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## Isabel Allende

**My Invented Country**  
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**You attribute your career as a novelist to the experience of fleeing Pinochet's reign. What is life like for contemporary novelists living in Chile?**

In Chile we have had democratic governments since 1989 when Pinochet was forced to step down. There is no censorship for books, and writers are doing very well. There is a new generation of very interesting young writers. Their lives are not easy, because very few writers can make a living in the world and especially in a small market, as Chile is, but they don't give up. Writing is a calling, not a choice.

**Most fiction writers draw on family events for inspiration. Is it stressful or liberating to write about your family in a memoir, without the cloak of fiction?**

I wrote about my family in a memoir called *Paula* and then again in *My Invented Country*. I don't find it difficult but sometimes my relatives get angry ...

**How difficult was it to write during this painful period of your life? Or did you find the task of writing somehow cleansing, a way to ease your mind away from the tragedy unfolding before you?**

Writing *Paula* was not difficult, it was very healing. I wrote it with tears, but in one breath, as if Paula herself was dictating those words from the Beyond. I started the book a month after my daughter's death and I wrote for a year. During that time I was permanently in touch with Paula, remembering, analyzing what had happened, making peace with my loss. The book helped me to understand the tragedy and gave me an opportunity to reflect on my own life.

**You have lived more lives than most. You have the gift to reinvent yourself and to adapt to whatever life casts your way. Yet in your book you write, "I'm lost, I don't know who I am ... Too many contradictions ... " After all you've been through, do you believe that we are all multifaceted beings, all of us complex and full of contradictions and capable of much more than we can ever imagine?**

I never said I wanted a "happy" life but an interesting one. From separation and loss I have learned a lot, I have become strong and resilient as is the case of almost every human being exposed to life and to the world. We don't even know how strong we are until we are forced to bring that hidden strength forward. In times of tragedy, of war, of necessity, people do amazing things. The human capacity for survival and renewal is awesome.

**Q: Michael and Nicolas were both diagnosed with porphyria: How is their health?**

Both Michael and Nico are healthy. Porphyria seems to affect women more than men because often a crisis is triggered by hormonal changes. Menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, etc. are vulnerable times for women with porphyria: Unfortunately my two granddaughters also suffer from this condition. I hope that they will have a long and healthy life ...

**Your uncles taunted you with games of Ruffin as a child. Your grandfather believed that it was important to toughen up a child in order to prepare them for the harshness of life. Now that you've lived in North America a number of years, and you're a grandmother, do you still feel children should be toughened up, or are you more comfortable with your earlier observation of North American culture that "childhood must be a period of placid innocence?"**

For most children in the world life is tough. Only privileged (and very lucky) kids have a placid innocent childhood. I believe that children can take a lot of stress and hardship as long as they are loved. The problem is that most kids get very little love and we live in a society that does not take care of them. In the United States there are millions of children with no health care, no daycare, no proper schooling, no art, music, sports, etc. In most of the world children are the first victims of violence and war. Best examples are those 14 year old Palestinian suicide bombers, those 9 years old soldiers in Africa, those 7 year old girls in Bangladesh working in sweat shops or being forced into marriage, those 10 years old child prostitutes in Thailand ...

**You use real people in your life as models for your novels' characters. You also use real events to come up with your plots. Yet you have a storyteller's gift for fleshing out each character and composing beautifully written stories. Do you ever find yourself at a point where your journalistic background clashes with your fiction?**

My training as a journalist has been very helpful in my fiction-writing career. From journalism I learned to write under pressure, to work with deadlines, to have limited space and time, to conduct and interview, to find information, to research, and above all, to use language as efficiently as possible and to remember always that there is a reader out there. Many fiction writers write for the critics or for themselves, they forget the common reader. I never do. I don't think journalism clashes with my fiction, on the contrary, it helps enormously.

**It's been over ten years since you completed *Paula*. For your empathetic fans who read your story with shared tears and laughter, please tell us how you and your family have fared over the past decade.**

We have a good life and we feel blessed because we have been able to stick together. We have an extended family that really works.

Paula's husband, Ernesto, has remained my son. He is married to Giulia, a lovely young woman who is now my assistant. They live a block away from our home and we see each other almost daily. My son Nicolas had three kids with Celia, then they divorced and both have new partners. Nico's wife is Lori, she runs my foundation. Nico and Lori also live a block away, so we are very close. Willie and I are still married and very much in love. We have a dog called Olivia: My parents are alive, they are in their eighties and they are still healthy and lucid. The family gets together on week-ends, we go away on vacation, we share everything. My grandchildren are smart, happy, funny kids. On December 6, the day of Paula's death, we get together to celebrate her life and share our memories of her. She is always with us, like a soft presence. I believe that her spirit protects us.