

Southfield Public Library

Japanese Lover by Isabel Allende

Discussion questions used at SPL June 13 & 14, 2017

Discussion Questions issued by the publisher

1. As Alma Belasco reflects on her long life and the decisions she made to leave Ichimei and marry Nathaniel, do you think she would have done anything differently if she had had the chance? Why or why not?
2. At the beginning of her time at Lark House, Irina observes, “In itself age doesn’t make anyone better or wiser, but only accentuates what they have always been.” (p. 13) Do you think this is true of Alma Belasco? Why or why not?
3. Alma and Samuel Mendel are just two of many people who were forced to flee Europe during World War II—leaving their homes and loved ones behind. How does this affect the rest of their lives? How does it impact their view of family?
4. Consider this passage as the Fukudas and other Japanese and Japanese-American families board the buses to the internment camp at Topaz:

“The families gave themselves up because there was no alternative and because by so doing they thought they were demonstrating their loyalty toward the United States and their repudiation of Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor. This was their contribution to the war effort.” (p. 88)

How does the experience at Topaz affect each of the Fukudas’ sense of patriotism and their experiences as Americans? How does this change for each character over the course of internment?
5. Compare and contrast how the Belascos, a very formal family, uphold tradition, versus how the Fukudas, a family of recent immigrants and nisei, respect tradition while embracing their new Americanism.
6. Alma and Ichimei both experience the tragedy and loss of WWII firsthand. How does it affect each of them as children? How does it contribute to their understanding of one another as adults later?
7. Ichimei Fukuda and Nathaniel Belasco are the two great loves of Alma’s life. How are they able to coexist in her heart?
8. What role does race play in the choices Alma makes about her relationship with Ichimei? How would their relationship have played out in a different time period? Compare this with the choices that Megumi makes in her relationship with the soldier Boyd Anderson.

9. How do the choices of each mother throughout the novel change the lives of their children? Consider Alma, Lillian, and Heideko.

10. In reconstructing her life story for Seth's book, Alma had the opportunity to piece "together the fragments of her biography, spicing them with touches of fantasy, allowing herself some exaggeration and white lies" (p. 177). How does it affect Alma, nearing the end of her life, to be able to control the narrative of her own life? Why do you think she chooses to leave out the stories about Ichimei at first? Why does she eventually decide to tell Seth and Irina the full story?

11. Consider this statement which Ichimei writes in a letter to Alma: "Love and friendship do not age." (p. 176) Is Ichimei right about this? Why or why not? Consider the way that their relationship changes throughout the novel.

My Questions:

1. In this Allende novel the author is accused of creating a series of stereotypical characters: the wealthy Jews, the "serene" Japanese, the traumatized and possibly alcoholic Eastern Europeans. Do you think she (Allende) has such a large cast of characters that inevitably it produces "forgot-to-tell-you flashbacks", as when Alma's lost brother suddenly appears, recounts his story, vanishes and then later reappears with a parenthetical reminiscence involving Israel.
2. Is this novel a typical "great loves" fairytale story where the men rescue the women, like knights on horseback — and when they issue orders ("Well, Irina, that's going to have to change"), the women are grateful? Does the author expect us to accept at face value that the women are looking to be rescued or told what to do?
3. Millions of people have traded great passion for conventional happiness or been enticed into love by a desirable lifestyle. But only in fairy tales do such compromises occur without many consequences. What are the consequences each character faces if they had chosen to follow their passion? Which would you choose; being true to oneself or obedient to family tradition and social expectations?
4. Are the characters authentic? If not how so? If so, in what ways, please give an example.
5. Topical issues discussed throughout the book include Aids, child abuse, the Holocaust, abortion, pornography, etc. How do you feel the author handled each issue? Was there enough written on the subject to inform you about the magnitude of each?
6. How well does the author explore ageing, love, friendship, family, etc.?

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General discussion questions

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author’s writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author’s use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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Title: Japanese Lover by Isabel Allende; Biography & Discussion Questions

Discussion questions taken from a website: LitLovers.com

website address: <http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-fiction/10387-japanese-lover-allende?start=1>

Author Bio

- Birth—August 2, 1942
- Where—Lima, Peru
- Education—private schools in Bolivia and Lebanon
- Awards—Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, 1998; Sara Lee Foundation Award, 1998; WILLA Literary Award, 2000
- Currently—lives in San Rafael, California, USA

Isabel Allende is a Chilean writer whose works sometimes contain aspects of the "magic realist" tradition. Author of more than 20 books—essay collections, memoirs, and novels, she is perhaps best known for her novels *The House of the Spirits* (1982), *Daughter of Fortune* (1999), and *Ines of My Soul* (2006). She has been called "the world's most widely read Spanish-language author." All told her novels have been translated from Spanish into over 30 languages and have sold more than 55 million copies.

Her novels are often based upon her personal experience and pay homage to the lives of women, while weaving together elements of myth and realism. She has lectured and toured many American colleges to teach literature. Fluent in English as a second language, Allende was granted American citizenship in 2003, having lived in California with her American husband since 1989.

Early background

Allende was born Isabel Allende Llonca in Lima, Peru, the daughter of Francisca Llonca Barros and Tomas Allende, who was at the time the Chilean ambassador to Peru. Her father was a first cousin of Salvador Allende, President of Chile from 1970 to 1973, making Salvador her first cousin once removed (not her uncle as he is sometimes referred to).

In 1945, after her father had disappeared, Isabel's mother relocated with her three children to Santiago, Chile, where they lived until 1953. Allende's mother married diplomat Ramon Huidobro, and from 1953-1958 the family moved often, including to Bolivia and Beirut. In Bolivia, Allende attended a North American private school; in Beirut, she attended an English private school. The family returned to Chile in 1958, where Allende was briefly home-schooled. In her youth, she read widely, particularly the works of William Shakespeare.

From 1959 to 1965, while living in Chile, Allende finished her secondary studies. She married Miguel Frias in 1962; the couple's daughter Paula was born in 1963 and their son Nicholas in 1966. During that time Allende worked with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in Santiago, Chile, then in Brussels, Belgium, and elsewhere in Europe.

Returning to Chile in 1996, Allende translated romance novels (including those of Barbara Cartland) from English to Spanish but was fired for making unauthorized changes to the dialogue in order to make the heroines sound more intelligent. She also altered the Cinderella endings, letting the heroines find more independence.

In 1967 Allende joined the editorial staff for Paula magazine and in 1969 the children's magazine Mampato, where she later became editor. She published two children's stories, Grandmother Panchita and Lauchas y Lauchones, as well as a collection of articles, Civilice a Su Troglodita.

She also worked in Chilean television from 1970-1974. As a journalist, she interviewed famed Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. Neruda told Allende that she had too much imagination to be a journalist and that she should become a novelist. He also advised her to compile her satirical columns in book form—which she did and which became her first published book. In 1973, Allende's play El Embajador played in Santiago, a few months before she was forced to flee the country due to the coup.

The military coup in September 1973 brought Augusto Pinochet to power and changed everything for Allende. Her mother and diplomat stepfather narrowly escaped assassination, and she herself began receiving death threats. In 1973 Allende fled to Venezuela.

Life after Chile

Allende remained in exile in Venezuela for 13 years, working as a columnist for El Nacional, a major newspaper. On a 1988 visit to California, she met her second husband, attorney Willie Gordon, with whom she now lives in San Rafael, California. Her son Nicolas and his children live nearby.

In 1992 Allende's daughter Paula died at the age of 28, the result of an error in medication while hospitalized for porphyria (a rarely fatal metabolic disease). To honor her daughter, Allende started the Isabel Allende Foundation in 1996. The foundation is "dedicated to supporting programs that promote and preserve the fundamental rights of women and children to be empowered and protected."

In 1994, Allende was awarded the Gabriela Mistral Order of Merit—the first woman to receive this honor.

She was granted U.S. citizenship in 2003 and inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2004. She was one of the eight flag bearers at the Opening Ceremony of the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, Italy.

In 2008 Allende received an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from San Francisco State University for her "distinguished contributions as a literary artist and humanitarian." In 2010 she received Chile's National Literature Prize.

Writing

In 1981, during her exile, Allende received a phone call that her 99-year-old grandfather was near death. She sat down to write him a letter wishing to "keep him alive, at least in spirit." Her letter evolved into The House of the Spirits—the intent of which was to exorcise the ghosts of the Pinochet dictatorship. Although rejected by numerous Latin American publishers, the novel was finally published in Spain, running more than two dozen editions in Spanish and a score of translations. It was an immense success.

Allende has since become known for her vivid storytelling. As a writer, she holds to a methodical literary routine, working Monday through Saturday, 9:00 A.M. to 7:00 P.M. "I always start on 8 January," Allende once said, a tradition that began with the letter to her dying grandfather.

Her 1995 book *Paula* recalls Allende's own childhood in Santiago, Chile, and the following years she spent in exile. It is written as an anguished letter to her daughter. The memoir is as much a celebration of Allende's turbulent life as it is the chronicle of Paula's death.

Her 2008 memoir *The Sum of Our Days* centers on her recent life with her immediate family—her son, second husband, and grandchildren. *The Island Beneath the Sea*, set in New Orleans, was published in 2010. *Maya's Notebook*, a novel alternating between Berkeley, California, and Chiloe, an island in Chile, was published in 2011 (2013 in the U.S.). Three movies have been based on her novels—*Aphrodite*, *Eva Luna*, and *Gift for a Sweetheart*. (Adapted from Wikipedia. Retrieved 5/23/2013.)

CAMP LOCATION	POPULATION	DATE OPENED
Amache, Colorado	7,318	Aug. 27, 1942
Gila River, Arizona	13,348	July 20, 1942
Heart Mountain, Wyoming	10,767	Aug. 12, 1942
Jerome, Arkansas	8,497	Oct. 6, 1942
Manzanar, California	10,046	Mar. 21, 1942
Minidoka, Idaho	9,397	Aug. 10, 1942
Poston, Arizona	17,814	May 8, 1942
Rohwer, Arkansas	8,475	Sept. 18, 1942
Topaz, Utah	8,130	Sept. 11, 1942
Tule Lake, California	18,789	May 27, 1942

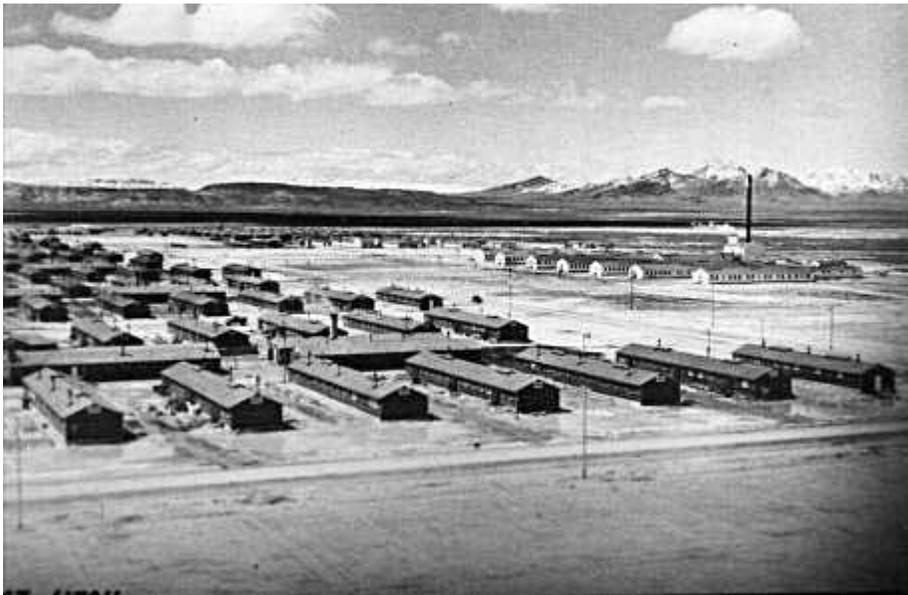


Photo credit <http://ilovehistory.utah.gov/time/stories/topaz.html>











Topaz Internment Camp Museum replica of the living conditions.

