



Isabel Allende x Alicia Menendez LIVE at the 92Y

On June 6, 2023, the iconic author and advocate joined our host on stage before a live audience at NYC's 92Y. Their conversation touched on everything from her new novel, *The Wind Knows My Name*, to her experiences of love and loss, and her reflections on love and sex in her eighties.

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- Alicia Menendez: This spring, I had the chance to share the stage before a live audience with the incomparable Isabel Allende at New York's 92Y. We spoke about her new book, *The Wind Knows My Name*, migration, grief and Loss, and her reflections on love and sex in her 80s. Here's the conversation.
- Isabel Allende: Thank you for that. Welcome. Thank you. My husband is here. Did you hear that Roger? Pay attention.
- Menendez: Can you take me back to the play you saw, *Kinder Transport*, that is the genesis of what would become *The Wind Knows My Name*?
- Allende: Many years ago here in New York, I saw a play, I think it was called *Kinder Transport*, and it was based on this story, the story of those children that the parents had to send away. The novel begins in 1938 in Austria. The Jewish families were so terrified of the Nazis at that point who were taken over the country and England accepted 10,000 kids who were to travel alone without the families. And 10,000 families sent their kids alone to a foreign country without knowing who would receive them. And so when in 2018, 2019, we saw in the press the horrible situation of the families being separated at the border as a government policy to deter people from coming to the United States, it reminded me of the play, and I'm a mother and a grandmother. Would I do that? Would I send my child alone? What would happen if I was separated from my kid? It would be just devastating. So putting the two stories together with 80 years in between was like the natural way of organizing the novel.
- Menendez: And you acknowledged that even those two incidents are not the only time in history that this has happened..
- Allende: Oh no, not at all. Because think of the times of slavery when they could take away the child from a mother's arm and sell it away to somebody else or their Indigenous children that were separated from their families and placed in horrible Christian boarding schools to civilize them. Or the mothers in Ireland that were taking the babies away and given to adoption because they were single mothers. It has happened and it keeps happening. That is what's so terrible.
- Menendez: This is not your story of immigration, and yet it is undeniably informed by your own experience. Take me back to 1973 and the moment when you realize it's time to go.
- Allende: Well, it wasn't so clear. I knew that I had to get out, but I never thought it would be for long. I thought I had to get out because I was threatened and I thought, well, maybe in a few

weeks I can come back. And then I realized that was in a blacklist and my husband said, "No, you can't come back." And eventually he came with my children and we reunited in Venezuela, never thinking that we would spend such a long time. I lived in Venezuela 13 years, my son, 16. And the average time that a refugee spends away from home is between 17 and 25 years. And this is a statistic, and that is if they go back, most refugees leave with the keys of their home in their pockets with the idea that they will come back and open the door and find everything as they left it. And if they go back, nothing is the same. It's another country, another generation. There's no place for them.

Menendez: And yet you would not be Isabella Allende, the author we know and love, had it not been for exile?

Allende: I know that I became a writer out of longing. The House of the Spirits was an exercising memory, trying to remember and recover the losses, the country, the family, the home, the language, everything that I had left behind. And that is The House of the Spirits. There is a quote by one of the characters of Bertol Brecht in one of his plays. And the character says, "I am the man who goes around with the brick to show the world how his house was." And The House of the Spirits is my brick. So I carried around and that's everything that I had is there intact forever. I wouldn't be a writer really without that experience, but I was a very privileged refugee. I can't complain. Venezuela was a wonderful country, open, generous, joyful, that received thousand, millions of immigrants from all over the world. And there was space for everybody. And there was whiskey and champagne and dancing and tequeños and oh God, it was fantastic.

Menendez: I want to read you two parts of the book that I loved and I underlined. This is from Samuel first and he says, of Anita, who's the other character this intersects with. "He wondered if he had consciously erased his first five years or if he was just too young to remember them. Anita was older than he had been when he was separated from his family. She would forget nothing." And then this, "This kind of travesty isn't something you get over, you simply learn to live with it." When in your own life, has that been true?

Allende: When my daughter died. When my daughter died, well, I think that any mother feels that you want to die with her, you want to go with her. And then writing a book about it helped me because it helped me to organize everything. And you learn to live with it and it never goes away. The pain is under the skin forever and it's fine. You live with it and the pain becomes a sweet pain. It's like tenderness that it sort of hurts and at the same time you don't want to let go of it. And writing the book allowed me to understand, accept what had happened and live with it. I don't think I would've been able to do it without that. And I get messages every week.

This happened 30 years ago. I get messages every week from people who have a great loss. Maybe it's not a child, but some other losses, we all have losses. And they ask me for advice and I cannot give advice because everybody wants in a different way. But the only advice that I can give is get out of yourself. Because grief closes us. We become tight inside. The grief stays there like a rock. And if we're able to open up and share it and get other people involved, it's much easier. You can live with it.

Menendez: There's also a practice, I know that you practice, that you infuse into the windows my name, which is this idea of talking to the person that you have lost of continuing. Your morning routine, you wake up and you lie in bed and you have questions for those you have lost and you continue to ask them.

Allende: Well, I don't see ghosts and I am not very superstitious, not more than any of you, but I have surrounded myself with the spirits of the people and their animals also, especially the animals that I have loved. And they are no longer here. So I have their pictures. And every morning I wake up really early and first thing, gratitude because I have two dogs in my bed and a husband snoring over there and I'm not alone. And so that is fantastic. And in that order, the dogs and... So first is gratitude, and then makeup. I get up and I put on my makeup. So where I have my makeup is I have the photographs of my mom and Paula, both of them dressed in their bridal gowns. My mother was never really a bride because she could never marry my stepfather because in Chile there was no divorce. So my mother had this thing that she was the mistress and they lived together 65 years. And I said, "Mother, mistress is someone young and sexy. You are not a mistress. You have been with him 65 years. Give me a break." And then my mother would say, "Yeah, because I am the mistress." So once we were going to Sonoma for a wine tasting and my mother came again with this thing about the mistress, and I said, "Who do you want? You want to get married with a white gown?" "Yes," she said. Okay, I turned around and I drove to San Francisco to a bridal shop. My mother was 80, and so they dressed my mother like a bride with a crown, with a veil, with flowers. And we took a picture and my mother had it all framed in a silver frame in the living room just to bug my stepfather. So I have those two pictures there and I say good morning to them, and I say goodnight to them when I take off my makeup.

Menendez: You say you are proud of being 80. Tell me what it is about being 80 that you are proud of.

Allende: Well, first of all that I'm not dead. The alternative is not good, yeah. So having been able to reach this age is something to be proud of. And then I am happier. The only time in my life that I have been as happy as now is when my two babies were born. The joy of holding my newborn babies is something that I have never forgotten. I have never forgotten the pain of giving birth either. So now I have that same joy that I had then when they were little, then they grew up and then I don't like them very much. But when they were little, they were charming. And now I have that for the first time in my life, a feeling that I am comfortable in my skin, that I am happy with the person I am, that I am grateful for everything I have. And I don't want anything. I don't need anything. I don't want anything. I keep giving everything away and getting rid of stuff. It's not that I'm preparing for the coffin, but it doesn't make sense to accumulate stuff. Letting go, letting go of grudges, of bad memories, of toxic people, of stuff that I don't want to do, of uncomfortable shoes, go, of jewelry that you have to take care of. Oh God, let go.

Menendez: And you don't have to concern yourself with pleasing anyone else.

Allende: Well, I try to please Roger and the dogs.

Menendez: I just want to get there faster. I think there are a lot of us who want to get to the point where what we are seeking is not validation from the world. So how do I do that before 80?

Allende: It's very hard for young women. It's very hard for women in general. We are brought up in a culture where we are supposed to please and to comply and compromise and say yes. So when you reach my age, you don't give a shit about any. So...

Menendez: Did that happen at 80 or did that happen... I mean, it feels as though that has to be a process.

Allende: Well, of course everything is a process. People say, well, when you are old, you are wise. If you have been a jerk all your life, why could you be wise when you get old? You'll be a

most horrible jerk. So you have to prepare for everything in life, and you have to prepare for an old age. And so the process of letting go and accepting oneself and being comfortable with oneself doesn't happen in one day. You build up to that moment slowly but surely. But I think that one moment for me that was crucial, that changed me completely was my daughter's death. I turned 50 that year. I suppose that 50 like a moment in a woman's life in which she evaluates a lot of stuff. I couldn't because I was caring for Paula. But after that, and I don't know if it's because of age or it was because of what had happened, everything started to change. The process started really then, and it's been a long journey, but a happy one.

Menendez: I have two more questions for you before we start taking questions from the audience to not have published your first novel until you were 40. You used to hear, "They did this at 40." And when I was 20, I was like, wow, that person was almost dead. And then they did something. And now that I'm going to be 40 this summer, I feel very differently about that. What would you say to someone my age who feels as though they have not yet begun?

Allende: Well, I began late to be a writer, but before I had done other things, we think that we need to do something important. We don't need to do anything. We just need to be. And all those years that we think that we are preparing for something, why? You don't have to prepare for it, just live one day at a time and enjoy the day. I have learned that very late in my life, and I wish I had known that before. I would've enjoyed my life more, way more.

Menendez: Isabel, if you were stranded on the desert island, who would you want to be with?

Allende: Antonio Banderas. No, no. Roger, Roger, Roger.

Menendez: Isabel, knowing what you know now, what, besides a pair of keys, would you have taken with you back in 1973?

Allende: In 1973, I took some soil from our garden with the idea that I would plant something somewhere. And I did, I suppose in Venezuela. But that's the kind of sentimental thing that... I don't know. It's not even worth trying to keep anything. It's just you leave everything behind and there's no way, that you can carry the keys, you can carry soil, but the truth is that you've lost everything.

Menendez: What did I miss?

Allende: Nothing in particular, but I think that we didn't talk about love, for example.

Menendez: We'll talk about-

Allende: Or sex, we didn't.

Menendez: And you write. I mean, who else could manage to weave a love story and sex scenes into a book about child separation? Because it's all happening all at once.

Allende: Well, that's a lot of research.

Menendez: What has surprised you most about love and sex in your eighties?

Allende: That I could fall in love again because I separated from Willie when I was 74, and everybody said, "Are you crazy? After investing 28 years with this guy, why are you divorcing now?" But of course, at that age, and I wasn't expecting anybody else, so I sold... I mean, I gave away everything, I had sold the house and moved to a very small house to live with my dog, but life as surprises. And so Roger appeared in the horizon. He was like a stalker.

And he heard me on NPR and started emailing every morning and every evening for five months until we finally met. So the thing about falling in love late in life is that it's the same as falling in love when you are young, but with a sense of urgency. There's not a day to lose. So there's no time for little petty stuff, for jealousy, for little fights, for intolerance, for

impatience, for all the stuff that I carry with me that I'm trying to control. And there's no time for any of that because the day is accounted. And now I should talk about sex because you are all asking the question, do you have sex at 80? Well, yes, but I need blueberries for that. These blueberries have marijuana.

Menendez: And chocolate, no?

Allende: I highly recommend them.

Menendez: I can't let us end on marijuana. So I'm going to ask one more question and then I'll remind you, your books are available in the back. How do you reconcile everything you have lost, your country, your child with this beautiful, successful one in a million life that you have had?

Allende: I'm grateful because my life has had a lot of losses and a lot of love. It's been like a rollercoaster. What I have learned is to be open to every experience and not be afraid of risk. Just what's the worst that can happen, for God's sake? Just let it go and be open to whatever can happen. If you don't take the risk, nothing happens. So that I have learned. When you ask about reconciling, sometimes you don't have the choice. And when you have the choice, I always go for the risk because I don't want a flat life.

Menendez: And that is a perfect note to end on. Ladies and gentlemen, Isabel Allende.

Allende: Thank you so much. Thank you.

Menendez: Our gratitude to the 92Y for allowing us to share this conversation. You can check out the full conversation on their website, 92y.org, and thank you to those of you who showed up in person. I love seeing your faces in the audience. If you're interested in future Latina to Latina events, be sure to check out the link in our show notes. You can share your email and we'll let you know when we plan to be in your city. Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightb mix this episode. We love hearing from you, email us at Hola@LatinatoLatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram, or tweet us @latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcast, Google podcast, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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