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Isabel Allende, Fortune's Daughter

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Isabel Allende, Fortune's Daughter

John Rodden (bio)

Since the death of her twenty-seven-year-old daughter, Paula Frias, in December 1992, Isabel Allende has frequently stated that she is a “changed” woman. Evidently, the struggle to save Paula—who suddenly fell ill in 1991, slipped into a coma, and died twelve months later from a

rare immune deficiency disease (porphyria)—deepened Allende.

My own interviews with Allende before and after Paula's death confirm this perception. I have found her a noticeably different woman—more reflective, less goal-directed, more self-revealing, less guarded—from the writer I knew when we taught together at the University of Virginia in the late 1980s. She also told me in a May 1995 interview that her grief over Paula's death was so paralyzing that she might never write again—at least, not fiction. She had just published *Paula*, her memoir about the agony of watching Paula die. Writing that book had not only led to Allende's spiritual transformation but altered her experience of writing. Suddenly it was far more enjoyable—and yet it seemed not to matter so much. Allende found herself savoring the activity of writing more and worrying less about the literary “product.” As she told one interviewer:

Before, I always wanted to get things done. Fast and well. I always wanted a finished book. I wanted to come to the end and to have something. Now I enjoy the process far more. I've discovered in a much deeper way the joys of writing itself. I've really learned to enjoy writing, which means to enjoy living and being present to it. . . . Rather than focus on the finished product, I'm enjoying each moment in the process. . . .

Nothing will ever be more significant than this loss. And now I know: I could die tomorrow.

Nonetheless, the capacity to craft her writing into a readable product did return. In the last three years Allende has produced two books—a lighthearted cookbook, *Aphrodite: A Memoir of the Senses* (1998), and a novel, *Daughter of Fortune* (1999), Allende's first work of fiction in eight years.

Allende's literary rebirth has coincided with—and is apparently indebted to—her mystical turn, which has resulted in her discovery of a new House of the Spirits. With that discovery have come existential “lessons” that Allende has drawn from the harrowing year of Paula's

sickness and death: the words *destiny, trust, acceptance, and openness* come up **[End Page 32]** again and again in her interviews after Paula's death. Indeed, the whole cast of her conversation has shifted to the spiritual realm. As she told one interviewer:

Life is like a very short passage in the long journey of the soul. It is just an experience that we have to go through, because the body has to experience certain things that are important for the soul. But we shouldn't cling to life and the world so much: we shouldn't cling to the material aspects of the world, because you can't take them with you. You will lose them no matter what.

Since the mid-1990s Allende has repeatedly spoken of learning to "let go." As she put it in another interview: "When I said *dead*, [Paula's death] became real and I could deal with it."

Elsewhere Allende has spoken of another, more mundane death, or form of clinging, with which she still copes: literary ambition. "Ambition is like a bottomless pit," she says. After the publication of *The House of the Spirits*, she "had the sensation that I had done something in my life and I could now die in peace," but soon the hydra-headed monster returned to haunt her: "One becomes ambitious and wants more and more."

Asked in other interviews to sum up what she has learned as a result of Paula's death, Allende makes her spiritual discovery even more explicit:

*Your approach to the world is different. . . . You become more detached. . . . You gain a sort of spiritual dimension that opens up completely your world. **[End Page 33]***

I've asked myself countless times: Why her? Why her and not me? If I...



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