

BOOK CLUB To Go!

Paula

By Isabel Allende

Introduction

Paula is a soul-baring memoir, which like a novel of suspense, one reads without drawing a breath. The point of departure for these moving pages is a tragic personal experience. In December 1991, Isabel Allende's daughter, Paula, became gravely ill and shortly thereafter fell into a coma. During months in the hospital, the author began to write the story of her family for her unconscious daughter. In the telling, bizarre ancestors appear before our eyes; we hear both delightful and bitter childhood memories, amazing anecdotes of youthful years, the most intimate secrets passed along in whispers. Chile, Allende's native land, comes alive as well, with the turbulent history of the military coup of 1973, the ensuing dictatorship, and her family's years of exile.

As an exorcism of death, in these pages Isabel Allende explores the past and questions the gods. The result is a magical book that carries the reader from tears to laughter, from terror to sensuality and wisdom. The glorious characters of Allende's fiction - clairvoyants, revolutionaries, and most of all, the questing woman who makes her way through storytelling – populate this autobiography, perhaps Allende's finest work, and certainly her most revealing. In *Paula* we understand that the miraculous world of *The House of the Spirits* and *Eva Luna* is the world Isabel Allende inhabits – it is her enchanted reality.

(isabelallende.com)

About the Author

Born in Peru and raised in Chile, Isabel Allende is the author of eight novels, including, most recently, *Zorro*, *Portrait in Sepia*, and *Daughter of Fortune*. She has also written a collection of stories; three memoirs, including *My Invented Country* and *Paula*; and a trilogy of children's novels. Her books have been translated into more than twenty-seven languages and have become bestsellers across four continents. In 2004 she was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Isabel Allende lives in California.

(harpercollins.com)

Reviews

“In her first nonfiction work, Allende produces a beautiful and deeply personal account of the process of grieving and the power of stories.” – *Kirkus Reviews*

“Allende is a mesmerizing novelist (*The House of the Spirits*; *The Stories of Eva Luna*) who here takes on a double challenge. Writing nonfiction for the first time, she interweaves the story of her own life with the slow dying of her 28-year-old daughter, Paula. A magician with words, Allende makes this grim scenario into a wondrous encounter with the innermost sorrows and joys of another human being.” – *Publishers Weekly*

Further Reading

Angela's Ashes: A Memoir by Frank McCourt

Black Boy by Richard Wright

Love in the Time of Cholera by García Márquez

(*bookrags.com* and *novelistplus*)

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. Isabel speaks lovingly about all of her eccentric relatives and has special relationships with each one. What influence did each relative have on the author? How did each help to shape the author's life: Tata? Memé? Tió Ramon? Tió Pablo? Her mother? Granny? Mama Hilda? Paula?
2. As a child, Isabel was molested by a fisherman near her beach house in Chile. The author says she was scarred by the experience but no longer feels repugnance to it (page 109). She feels something closer to tenderness for the fisherman for not raping her. Why is she so forgiving?
3. Do you feel Tata had a role in the fisherman's death, or was his murder a bizarre coincidence, as are most episodes in the author's life?
4. Tata asks Isabel to help him die with dignity, but she is unable to fulfill her grandfather's wishes. Years later, long after Paula slipped into the coma, Isabel also feels she should be able to help end her daughter's suffering, but cannot. She mentions the sleeping pills hidden away and says she may use them, but her brother Juan tells her not to because she'd be forever burdened by the guilt. Do you feel Paula finally succumbed to her illness, or did Isabel or Nicolás help end Paula's suffering? Did Paula linger so long because Isabel was unwilling to let her go?
5. Magara was a strict and callous caretaker who helped raise Isabel and her brothers. Isabel says that Magara hated her, but there does not seem to be any dramatic moment in the book that punctuates that sentiment. How did Magara make Isabel feel this way?
6. Love is bountiful in Isabel's life, and in the lives of her family members. A mother's love plays a particularly prominent role in her story. How did maternal love help shield Isabel and her children from the pain and violence that permeated their lives?

7. Early in the book, the author writes to her daughter, "Listen, Paula. I am going to tell you a story, so that when you wake up you will not feel so lost." Does Isabel really write with the hope that she will share this story with Paula when she awakens, or does the task of writing help Isabel come to terms with her daughter's terminal illness?
8. Are the spirits in Isabel's life real, figurative, or a mix of the two? Do you feel that she believes the spirits dictate her stories to her, or by opening her mind to her spirits is she letting go of all barriers between her and her imagination?
9. Isabel Allende's work has been described as sentimental. But in writing her memoir for Paula, Isabel had to respect Paula's strong aversion to sentimentality. Did she succeed?
10. Paula's adult life is spent in search of God, while Isabel is agnostic. Does Isabel ultimately embrace God in Paula's final moments?

(harpercollins.com)