

Critical Insights: Isabel Allende
The House of the Spirits:
A Twentieth-Century Family Chronicle

By *Charles Rossman*

Isabel Allende has described the genesis of her first novel: "On January 8, 1981, I was living in Venezuela and I received a phone call that my beloved grandfather was dying. I began a letter for him that later became . . . *The House of the Spirits*" ("Questions and Answers"). Allende's letter-cum-novel was published in Barcelona just a year and a half later and quickly became a literary sensation in the Spanish-speaking world. German, French, and Italian editions appeared in 1984, and an English translation followed in 1985. All four were best sellers and Isabel Allende suddenly found herself, in her early forties, the most famous female Latin American writer of the late twentieth century. To grasp the import of her sudden fame and her novel's astonishing popularity requires some historical background.

The "Boom" and Beyond

During 1962 and 1963, twenty years before the publication of *The House of the Spirits*, four Latin American male writers published a novel each.¹ So began a period of exceptional fertility and commercial success in the Latin American novel. That period reached its peak in 1967 with the publication of García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a hugely admired and influential work that paved García Márquez's way to the Nobel Prize.²

This "Boom" in Latin American fiction, as the movement soon became known, brought unprecedented international publicity to its major writers. Before the Boom, Latin American literature had remained, from the perspective of North American and European readers and critics, largely a regional matter. Suddenly, new books by García Márquez and Vargas Llosa were reviewed in the *New York Times* or the *Times* of London or *Le Monde*. Fiction by the Boom writers was quickly translated and heavily promoted by North American and European publishers, and the writers themselves won international prizes and were offered visiting professorships at distinguished universities. It was an exhilarating time, a marvelous flowering of genuine literary genius. But the Boom remained almost exclusively a male affair; tellingly, all five of the most frequently cited Boom writers are men.³

Isabel Allende published *The House of the Spirits* fifteen years after the major impact of the Boom, whose writers cleared a path for her in at least three specific ways. First, the Boom writers provoked unprecedented international curiosity about Latin American literature and its authors. Second, they created a huge market for Latin American fiction. And, finally, the very success of Allende's male predecessors drew attention to an increasingly obvious literary absence, the voice of a Latin American *female* novelist.

The fiction of the Boom, albeit undeniably engrossing, is unequivocally male centered. It is typically narrated from a male perspective and predominantly concerned with the fulfillment or frustration of the loves, goals, and struggles of male protagonists. Notable examples are Cortázar's postadolescent victims of angst in Paris and Buenos Aires in *Rayuela*; Vargas Llosa's adolescent cadets in *The Time of the Hero*; Fuentes's massively egocentric and

corrupt business tycoon and womanizer, Artemio, in *The Death of Artemio Cruz*; and García Márquez's dazzling array of Buendía men, distributed over several generations in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In this fictive context of unrelenting *machismo* and the mainly subordinate women who enable their men's follies, Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* offered readers the rare novelistic experience of four generations of self-actualizing women--Nivea, Clara, Blanca, and, finally, Alba, who at the book's end is about to give birth to a child that she presumes will be a daughter. Allende herself has described the essential qualities of her protagonists: "All the women in my book are feminists in their fashion; that is, they ask to be free and complete human beings, to be able to fulfill themselves, not to be dependent on men" (Rodden 41).

Despite the widespread celebrity of *The House of the Spirits*, the many similarities and parallels between Allende's novel and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* troubled some critics. For instance, Gene Bell-Villada commented that "in prose and format [Allende's novel] was mostly imitation García Márquez" (23). In Allende's defense, other critics rightly pointed out that, because it is mostly narrated from the perspective of strong, triumphant women, and stresses the misogynistic and brutally tyrannical nature of Esteban Trueba, the book's male protagonist, *The House of the Spirits* can be interpreted as a counternarrative to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Properly understood, these critics argue, Allende's novel is a *critique*, not an imitation, of García Márquez's work. Indeed, the feminist perspective adds a crucial *corrective* to the ideologically reductive representations of dominant men and subordinate women that characterize most Boom fiction, not just García Márquez's.

Two other charges unsympathetic critics brought against Allende were that she derived the narrative device of the "family chronicle" from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, as well as the technique now known as magical realism. But, in fact, both criticisms ignore literary history. Well before García Márquez appeared on the scene, the so-called family chronicle--a depiction of two or more generations that explores both the characters' interpersonal conflicts and their complex interaction with historical events--was a common novelistic means for simultaneously dramatizing the evolution of characters and of their culture. Similarly, magical realism--which is basically the interweaving of realism, or verisimilitude, with fantasy, and treating both the empirically "real" and the fantastical as equally valid objective experiences--had a long history in both theory and practice before García Márquez made the technique a familiar aspect of Boom fiction.⁴

In any case, the mid-1980s dispute over Allende's indebtedness to García Márquez has been rendered moot by her long and distinguished writing career. The novice whose first novel drew heavily from her influential predecessor has manifestly established her own confident and compelling voice.

What follows is an analytical close reading of *The House of the Spirits*, which may ultimately prove to be Allende's most influential and enduring work of fiction. We begin with some basic facts about the novel's setting, characterization, and point of view, before turning to more comprehensive matters of plot, structure, and meaning.