the book. It is definitely a first novel, and lacks some of the polish of someone who has been writing for a while. She tends to use foreshadowing excessively, but perhaps that was the result of having a character with precognition. The way she writes some of the sex scenes reminded me a bit of how a 15 year old boy might have attacked the task rather than a healthy woman in the prime of her sexuality. At times, with the magical elements, it felt like Allende was cutting and pasting every New Age, Occultist, transcendental practice she could think of. There is not a lot of character development, only three or four characters show any real growth in the 552 pages of the novel. It took the main character, Trueba, almost the whole book and his entire life of 90 some years to have the epiphany that maybe, perhaps, his approach to life might have been a little flawed.

The main reason to read the book, though, is that it is very entertaining.

And so it went once upon a fantasy in an unnamed country.

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