

Plays

- The Ambassador* (Chile)
The Ballad of Nobody (Chile)
The Seven Mirrors (Chile)
The House of the Spirits
Paula
Eva Luna (a musical)

Film Adaptations

- The House of the Spirits*, 1993
Of Love and Shadows, 1994

Isabel Allende**Why I write**

I need to tell a story. It's an obsession. Each story is a seed inside of me that starts to grow and grow, like a tumor, and I have to deal with it sooner or later. Why a particular story? I don't know when I begin. That I learn much later.

Over the years I've discovered that all the stories I've told, all the stories I will ever tell, are connected to me in some way. If I'm talking about a woman in Victorian times who leaves the safety of her home and comes to the Gold Rush in California, I'm really talking about feminism, about liberation, about the process I've gone through in my own life, escaping from a Chilean, Catholic, patriarchal, conservative, Victorian family and going out into the world.

When I start writing a book, I have no idea where it's going. If it's a historical novel I've researched the period and the place, but I don't know what story I want to tell. I only know that in a subtle way or in a hidden way, I want to have an impact on the reader's heart and mind.

I think it might surprise my readers to know how picky I am with language. How I read aloud a paragraph and if there are words repeated, I don't like it. I go through the translation into English line by line. The translator sends me every twenty or thirty pages, and if I see a word that doesn't exactly match my meaning, I go to the dictionary. It's so important for me, finding the precise word that will create a feeling or describe a situation. I'm very picky about that because it's the only material we have: words. But they are free. No matter how many syllables they have: free! You can use as many as you want, forever.

I write in Spanish. I could write a speech in English, but fiction happens in the womb. It doesn't get processed in the mind until you do the editing. But storytelling comes in Spanish to me. It's like making love. I could not be panting in English. It doesn't work that way.

I try to write beautifully, but accessibly. In the romance languages, Spanish, French, Italian, there's a flowery way of saying things that does not exist in English. My husband says he can always tell when he gets a letter in Spanish: the envelope is heavy. In English a letter is a paragraph. You go straight to the point. In Spanish that's impolite.

Reading in English, living in English, has taught me to make language as beautiful as possible, but precise. Excessive adjectives, excessive description—skip it, it's unnecessary. Speaking English has made my writing less cluttered. I try to read *House of the Spirits* now, and I can't. Oh my God, so many adjectives! Why? Just use one good noun instead of three adjectives.

When I tell the story of slavery, I tell it from the slave's point of view. I also go into the master's heart. I want my reader to feel the slave, to understand what it is to not have freedom.

Heaven is when the muse shows up

When I feel that the story is beginning to pick up rhythm—the characters are shaping up, I can see them, I can hear their voices, and they do things that I haven't planned, things I couldn't have imagined—then I know the book is somewhere, and I just have to find it, and bring it, word by word, into this world.

Then my life changes. Then it becomes a completely different process of excitement, and obsession, and stress. I can work for fourteen hours. Just sitting down for that much time is hard! My son programmed my computer so that every forty-five minutes I have to get up. If I don't, I get so stiff that I can't get up at the end of the day.

I correct to the point of exhaustion, and then finally I say I give up. It's never quite finished, and I suppose it could always be better, but I do the best I can. In time, I've learned to avoid overcorrecting. When I got my first computer and I realized how easy it was to change things ad infinitum, my style became very stiff.

There's a certain charm in what is spontaneous. I want the reader to feel that I'm telling the story to him or her in particular. When you tell a story in the kitchen to a friend, it's full of mistakes and repetitions. I try to avoid that in literature, but I still want it to be a conversation, like storytelling usually is. It's not a lecture.

It's hard to find that balance. But I've been writing for thirty years, so now I know when I'm overdoing it. I read it aloud, and if it's not the way I talk, I change it.

In all my books there are strong women who have to overcome incredible obstacles to have their own destiny. I'm not trying to create models for other women to imitate. I just want my women readers to find the strength. And I want my male readers to understand what it is to be a woman—to find the sympathy.

So I suppose that's it. Then, too, I'm unemployable. What else would I do?

Hell is January seventh

I start all my books on January eighth. Can you imagine January seventh? It's hell.

Every year on January seventh, I prepare my physical space. I clean up everything from my other books. I just leave my dictionaries, and my first editions, and the research materials for the new one. And then on January eighth I walk seventeen steps from the kitchen to the little pool house that is my office. It's like a journey to another world. It's winter, it's raining usually. I go with my umbrella and the dog following me. From those seventeen steps on, I am in another world and I am another person.

I go there scared. And excited. And disappointed—because I have a sort of idea that isn't really an idea. The first two, three, four weeks are wasted. I just show up in front of the computer. Show up, show up, show up, and after a while the muse shows up, too. If she doesn't show up invited, eventually she just shows up.

Channeling an eighteenth-century Haitian slave

I have to be very careful with dialogue, because my books are translated into thirty-five languages. It's hard to translate dialogue. Colloquialisms change and the book becomes dated. You never know how your characters' conversations are going to translate to Romanian, to Vietnamese. So I don't use a lot of dialogue. What I do use, I try to keep really simple.

In *Island Beneath the Sea*, the slave couldn't be more different than myself physically or emotionally. She's a tall African woman. Yet I know how I would feel if I was in her place. When I'm writing, I *am* a slave. I *am* on the plantation. I feel the heat, I smell the smells.

Being in the thrall of creating a story, it's a sickness. I carry the story with me all day, all night, in dreams, all the time. Everything I see, everything that happens, it seems to me the universe is talking to me because I connect it to the story. I feel invincible. It could be the most horrible story, but I feel totally happy.

When I was writing my latest book, *Island Beneath the Sea*, I got so awfully sick that I thought I had stomach cancer. I kept vomiting. I couldn't lie down. I had to sleep sitting up. My husband said, "This is your body reacting to the story. When you finish the book, you'll be okay." And that is exactly what happened.

The best time: the first

I've received so many gifts as a writer. I've won awards and prizes. My books have been made into movies and plays. I was

even a flag bearer in the 2006 Winter Olympics in Torino, Italy. Can you imagine? I walked into the stadium behind Sophia Loren and before Susan Sarandon. I have a fantastic picture of the ceremony. You see Sophia Loren—beautiful, tall, elegant—and then the flag, and then a hole, and then Susan Sarandon, also beautiful. I'm five feet tall, and I am under the flag. I'm invisible.

But the best time for me was in 1981, when I was writing my first novel. There was no ambition to it, no hope that it would be published, no pressure of any kind. I didn't know yet that I was a writer—I knew that only after I finished my fourth book—so I had no expectations, just the freedom of telling a story for the heck of it.

I worked in my kitchen in Caracas at night, on a little portable typewriter. A typewriter! So I couldn't make mistakes. When I finished the book I showed it to my mother. She said, "Why did you name the worst character in the book after your father?" I never met my father, but I said, "No problem, I'll change the name." So I had to find a name for that character with the same number of letters, and then I had to go through five hundred pages, inserting the new name on each one.

I would cut the pages up with scissors and Scotch tape the corrections in. Some pages had so many corrections, they could stand up and walk.

But the freedom of it! That was a wonderful time, not caring about anything but the story, carrying my one copy of my book everywhere I went, at my breast, like a newborn baby.

So now I know that if I'm in a writer's block, I can go back to writing nonfiction. Writing memoirs has its advantages. I know I can never be blackmailed, because I keep no secrets.

But I'm still scared of being unable to write. It's like swallowing sand. It's awful.

Into the future

Storytelling and literature will exist always, but what shape will it take? Will we write novels to be performed? The story will exist, but how, I don't know. The way my stories are told today is by being published in the form of a book. In the future, if that's not the way to tell a story, I'll adapt.

Language: that is what matters to me. Telling a story to create an emotion, a tension, a rhythm—that is what matters to me.

Isabel Allende's Wisdom for Writers

- It's worth the work to find the precise word that will create a feeling or describe a situation. Use a thesaurus, use your imagination, scratch your head until it comes to you, but find the right word.
- When you feel the story is beginning to pick up rhythm—the characters are shaping up, you can see them, you can hear their voices, and they do things that you haven't planned, things you couldn't have imagined—then you know the book is somewhere,

The worst time: going dry

My daughter, Paula, died on December 6, 1992. On January 7, 1993, my mother said, "Tomorrow is January eighth. If you don't write, you're going to die."

She gave me the 180 letters I'd written to her while Paula was in a coma, and then she went to Macy's. When my mother came back six hours later, I was in a pool of tears, but I'd written the first pages of *Paula*. Writing is always giving some sort of order to the chaos of life. It organizes life and memory. To this day, the responses of the readers help me to feel my daughter alive.

But after I wrote *Paula*, I went into a writer's block. I would try every day to write, but I was dry inside. After two years of despair, I met Annie Lamott at Book Passage, our local independent bookstore. She asked me if I was doing any better. I said no, I'm worse. She said, "Oh, Isabel, your reservoirs are empty. You have to fill them up." I said, "How can I fill them up?" Annie said, "You'll find a way."

Annie was right. I went with my husband and a friend to India. That shook me up. I asked myself, "Why would I be complaining and whining when there's so much sorrow and wonder in the world? Who am I to be focused only on myself?" That was a wonderful thing.

When I came home, I still couldn't write fiction, so I gave myself a task. I told myself I can write about anything, as long as it's not politics or football.

I needed a subject as removed as possible from the theme of *Paula*. So I wrote *Aphrodite*, a nonfiction book about sex and gluttony.

and you just have to find it, and bring it, word by word, into this world.

- When you tell a story in the kitchen to a friend, it's full of mistakes and repetitions. It's good to avoid that in literature, but still, a story should feel like a conversation. It's not a lecture.