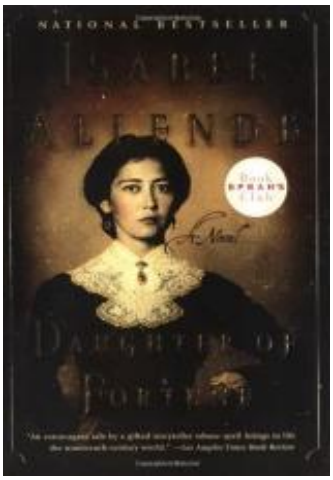
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Daughter of Fortune

by Isabel Allende



About the Book

Can we control our own destinies? What does it take to change the course of our lives so that we may pursue our dreams? And how do we know that our decisions are the right ones, especially if we hurt others or ourselves in the process? These are the questions posed by Isabel Allende's fascinating story of bravery and passion, of a young woman's incredible journey from one world to another, from innocence to wisdom. Born into a 19th-century society that values birthright above character, Eliza Sommers is at a startling disadvantage. An orphan of unknown heritage, Eliza is raised in the British colony of Valparaíso, Chile, by the Victorian spinster Rose Sommers and her brother Jeremy. She is not even sure how she arrived at the Sommers household-only that she is lucky enough to be cared for, educated, and even loved by her adopted family. So when Eliza exhibits the signs of a first love, the women in her life come to her "rescue," certain that this adolescent passion will lead to trouble. But Eliza's feelings for Joaquín, a young, penniless revolutionary, are all-consuming. Meanwhile, in America, gold has been discovered in the hills of northern California, and by 1849, everyone is swept up in the promise of the Gold Rush. When Joaquín leaves Eliza in hopes of striking it rich in California, she is determined to follow him there, risking every comfort and certainty she has ever known.

Allende's portrait of California illustrates the chaos and excitement of the Gold Rush-the promise of wealth, and of a new world. Like Valparaíso, San Francisco is a major port into which foreigners stream daily. But Eliza is a stranger in California. Cloaking her identity-and her sex-she must carve out a new life for herself by whatever means possible. Like thousands of other newcomers, and like her Chinese friend Tao Chi'en, she is thrust into a melting pot of unfamiliar languages and customs. But Eliza and Tao Chi'en quickly learn the value of assimilation, gradually discarding their own suspicions and prejudices. Eliza's love for Joaquín leads her to California, but the majesty of the land, the opportunities it holds, and the chance to reinvent herself as a woman in control of her own life are forces that eventually usurp her youthful infatuation. Spirited and sensual, willful and determined, Eliza is a modern woman living in a world that is just learning to be modern. Her courageous story compels us to look beyond the boundaries imposed on us by others and by ourselves. And it teaches us that by opening our minds-and our hearts-we are opening ourselves up to golden opportunities for love, happiness and good fortune.

Discussion Guide

1. Eliza thinks that the facts of her birth don't matter: "It is what you do in this world that matters, not how you come into it," she claims. Tao Ch'ien, on the other hand, cannot imagine "his own life apart from the long chain of his ancestors, who not only had given him his physical and mental characteristics but bequeathed him his karma. His fate, he believed, had been determined by the acts of his family before him." How do these different beliefs determine the way Tao Chi'en and Eliza make decisions about their lives? What are your own feelings about ancestry and self-determination?

2. Eliza grows up under the influence of a number of strong individuals--Mama Fresia, Rose, Jeremy Sommers and his brother, John. What does she learn from each of people? How do their differing philosophies contribute to Eliza's experience of the world? How do they shape her personality?

3. In 19th century Chile, a married woman could not travel, sign legal documents, go to court, sell or buy anything without her husband's permission. No wonder Rose doesn't want to get married! How would the lives of the women you know be different under those conditions? What are the consequences in a society that limits the freedoms of a segments of its citizens?

4. What do you think Allende means by referring to Eliza as a "daughter of fortune?" How are the different definitions of the word "fortune" significant in Eliza's story and the novel as a whole?

5. How is Tao Chi'en a "son" of fortune? What are the crucial turning points in his life, and where do they lead him? To what extent is he responsible for his own good and bad fortunes?

6. "At first the Chinese looked on the foreigners with scorn and disgust, with the great superiority of those who feel they are the only truly civilized beings in the universe, but in the space of a few years they learned to respect and fear them." writes Allende about the arrival of Western peoples into Hong Kong. How is this pattern of suspicion, fear, and resigned acceptance repeated throughout the novel? How does Allende illustrate the confusion of clashing cultures in Valparaiso, on board Eliza's ship, and in California? Do you think people of today are more tolerant of other cultures than they were 150 years ago?

7. While Eliza is vulnerable in California because of her sex, Tao Chi'en's prospects are limited because of his race. How

do both characters overcome their "handicaps?" What qualities help them make their way in a culture that is foreign and often unwelcoming?

8. What do details such as Mama Fresia's home remedies and her attempts to "cure" Eliza of her love for Joaquín, or Tao Chi'en's medical education and his habit of contacting his dead wife say about the role of the spiritual in the everyday life? Must the spiritual and the secular remain separate? What about the spiritual and scientific worlds?

9. How have the novel's characters-Rose or Jacob Todd, for instance-managed to create opportunities out of the obstacles they've faced? What do you think Allende is saying about the role that fate plays in our lives, and about our capacity to take control over our own destinies? How are we all sons or daughters of fortune?

Author Bio

Isabel Allende, born in Peru and raised in Chile, is a novelist, feminist and philanthropist. She is one of the most widely read authors in the world, having sold more than 80 million copies of her books across 42 languages. She is the author of several bestselling and critically acclaimed books, including MY NAME IS EMILIA DEL VALLE, THE WIND KNOWS MY NAME, VIOLETA, A LONG PETAL OF THE SEA, THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS, OF LOVE AND SHADOWS, EVA LUNA and PAULA.

In addition to her work as a writer, Isabel devotes much of her time to human rights causes. She has received 15 honorary doctorates, been inducted into the California Hall of Fame, and received the PEN Center Lifetime Achievement Award and the Anisfield-Wolf Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2014, President Barack Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation?s highest civilian honor, and in 2018, she received the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters from the National Book Foundation. She lives in California with her husband and dogs.

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