

Book Review

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Left on a Genteel Doorstep

Isabel Allende's novel follows its foundling heroine from an English colony in Chile to the California gold rush.

DAUGHTER OF FORTUNE

By Isabel Allende.

Translated by Margaret Sayers Peden.

399 pp. New York:

HarperCollins Publishers. \$26.

By Ruth Lopez

ISABEL ALLENDE'S entry into the world of letters began abruptly in 1981 when, nearing 40, she started a letter to her centenarian grandfather. That letter turned into "The House of the Spirits," a best-selling novel that later became a movie. Allende, a Chilean former journalist who at the time was living in exile in Venezuela, wrote several more novels, then took a break from fiction in the mid-1990's and wrote two memoirs, "Paula," about the death of her daughter, and "Aphrodite: A Memoir of the Senses," a book on the sensual pleasures of life.

With all writers, perhaps particularly with former journalists, nothing really gets thrown out. All the extra stuff — all the details, the anecdotes — goes into a sort of literary compost pile.

Ruth Lopez is the book editor of The New Mexican in Santa Fe.

"Daughter of Fortune," Allende's latest historical novel, which covers a decade beginning in 1843, seems to spring from just such a fertile concoction.

Eliza Sommers, the protagonist among Allende's rich cast of characters, is raised in the English colony of Valparaiso, Chile. An orphan, she is abandoned on the doorstep of the British Import and Export Company and adopted by its owners, Miss Rose and her brothers, Jeremy and Captain John Sommers. Ensnared in this new family, Eliza inhabits a comfortable world of piano lessons, starched petticoats and social clubs — a world in which her aunt (a woman with a past, even at the age of 20) holds "musical Wednesdays" and has her charge sit with a metal rod strapped to her backbone during embroidery lessons. When the time is right, Rose is determined to send Eliza to Madame Colbert's exclusive school for girls.

Eliza's life is one that, class differences aside, isn't terribly alien from its surroundings. As Allende writes, the British and the Chileans actually have much in common, including "an absurd fondness for tradition, patriotic symbols and routine." Yet despite all this, Eliza always feels a bit out of place. It is a feeling that deepens after she overhears Jeremy telling a friend that she "hasn't

the least notion of her place in society."

Much to Rose's dismay, Eliza is most comfortable in the kitchen with Mama Fresia, the Sommers' cook and housekeeper, who spends her time among a crowd of animals, including the one that replaced Eliza's wet nurse after her milk went sour. "There the goat that had nursed Eliza ruminated through the winter; by now it was very ancient, but no one would think of sacrificing it, for that would be like murdering one's mother."

Eventually, Allende extends her storytelling in both time and geography, sweeping from Chile to northern California (where, incidentally, the author now resides). Eliza ends up in California for the gold rush of 1849 after running away in search of her lover, a young radical named Joaquín Andieta, who once held a subordinate position in the Sommers' trading company. Along with several other key characters, Andieta has joined the multicultural hordes who have gone off in search of their fortunes.

Eliza herself travels in the company of Tao Chien, a Chinese doctor whose own elaborate story is told over several chapters. In "Paula," Allende wrote about the "colorful" acupuncturist hired to work with her gravely ill daugh-

ter — "whom I am saving to be a character in a novel, that is, if I ever write fiction again." If Allende's readers found that statement disconcerting, they will be pleasantly surprised by the Technicolor appearance of Tao Chien.

In California, Eliza makes a living playing the piano in a brothel and discovers that she can maneuver much more freely when disguised as a male (known fondly as Chile Boy). She is separated from, then reunited with, Tao Chien and finally settles down to a life of her own, pulling her dresses out of hiding and ceasing her disguise.

In "Daughter of Fortune," a novel more akin to a television mini-series than a motion picture, Allende has continued her obsession with passion and violence. There is nothing profound in the novel's prose, which simply tells a pleasurable story. Somehow, even as "Daughter of Fortune" billows up, seemingly veering out of control, Allende smoothly navigates us through this harmless, happy monster of a book. To the very end, there are plenty of rene-gade currents threatening to pull the story in other directions.

That's called an abundance of material, and in Allende's case there's surely much more waiting in the wings, ready to be moved onstage in her next book. □