

PAULA

A review of a recent work by the Chilean author Isabel Allende.

“All sorrows can be borne,” Isak Dinesen once said, “if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.” That approach worked well for Isabel Allende—until lately. When her beloved grandfather lay dying she wrote him a letter that became her first, and most successful, novel, *The House of the Spirits*. Grieving for Chile under Pinochet, she wrote *Of Love and Shadows*. As her first marriage collapsed, she invented the ebullient, upbeat heroine of *Eva Luna*.

But when her 27-year-old daughter, Paula, fell ill in December 1991 with a hereditary metabolic disorder known as porphyria and quickly lapsed into a coma, the writer’s courage at first failed her. But then her agent, Carmen Balcells, showed up at the Madrid hospital with a stack of yellow note pads. This memoir is the result, and it is Ms. Allende’s best work to date.

A mother trying to entertain a bedridden child, she piles on episode and anecdote in a brilliant flood of autobiographical reminiscence spanning three generations on four continents. A real-time account of Paula’s illness—the coma lasted a year—and her family’s anguish intervenes with increasing insistency, until the two narrative threads dwindle to one, which snaps with the young woman’s death in December 1992. Celebration rather than despair provides the overriding tone.

Ms. Allende’s novels often deal in flat folkloric archetypes: the patriarch, the dandy, the peasant. Here we meet their complex, unpredictable sources. Her maternal grandfather is an invincible old stoic who suppresses pneumonia by cinching his waist with a leather harness—breaking his ribs in the process. He takes his small granddaughter to wrestling matches, and lusts for blood from his ringside seat. Ms. Allende’s father, a decadent aristocrat, disappears when she’s an infant. Her stepfather, a charming diplomat, teaches her debating tricks and social skills. She reads his unexpurgated *Thousand and One Nights*

on the sly. Ms. Allende invokes these family spirits and many others with tremendous verve, generous detail and irresistibly rhythmic prose, as if her narrative could distract death itself.

Ms. Allende’s literary breakthroughs, her divorce and remarriage dominate the second half of the book. It could have been called “Isabel.” And therein lies the deep unspoken pathos of this work, with its unusual combination of self-affirmation and loss. Other writers separate the two. Ms. Allende, recording her triumphs, is desperate to share her over-flowing vitality with her daughter. What’s a mother for? She succeeds only in marking the distance between herself and Paula—the confident survivor and the stricken young woman.

The reader, meanwhile, strains to know Paula better. Hearing of her goodness, brilliance and grace is not enough. One astounding remark begs for further comment. As Isabel recalls it, she once offered to buy Paula three new blouses. “We go to our grave in a winding sheet,” her daughter responded. “Why do you bother?” We’re left to guess at the complex complementarity of a flamboyant, self-dramatizing mother and her ascetic, deeply religious child.

Ms. Allende does report, with disarming honesty, that Paula hated her mother’s sentimentality. We can’t disagree. Family members caring for Ms. Allende’s daughter are uniformly ennobled by the crisis. Recriminations and petty quarrels don’t seem to intrude. High-flown rhetoric obscures some of her introspective passages. And yet, in her reportorial mode she’s unbeatable. Journalism was what Isabel Allende did in her freewheeling youth, before she discovered she could write novels. She does it wonderfully well. As *Paula* courageously reveals, she has everything it takes: the ear, the eye, the mind, the heart, the all-encompassing humanity.

Suzanne Ruta, The New York Times Book Review

1 What does the reviewer say about Ms. Allende's motive for writing *Paula*?

- A She wanted to explore the reason for her daughter's suffering
- B Writing about her own misfortunes had always given her comfort
- C Writing about her daughter would help her understand herself
- D She wanted to write down what had happened in order not to forget

2 What does the reviewer mean by "the two narrative threads dwindle to one"? (3rd paragraph)

- A Ms. Allende describes both Paula's illness and her family history
- B Paula dies suddenly though not unexpectedly
- C Paula's death leaves Ms. Allende desperate
- D Ms. Allende pays little attention to the events leading up to Paula's death

3 What are we told about the characters in Ms. Allende's novels?

- A They are modelled on people she describes in *Paula*
- B They all have a similar outlook on life
- C They are like the people she read about when she was a child
- D They represent different sides of Ms. Allende herself

4 What impression do we get of Ms. Allende from the second part of the book?

- A She cares more about her own success than about Paula
- B She blames herself for having done too little for Paula
- C She realizes she and Paula are very much alike
- D She wants to transmit some of her strength to Paula

5 What does Paula's answer "We go to our grave in a winding sheet" suggest?

- A Paula wants her funeral to be simple
- B Paula welcomes her mother's offer
- C Paula is not concerned with worldly matters
- D Paula knows that everybody has a short life

UN DEVELOPMENT AID

The capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka, might also be called the capital of UN development aid. But what do local people think of the UN's work?

Bangladesh certainly relies on foreign aid. On average, foreign assistance accounts for about two thirds of total investment. Out of the total aid disbursed in 1991, the UN system—including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—accounted for 36.5 per cent. What worries many Bangladeshis, however, is the dependence syndrome which aid creates and which permeates every level of Bangladesh society. To many, aid has come to mean the easy way out. Rather than mobilizing local people to construct a dirt road, rural officials will wait for access to Food for Work grain. Instead of getting the young to clean up the neighbourhood, people will complain about the lack of municipal services.

A typical response would be to welcome UN aid in general but to wish the Government were more choosy about the quality of the aid pouring into the country. As it is, the Administration gives a red-carpet welcome to almost any project proposed by donors. Often the only bone of contention between donor and recipient seems to be what kind of luxury car will provide the most appropriate form of transport.

But the very idea of development is increasingly coming under fire from fundamentalist forces. Their accusations are that development has largely been funded by 'Christian money' and that development draws women out of *purdah* (seclusion). Up to now the physical assaults have been directed at grassroots organizations—burning down schools, preventing access to medicare and the like.

All of this highlights UN agencies' confusion over their role. Their job used to be

simpler: they concentrated on technical assistance and big infrastructure projects. They still tend to do a lot of that. But lately the incorporation of human development (emphasizing health and education) into their agenda seems to have turned UN agencies into actors in search of a role.

Aid workers in Bangladesh—and UN agency staff not least among them—are often in the enviable position of being the trend-setters in a developing world. They occupy the most exclusive bungalows in uptown Dhaka. They ride impeccable white sedans with chrome yellow licence-plates which flash in the sun and proclaim to the world their difference from ordinary citizens. UN jobs lure Bangladeshis as honey lures bees. The rewards are many: the fat pay, the bonuses, the glamour, not to mention the power which comes from holding the purse-strings. They start pursuing the model of development they see around them—not the hot and clammy project offices in the countryside but the cool, trendy cocktail circuits of uptown Dhaka. When confronted about their lifestyle, aid donors have a ready answer: 'What about the even more lavish lifestyle of the local elite—not to mention the oppressive, almost feudal social system!'

One wonders if it would be more fruitful if they asked instead why, despite two decades of development assistance, Bangladesh has failed to graduate to self-reliance. Or why Bangladesh has been persistently portrayed in the world media as the classic case of hopelessness and despair.

Meghna Guhathakurta, New Internationalist

6 What is the writer's *main* point in the first paragraph?

UN development aid...

- A is invested in projects that are of little use to ordinary people
- B has raised the living standards of many Bangladeshis
- C has led to a passive attitude among many Bangladeshis
- D is considerable but still insufficient

7 What complaint does the writer make in the second paragraph?

- A The Government does too little to control UN investments
- B A lot of money disappears into the pockets of Government officials
- C The Government sometimes does business with dishonest UN aid workers
- D Disputes between Government and UN officials have lowered the quality of the aid programmes

8 How, according to the text, has the rise of fundamentalism affected UN agencies?

- A They now regret they used to disregard characteristic features of Bangladeshi culture
- B They are considering giving up all technical assistance
- C They have suddenly realized that development aid is based on Western ideology
- D They are at a loss as to how to adapt to the new situation

9 What is suggested about the aid workers' lifestyle?

Their lifestyle...

- A may have negative consequences for the aid programmes
- B is a model for those who want to improve Bangladeshis' living standards
- C has accelerated the breaking-up of the hierarchical Bangladeshi social system
- D may serve as a pretext for the local elite to stop urgent reforms

10 What does the writer tell us in the last paragraph?

- A Bangladesh and not the UN is to blame for the present situation
- B It is important to find out why UN aid has not produced the desired effect
- C The media make the situation in Bangladesh appear a lot worse than it really is
- D More attention should be paid to successful UN projects in Bangladesh

And here are some shorter texts:

Sex and Rabies

Fewer than twenty-five people died from rabies in the whole of France between 1850 and 1872. As now, the panic and fear it inspired were out of proportion to the incidence of the disease. How extraordinary, though, that rabies was clearly linked in public and medical minds with sex: there was a widespread belief that it could begin spontaneously as a result of prolonged sexual abstinence. As an ingenious rationale for a relaxed sex life, the need to avoid rabies certainly takes some beating.

11 What does the author tell us about the supposed link between sex and rabies?

- A It increased people's fear of the terrible disease
- B It was an excuse for some people to be more sexually active
- C It made 19th-century people even more shy about sex
- D It made many people confident that rabies could be cured

Men and Women

Biologically speaking, the male is the weaker sex in most respects. One important consequence is that women are more likely than men to experience the death of their spouse and that the marriage market for widows is more restricted than that for widowers.

12 What does the writer suggest?

- A The loss of a spouse is a greater blow to a woman than to a man
- B Among single elderly people women are in the majority
- C Married people live longer than those who are unmarried
- D The death of your partner will shorten your life

Lukewarm Swansea

Swansea's 40-year indifference to its most famous son, Dylan Thomas, has always caused embarrassment. Twice the city council has declined to buy the suburban semi where he was born and resisted plans by others to open it as a memorial. A friend, who recalls the embryo poet being sacked from the local evening paper where they both worked, thinks the city's coolness may stem from the fact that Dylan left at an early age and made his name elsewhere.

13 What are we told about Dylan Thomas?

- A He did not live long in Swansea
- B His poetry has always embarrassed Swansea readers
- C He felt out of place as a journalist in Swansea
- D His birthplace was in the centre of Swansea

14 What are we told about Swansea?

- A At last the city is planning a Dylan Thomas Memorial
- B The city seems unwilling to honour Dylan Thomas
- C Its city council spends little money on culture
- D Its local evening paper once refused Dylan Thomas's poems

The Mayas

As recently as 30 years ago, many archaeologists imagined the Mayas as peaceful mystics, their lives focused on stately ceremonial centers where astronomer-priests interpreted the stars.

However, that picture faded in the 1960s and 1970s as a breed of anthropologists known as epigraphers cracked the complex hieroglyphic system of Maya writing. The glyphs told a lively story of politics and warfare, and the ceremonial centers became quarrelsome city-states.

Now, with a new reading of texts from sites throughout the Maya heartland in Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize, the Mayas have taken another step toward modernity. It seems as if most of the individual city-states were tied in two large, durable alliances. Like NATO and the Warsaw Pact, each alliance was led by a dominant power.

15 What is the writer's *main idea*?

- A The Maya civilization gradually changed from a peaceful society into a more warlike one
- B Thanks to the epigraphers it was possible to show that the archaeologists' theories had been correct
- C The Maya civilization has much more in common with ours than was originally believed
- D Despite recent discoveries the Mayas will always remain a mystery to us

In the following text there are gaps which indicate that something has been left out. Look at the four alternatives that correspond to each gap and decide which one best fits the gap. Then mark your choice on the answer sheet.

THE VIRUS OF MYXOMATOSIS

The fate of rabbits in Australia when exposed to an exceedingly virulent new infection may be used to illustrate the manner in which a virus infection acts when it penetrates a new population and then survives to become endemic.

The story is indeed dramatic. English settlers introduced rabbits to Australia in 1859. In the absence of natural predators, the new species spread rapidly throughout the continent becoming very **...16...** and, from the human point of view, a pest that ate grass that sheep might have otherwise consumed. The Australian wool pack was thereby reduced; so were the **...17...** of innumerable ranchers.

Human efforts to limit the number of rabbits in Australia took a new turn in 1950 when the virus of myxomatosis, which is a distant relative of human **...18...**, was successfully transferred to the rabbit population of that continent. The initial impact was **...19...**: in a single season an area as great as all of western Europe was infected. The death rate among rabbits that got the disease in the first year was 99.8 per cent. In the next year, however, the death rate went down to a mere 90 per cent; seven years later mortality among infected rabbits was only 25 per cent. Obviously, very rigorous and rapid selection had occurred among rabbits and among viral strains as well. Samples of the virus derived from wild rabbits became measurably milder in virulence with each successive year. **...20...**, the rabbit population has not recovered its former level in Australia and may not do so for a long time—perhaps never. In 1965 only about one fifth as many rabbits lived in Australia as had been there before myxomatosis broke out.

William McNeill, Plagues and Peoples

- 16** A rare
B different
C numerous
D stable
- 17** A expenses
B problems
C farms
D profits
- 18** A life
B smallpox
C nature
D error
- 19** A insignificant
B explosive
C delayed
D controversial
- 20** A Nevertheless
B Instead
C Unfortunately
D Consequently

This is the end of the test. If you have time left, go back and check your answers.