

[Click to Print](#)**Web Exclusive...****Q&A With Isabel Allende**

By Carlos J. Queirós, November 2006

The bestselling author on her newest book, issues of identity, aging, and more

Hundreds of years ago—long before Chile embraced its first female president in March 2006—there was Inés Suárez. Although an immigrant to Chile, a fierce *conquistadora*, and, arguably, the country's founding mother, this epic figure has largely been ignored by history books. This may change with Isabel Allende's latest novel, [Inés of My Soul](#), in which the author blends historical facts with her masterful imagination to reveal resonant truths only fiction can provide.

Q: What was it about Inés Suárez that made you want to explore her life through fiction?

A: Years ago, when I was researching for [Daughter of Fortune](#), I had to go far back into Chile's history. Then I wrote another book called [My Invented Country](#), sort of a lighthearted memoir about my country. Throughout all this research I kept finding the name of Inés Suárez. While there wasn't much about her—history is usually written by males and people who have won battles—what I did find was fascinating. First of all, she was a dowser and could find water in the desert. Because of this, the troops were only able to cross the desert with her help. She also saved the city of Santiago when it was attacked by the Indians; she was there with 36 men, and it was her actions when she decapitated the hostages that saved the city. She remained in Chile for 40 years and died there as the richest landowner, having founded hospitals, churches, and other institutions. All this is registered in documents but not in the history books.

Q: Why do you so often choose to write your novels from the perspective of exiles or "marginals?"

A: Well, maybe it is because that has been my case. When I was little, I was sort of excluded because my mother and father separated. Chile is very Catholic and, at that time people did not remarry or divorce. So I felt marginalized from my family in many ways. Then, I was always a foreigner traveling with my stepfather, who was a diplomat. Soon I became a political refugee in Venezuela, and now I'm an immigrant in the United States. I've always been outside the big umbrella of the establishment and sheltered in a way. I write from that perspective because I see the world from that perspective.

Q: Inés Suárez believes she is about 70 years old yet writes that her life is filled with "years well lived, but my soul and my heart, still caught in a fissure of my youth, wonder what devilish thing has happened to my body." Do you find this reflects how many people feel about aging?

A: Yes, especially my generation. My parents and grandparents' generations were supposed to look and be old. Our generation is different. I'm 64, and I'm as healthy and strong as I was when I was 20. So I have to look at myself in the mirror and ask: what happened to this body? Inside I feel as though I have not aged, but outside, of course, we do age. What's happened is that we're expected to live much longer and to keep ourselves healthy much longer.

Q: Do you find that society in different countries views aging in different ways?

A: In Chile all the older people I know are taken care of by their families. I don't know anyone who is in a geriatric residence. Everyone is either living independently in an apartment with a caretaker or with their children or grandchildren. I don't see the problem being as horrible as I've seen it here in the United States. The community in Chile takes it upon themselves to care for the elderly, and they are more respected. My stepfather turned 90, and although the family is scattered all over the world, everybody travels with their children or grandchildren to visit. I take care of him financially, but if I couldn't do it we'd all pool our resources

together. I think that Chile will eventually face the same problems because the apartments are very small and people are living longer. I've been traveling in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the old may be poor, but they aren't alone.

Q: Fourteen years ago you became a U.S. citizen, but you've also lived in Chile, Bolivia, Europe, and the Middle East. In *My Invented Country: A Nostalgic Journey Through Chile*, you began to identify yourself as an American with roots in Chile. What do you see as the link between a sense of identity and nationality?

A: In my case, I have lived in so many places that I don't fully belong anywhere. I nurture myself from my Latin roots. Each time I go to Chile and hear the language and the stories, I come back invigorated. But I live here in the U.S. very happily. I'm a critical citizen and an energetic dissident, let's say, but I love this country. My identity is very American since I've been here for 20 years.

Q: You've said, "I write because I need to remember and overcome." What do you mean by this?

A: Most of my historical novels have to do with memory. They're about things that I have experienced or need to preserve in some way. In doing so, I overcome sadness, confusion, solitude, fear, death. When I wrote the memoir *Paula*, it was an exercise in remembering but also an attempt to overcome the death of my daughter. I would not have survived without that book. Writing allows me to create an artificial order from the confusion of the world. We have so little control over our circumstances, but when we write we create an imaginary order. The act of choosing the adjectives to describe a situation, choosing what to tell and what to omit—you are creating a reality that is, in a way, manageable.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: I just finished a memoir that concerns the last 10 years of my family.

Q: What are your thoughts on Michelle Bachelet becoming Chile's first female president?

A: I know her personally, and she is an extraordinary woman. Her father was killed as a general, and she and her mother were tortured. They lived in exile and then returned to Chile. Her situation is very interesting not only because she's Chile's first female president, but because at every level of government she's appointed half men and half women. This, of course, has provoked great interest but also male chauvinism. She has told me that a woman needs to put forth double the effort of any man to get half the recognition and half the respect. I agree totally with her because this has been the case in my life too.

Q: You write so vividly about the brutality of the Spanish conquest of Chile in the 1500s. Do you see any parallels between events that occur in your novel and the present day?

A: Well, there are always parallels in history because we keep on repeating the same things although with different colors, shades, languages. It's the story of conquering, of power, of possession. In the case of the Conquest, the excuse was the cross and Christianity. That was the main goal of conquering the world, but, of course, behind that was the fact that they wanted the gold and the territory. In a way, we are now after oil. We can talk about democracy as much as we want, but what we really want is the oil and the power. So it's the same story, and it was the same story in the 1800s too.

Carlos J. Queirós lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he freelances and is at work on a novel and collection of short stories. Read his [interview with Javier Sierra](#) on AARP Segunda Juventud Online.