READER’S GUIDE
THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS
ISABEL ALLENDE
Isabel Allende was born in Peru, raised in Chile, lived in Bolivia, Venezuela and Lebanon and settled in the United States. In her memoir of Chile, My Invented Country, she describes how her identity was shaped by transience: “From saying good-bye so often my roots have dried up, and I have had to grow others, which, lacking a geography to sink into, have taken hold in my memory.” Her memory, unmoored from any country, has found shape in her books, many of which, including The House of the Spirits, are fictionalized portraits of her life.

Allende was born in 1942 in Lima, where her father worked as a secretary in the Chilean embassy. When her mother and grandmother brought her home from the hospital they found a birthmark in the shape of the sun at the base of her spine—a symbol of health and good fortune she shares with Alba in The House of the Spirits. Her father abandoned the family around the time her brother Juan was born, and her mother returned with the children to her parents’ home in Santiago. Allende’s grandmother, who could foretell the future and move a sugar bowl with her gaze, inspired the character of Clara in The House of the Spirits.

Her mother’s second husband, a diplomat, brought the family to embassy posts in Bolivia and Lebanon. Allende’s longest period in Chile, from 1958 until 1975, was bookended by wars: She returned to her grandparents’ house in Santiago at age 15 after the Suez Canal crisis made it too dangerous to live in Beirut; she left Chile after the 1973 military coup and tyrannical rule of General Augusto Pinochet made it too dangerous to live in her home country.

In between, Allende married, had two children and followed a career as a feminist journalist and television host. In 1972, she visited Pablo Neruda at Isla Negra, wrongly assuming the poet had invited her there to conduct an interview. “I’d never put myself through that,” he told her. “My dear child, you must be the worst journalist in the country.” He encouraged her to write novels, where fibbing, invention, subjective positions and self-centeredness are “virtues” instead of “defects.”

In 1970, Salvadore Allende, Isabel’s father’s cousin, was elected the first socialist president of Chile. After brief, successful social and labor reforms, the country was plunged into an economic crisis. The 1973 military coup signaled the beginning of decades of state-sponsored terrorism inside the country, in which leftists and intellectuals were kidnapped and killed. After years of passing information about the regime’s methods of torture out of the country, and helping smuggle blacklisted people over embassy walls, Isabel Allende fled to Venezuela in 1975 with a bag of dirt from her garden and her grandmother’s relics.

She began The House of the Spirits on January 8, 1981 as a letter to her dying grandfather still in Chile. She has begun all of her subsequent books on a January 8, including Paula, her seventh book, a memoir and letter written to her dying daughter that she considers her most important book. “All the rest was rehearsal,” she has said.

Allende has written seventeen books, including four memoirs (one, Aphrodite, about the sensuality of love and food), four books for young readers, and eight novels. She has said her life has been determined by the forces of love and violence, and her books bear traces of both. An exile with roots in memory, instead of place, Allende writes as a quest to clarify that memory and locate her identity. “Writing is a long process of introspection: It is a voyage toward the darkest caverns of consciousness, a long, slow meditation,” she wrote in Paula. “I write feeling my way in silence, and along the way discover particles of truth, small crystals that fit in the palm of one hand and justify my passage through this world.”

In 1988, a year after she divorced her first husband, she moved to San Francisco to live with Willie Gordon, an admirer of her books whom she later married. In their home, Allende shaped rooms where she could summon spirits: a room for prayer and one for work. She keeps her grandmother’s séance table nearby and writes with her computer propped on a copy of The House of the Spirits and Neruda’s Canto, General.

She has said her writing comes from tapping into this spiritual world, which is at once safe, essential and collective. “I try to write the first sentence in a state of trance, as if somebody else was writing it through me,” she has said. “And slowly as I write, the story seems to unfold itself, in spite of me.”

Despite the presence of spirits in her work, Allende does not classify the fantastic elements of her books as merely magical, and does not think of herself as practicing magical realism. She has described that style as not simply a literary form but, rather, “a way of accepting the world.”

She also encourages students to “enjoy” her work, not study it. “This is like food. You shouldn’t sit down and talk about it,” she has said. “This is like making bread, and not more than that.”
The country in *The House of the Spirits* is never named, but it closely follows the historical trajectory of Chile, including the rise of the working class, the democratic election of a socialist president, and the bloody coup and military rule that terrorized those suspected of sympathizing with the deposed government.

For much of its history, Chile was led by aristocratic landowners. In *Paula*, Isabel Allende describes the Chile of her grandfather’s and mother’s generations as a place where all roles were defined by class: “It had more castes than India,” she wrote. “Birth determined status. It was easy to descend in the social hierarchy, but money, fame, or talent was not sufficient to allow one to rise, that required the sustained effort of several generations.” Class was also prescribed by racial ancestry: upper classes tended to have European features while lower classes showed more indigenous physical traits.

In the late twentieth century, Chile swung between the extremes of liberal and conservative governments. Salvadore Allende’s election in 1970 marked a dramatic change for the country, which had never before chosen a socialist leader. Isabel Allende wrote that as soon as her father’s cousin was elected, “his adversaries began to sabotage it.” The American government was complicit in the sabotage: a year before Allende became president, the CIA had begun to fund right-wing groups and support generals who were sympathetic to the idea of a coup.

The 1973 military coup was unlike the brief military seizures of power earlier in the century, which it eclipsed in terms of violence and totalitarian control. The junta, led by General Augusto Pinochet, imposed the strict capitalism Allende had started to unravel by nationalizing resources. Their doctrine became known as “savage capitalism” and it privatized formerly public services like health and education. In *My Invented Country*, Allende’s memoir of Chile, she described the creation of a “callous society” in which “profit is sacred”: “If you are poor it’s your own fault, and if you complain, that makes you a Communist. Freedom consists of having many brand names to choose from when you go out to buy on credit.”

Pinochet’s rule lasted until 1989. Isabel Allende attributes the end of his tyranny to Chileans’ obsession with laws—an ironic twist of history. Under the constitution that Pinochet amended to make himself a “president” and not just the leader of a military junta, he prescribed an eight-year limit to his term. In 1988, he called a plebiscite to see if the country’s voters wanted to call for an election. They did, and he lost to his democratic opponent.

Allende never moved back to Chile, although with the end of Pinochet’s rule she could return there without being persecuted. When she visited the country after the elections, she found that people were still intimidated by the military, “quiet and frightened as they went about their lives,” and suspicious of exiles like herself.

In 1998, when Pinochet was arrested in London during a trip to receive medical treatment, Chileans realized that their former dictator would not be treated with impunity everywhere. Allende, who happened to be in Santiago on the day of Pinochet’s arrest, wrote in *My Invented Country* that “within the course of a week a Pandora’s box was opened and all the things that had been hidden beneath layers and layers of silence began to emerge.”

Pinochet died in 2006, before he was convicted of any crime, but the Chilean public’s willingness to talk openly about his violent rule continued. “The tacit agreement to bury the truth was over,” Allende wrote.
1. Describe Esteban Trueba’s character. When is he ruled by violence, wealth, lust, compassion or pride? At which points in the novel is he repulsive to the reader and at which points is he sympathetic? How does he illustrate some of the larger impulses (especially concerning class and power) guiding the country in the novel?

2. What are some examples of magic in the novel? What are some examples of magic being used to communicate—with spirits, with knowledge of the past or future, or with people across distances?

3. Compare the “big house on the corner” to Tres Marias. How does each home reflect the family’s fortunes during the time its members spend there?

4. Transito Soto reappears at important moments throughout the novel. How does she reflect the changing culture around her? What wisdom does she share with Esteban Trueba?

5. How is the Catholic Church central to the culture described in Allende’s novel? What role do religious people or clergy play throughout the history traced in the book?

6. What motivates Esteban Garcia to act as he does with the Trueba family? How is he similar and different than his namesake?

7. Why does Blanca’s marriage to Jean de Satigny fail?

8. What traits do Jaime and Nicolas share despite how different the twins seem?

9. The House of the Spirits begins and ends with the same words, “Barrabas came to us by the sea.” What are some other instances of events, characters, or phrases repeating throughout the course of the novel? How do those cycles relate to the progress of time? Why would the novel include new events that recall past ones?

10. Why does Alba begin to tell her family’s story? Is she the “writer” of the whole book?
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Memoir:
Paula (Harper Collins, 1995)
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The Sum of Our Days (Harper Collins, 2008)

Young Adult/ Children's Literature:
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City of the Beasts (Harper Collins, 2002)
Forest of the Pygmies (Harper Collins, 2005)

Additional Resources:
www.isabelallende.com
Billen, Andrew. “With a family like mine you don’t need an imagination.”