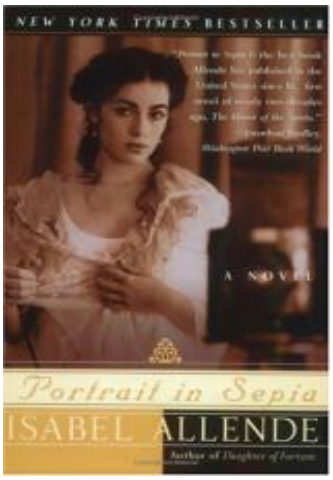
Portrait in Sepia

by Isabel Allende



About the Book

Internationally celebrated novelist Isabel Allende has written a magnificent historical novel set at the end of the nineteenth century in Chile, a marvelous family saga that takes up and continues the story begun in her highly acclaimed **Daughter of Fortune**.

Recounted in the voice of a young woman in search of her roots, **Portrait in Sepia** is a novel about memory and family secrets. Aurora del Valle suffers a brutal trauma that shapes her character and erases from her mind all recollection of the first five years of her life. Raised by her ambitious grandmother, the regal and commanding Paulina del Valle, she grows up in a privileged environment, free of the limitations that circumscribe the lives of women at that time, but tormented by horrible nightmares. When she is forced to recognize her betrayal at the hands of the man she loves, and to cope with the resulting solitude, she decides to explore the mystery of her past.

Portrait in Sepia is an extraordinary achievement: richly detailed, epic in scope, intimate in its probing of human character, and thrilling in the way it illuminates the complexity of family ties.

Discussion Guide

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?

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.

Critical Praise

"Rich and complex ... Allende exercises her supreme storytelling abilities ... a grand installment in an already impressive repertoire."

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