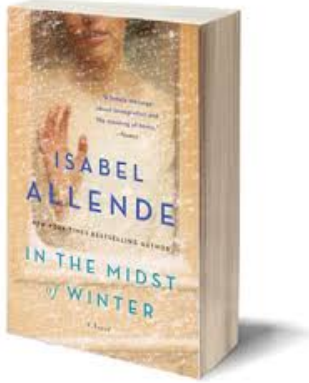


In the Midst of Winter

Discussion Questions



Author: Isabel Allende
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1. Each of the three main characters—Lucia, Evelyn, and Richard—experiences some kind of isolation in their life. The book begins with Lucia physically isolated in her apartment during a snowstorm. In what other ways is she isolated? How is her isolation different from Evelyn's? And from Richard's?

2. Evelyn comes to the United States as a refugee fleeing violence. Compare her experience entering the country with that of other immigrants you know of or have read about. Why did they leave their native countries, and what were their first experiences as immigrants? Did you find any aspects of Evelyn's journey surprising? It is said that the United States is a country of immigrants, and that immigrants made this country great. Do you agree? Why or why not? Did this book change the way you think about immigrants? If so, how?

3. Many immigrants in the United States currently work in caretaker jobs: as nannies taking care of small children, or as home health aides caring for the sick, elderly, or dying. Do you know of any immigrants in these kinds of jobs? Do they encounter any difficulties similar to Evelyn's? How do Frankie's parents treat Evelyn? Why does she seem "invisible" to Frankie's father?

4. Evelyn's relationship with Frankie is very special, and reveals a lot about her character. Why is she so successful at caring for him? In what ways does she expand his horizons? Do you know of someone who works with people who are physically, mentally, or emotionally challenged? Do they share any of Evelyn's character traits?

5. When Evelyn leaves her native village, she tells her grandmother Concepcion, "Just as I am going, Grandma, so I will return." Compare Evelyn's relationship with her grandmother to her relationship with her mother, Miriam. What positive things has each of them given to Evelyn?

6. Lucia loses her brother during the political turmoil in Chile during the early 1970s and is forced to flee the country, eventually becoming an exile in Canada. What qualities does she have that help her face her life as an exile? Do you know of anyone who is an exile? What special difficulties do they share? How do the challenges of Lucia's exile compare with Evelyn's challenges as a refugee?

7. People and animals share their lives. Compare the companionship between Richard and the four cats and between Lucia and Marcelo. How do their interactions reflect each of their personalities?

8. Richard and his wife, Anita, go through the devastating experience of losing their baby son. How do their reactions to this tragedy differ? And how do these differences ultimately determine the fate of Bibi and of their marriage?

9. Anita's family has always been very tight-knit, giving her a sense of well-being and support. How does this compare with Richard's upbringing? He comes to resent Anita's family after the tragedy. Why do you think this is so? Is he fair in resenting their efforts?

10. When Richard arrives in New York with Anita, and his friend Horacio sees the state she is in, he says to Richard, "Make sure you don't let her down, brother." In what ways does Richard end up letting Anita down? Why do you think he does? How does the fate of Anita and his children continue to shape his life long after their deaths?

11. There is often a conflict between "the letter of the law," which refers to a literal interpretation of the words, and "the spirit of the law," which refers to the intention behind the law. At the end of the book, Lucia tells Richard, "The law is cruel and justice is blind. Kathryn Brown helped us tilt the balance slightly in favor of natural justice, because we were protecting Evelyn, and now we have to do the same for Cheryl." Do you agree with Lucia's decision? Why or why not? If you were in a situation similar to Lucia's, how do you think you would handle it?

12. Each of the main characters is a stranger to the people around her/him. In what way is Evelyn a stranger to the family she works for? Lucia is of course a foreigner in New York, but even as a colleague of Richard's at NYU she remains a stranger to him, just as he is to her. Why do you think that is? In what ways do they misinterpret each other? To what extent do Evelyn, Lucia, and Richard each become less of a stranger by the end of the book?

13. Our protagonists each deal with trauma in their own way: Lucia with an open heart and taking risks; Evelyn by hiding, being silent, and trying to make herself invisible; and Richard by closing down and protecting himself. They have all experienced events that could have utterly destroyed them. Identify what these are for each character and compare how they each handled those events. In what ways did they succeed in overcoming the trauma of their past? In what ways do they still carry it with them?

14. Lucia and Richard find love at a mature age. At first, they believed they were too old to find love, before realizing that they came together at exactly the right time. Is there an age limit for certain life experiences like falling in love? How has the process and concept of aging changed today when compared to the previous generation? Consider how the timeline has shifted for younger generations with regards to traditional milestones of earning a higher degree, building a career, getting married, owning a home, and starting a family, etc.

15. "In the midst of winter, I finally found there was within me an invincible summer." Why do you think Isabel Allende chose to include this quote from Albert Camus in the book's epigraph, title, and final scene? Most of the story literally takes place during the winter. But on the symbolic level, Evelyn, Lucia, and Richard are all experiencing a winter of the spirit. What does that consist of, for each of them? And what do you think the "invincible summer" is that each one finds within?

Author Bio

- Birth: 1942; Lima, Peru
- Education: Private schools in Bolivia and Lebanon
- Currently: Lives in San Rafael, California

Isabel Allende is a Chilean writer whose works sometimes contain aspects of the "magic realist" tradition. Author of more than 20 books—essay collections, memoirs, and novels, she is perhaps best known for her novels *The House of the Spirits* (1982), *Daughter of Fortune* (1999), and *Ines of My Soul* (2006). She has been called "the world's most widely read Spanish-language author." All told her novels have been translated from Spanish into over 30 languages and have sold more than 55 million copies.

Her novels are often based upon her personal experience and pay homage to the lives of women, while weaving together elements of myth and realism. She has lectured and toured many American colleges to teach literature. Fluent in English as a second language, Allende was granted American citizenship in 2003, having lived in California with her American husband since 1989.

Early background

Allende was born Isabel Allende Llonca in Lima, Peru, the daughter of Francisca Llonca Barros and Tomas Allende, who was at the time the Chilean ambassador to Peru. Her father was a first cousin of Salvador Allende, President of Chile from 1970 to 1973, making Salvador her first cousin once removed (not her uncle as he is sometimes referred to).

In 1945, after her father had disappeared, Isabel's mother relocated with her three children to Santiago, Chile, where they lived until 1953. Allende's mother married diplomat Ramon Huidobro, and from 1953-1958 the family moved often, including to Bolivia and Beirut. In Bolivia, Allende attended a North American private school; in Beirut, she attended an English private school. The family returned to Chile in 1958, where Allende was briefly home-schooled. In her youth, she read widely, particularly the works of William Shakespeare.

From 1959 to 1965, while living in Chile, Allende finished her secondary studies. She married Miguel Frias in 1962; the couple's daughter Paula was born in 1963 and their son Nicholas in 1966. During that time Allende worked with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in Santiago, Chile, then in Brussels, Belgium, and elsewhere in Europe.

Returning to Chile in 1996, Allende translated romance novels (including those of Barbara Cartland) from English to Spanish but was fired for making unauthorized changes to the dialogue in order to make the heroines sound more intelligent. She also altered the Cinderella endings, letting the heroines find more independence.

In 1967 Allende joined the editorial staff for *Paula* magazine and in 1969 the children's magazine *Mampato*, where she later became editor. She published two children's stories, *Grandmother Panchita* and *Lauchas y Lauchones*, as well as a collection of articles, *Civilice a Su Troglodita*.

She also worked in Chilean television from 1970-1974. As a journalist, she interviewed famed Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. Neruda told Allende that she had too much imagination to be a journalist and that she should become a novelist. He also advised her to compile her satirical columns in book

form—which she did and which became her first published book. In 1973, Allende's play *El Embajador* played in Santiago, a few months before she was forced to flee the country due to the coup.

The military coup in September 1973 brought Augusto Pinochet to power and changed everything for Allende. Her mother and diplomat stepfather narrowly escaped assassination, and she herself began receiving death threats. In 1973 Allende fled to Venezuela.

Life after Chile

Allende remained in exile in Venezuela for 13 years, working as a columnist for *El Nacional*, a major newspaper. On a 1988 visit to California, she met her second husband, attorney Willie Gordon, with whom she now lives in San Rafael, California. Her son Nicolas and his children live nearby.

In 1992 Allende's daughter Paula died at the age of 28, the result of an error in medication while hospitalized for porphyria (a rarely fatal metabolic disease). To honor her daughter, Allende started the Isabel Allende Foundation in 1996. The foundation is "dedicated to supporting programs that promote and preserve the fundamental rights of women and children to be empowered and protected."

In 1994, Allende was awarded the Gabriela Mistral Order of Merit, the first woman to receive this honor.

She was granted U.S. citizenship in 2003 and inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2004. She was one of the eight flag bearers at the Opening Ceremony of the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, Italy.

In 2008 Allende received an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from San Francisco State University for her "distinguished contributions as a literary artist and humanitarian." In 2010 she received Chile's National Literature Prize.

Writing and awards

In 1981, during her exile, Allende received a phone call that her 99-year-old grandfather was near death. She sat down to write him a letter wishing to "keep him alive, at least in spirit." Her letter evolved into *The House of the Spirits*—the intent of which was to exorcise the ghosts of the Pinochet dictatorship. Although rejected by numerous Latin American publishers, the novel was finally published in Spain, running more than two dozen editions in Spanish and a score of translations. It was an immense success.

Allende has since become known for her vivid storytelling. As a writer, she holds to a methodical literary routine, working Monday through Saturday, 9:00 A.M. to 7:00 P.M. "I always start on 8 January," Allende once said, a tradition that began with the letter to her dying grandfather.

Her 1995 book *Paula* recalls Allende's own childhood in Santiago, Chile, and the following years she spent in exile. It is written as an anguished letter to her daughter. The memoir is as much a celebration of Allende's turbulent life as it is the chronicle of Paula's death.

Her 2008 memoir *The Sum of Our Days* centers on her recent life with her immediate family—her son, second husband, and grandchildren. *The Island Beneath the Sea*, set in New Orleans, was published in 2010. *Maya's Notebook*, a novel alternating between Berkeley, California, and Chiloe, an island in Chile, was published in 2011 (2013 in the U.S.). Three movies have been based on her novels—*Aphrodite*, *Eva Luna*, and *Gift for a Sweetheart*. Awards for Allende's works include the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, 1998; Sara Lee Foundation Award, 1998; and the WILLA Literary Award, 2000. (Adapted from Wikipedia. Retrieved 5/23/2013)