

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
Tuesday, January 4, 2011

Location: Home of Bob and Mae Targett
Hosts: Bob Targett and Carol Fox
Novel: *The House of the Spirits*, Isabel Allende
Papers: Biographical: Toby Siegel
Critical: Jay Siegel

Twenty-four members and two guests were present for the meeting at Targetts' on a quiet winter evening. All enjoyed the refreshments provided by Targetts and Foxes, including sparkling wine in honor of Bob's upcoming transition to Emeritus status. Jill Mushkat attended as guest of Jack Conomy, and Siobhan Lukowsky as guest of Joyce Kessler. The program committee asked that someone suggest a location for the upcoming May annual business meeting; this issue seemed to be in the process of resolution. There were no reports from Treasurer or Corresponding Secretary. Minutes of the December meeting were read and approved.

Toby Siegel presented the biographical paper.

Isabel Allende attributes her transition from journalist to fiction writer partly to a remark made by Pablo Neruda during an interview appointment she had with him; the poet told Allende that she might be "the worst journalist in the world," and that she should write novels instead because in that context her flaws would become virtues. Allende has said "I am inventing myself all the time..." and claims that she always writes the first sentence of a new project "on January 8, the day I started *The House of the Spirits*." She writes first in Spanish, then translates. She published her first novel in 1982, and it began winning awards soon after. It represents a straightforward acceptance of the magical world she knew as a child living with her grandmother, who served as a model for the character of Clara. Allende was influenced in her development and her art by fairy tales as well as family tales.

Allende's first marriage lasted 25 years and her two children were born during it. When asked in an interview what was her proudest achievement, she answered that "motherhood is what justifies my existence." Yet her novels present important elements of her world view, including her feminist convictions. In her early years, she witnessed the revolution in Chile in which her cousin Salvador Allende died. This provided basis for much of the novel's

content, but her presentation of the story in her novel is strongly feminist, giving women great power—all of her main female characters are feminists. In Allende's view, the book offers hope and salvation for the Trueba family as well as for Chile.

Allende's memoir also tells of difficulties in making the movie of the novel (with Meryl Streep, Glenn Close, Antonio Banderas, and other stars). One important difficulty was that family members felt she had betrayed them by telling family secrets.

Jay Siegel presented the critical paper.

First published in 1982, *The House of the Spirits* is both an international best-seller and a recipient of much critical acclaim. Even though it was banned in Chile during the Pinochet period, 56 million copies have been printed, so it is probably the most-read of all South American novels. Women's Studies departments have been especially interested in Allende's work. The South American literature boom of the 1960s-70s, combined with the rising tide of feminism and Allende's political name recognition, may have contributed to the widespread attention gained by the novel.

One notable feature of the novel is its incorporation of "magical realism," an "aesthetic style/genre blending magic with realism in order to access another level of reality" (Wikipedia). Magical realism first got serious attention in Gabriel Garcia Marquez' 1967 novel *100 Years of Solitude*. Allende was at first flattered by comparisons between her novel and *100 Years of Solitude*, but later came to dislike comments on the similarity of her work to that one. Allende attributes the magical realism in her work to the influence of her own grandmother, not to influence of Garcia Marquez.

Recent critics have suggested that "for today's fiction to work, the author needs to stay out of the narration"—which is problematic in third-person narrative tied to the point of view of a certain character. Jay suggested that perhaps Allende does not achieve this stylistic goal, since she does tie narrative to certain characters' points of view. Does this create "static and two dimensional characterizations"? Arguably, the four generations of "strong women" in the novel (Nivea, Clara, Blanca, Alba) are nearly indistinguishable in this regard.

Next Jay raised the question of development of male characters. Esteban is perhaps the most interesting (potentially a tragic hero, parallel to Milton's Satan?) but Jay found it disappointing that Esteban gets mild and regretful in

his old age. Here, Allende gets in the way, and keeps Esteban's character from being clearly presented. Further, we learn only at the end of the novel that the overarching narrator is Alba—but still, the desired freedom and directness of style is not achieved with this main narrator either, because the novelist interferes.

In closing, Jay questioned whether *The House of the Spirits* is high quality fiction, persuasive on a deeper level, or disappointingly more like “supermarket fiction.”

Group discussion arose from the five questions presented:

1) What do you think of the title? ... Do you think that the emphasis of magic in the title distracts from the thrust of the novel?

Generally readers approved of the title, noting that it weaves together the eccentricities of the family (with spirits wandering in and out) with political events of the day (the “house” referring to the family dwelling as well as the dynasty)—and the concept that the house itself has many branches, not fully explored or finished—like life.

2) It has been said that Clara symbolizes spirituality and that Esteban emphasizes materialism and freedom. Do you agree or disagree?

Readers questioned the term “freedom” as describing the force of Esteban's character; rather, he seems aggressive, narrow-minded, clueless in some respects (sometimes even humorously so). Question arose whether Esteban was a “prisoner of his culture,” trapped in the macho pattern and therefore not to be condemned for his behavior.

However, readers did agree that Clara's character maintains a level of spirituality in the home, and once she is gone the household declines. Typically across cultures, those (like Esteban) who pursue material wealth lose hold of spiritual values. Conversely, slave cultures tend to be spiritual because they don't have material wealth to distract them.

On a related point, it was mentioned that the mountains and mists and fogs typical of much Chilean geography probably make it easy to visualize spirits coming and going.

3) Barrabas [named for the Biblical criminal who is granted his freedom] is a high visibility symbol in this novel. What does he symbolize and how does it reinforce the story?

The group as a whole seemed somewhat puzzled by the symbolism of Barrabas. Attempts were made to connect the plot concerning Clara's dog to that of the Biblical Barrabas. The question was raised whether the behavior of Barrabas with female dogs in the neighborhood was meant to parallel Esteban's behavior with the peasant girls (and Barrabas' death to suggest Esteban's comeuppance)? Discussion of this question did not seem to reach consensus.

4) Allende claims that the relationship between the sisters-in-law Clara and Ferula is not a lesbian relationship. Based on your reading, do you agree or disagree?

Consensus on this was that a loving and interdependent relationship between sisters-in-law was appropriate in the culture and Esteban's suspicion of impropriety was a projection of his own jealousy because he couldn't get Clara to return the strength of his feelings for her.

5) *Is* this novel "great" or "supermarket" fiction? Or something between the two?

Allende has supporters and detractors, among readers and among critics. Some of her strongest supporters are in Women's Studies departments; however, some of our discussants (Joyce and Siobhan) who teach in that area find Allende's work to be less focused, less complex, less fully or consistently developed than that of other South American feminist authors they have studied. Contrastingly, Jill pointed out that while some of that may be true, at the time this novel was published it was a leader in South American feminist writing.

Some felt that the novel was too limited in focus (dominated by gender-role concerns), whereas others felt it handled important universalities (about revolutions and prototypical characters). Whitney raised the concern of "near plagiaristic" similarities between Allende's plot and that of *100 Years of Solitude*—an issue we might revisit at our April meeting. Perhaps this is somewhere in between "great" and "supermarket" literature, a "good solid middle class novel." Ted Sande suggested in closing that from an historical perspective, we are too close to the events and author of the book to decide on its status as "a classic."

The group broke for a second round of refreshments to close the evening, with general compliments to the presenters for raising interesting and controversial issues.