



Why Living Icon Isabel Allende Has Never Kept Secrets

She believes the secrets you keep make you vulnerable. And she is sharing plenty of them in her new book, *The Soul of a Woman*. Isabel joins Alicia from her cozy writing room in her attic for an intimate chat that touches on infidelity, maternal grief, and the process of becoming "a woman on her own terms."

Alicia Menendez:

When I was a teen, I read *The House of the Spirits* and it turned my world upside down. I was mesmerized by the women that jumped off the page and by Isabel Allende, the brilliant writer who'd brought them to life. Isabel's books have been translated into more than 42 languages and have sold more than 74 million copies worldwide, and now she's out with her 25th book, *The Soul of a Woman*. It's part memoir, part meditation on feminism. The whole book feels like an act of generosity and that spirit carries through in my conversation with this incomparable icon.

You have a tradition. January 8th you sit down, you begin writing. Were you able to do that even this year in the midst of a pandemic?

Isabel Allende: I did it last year and this year too. The pandemic has been good for me, because it forces me to sit here in the attic where I work and just be here. I'm used to having a lot of time alone in silence. That's something that I need for my work, so it has not been so hard. Plus, I am living in a sort of extended honeymoon because I got married right before the pandemic and now we are locked in here with my husband. There's nowhere to escape.

Menendez: I was about to say that this is when a lot of relationships are gonna be tested.

Allende: Well, ours has been tested, and I think we are surviving pretty well. We are learning patience and I needed to learn patience much more than him, actually.

Menendez: Even in your seventies?

Allende: He's a patient man. Yeah.

Menendez: Still learning patience. I love that when I imagined your attic, this is the most elegant attic I have ever seen.

Allende: You want to take a look? Okay, so nothing matches here. Look.

Menendez: It's so bright.

Allende: It's bright, and white, and I try to keep it clean, because it's really small. So, I have to be very, very well organized. When I start a new book, I take out everything that is related to the previous work that I have been doing, so that the whole room is prepared just for the book. With the dictionaries, the research, everything I need, and nothing else. Only the

research that is necessary for that particular book, but otherwise it's always the same photographs, the same candles, or new candles, but in the same pots, and the books.

Menendez: You write that your mother's situation, abandoned in Peru with two toddlers in diapers and a newborn baby-

Allende: Three toddlers.

Menendez: Three toddlers in diapers.

Allende: A newborn baby and two toddlers. That's right. Yeah.

Menendez: ... is what triggered "your rebellion against male authority." First, tell me about your mom. What was your mom like?

Allende: My mom, first of all, was gorgeous. She was a gorgeous woman. She had been the debutante of the year and she was not prepared to work. She belonged to a generation and a social class in which young women were supposed to be somebody's mother and somebody's wife. And she married the wrong man against her parents' wish and it was a disaster. She had... She was married for four years, and had three kids, and then she returned to live in her parents' house, because she couldn't support herself and the kids. And she became a charity case in her father's house.

Seeing my mother so vulnerable, without resources of any kind, not only no money. Of course, she had a roof over her head and schooling for the children and all that, but she didn't have any cash, any allowance, any money for herself. She was always watched, because she had separated from her husband in a Catholic society where people didn't do that. You could put up with anything, or all kinds of abuse, but you didn't separate. There was no divorce in Chile until 2004. So, the only thing that my mother could do was to annul the marriage. And that was some legal scheme that you could do if both partners agreed, and my father agreed to the annulment on the condition that he would never have to take care of his children. And he took it to the extent that he never saw them again.

So, I never saw my father and I never hear anything from him until much, much later in my life.

Menendez: That's extremely hurtful to hear even secondhand.

Allende: You know what? It sounds worse than it was because I never missed him. It was like this big hole, this mystery, the father. And we never talked about him because my mother would get a migraine and it was her sort of taboo subject. But in a way, I had my grandfather, and because he was such a huge absence, he was never missed. I never fantasized that my father would be a great man that would come to rescue us at some point. On the contrary, we had a nanny who was a terrible person, and she would scare us saying that my father could come and take us. And that was like the boogeyman, you know?

Menendez: Do you think that is part of what liberated you to have so many female protagonists in the foreground of your work?

Allende: In my books, I have strong female protagonists. Lots of women in my books. And fathers are always absent, either because they are dead, or because they have gone away, or because they are so authoritarian that there's no emotional connection. And I suppose that

comes from, of course, from my father. From the absence of my father. But I write about women because I know them so well. I have been working with women and for women all my life. And surrounded by strong, extraordinary women. The people who have really helped me in life, who have pushed me forward, have all been women. The only three men I can mention is my grandfather, my stepfather, who became my best friend, and my son, who is the pillar of my life. But even the husbands have been great to have husbands, but they have not helped me in my journey. They have been companions to a certain extent.

Menendez: You know, I think it is easy to underestimate the primacy of the relationships we have with other women.

Allende: You know, the culture wants to present women as rivals, and that we will do anything to get a man, even sleep with our best friend's or our sister's boyfriend or something. That might happen once in a while and it's a good novel, but in real life, women have solidarity. Women help each other. I would have not been able to do anything in my life without first of all, the housekeepers that help me with my children, that I could get out there and have three jobs out there, because these saintly women were at home taking care of my children instead of taking care of their children. That to begin with. Then, my mother-in-law, who lived next door when my children were little. An adopted grandmother that lived with us. And then, later in my life, of course the journalist that taught me the craft of writing. My agent, Carmen Balcells, who believed in my book. Those are the women.

And today, that I have a foundation, who inspires my books? The women, the grantees of the foundation. These vulnerable, at-risk women who have gone through hell. Some of them have lost everything, including their children, and they get back on their feet, and they fight back, and they are able not only to help others with compassion and generosity, but to have some kind of joy. They can cook, and sing, and dance sometimes. So, those women inspire me constantly.

Menendez: You write about the period in your life between which you realized that you don't want your life to be on the same trajectory as your mother's and the period where you find some of those women you were just talking about. You describe your younger self as a woman on your own terms, no models to emulate until later, when you started working as a journalist. What then did you learn from those women as you watched them?

Allende: We were all more or less the same age. Let's say they were a couple of years older. We were not even 30 years old. I was 26.

Menendez: Oh my God.

Allende: They were really young. But you know, at that time, people started young in life. I married at 20 and immediately got pregnant, so that's the way it was. This eternal adolescence that we see today, that didn't exist. There was no time and no resources for that. These women, we were all journalists. They had gone through the school of journalism in Chile, but because the school of journalism was very new, some people who worked in the profession were allowed to have a license as journalism. That was my case. But I knew nothing. My schooling had been very irregular, because I followed my stepfather's career as a diplomat in different countries. I wrote Spanish with terrible spelling mistakes. I knew very little about grammar. But I had curiosity and I think that what saved me was a sense of humor, because that made my feminism a little different.

And so, we started this magazine, and in six years that the magazine existed in Chile, changed the culture. To the point that today, 40, 50 years later, when people look back at the history of the country, this is a moment, when the magazine was out, in which the feminist movement arrived in Chile, the pill came, which was-

Menendez: Huge.

Allende: That changed everything. The pill. When you could have control over your fertility. When women went out to the workforce. And we were publishing about subjects that had never been treated before publicly in Chile. Abortion, prostitution, infidelity, venereal diseases, exploitation, domestic violence. All that, that were taboos, people never talked about it. We were publishing.

So, it really made a huge impact. Created a lot of enemies for us, but a lot of allies too, you know?

Menendez: You know you're doing something right when you're creating a lot of enemies.

Allende: Absolutely. Yeah.

Menendez: For all of this rebellion against male authority, though, you still become a wife and a mother.

Allende: Yeah, and also a sort of geisha wife, you know? That I would wait for my husband with a martini and take out his clothes at night, so in the morning he would just pick them up from a rack and put them on. All that shit that I did, for God's sake. And plus, I was a devoted mother, and daughter, and granddaughter. I did all that because I had a lot of energy. A lot of... I was very hyper and so I could do all that and more.

Menendez: And at the same time, you write, "I didn't want to admit that I was dying of boredom. My brain was turning into noodle soup."

Allende: Yes. I'm not domestic at all, but I didn't know it yet. And it would have been so shameful to admit it at the time, but there was a point when I had to say, "Yes, I am vain, I am hyper, and I'm not domestic, and I am not particularly faithful."

Menendez: Tell me about that last part.

Allende: Well, I have been faithful in the last 40 years of my life out of necessity, because nobody wants me, but when I was in between 35 and 45, I slept with a few men.

Menendez: A few.

Allende: I should have written their names down. I tend to forget. You know, that's the worst part about aging. You forget the past.

Menendez: Some of those things, though, I think are meant to be forgotten.

Allende: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, if there are no consequences, you can forget. But sometimes there are consequences, you know? You have to be aware of that.

Menendez: We'll come back to those consequences. In 1973, your father's first cousin, Salvador Allende, overthrown in a coup led by Pinochet. At the outset, you're planning flights for others who are under attack, and then the death threats start coming for you. Do you remember the moment when you thought to yourself, "I have to go?"

Allende: Yeah. Somebody told me. The producer on television that had information told me that I was on a list and that I should get out temporarily until things cleared up. But then when I got out, we learned a month later that it was not safe to go back, and so my husband just closed the house with everything inside, took the children, and reunited with me in Venezuela. Never thinking that it would be for so many years.

Menendez: I'm Cuban, my family is Cuban, and they came here as immigrants. There was some economic opportunity for them, but then they could not return, and so I am of a community that is a community that lives in exile and part of what makes exile so confusing is it's exactly as you say. Sometimes people think it'll be a few months, it'll be a few years, and then in the case of many Cubans-

Allende: Never.

Menendez: It is lifetime. It's never.

Allende: Well, the average time that a refugee spends away from home is between 17 and 25 years in case they return. Many never return. And there are 80 million refugees in the world today. Counted. There are many more not counted. And most of them are women and children. It's a tragedy. But on the other hand, I have been very fortunate because we could go to Venezuela, which at the time was a generous country. Open, hospitable, rich. It was the second or third richest country in the world because of the oil boom. And there was space for everybody. It was packed with immigrants that did all the work, really. So, there were many opportunities. It was not difficult to get a visa. I was undocumented for a very short period.

So, we could have a life there. I'm very grateful to that country. It could have been way, way worse.

Menendez: Having survived a coup, how then did you feel watching the January 6th insurrection at the U.S. capitol?

Allende: You know, I was horrified at the insurrection, but it didn't look like the coup. Because the coup was organized by the military. Now, imagine that the Pentagon had a coup. They bomb the White House, they arrest everybody in Congress, they censorship for everything, and there is no habeas corpus, or the judiciary system is dismantled, no political parties allowed, no more than six people can meet without a permit of the police. You are watched all the time. You can be arrested anytime. You can disappear. That's a military coup. And this was a bunch of assholes, that's the truth, that assaulted the capitol, but it was disorganized. They didn't have the military behind. They were not going to take over the country.

So, in a way, it was awful, absolutely awful, and it shows the face of fascism in this country. But it's not a military coup.

Menendez: Do you watch it though and worry that it is a slippery slope?

Allende: Yes. It is. Because if you don't stop it, things can happen, and they can turn badly very fast. I write history. A lot of historical novels. So, I keep on studying history in different periods. What is happening in the country, what was happening then and what might happen, is very similar to what happened in Germany before the war, between 1933 and 1939, when Hitler came to power. At the beginning, Hitler was just a guy, a guy who became a sort of

cult figure, and he was arrested. He spent 18 months in prison, where he wrote a book, *Mein Kampf*. He started escalating and people becoming more and more afraid of him. Nobody dared confront him. Until he became the chancellor, and then from chancellor into the dictator who became the Hitler we know.

But that escalated because people allowed it. Because the parties allowed it. Because nobody confronted it. Because the military were scared. Why? Because he had a huge following. He had energized a country that felt defeated. Germany after the war felt that it was a broken country, really. And they said that they were a superior race, the white race, the white supremacy, that had been offended, humiliated, and defeated, and Hitler brought back a sense of pride, and unity, and patriotism, and nation, and the myth of the superman, of the white superman. So, that happened then, and it can happen anytime, anywhere.

Menendez: How did living in exile shape you as a writer?

Allende: It made me a writer because I don't know if I would be a writer if I had remained in Chile, probably not, because I wrote *The House of the Spirits* many years after I arrived in Venezuela. Many years. And I think it was like an exercise in remembering, in nostalgia, in trying to recover everything I had lost. My family, my country, my friends, my job, my home, everything. That's *The House of the Spirits*. Actually, Beckett has a character in one of his plays that says, "I am that man that goes around with a brick under his arm to show the world how his house was." And in a way, I felt that *The House of the Spirits* was my brick. That I could show the world what I had lost.

Menendez: At the same time that you're forced into exile, you were also young, and you are figuring yourself out. You write in *The Soul of a Woman*, "I wouldn't want to commit again the epic idiocies I engaged in from my thirties into my fifties because of sexual passion, but I don't want to forget them either. They are like merit badges." What were those epic idiocies?

Allende: Well, the first one, the one that I really regret, I was married to the father of my children. Our marriage was collapsing slowly after we left Chile, because like many couples of that time, we were sort of supported by the crutches of both families, of society, of convenience, of everything that kept couples together at the time. And then you get out with nothing, no money, no relatives, no crutches, and most marriages ended in exile. My husband got a job in a province far away and we would see each other like every two months, so I was in Venezuela, I couldn't get a job, I did all sorts of odd jobs to make a living, my children were crying every day because they wanted to go back to Chile, so life was really bad, and I fell in love with an Argentinian musician, and I left my children and I followed him to Spain, and I spent a month or a month and a half with him in Spain, and I realized that I was not going to be able to bring my children with me. I didn't have money or resources to do that. Also, the father probably would not allow it. And I had to go back to my children, and this man was not worth losing my children. Can you imagine?

So, I did go back, and I cut all contact with him completely. I never spoke to him again. And it took me like two years to get over this love affair. But I did. To the point that now I can hardly remember the name. I think I don't remember the name. But what happened was that my children never forgave me. It took years for them to understand what had happened, because I had abandoned them. Not only I had brought them to Venezuela without even asking, and then I abandoned them. Or abandoned to a certain extent,

because my parents were living in the same building in another apartment. But still, you know?

Menendez: The thing that I couldn't get over as I was reading it was the bravery it takes to commit that to the page, to share that transgression with the world. How do you summon that honesty, that bravery?

Allende: Look, I haven't done anything that is very original. How many people have done the same stupid things I have? I haven't committed a crime that is in any way unique, so why can't I share it? Or maybe I'm just shameless. It could be. But I don't hide stuff. My mother used to say that I was very indiscreet, and my answer was always that it's not what you share that makes you vulnerable, it's the secrets you keep. And those secrets that you keep sooner or later come out, and that's when you are really vulnerable, when you are hiding something. But I can't remember anything that I need to hide.

Menendez: I do want to ask you about Paula, the book you wrote about your daughter falling into a coma and her death. I read it before I was a mother and it was unbearably sad then, but now that I am a mother myself, I am even more moved by the gravity of your loss, and I have come to realize how little there is out there for parents who have experienced the loss of a child. I wonder, when do you miss her most?

Allende: Let me go back a little. I get hundreds of emails and messages every day, and every week, almost 30 years later, I get messages about Paula. Either because someone read the book and now that person has a loss, or because somebody else has a loss and she wants to give them the book with an autograph, or for whatever reason. I get innumerable messages. And sometimes desperate parents, and they ask me how can I overcome this, and I say, "You don't have to." You will never get over it. And it's fine. You will carry this sadness that is a sweet sadness, like tenderness, under the skin. And you live with it, and it's your companion.

And sometimes I see, for example, a young woman wearing jeans and sneakers and a white linen shirt and a ponytail, and I see her from her back. She's walking in the street. It's Paula. And then I feel the blow in my chest and then it goes away. And I don't want to miss that. Why is it so painful? Because we love them so much. Why do we remember them so much? Because they gave us so much in the time that we shared. Do we want to not have had that? Because some people have said, "I wish I had never had children if I am going to lose them." I've never thought that. I go through the pain again, but I had her for some years.

But don't worry, my dear. It's not going to happen to your kids.

Menendez: But I think about people I love who it is happening to and it is just such an unimaginable loss.

Allende: It is. I think it's the worst that can happen. My mother said nothing worse will ever happen to you again. You've gone through the worst, so now you can relax for the rest of your life. And you know what? Since then, things have happened. When I got divorced at 72, people said, "How can you do that?" And the pain of the divorce, it's not even 10%. I could divorce 100 times and it wouldn't matter, really. Nothing is comparable.

Menendez: Thank you for that. The Soul of a Woman, your 25th book. Is that right? 25?

Allende: Yeah. I think so.

Menendez: Okay. You've lost count. That's when you know you have done something right.

Allende: It doesn't matter that much. Yeah.

Menendez: How does releasing this book compare to releasing your first book, *House of the Spirits*?

Allende: Oh, it's not comparable. *The House of the Spirits*, I wrote in total innocence. I had no idea what I was doing. I had never read a book review in my life. I had never taken a class. I had never been in a writing workshop. I was a book reader. That's it. And so, I wrote something that I didn't even know if it was a novel. It could have been a memoir. I didn't know what it was. And I had no hope that it would ever be published. My mother insisted in sending it to several publishers in Latin America. They didn't even read it. I think I got one or two rejection letters, but the rest didn't even answer. And then somebody said send it to an agent in Spain, they gave me the name of the agent, Carmen Balcells. I sent the book, and the book was published in September, and in October, Carmen took the book to the Frankfurt Fair. And in the matter of a week, every language in Europe had bought the book.

And it became a huge success, but I was living in Venezuela and I didn't have the echo of it until a year later. So, everything that happened with *The House of the Spirits* was a surprise. It was a bonus. It was a gift from heaven. And I was just delighted with anything. The worst possible contract for a book, I got it in the United States for *The House of the Spirits*. They paid almost nothing, and the contract was indefinite, forever. Yes. So, it took years to undo that. But I was delighted that it was going to be published in English, so I didn't care.

And now, when I publish a book like this, number 25, first I am more self-confident about my writing. I know that I have enough experience to write about almost anything if... Well, not politics or football, but almost anything if I'm given the time to research. And I know that my books will be published, because the same publishers that published *The House of the Spirits* are still publishing me. So, I don't have to worry about that, so the dynamics are so different, and I have a readership that is so loyal. Incredibly loyal.

Menendez: I want to talk a little bit about the work. When I spoke with playwright Quiara Alegría Hudes, she talked about how she sometimes has to step away from the computer in order to really get dialogue. Lilliam Rivera is a busy working mom. She finished her young adult novels in cars, in libraries. Your writing process as I understand it is very butt in the chair, morning till night. What does it look like and what do you do when you run up against a wall?

Allende: Well, I was lucky, because I started writing *The House of the Spirits* when my kids were adolescents. I mean, they were practically grownups, so I didn't have to take care of children. For a writing mother with little children, whew. It's impossible. I don't know how they do it. *The House of the Spirits* I wrote in the kitchen, because we lived in an apartment. I wrote at night in the kitchen. I had a day job. And *Of Love and Shadows*, I emptied a closet, put a board with my typewriter, and a light about, so at least I could keep my papers there and close the doors of the closet, and that was like a space.

And then finally I had a room of my own, but when I moved to the United States, I wrote a collection of short stories in a car, and in coffee shops, because I didn't have a room of my

own. And since then, I have my schedule for writing, because my life is very complicated. I have to promote my books in 42 languages, so that means that right now I am on Zoom half of the day. If I don't set aside the hours for writing, I wouldn't get nothing done.

Menendez: I'm gonna think of you the next time that I'm clearing off the kitchen table of all my children's stuff so that I-

Allende: You are too young. You won't be able to get rid of the children yet.

Menendez: But this is also the advantage to you having started at 20, which is by the time you were writing *House of the Spirits*, you were probably-

Allende: I was 40. I was 40.

Menendez: Yeah. Young. When you look at all of this success, what have you sacrificed in order to have everything you have?

Allende: Nothing. Nothing. I have been able to have a life, to fall in love, to have children and grandchildren and be an excellent grandmother, always present, every day. I didn't have to sacrifice anything because I'm a workaholic. I can work many, many hours and I'm very disciplined. And I don't care about the result so much as I care about the process. So, success doesn't influence my life in any way, because what I love is doing what I do.

Menendez: You realize how remarkable that is, right? That there are a lot of people who say that, like I would love to be able to say that and mean it, but to truly mean it with the sense of integration you have is incredibly unique.

Allende: No. You know what? If I was a rock star, a singer, someone who needs the applause, it would be different. Because then success is measured by the reaction of people. But as a writer, it's not the same. Writers are very private. What happens here in this room, in this attic, is very intimate, and success doesn't reach here, doesn't enter the house. I live a very comfortable life, a nice life, but it's not a luxury life at all, because I'd rather give my resources to the foundation. I get... The rewards in the foundation are incredible. And who needs two cars? Who needs two hats if you have one head?

Menendez: This is so generous and incredible-

Allende: Oh, please.

Menendez: Thank you. Thank you. And congratulations. The book is fantastic.

Allende: Thank you so much. Thank you very, very much. Take care.

Menendez: Bye.

Allende: Bye.

Menendez: Thank you for joining us. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our senior producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you when you email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, when you slide into our DMs on Instagram, when you tweet at us @LatinaToLatina. Remember to subscribe, follow us on RadioPublic, Apple

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