



Portrait in Sepia

By Isabel Allende
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Introduction "Each of us chooses the tone for telling his or her own story," says Aurora del Valle, the heroine of Isabel Allende's newest novel. "I would like to choose the durable clarity of a platinum print, but nothing in my destiny possesses the luminosity. I live among diffuse shadings, veiled mysteries, uncertainties; the tone of telling my life is closer to that of a portrait in sepia." Aurora is referring to a technique in old-fashioned portraiture, one that results in a soft and dreamlike, rather than sharp, image. Likewise, Aurora's personal history is shadowy. Her mother died hours after she was born; her father was a stranger. Aurora's memories of early childhood are a mixture of family legend and hazy images, one of which haunts her for years. She pieces together her past through stories told to her by her many relatives. Like a child wandering through a maze, each piece of new information illuminates a dark corner of her life, and explains mysteries that both confounded and thwarted her. Aurora's story takes readers on a remarkable journey from San Francisco's grandest Nob Hill mansions to its thriving yet nearly invisible Chinese community. It places us in the stifling living rooms of traditional Chilean society and then hurls us across the country's rugged landscape to its spacious farms and ranches. We witness the violence and brutality of the Chilean revolution, as well as the cruel oppression of

women in Chinese society. As in her previous novels, Allende's enormous talent for blending history and fiction are in wondrous evidence. More than just a vehicle for teaching us some important historical lessons, Aurora emerges as a complex and rewarding character with a fascinating story of her own. As she matures from a timid girl unsure of who she is or where she came from to a strong and willful young woman with a clear sense of what she wants, Aurora's life reflects the elements of her heritage, whether she realizes it or not. She possesses her paternal grandmother's open-mindedness and loyalty; her maternal grandmother's stubbornness and kindness. She inherited her biological father's artistic flair; her mother's romanticism; and, eventually, her grandfather's quiet confidence. Aurora is also a product of her multicultural past. Part Chilean, part Chinese, part English, she feels no strong affinity to any culture. In separating from her husband, she has removed herself from Chilean society. When she looks at a photograph of herself as a young child, she doesn't recognize the girl dressed in a coat of Chinese silk. And yet she is haunted by a dream in which she is that little girl. A dream that doesn't make sense until she learns, at last, the details of her birth. How much are we a product of our past? Is it important to know where we came from? What happens when the truth is different from what we thought? Allende attempts to answer these questions in this novel that is as full of twists and turns as a mountain road, as broad in scope as the estates of a Chilean *patrone*. Her portrait of Aurora's life -- from the time she was adopted by her paternal grandmother, to her emergence as a talented photographer and independent woman -- speaks volumes about history, politics, racism and sexism. But it also reveals an intricately constructed and fully developed character. Aurora's past may be hazy and filled with shadows, but her character is as sharply etched and indelible as the finest photographic print. **Discussion Questions**

1. Allende opens her novel with a striking image: a large, ornate bed which Paulina del Valle orders to be paraded through the streets of San Francisco in an attempt to humiliate her husband and his mistress. When and how does the image of this bed recur throughout the story? What do you think it symbolizes?
2. How does Allende contrast the cultures of San Francisco, Chinatown and Chile? How do the strict religious and cultural traditions of Chile contrast with the chaotic, vibrant life of a growing American city? Which seems a better place to raise a child?
3. In Paulina del Valle, Allende has created a richly complex character, as despised as she is loved, as self-absorbed as she is generous. What do you think of Paulina? Do you think she provided Aurora with a better environment than Eliza could have? How does she serve as a model for modern women, and how does she represent the traditional world of 19th century Chile?
4. Aurora is raised in a wealthy Chilean household surrounded by people who love and care for her. Yet her past -- and therefore her true identity -- remain a secret. Do you feel sorry for Aurora? Do you think she would have been shocked to know the details of her birth? How important is it to know where we came from, and who our parents are?
5. Aurora del Valle is three-quarters Chilean and one-eighth Chinese and one-eighth English. How do these multi-cultural origins emerge in her personality? What effect does your own ethnic background have on your life today? In a country that prides itself on its multi-culturalism, how important is it for us to preserve the traditions and beliefs of our heritage?
6. Aurora remarks of her engagement to Diego, "The danger signs were evident to anyone with two eyes in his head, except for my grandmother -- blinded by fear of leaving me alone -- and me, madly in love." Just like her mother Lynn, Aurora's desire leads her to a disastrous choice. But how much choice did Aurora -- or her mother, for that matter -- really have? Do you think either woman could have avoided the forces that led them to sacrifice so much to unworthy men?
7. Why do you think Aurora is drawn to the art of photography? What can a picture reveal that the naked eye cannot see? Do you think Aurora's portraits of Diego and Susana were a subconscious attempt to reveal a fact she already knew?
8. Aurora's life is filled with powerful women: her two grandmothers, Nivea, her tutor Senorita Pineta, her mother-in-law Dona Elvira. How do these women shape her life? What elements of each of them do you detect in Aurora as a mature woman?
9. Aurora is surrounded by equally impressive men: her grandfather, Tao Ch'ien, her uncle Severo; Williams, her grandmother's second husband; and Ivan Redovic, the man who becomes her lifelong companion. What qualities do these men share? How do they contrast with the less admirable men she encounters? Do you think Allende provides balanced portraits of the men in this novel? Why or why not?
10. Why do you think Allende waited until the end of the novel to tell the story behind Tao's death? What does the incident represent to Aurora's life and to the novel? What is the effect of having Eliza tell the story to Aurora, as opposed to Aurora telling the story to the reader?

All of Isabel Allende's works are available in the original Spanish from Rayo: [Afrodita](#), [Cuentos de Eva Luna](#), [De Amor y de Sombra](#), [El Plan Infinito](#), [Eva Luna](#), [Hija de la Fortuna](#), [La Casa de los Espiritus](#), [Paula](#), and [Retrato en Sepia](#).