

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

LOVERS
AT THE
MUSEUM

A
SHORT
STORY

ISABEL
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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Eva Luna

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The House of the Spirits

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A night watchman found the lovers sleeping in a knot of arms, legs, and tulle, enveloped in the foam of a ruined wedding gown in one of the galleries of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. He discovered them directly in front of a vast mural named *Rising Sea*, which Detective Aitor Larramendi took for a wrinkled curtain. He didn't get modern art; he preferred bucolic landscapes with cows. The guards reported that the couple had first been discovered by one of the cleaning ladies at five o'clock in the morning, before the museum doors were opened to the public. The woman was not surprised to see them, initially thinking they were another one of the art pieces. She had only raised the alarm when she hit them with her broom and realized they were human. She was scared stiff.

Aitor Larramendi recorded the testimonies of the guards and the cleaning lady, an immigrant from North Africa, who was still terrified. The last thing she wanted was to deal with the police.

"I had nothing to do with it!" she said, sobbing.

"Calm down, ma'am. You are not being accused of anything. Just tell me what you saw," said the inspector, handing her the box of tissues he always kept in his office.

"I thought they were dead, that they had committed suicide," she stuttered, bathed in tears.

"Was there blood?"

"I didn't see blood anywhere. Since they didn't move, I thought they had done it like Michael Jackson. Remember?"

"That was not suicide. It was an overdose," the detective clarified.

"That's what I thought."

"Continue. Tell me what happened."

"It was the end of my shift. I was sweeping the last room when I saw a disheveled girl lying on the floor, tangled in white veils. There was a guy next to her with a leg and an arm over her and his nose against her neck. He was just as God put him into this world, without even so much as a rag to cover his privates. That's why I thought it was one of those things in the museum. What are they called?"

"*Installations*," replied the detective.

"What are they for?" she asked.

Aitor Larramendi couldn't answer that. He wrote her statement in his report and added that the crime scene showed obvious signs of a

bacchanalia. Although he had never attended a bacchanalia—something he secretly lamented—his long experience as a detective allowed him to find the most insignificant sign of a misdeed and follow it with fierce determination until he caught the culprit, be it male or female. In the training sessions he conducted at the police academy, he always emphasized that the female gender was just as prone to vice, if not more so.

Inspector Larramendi, appropriately nicknamed “the hound of Bilbao,” was a man who induced fear with his five-foot-two frame, lizard-like and skeletal, and a huge mustache stamped across his face like a barber’s practical joke.

When they were arrested, the boy and the girl claimed that they had spent the night inside, but the indignant guards swore that such a thing was impossible because they patrolled the premises tirelessly. Furthermore, the security cameras picked up everything down to a person’s innermost secret thoughts, and the infrared alarms would blare to life at the slightest provocation. The building was protected with sensors that activated an apocalyptic commotion to alert the police, the firefighters, and the museum director, a nervous man weighed down by his responsibilities. The security experts insisted that not even a cockroach could go undetected in the Guggenheim, let alone a couple of passionate lunatics.

“I didn’t see a soul all night,” said the girl when she sobered up in the detox clinic eleven hours later. Her name was Bibiña Aranda.

The paramedics had taken her away on a stretcher, completely covered by a sheet and looking more dead than alive. The train of the wedding gown and her long dark hair spilled from the stretcher and dragged across the floor like algae in the calm waters of the Bay of Biscay. She was followed by a trail of sighs among the police officers, who could intuit the shape of her body under the sheet. The dress, with its twelve yards of pearly organza, like a cloud hemmed in at the seams when it was new, was now reduced to sullied tatters.

In the meantime, two men in uniform had escorted the boy, naked and handcuffed, to a police car. The closest witnesses saw that the suspect had an insolent erection. He didn’t seem to understand the seriousness of his situation. Larramendi was personally offended by this detail, and he ordered that the young man be covered with something. One of the policemen took off his cap and put it over the offensive member, but that did not conceal it completely.

The detective was able to ask him a few questions before they took him away.

“Name?” he barked.

“Indar Zubieta, at your service,” replied the boy, smiling.

“How did you outwit the museum guards?” the inspector barked again.

“There were no guards, man. Those guys must have been off playing cards or watching TV. Everybody was glued to the screen last night because of the big scandal with the pope, you know? We did it like rabbits all over the place. I was just as you see me now, stark naked, and she was in her white dress because I couldn’t unfasten the little buttons, tiny as fleas.”

Detective Larramendi returned to the museum and recovered the dead flowers from the bridal bouquet, which were scattered across different floors. The roses, which had surely been pure as the driven snow in their original state, lay now like decaying mollusks, saturating the air with the imposing fragrance of an overperfumed courtesan. According to the detective’s meticulous calculations, the dress’s train had swept through 66 percent of the imposing central atrium. In the areas that had not been swept clean, he found curly hairs, signs of bodily fluids, and other unmistakable traces of lust. He encountered similar clues in the remaining twenty galleries and concluded that the delinquents had roamed the building to their hearts’ content. Later, when he wrote his report, he changed the word *lust* for *carnal love* and *building* for *cathedral of the arts*, which he deemed more elegant.

Larramendi’s hound-like instincts allowed him to see what was invisible to the normal human eye—that is to say, the vibration of caresses, tremors, and murmurs floating on the still air of the museum, from the entrance all the way to the last room on the third floor. But despite his legendary ability to discover proof of guilt where no clues existed, he could not find one empty bottle, forgotten cork, marijuana cigarette, or heroin needle. He couldn’t prove, therefore, that the suspects had violated the rules of the museum regarding toxic substances. He assumed, then, that they must have gotten drunk or stoned before entering the building. Sorry, cathedral of the arts.

As the museum regulations did not make any specific reference to copulation in any of its variations, the law could punish the couple only for staying inside after hours, a minor infraction, considering that, aside from a bit of littering, they had not done any damage. In truth, according to the

staff, the museum gleamed that day as if bathed in bright sunlight, even though it was raining outside. It had rained all week.

“That’s why we went in. Because of the rain. The humidity makes my hair frizzy,” Bibiña Aranda explained during Larramendi’s interrogation at the clinic. She had not fully recovered from the intoxication that had almost killed her, but she could talk.

“Why were you wearing a wedding dress?” asked the hound, rubbing his mustache.

“Because I didn’t have time to change.”

“Where was the wedding?”

“Who had a wedding?” she asked.

“You and that idiot Indar Zubieta,” said Larramendi, whose patience had a short fuse.

“And who is that?” she asked again.

“What a question, woman! Your husband, fiancé, lover, or whatever he is; the guy who was with you at the museum.”

“His name is Indar? Nice name. A manly Basque name. It means *powerful strength*. I like strong men. Don’t you?”

“Let’s start again from the beginning. Where and when did you meet?” asked the detective, feigning calm.

“I don’t remember. I don’t hold my liquor too well; it runs in my family. I drink one or two glasses and I get silly.”

“That’s obvious. You were totally wasted!” shouted the hound of Bilbao.

“Drunk on love . . . ,” she replied with a dreamy expression.

“*Love*, you say, yet you don’t even know the man you fucked all over the museum!” he exclaimed.

“No idea, Inspector.”

“How did you get in?”

“Through the door, of course,” she replied, laughing.

“So you went inside when the museum was still open to the public,” Larramendi concluded.

“No. I think it was closed”

That coincided with the testimony given by Indar Zubieta, whom the right-wing press called “the billy goat in the museum” on account of his persistent erection and the left-wing paper had dubbed “the magician of love” because he looked like a socialist.

Larramendi put in his report that although the museum was closed, the couple had been able to easily obtain entrance. They simply pushed the doors, and they'd swung open. Inside, they were welcomed by soft, romantic lighting, and the heating must have been on because the couple was never cold.

The exhausted museum director, interrogated by Larramendi that same day, explained that the temperature and humidity were rigorously controlled to preserve the works of art under optimal conditions. The detective considered that precaution rather unnecessary, given that most of the so-called art was made of plastic or metal, but he decided not to pursue that point. The director insisted that it would have been impossible for the suspects to enter the building as they said because the doors were locked by an electronic system at seven o'clock on the dot every evening.

After several hours of thorough inquiries and astute interrogations, Aitor Larramendi determined that the transgressors had not known each other before committing their offense. He reluctantly conceded that they had not acted with premeditation or treachery. This is what he was able to ascertain:

On that memorable Saturday, Bibiña Aranda was all set to marry her boyfriend of many years, a good, unimaginative man with broad shoulders who worked in his father's bakery and had been no less than the goalie for the Saint Ignatius of Loyola football team. He had even won a couple of silver-plated trophies. However, when the inspector confronted the Jesuit priest and several witnesses, he discovered that the wedding had never taken place. The bride stumbled into the church an hour late, sobbing like a widow and gripped by the powerful arms of her older brother, who appeared to be dragging her down the aisle. Her loud sobbing drowned out the sound of the wedding march, which the organ player had commenced as soon as the bride appeared in the doorway. If there had been any doubt that the bride was not in her right mind, it became clear to the guests when, before reaching the altar, she kicked off her shoes, turned around, and ran out of the church, leaving the football player, the Jesuit priest, and the rest of the stunned audience with their mouths agape. They had no idea what had become of her until two days later, when her picture appeared in the official Basque newspaper, *Euzkadi'ko Agintaritzaren Egunerokoa*, under the headline "Reckless Lovers in the Guggenheim."

Armed with this information, the tireless hound of Bilbao confronted Indar and Bibiña, determined to get to the bottom of this maddening case.

“We got in easily,” repeated Indar for the hundredth time in the inspector’s office, sticking to his original version of events.

“And what happened then?” asked Larramendi.

“We made love. What else would we do? Time flew, Inspector. Do you want to know how we did it?”

“Don’t fuck with me, Zubieta. When and where did you meet Bibiña Aranda?”

“So that’s her name! Bibiña. I could have sworn she was called Helen.”

“Why?”

“Because of Helen of Troy, the lady from antiquity. They say she was one hot gal. Bibiña is a real looker, too, don’t you think?”

“Focus, Zubieta. Where did you meet?” the detective insisted.

“At the counter of Iñigo’s bar. I noticed her immediately.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you notice her, man!”

“Well, Inspector, it’s not every day you see a chick in a wedding dress bathed in tears and throwing back pints like an Englishman.”

“What did you do next?” asked Larramendi.

“I gave her a tissue to blow her nose.”

“Continue.”

“She looked at me, and that was it, Inspector. Hercules’s arrow.”

“Cupid,” the detective corrected him.

“Ah! That’s the fat angel? Whatever. The point is that I fell in love, to my bones. That’s how it was. I swear. Her face was swollen, her makeup was a mess, she looked like a clown, but those green eyes, like Cleopatra’s, pierced right through my heart. I’m telling you, Inspector, nothing like that had ever happened to me. I felt a brutal electric shock, like sticking a finger in a socket.”

“What did you say to her?”

“Nothing. What could I say? I couldn’t even talk. I was hypnotized.”

“And her?” asked the hound.

“She didn’t say anything either. She put her head on my chest and went on crying like a baby. I didn’t know what to do. Finally I took her to the restroom and washed her face. I asked her why she was so sad, and she told me that her fiancé was a hopeless jerk. So, I asked her to marry me then and there.”

“Obviously you were both drunk,” concluded Larramendi.

“She was a little tipsy, but I don’t drink. I am a teetotaler, as they say. I had smoked a joint, but I didn’t have any alcohol at all. I’d gone to the bar to collect from Iñigo; we had a bet going on the fate of the Holy Father,” Zubieta explained.

“What did she say to your proposal?”

“She said she would marry me so as not to waste the dress, and then she kissed me on the mouth.”

“And you, what did you do?”

“I kissed her back. Wouldn’t you have done the same, Inspector? We couldn’t pull away from each other. We kissed like we were desperate. It was love at first sight, like in the movies.”

“And then?” pressed the detective.

“And then Iñigo, that asshole, threw us out on the street. He said that we should find a motel, that we were shameless and that his bar was a respectable establishment, not some brothel. Excuses to avoid paying what he owed me for the bet!”

“Continue, Zubieta. What else happened?”

“We left. We wandered around looking for a place to eat something. A sandwich would have been good, but we couldn’t find any. Then it started to rain a little, and we didn’t have an umbrella. I covered her with my jacket, but there was no way to protect the dress. I wanted to take her to my apartment, but then I remembered that my mom would be there with my lame uncle watching TV. The scandal with the pope, you know.”

“Yes, man, I know.”

“The museum appeared in front of us like some illusionist’s trick. It was amazing!” Zubieta fell silent, lost in his memories of that splendid night.

“Go on, damn it!” the detective demanded. “I don’t have all day to waste on you!”

“We thought we could take shelter there, so we ran down the long path that led to the doors.”

“Nobody stopped you? Where were the guards?”

“There was nobody there, not a soul, Inspector.”

“And then . . . ?” Larramendi demanded.

“I already told you. The door opened when we touched it, inviting us in. The girl kissed me again, and she said she wanted me to carry her over the threshold like a real bride. I tried to lift her, but I got caught in the train of

the dress, and we fell down, dying with laughter. We tried to get up, and we slipped again. Finally, we crawled inside, kissing and laughing and groping each other. It was crazy love, Inspector. I had never—”

“Are you going to tell me that you did not ask the girl’s name or why she was in a bridal gown?” interrupted the detective, who had been married for twenty-three years to a prudish, matronly woman and really didn’t want to hear about delights that he would never experience.

“I didn’t think about it, that’s the truth, Inspector. Also, I am not much of a talker. I like to get straight to the point. You understand?”

Larramendi also preferred to get straight to the point. A few hours later, when he figured that Bibiña would be more lucid, he returned to the detox clinic to question her for a second time. He was determined to be delicate with the girl so as not to frighten her.

“Are you a whore?” he asked.

The girl was sitting up straight in a metal chair, dressed in a hospital gown like a madwoman, with her long hair tied in a ponytail. She burst out crying, humiliated. Between hiccuping sobs, she informed the man that she had been educated by the nuns, had preserved her virginity intact until the night at the museum, and was not going to tolerate the insults of a short-legged, mustachioed ape. What was he thinking!

“Okay, girl, calm down. That was a routine question. I meant no offense,” stammered the hound, intimidated. In all his long career, no one had ever disrespected him in such a manner.

“Routine! Let’s see how you explain that routine question to my three brothers. The Aranda boys don’t belong to the Basque separatists, but they are ready to take up arms if the honor of our family is at stake!” the young woman warned him.

“It’s just that it seems a little strange that you and Zubieta would do what you did without being introduced, without even knowing each other’s names, nothing . . .”

“It was as if we had known each other always, Inspector, as if we had been together in another life. Do you believe in reincarnation?”

“No. I’m Christian,” explained the hound of Bilbao, touching the cross that hung around his neck.

“Me, too, but you can be Christian and believe in reincarnation. I, for example, also believe in acupuncture and astrology. I’m a Leo because I

was born in August. It's a fire sign; that's why I'm passionate and I fall in love without thinking. And you, what sign are you?"

"That's enough, Bibiña. Tell me what happened in the museum," interrupted the detective, suddenly exhausted.

"That place is bewitched. The minute we crossed the threshold, it was as if we were married before God and the law," she said and then told him how, with her boyfriend, the football player, she'd felt nothing; when she kissed him, it had been like blowing up a balloon.

"Can you imagine, Inspector? It was destiny. Everything is written in the stars. If I hadn't escaped from the church and gone into that bar, I would have never met the love of my life," the girl added.

"That's not love, woman, that's drunken delirium, plain and simple. How do you explain the fact that you spent the whole night carousing in the museum and yet the security videos show nothing?"

"Maybe we turned transparent," Bibiña suggested.

"Don't be funny!"

"I told you, Inspector, that place is enchanted. It's not just me saying it. Everyone knows that strange things happen in there."

"What nonsense! It's the most modern museum in the world!" Aitor Larramendi exclaimed. But he knew very well what the girl with the green eyes was referring to.

Rumors had begun circulating as soon as construction of the building started. The workers insisted that hair-raising phenomena occurred: tools were lost, and they resurfaced in unusual places; messages appeared engraved in cement that had been smooth the day before; blue flames and sparks could be seen where there were no electric connections; and, on one occasion, everybody saw, hard at work on the first floor, a plumber who at that precise moment was in the hospital undergoing a gallbladder operation. If someone can be present in two different places simultaneously, there's no doubt that the devil is involved. They brought in a bishop to bless the site, but the abnormal occurrences continued, so no one wanted to work there alone or at night. After the museum was completed, the artwork was installed, and the tourists began to arrive, the devil discreetly withdrew, and the rumors ceased. Nothing inexplicable had happened in the Guggenheim for many years.

"The building is crawling with alarms. I don't know why none of them went off," mumbled the inspector.

“Are you sure we were in the museum?” asked the girl.

“Are you messing with me, Bibiña?”

“I’m serious. If it was closed, as you say, and the alarms didn’t go off, maybe we were never inside. Look, I know the museum. I have been there a couple of times on school trips, and the truth is that the place where we made love didn’t look like the museum. It was more like some fantastical palace, something out of a movie.”

“What do you mean by *fantastical*?” asked Larramendi, suddenly intrigued.

“We saw diamonds dripping down the windows, and there was music like a waterfall.”

“That was the rain, child, just the rain,” Larramendi explained.

“And it smelled like ripe plums,” Bibiña added.

“That was probably the bridal flowers,” the inspector suggested.

“No. It was plums. Have you smelled plums? They have a dense fragrance that leaves a sense of urgency in the mouth.”

“Fine, it smelled of plums,” the inspector conceded.

“But there are no plums in winter. Don’t you think it’s strange? You say that we broke into the Guggenheim, but I am telling you that we were in a magical place. There were no walls; it was like being in a translucent sphere of light. Or at the bottom of an illuminated pool.”

“The museum is made of limestone, titanium, and glass, Bibiña. It has huge windows, and light pours in,” explained Larramendi.

“Yes, but it was nighttime.”

“Illumination inside is top notch,” he insisted.

“Believe me, Inspector, we wandered through fantastical rooms. Everything inside vibrated; it was alive; there were beings from other planets, the cosmos.”

“What do you know about the cosmos, child?”

“I saw a TV show about it. There were extraterrestrials and strange, friendly animals in that museum.”

“Those are modern art sculptures, Bibiña. Plexiglass, stone, acrylic balls, a steel spider, a gigantic dog covered in flowers, four brushstrokes on a canvas, the kind of art my three-year-old nephew can do, but this stuff costs a fortune. I hope you didn’t touch anything,” said the inspector.

“Why?”

“It’s forbidden.”

“Well, we didn’t know that. We touched everything, but we didn’t break anything, I promise. Did I tell you about the diamonds and the music?”

“I’m telling you, it was the rain on the window,” he repeated.

“I’m certain that there was something vibrating in the air, like a murmur, like the river of words we say without thinking when we make love. You know what I mean?” she asked.

“No.”

“That’s too bad. Then we started floating.”

“What do you mean by *floating*?” asked Larramendi, rubbing his temples with a sigh; he had a headache.

“Have you ever been in love, Inspector?”

“I ask the questions here. Understood?” he replied.

“We were floating and holding hands, carried by a breeze that billowed in my wedding dress. It was like swimming in the air.”

“There’s no breeze inside the museum. It must have been the heating,” explained the detective.

“Indar . . . That’s his name, right? Indar took off his pants, his shirt, and his briefs. His clothes also floated, even his shoes.”

“So he stripped naked in the museum. You admit to committing lewd and indecent acts in a public place,” the irritated inspector concluded.

“No. There was no public. Just the two of us. Indar wanted to take off my dress, but he couldn’t unfasten the little buttons,” she said.

“And you expect me to believe that, meanwhile, you were buzzing around like flies?” the detective interrupted.

“More like butterflies, I would say. We fluttered through the galleries and breezed in and out of the paintings, and we drank the colors and got lost in the labyrinth and danced with the sculptures; then we landed.”

“Where exactly?” Larramendi wanted to know.

“Who knows, Inspector! It was an enchanted palace; everything was hanging in midair, the crooked stairs went nowhere, the crystal elevator climbed to heaven, there were curves and surprises everywhere and soft corners where we could make love more comfortably than in any bed.”

The hound concluded that the girl had not only suffered the effects of intoxication, but she also had the brain of a chicken. He left her at the clinic in the hands of a male nurse who had witnessed the dialogue, mouth agape. Back at the station, Indar Zubieta, still handcuffed, was drinking coffee and commenting on the pope’s scandal with a couple of on-duty detectives and

a journalist. He was no longer naked. They had loaned him uniform pants and a shirt, which were too big for him, since he was slim as a dancer. Larramendi did not approve of fraternizing with the detainees because it undermined authority and was a violation of the rules. He had pounded this into his subordinates to no avail. He snatched the paper cup from the young man and dragged him by an arm to the interrogation room.

“So you didn’t ask the girl’s name,” he blurted out, picking up his questions where he had left them hours earlier.

“There wasn’t much time for conversation. We were rather busy,” Zubieta replied.

“Fornicating like dogs in heat!” snarled the inspector.

“I would say like angels,” answered Zubieta.

“Like a pair of lunatics, stark naked!” Larramendi insisted.

“Yes, I admit I was in my birthday suit, as you say. But she kept her dress on, and she was also covered by her long hair. Did you notice how beautiful her hair is, Inspector? Pure silk. Like the mane of a mermaid.”

“Hold the metaphors, Zubieta. How did you disconnect the alarms and the cameras?”

“I didn’t touch any of that. There are ghosts in that museum. My lame uncle had to repair an elevator there once on Good Friday, at night, and he says that he saw a sculpture moving with his own eyes.”

“Which one?”

“The one that’s all crooked and twisted like intestines.”

“What’s your uncle’s name?”

“Look, Inspector, you don’t want to mess with my family, especially my uncle. He is not a mellow guy,” the detainee warned.

Indar Zubieta corroborated everything that Bibiña Aranda had stated. In spite of his famous talent for finding fatal contradictions in the suspects’ testimonies, which had served him well in his career, Aitor Larramendi had to admit that he didn’t have enough evidence to put the young lovers in jail for even a few months. However, instead of feeling defeated, he had a mysterious spring in his step, as if walking on air, and he struggled to repress a smile from spreading across his face and revealing his true feelings. For the first time, the hound of Bilbao’s rusted heart rejoiced at an unpunished misdeed. He was used to dealing with assassins, thieves, narcos, and white-collar criminals, despicable people who deserved to feel

the blunt force of the law. But in this case it was the vice of love, easy enough to forgive.

There were still some older citizens who remembered the past rumors and believed, like Zubieta's lame uncle, that at night in the museum the statues danced the conga, the colors slipped from the canvases to promenade through the galleries, and the space was filled with playful spirits. He didn't believe any of that, of course; he was a rational man. After considering several possibilities, the astute detective determined that the lovers must've walked into the Guggenheim at the precise instant in which the museum entered the dimension of dreams, and they unwittingly fell into a time that is not marked by clocks. Larramendi knew it would be difficult to explain this theory to his superiors, but with a little luck he would not need to do so. He ground out the stub of his cigarette under his shoe. It was election time, there were terrorist threats, and the National Health System was on strike. The authorities had no time to waste with a couple in love. And the Guggenheim was just a museum, after all. Who cared about art? Now, if the kids had breached security at the Bank of Bilbao, well, that would be quite a different matter.

A few days later Aitor Larramendi closed the folder that he'd labeled "The Bewitched Lovers," and he stuck it at the back of one of the cabinets that held cold cases. There were four such file cabinets in his office, a dusty but meticulously organized cubicle. He was resigned to the fact that he would never be able to explain the mystery of the daring young fornicators.

The press, busy with the scandal at the Vatican, soon forgot the lovers. The museum director was still plagued by anxiety attacks even after he replaced the guards, installed a new security system, and hired a Dutch psychic to find out what was truly happening in those famed halls. The woman did not discover traces of extraterrestrials or spirits of any sort.

As for the protagonists of that lovefest, let's simply say that when Bibiña Aranda went to the dry cleaner to pick up her wedding dress, which she had carefully repaired, Indar Zubieta was waiting for her at the corner with a bouquet of fresh roses.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © Lori Barra

Isabel Allende is one of the most widely read authors in the world, having sold more than seventy-seven million books. Born in Peru and raised in Chile, Isabel won worldwide acclaim in 1982 with the publication of her first novel, *The House of the Spirits*. Since then, she has authored more than twenty-six bestselling and critically acclaimed books, including *Daughter of Fortune*, *Island Beneath the Sea*, *Paula*, and *The Wind Knows My Name*.

In 1996, following the death of her daughter, Paula, Allende established a charitable foundation in her honor. The foundation has awarded grants to more than one hundred nonprofits worldwide, delivering life-changing care to hundreds of thousands of women and girls.

In 2014, President Barack Obama awarded Allende the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, and in 2018 she received the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters from the National Book Foundation. Allende lives in California.