

>> For the past nine years, booklovers of all ages have gathered in Washington D.C. to celebrate reading at the Library of Congresses National Book Festival. This year, the library is proud to commemorate a decade of words and wonder at the 10th Annual National Book Festival on September 25, 2010. President and Mrs. Obama are honorary chairs of the event, which provides D.C. locals and visitors from across the country and around the world the opportunity to see and meet their favorite authors, illustrators and characters. The festival, which is free and open to the public as always, will be held on the National Mall from 10 to 5:30, rain or shine. And joining me today, I have the pleasure of speaking with novelist Isabel Allende. She's a Chilean-American, and her work has been translated into more than 30 languages and have been best sellers in Europe, Latin America and Australia, selling more than 56 million copies. At the National Book Festival, Allende will talk about her latest book, *Island Beneath the Sea*. The novel, which is her 18th, chronicles the journey of Zarite, I hope I pronounced that right,

>> Mm-hmm.

>> which begins when she is sold into slavery as a nine-year old girl in 18th century Santa Domingo. Miss Allende, thank you so much for talking with me today.

>> It's my pleasure.

>> Now, *Island Beneath the Sea* is full of intricate historical details, which isn't surprising given your prowess in the genre. What lead you -- why did you begin writing historical fiction? What drew you to that?

>> I started writing historical fiction when I came to California many years ago because I realized that San Francisco was only 150 years old at the time, and before that, it was a fertile village called Yerba Buena. And what really created the city and the splendor of this area was the gold rush. And so I started researching the gold rush and I was fascinated by all the historical data that you can get, not from history books so much, but from personal letters, from biographies and memoirs. So I got involved in that and I realized that when I have a place and I have researched that place and that time, I have a theater where I can move my characters easily. Half the work is done by the research. So I have written several historical novels.

>> Now, how much of your work and the creation that you do is purely imagination? How much is influenced by that research?

>> Usually, the characters are imagined. They are fictional and they are live fictional, but the setting is real. The historical events mentioned are real. I have researched them. And I am very careful with details. For example, how long would it take a horse to drive from here to there? What were the [Inaudible] of the war? What were they wearing under the dresses? That kind of stuff.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> There are historical characters mentioned. Like in my new book, all the generals of the revolution in Haiti [Inaudible] what was happening in the [Inaudible]. The American Revolution -- all that is historical.

>> Now, parts of *Island Beneath the Sea*, talk about hardships in 18th century Haiti and, of course, it's a country that's been in the news a lot recently for hardships. How did you choose Haiti as a setting for the novel?

>> I started with New Orleans, really, because I had written a novel called *Zorro* in 2003 and there is a chapter set in New Orleans. So I went there to research the city and the place and where the [Inaudible] had been and I fell in love with the city. This is before Katrina. And it's a city in the United States that has unique flavor. It has the French flavor, the Caribbean flavor. It has excellent cuisine, music, a black culture that is striking, and then it has also voodoo and a magic, a magic feeling to it. And I thought it had all the elements for a wonderful novel. So we're going to write a novel about New Orleans when I started the research. I went there again. I started the research and I realized that much of its flavor comes from 10,000 refugees that came to the city between 1800 and 1804. That was the time of the flavor evolved in what was then a French colony called Saint-Domingue. In 1804, they became an independent republic, the first independent republic in Latin America, the first Negro independent republic. And the whites that owned the plantations had to escape, and they escaped with their family and often with their domestic slaves that they trusted, to several places. They went back to Caan, where there was no slavery so they couldn't get there with their slaves. And they went to Cuba. And 10,000 of them went to New Orleans.

>> Now, as you've been doing your research, have you found connections between so-called historical Haiti and also modern-day life on the island?

>> Well, there is a connection. First of all, the way the society is formed. It's a country of descendents from African and that came from very different places in Africa. So you see several -- they don't all look alike. It's not a homogeneous country. Also, they have a violent past, not only because of the revolution that lasted many years and cost many, many lives, but also it's a country that has been occupied by the United States and by other countries, exploited, boycotted. So it has had a lot of hardships. Plus the hurricane and plus the corruption of a strong government. The generals that replaced [Inaudible] were ignorant men, very violent, most of them, and they sometimes exploited their own people. So they would sell into slavery to the fighters of the Caribbean the same people that have fought for independence in Haiti. So there is a lot of corruption. Today, in this very poor country that has suffered so much, there are 300,000 slaves. They are called the *restaveks* and they are children sold or given away into slavery because the parents cannot feed them. And these children work as domestic slaves in the most awful conditions. Many of them don't survive.

>> Yeah. Now, the novel spans the course of four decades. Is it difficult to cover such an expansive time in terms of your plot and your character development? Does it require a lot more intensive research?

>> It requires a lot of research, but it was not difficult because I was following the lives of my characters. So I start with Zarite when she is nine years old and I end when she is 40. So, and there is some precedent before she was born also. So, it's not difficult when you follow a character. It's the life of the person.

>> Now, the main characters in many of your works are really extraordinary women: brave, independent, adventurous. How do you develop those characters? Do you draw inspiration from real women in your life or how does that happen?

>> Well, people accuse me of having always strong women in my book, but my question is, have you ever met a weak woman?

>> [Laughter] I don't know if I have.

>> Yeah. You would have to really look to find one. So, these are women who have to fight against incredible obstacles, who are not protected by the big umbrella of the establishment and believe in the patriarchy because we live in a society that is patriarchal in which, especially then, men have all the privileges. And it's very hard for a woman to make it, to get their independence. At that time, women didn't have access to healthcare, education, freedom of any kind, so unless you were a high-class courtesan that would use men for her own benefits, your life was very limited. And so I have one character in the book, Violette, who is exactly that. She's a courtesan who has learned to use the only thing she has, which is her beauty, and use it to have an independent and good life. But that's very rare.

>> Yeah. Well, I want to talk a little bit more about your writing process in general. And of course we've talked about the historical details in your writing, but you're also described as a writer who employs magical realism. Do you agree with that assessment and what does that mean?

>> I agree that I use magic realism in some of my books, but I cannot really find, as a writer, off magic realism because there isn't magic realism in many of my books. The difference between fantasy and magic realism is that fantasy is out of the blue. You never see it in real life. You never experience it in any way. For example, an example of fantasy would be the invisibility cloak of Harry Potter. You put on a cloak and you disappear. No one has ever seen that.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> Now, magic realism would be invisible Indians in the Amazon. And there is an explanation. The explanation is that they paint their bodies in the colors of nature and they will walk and they move so silently and so gracefully that they can be two yards away and you don't see them. So there is an explanation for magic realism. You can -- if you say

invisible Indians, it sounds like magic realism, but there is evidence that that has happened, people have seen it, and there is an explanation.

>> Is that affected or inspired by a spiritual nature in your own life or where does that come from?

>> It comes from living in a continent and in circumstances in which I know that life is very mysterious. There are things happen that we cannot explain, that we cannot control. And yet we have evidence that they happen. For example, premonition. The fact that you sometimes have the feeling that you've been in that place or incredible connections that you make between people or events, dreams. There are prophetic dreams. The incredible power of emotion from passion that sometimes move a society, move the world. We go to war for things that are completely invisible, mysterious. We go to war for fear, for greed, for things that are uncontrollable. So, all of that is part of magic realism. And in my book, in the *Island Beneath the Sea*, there's another element, but it's [Inaudible] and that is voodoo.

>> Voodoo.

>> Voodoo -- yeah, it's a very interesting religion. First of all, it has one god only. And it has the law, very similar to the saints in the Catholic church. Its one half, certain characteristics, and half, certain jobs to do in the spiritual world. And these -- during the ceremonies, the practitioner, with the drums and the dancing, fall in a trance, some of them. They fall in a trance and in trance they are mounted by the law. They become the law. So they experience the divinity in themselves and that is a very empowering thing. I have seen it. I have seen it in Brazil and it is an extraordinary thing to watch, the empowerment of these people. For example, a young woman in her 20s that can be mounted by [Inaudible], law of the underworld, and then she acts and becomes like a crooked old man. And for the time of the trance, she is [Inaudible]. And so, when these slaves went to war against the troops of Napoleon, the best trained troops in Europe, and they defeated them, they were convinced that from the *Island Beneath the Sea*, which was paradise -- meaning 10,000 souls would rise for each man that was fighting to help them against the soldiers. So they would go with a machete and confront the cannons of Napoleon because they were empowered by religion and by the spiritual being.

>> Now, you said that in general you write your fictional works in Spanish and then they're later translated into English and other languages. What is that process like? Are you intimately involved and how difficult is that? I mean, I think of foreign languages where an idiom or a certain phrase isn't exactly as it would be in, say, English.

>> I work closely with my American translator, Margaret Sayers Peden, who has translated all of my books except the first one. And she sends me every 30 or 40 pages and I check it with my Spanish. I don't have to correct her English. The translation is always perfect. Sometimes she might make an irony or some word that could be better or something like that. But it's minimal. I trust her blindly. And what is interesting is that when I read my text in English, I correct my Spanish because I can

see my text through the filter of another language and I can see the problems that it may have.

>> Now, before you were an author, you were a journalist for many years. Does that background play any role in your methodology? I mean, I think of the research that you do and it might come in handy there.

>> It really does come in handy because it's not only the research. How to conduct an interview, how to go -- you know, as a journalist, the question is what happened, what happened. As a writer, the question is, why did it happen? And in the why, you get the story. So I use all the skills that I learned as a journalist, the efficient use of language, how to go to the point, how to try to grab the reader's attention and not let that attention drift up to the very end.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> How to write with pressure and with a deadline, which is also very important.

>> You've taught at a number of American universities as well, including University of Virginia, Montclair College, UC Berkeley. How would you describe your teaching style?

>> Well, I'm not teaching anymore and I would say that I was a lousy teacher. [Laughing] So I wouldn't recommend anybody to be my student. Usually, I think that it's very difficult to teach someone to become a storyteller, to be a good storyteller. You can teach anybody the skills of writing. You can write well if you learn to write well. That's not the problem. The problem is that for storytelling, you need a certain instinct. Many people can't play an instrument, but few people can play that instrument in a wonderful way.

>> Yeah.

>> And the same is with storytelling. Many people can tell a story, but who are the real good storytellers? That, you cannot teach.

>> So did you look at a lot of the work from your students and say this person can write, but there's just no way to teach them how to tell a story?

>> Well, I never tell them that. But, of course, I wouldn't because I would be horrible and I may be wrong. It's very subjective.

>> That's true.

>> But, I can teach them certain skills, how to develop a character, how to create tension, what to say and what to draw and what to hold back until the end, how to structure a story so that it works. That kind of stuff you can do. But the instinct of the storyteller, I can't. And in 20 students, you may have one that will become a writer. A lot will be writers but they would probably be writers of nonfiction

>> Yeah.

>> or they will be teaching in a school or something like that.

>> Exactly. You're related to Salvador Allende who served as President of Chile in the early 1970s. Has politics played a role in your own life?

>> Yes. Because of politics, I had to leave my country. There was a military coup in 1973. My uncle that was [Inaudible] died during the coup, millions of people were victims of the overt aggression in one way or another and many, many left the country. I was one among them with my family. And I lived for 13 years in Venezuela as a political exile. So I think I became a writer because I had to leave my country and I couldn't continue with my job. I lost everything. And my first novel, The House of the Spirits is like [Inaudible] to recover all the world I have lost after the coup. So, politics have always played an important role in my life and also women's issues. I've been very aware of the plight of women and trying to help.

>> Now that's, I would imagine some of the work that you're doing with the Isabelle Allende Foundation that you started in 1996.

>> Exactly. That's what we do.

>> What can you tell me about what the foundation does?

>> The foundation works with programs. We don't create anything new. We support programs that all ready exist, that help women and girls in the areas of education, healthcare and protection. We do it in several countries and always among the poorest of the poor.

>> Well, Miss Allende, thank you so much for your time. Before I let you go, do you want to give us a sense of what's coming up for you in the future?

>> What's coming up in the future?

>> Yeah. Any work?

>> I have another novel that I have to correct a little, but I think it's done. So that would probably be published next year in Spanish. But I don't know when it will be published in English.

>> Well, thank you so much for your time today. Appreciate you talking with me.

>> Well, thank you, Matt.

>> And we do look forward to seeing you at the National Book Festival. That's September 25, 2010 on the National Mall from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. As always, free and open to the public. At the Library of Congress, this is Matt Raymond. Thank you so much for listening.