

**Session 10: Class Discussion of *House of the Spirits***

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Introduction and background on the novel

- Isabel Allende is the second cousin of Chilean president Salvador Allende
- Clearly sympathetic to the Left, but also very balanced in her portrayal of different characters
- She really had one good novel in her
- There's one recent novel where she tries to write from POV of a Latino man in U.S.; it was a ***total failure***

**Some questions for class discussion:**

- Did you like this book? What did you like and dislike?
- Who is the protagonist of this novel? Are there any other contenders?
- Do the men dominate this novel? The world in which the story is set? If not, why not?
- On a moral level, what do you think of Esteban Trueba? Is he a hero, an anti-hero, or neither? To which other literary characters (or relatives) might you compare him? Was he afflicted with a single fatal flaw that otherwise undoes him (like Thomas Hardy's Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.) Is he capable of learning? Change?
- In literature and film, characters are sometimes said to have an "arc" or trajectory during the storyline. Does Trueba have one? What is it?
- Esteban Trueba believed that "Marxism" must be opposed at all costs. He believed that if the peasants got land under agrarian reform, they would not be able to use it effectively, and Tres Marias would revert to its earlier state of disorder. Indeed, when he returned to his land-holding, the peasants had divided the land and wasted the livestock. Does this mean that Esteban was correct in his assessment of the impact of political change and agrarian reform?
- Does the novel offer a strong vision of good and evil? Or is evil simply strength? Is evil necessary for good to operate? (Think of the prostitute's attitude toward loosening sexual norms.)
- Tell me about the names of the women. What's their significance? How do they change at the end? Why?
- Of all the female characters, which was do you think was strongest? Weakest?
- Blanca and Alba make very different life choices. Who was right and who was wrong? To what extent did they, in fact, have *choices*?
- Blanca and her daughter Alba react quite differently in the face of the political changes sweeping their country. Why? In the end, Blanca decides to move to Canada, while Alba decides to stay home. Which decision do you feel is the correct one?

- It's been said that the novel is half apolitical and half political. Do you agree? Why? Does the focus of the novel change? If so, what does the change represent?
- Esteban Trueba believed that those who had always won would win again, and was shocked when his party lost the election. Why, in your opinion, did the party lose? Why did Esteban fail to foresee his own political demise?
- Miguel believed that political change could come only through violent confrontation. Do you think he was right? Can you envision a situation in which change could have come without the political violence described in *The House of the Spirits*?
- Hollywood's attempt to make this novel into a film was unsuccessful. The cast was stellar, the Direction excellent, and the cinematography spectacular, but the movie didn't really work. Why do you suppose that was? If your job were to turn the novel into a script, what would you do?
- If you had the opportunity to make a suggestion to the author about what to change, what would you recommend?
- How true are the political aspects to what you know of Chilean history from the Valenzuela article?
  - Captured votes; transformation of Chilean rural society
  - Who is Trueba meant to represent (Alessandri? Frei?)
  - Class politics
    - Traditionally divided into three thirds
    - What happened to the largest party (CDs)? What does this tell you about the book?
  - How about the relationship between the conservative elite and the military?
    - Karl Marx argued that the bourgeoisie (i.e., owners of property), faced with a threat from the Left, will trade the right to rule for the right to make money
    - Is this what happened?
    - What was the cost for the elite?