LA CASA DE LOS ESPÍRITUS

Isabel Allende (1982)
**INFORMATION**

The House of the Spirits (Spanish: La casa de los espíritus) is the debut novel of Isabel Allende. The novel was rejected by several Spanish-language publishers before being published in Buenos Aires in 1982. It became an instant best seller, was critically acclaimed, and catapulted Allende to literary stardom. The novel was named Best Novel of the Year in Chile in 1982, and Allende received the country’s Panorama Literario award. The House of the Spirits has been translated into over 37 languages.

The book was first conceived by Allende when she received news that her 100-year-old grandfather was dying. She began to write him a letter that ultimately became the manuscript of The House of the Spirits.

The story details the life of the Trueba family, spanning four generations, and tracing the post-colonial social and political upheavals of Chile – though the country's name, and the names of figures closely paralleling historical ones, such as “the President” or “the Poet”, are never explicitly given. The story is told mainly from the perspective of two protagonists (Esteban and Alba) and incorporates elements of magical realism.

**SYNOPSIS**

The house of spirits, Isabel Allende’s first novel, tells the story of four generations of a family and the way in which it is affected by the transformations in Chile, where the book is set.

The story begins with a recollection of the diary of Clara Del Valle on a Holy Thursday, followed by a commentary at a noon mass in the capital of an unknown country in South America. The scandalous incident in the church sets the tone for the rest of the novel. Clara would continue to write in her diary (to which she referred as notebooks for writing life) until her death.

Esteban Trueba is a humble citizen who leaves for the mines to earn enough money to be able to marry his beloved, Rosa del Valle, a beautiful woman with green hair. During his absence, Rosa dies through accidental poisoning: the rival political party of Severo del Valle, her father, wanted to assassinate so he can’t be elected.
Esteban is strong character, and constantly suffers attacks of anger, anxiety and violence. He suffers a lot when Rosa dies, and decides to go and rebuild the Tres Marias, an old estate abandoned by his father to try to forget his beloved and get rich. Ten years later, he has managed to rebuild the entire estate and, despite greatly improving the living conditions of employees, his tyrannical treatment and constant abuse arouse the silent resentment of more than one worker.

Shortly after he learns of the death of his mother (whom he did not hold in much esteem) and, returning to the capital, he meets the Del Valle family and ends up marrying Rosa’s younger sister Clara. Clara possesses supernatural abilities, such as the ability to predict the future, to speak with the dead, and telekinesis. His father, Severo del Valle, loses part of his fortune by ignoring Clara who warned him (as he predicted the death of his sister, among other things) that his partner would betray him to get rich and go to the Caribbean.

Clara and Esteban have three children: the first-born Blanca, and the twins Jaime and Nicolás. Blanca has been in love with a rebel peasant named Pedro Tercero since her childhood, whom she meets in Las Tres Marias. Just before the twins were born, Blanca’s grandparents died in a car accident - the brakes fail - in which the mother loses her head that Clara will later find and hide in the basement.

Esteban Trueba eventually becomes a successful businessman, and devotes himself to politics until he becomes a prominent Conservative party senator. One day, in the midst of an attack of cholera, he beats Clara, who loses several teeth. Although they never officially separated, and even lived in the same house for many years, she did not speak to him again. Nicholas embarks on a series of failed businesses, and ends up dedicating himself to a spiritual life, outside the country. Jaime, on the other hand, dedicates his life to medicine; He becomes a most merciful man, capable of suffering harsh pains for the benefit of the other. Blanca maintains furtive meetings with Pedro Tercero, and becomes pregnant. Upon discovering this, Esteban Trueba forced her to marry a French man, a marriage from which she soon escaped, to return to her home in the capital.
Blanca gives birth to Alba. The girl inherits the green hair of her great-aunt Rosa, and, according to Clara, her future looks like a very good one. Blanca continues with her secret encounters with Pedro Tercero, who is now a famous working class singer; And Jaime secretly becomes friend of both Pedro Tercero and the candidate for the presidency of the socialist party. By this time, Clara dies. When Alba enters university, she meets Miguel, a leftist student leader he falls in love with. Finally, after several attempts, the candidate of the socialist party wins the presidency. The Tres Marias hacienda is expropriated through agrarian reform, which generates an especially violent episode on the part of Senator Esteban Trueba. Pedro Tercero happens to occupy a public position in the new administration.

A few years later, supported by the conservative party, the national bourgeoisie, and the United States government, a military coup takes place. At the time of taking the presidential palace, Jaime was with the President. He is shot, and his family finds out weeks later. The military occupy power, led by an ambitious general of “august mustaches.” Esteban Trueba, who at first was ecstatic with the fall of the socialists, slowly realizes that the military do not think to give back the power to the civilians, and that the repression they exert has gone out of control. Miguel and Pedro Tercero happen to be persecuted, and to live in the clandestinity. Alba secretly harbors the persecuted at her home, helping them to obtain political asylum or to leave the country. Blanca manages to hide Pedro Tercero in her house, he confesses it to his father, and he sends them asylados to Canada. Alba is discovered by the political police. They kidnap her, torture her terribly for weeks, rape her, and confine her to solitary confinement. Through contacts, Esteban Trueba manages to take his granddaughter out of confinement. Shortly after, he dies of old age.

Alba finds the notebooks where the life of her grandmother Clara is written, and writes the history of her family.
MAIN THEMES AND QUESTIONS

Sacrifice

1. Explore the role of silence in the novel. (For example: Clara’s bouts of silence, Esteban Trueba’s refusal to allow radios in his house, and instances in which characters keep silent in one another’s interest or in order to save one another)

The Spiritual World

1. Does the supernatural have significance to all the characters, or only to those who can communicate with it and who believe in its power?
2. Do you think that the family’s story would survive if all instances of the supernatural were removed? If so, how would it be different?

Love and suffering

1. Consider the way in which love and suffering connect in The House of the Spirits. What message does Allende send by highlighting the ways in which they are inseparable? Give examples.

Family

1. Discuss the connection between mothers and daughters in the novel. Why do you think these special bonds do not occur between mothers and sons, or between fathers and sons? Are there any exceptions to this tradition?
2. Explore the issue of paternity in The House of the Spirits. What are the characters’ attitudes toward paternity throughout the novel? Do they change or remain constant?
3. Is maternity or paternity more important in The House of the Spirits? Justify your opinion.

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