**Cathedral Reads 2023**

**The House of the Spirits**

**Discussion Questions for Small Groups**

Guide: Please use these questions as a starting place for everyone in your group to share their experience with the novel, to learn from one another, and to determine what direction your group would like to go in their exploration of *The House of the Spirits* this summer. You might choose a few for each meeting and send them to your group to consider in advance. There will be no quiz at the end of the summer!

Groups should begin with a centering moment, a short prayer, quote, or breath exercise to get everyone focused and then a quick check in with each member: where are they in the novel, how’s the reading going, and how was their day in general. Please set some ground rules at the first meeting so that everyone knows how the discussion will flow— will the leader call on each person, will one speaker invite another to speak next, how will you make sure that everyone has a chance to speak but is not put on the spot if they just want to listen during that meeting—and how to be respectful of each other’s points-of-view. Perhaps your group wants to assign someone to look into a topic that arises in discussion and bring more information to the next meeting. Perhaps you want to take turns bringing a prayer or quote to the group. Then, before you sign off, the leader or another member can offer a parting word or something to think about before the next meeting.

If you choose one question and stay with it for your entire session, that’s ok; and if you race through all these questions and go elsewhere to find points of discussion, that’s ok, too. Our goal is to have you immerse yourself in the world Isabel Allende has created in order that you might share your experience with it with others in our community. And, in doing that, perhaps make new discoveries: a new friend, a new author, a new turn of phrase, or a new perspective. However you choose to approach this summer’s novel, we wish you good reading!

**Questions for Discussion:**

There are many characters in the novel. How are you keeping them straight as you read? Whose perspective are you connecting with the most?

Clara has supernatural powers: she can read auras, predict natural disasters, levitate furniture, and talk to ghosts. What do you think about this? Does it spark your imagination or does it make it hard for you to relate to her? How do her powers help her and hinder her with her relationships with her family?

Why does Clara choose to be silent? Is this a form of power or self-protection? How can silence be used positively and how can it be used negatively?

What is Clara’s relationship to the big house on the corner? How do the dwellings affect the family? What do homes represent in fiction and in life?

What is the importance of writing to Clara? Do you have family members who have kept journals or records? How have they impacted your understanding of your family or your history?

What is the relationship between Blanca and her Uncle Marcos? How are their gifts similar? How do they differ? Do you have any characters like Uncle Marcos in your life?

Esteban Trueba is an angry character. What made him this way? How does it affect his family? How does his character evolve? What other reactions could he have had to his circumstances?

How does Esteban deal with the different women in his life? If you asked them, would they agree about what type of person he is, or would they have different perspectives?

Why is Esteban’s relationship with Alba different than those with the other women in the family? Why do we show different parts of ourselves to different people? Is it possible to be fully known by another individual?

Alba has a very intense life, from the beginning. What aspects of her life were the most striking to you? How do her experiences shape her?

Alba represents the power of feminine relationships. How does Allende make this point?

The name Blanca means “shining white,” which connotes purity and thereby underscores the sexist expectations of her patriarchal society—Blanca is valued only for her potential as a wife and mother, and her life is determined entirely by men. How does she relate to the men in her family? To the women? How do her experiences shape the life of her daughter?

What is Blanca’s relationship with Pedro Tercero? Is this a positive relationship in her life? Why or why not?

What does Pedro Tercero represent in the novel?

What is Esteban Garcia’s relationship to Esteban Trueba? How does this shape his character? How does Allende suggest we can break negative cycles in families?

Férula’s character also underscores the many forms love can take and the power love has to transcend all things, including death.

Férula’s character shows us the many forms love can take and the power love has to transcend all things, including death. What are some examples of this? What did you think of her? How does she evolve over the course of the novel?

Who is the Poet? What role does he play in the story? The book opens with a Neruda quote. Have you ever read any of the work of Pablo Neruda? What do you think of it? Does reading this novel give you more perspective on it?

Many of the characters have traits that are attributed to their ancestors. What are some of these traits? How do the characters use them? What are the similarities and differences in how the same trait affects different characters? Are there notable traits in your family? How have they affected your relatives?

Esteban Trueba, Esteban Garcia, Pedro Tercero, and Miguel all grow up in families that struggle financially, yet their lives take very different paths? What are the differences in their situations? Could any of them have ended up differently?

The country in the novel is very divided along economic lines. How does economic status affect different characters’ reaction to and experience with the revolution? Do any of the character’s reactions surprise you? If so, why?

Clara tells Blanca that the poor don’t need charity, they need justice. What are the differences between the two? Which do you see more often in the world?

Jean de Satigny is a complex character. What do you believe he represents? What choices does he make to change his status? How do these choices work out for him?

Miguel says, “We always think things like that only happen elsewhere, until they happen to us, too.” Were characters in the novel naive to the changing world? If so, why? Why do some people believe that issues of the world can’t touch them? How do we create a healthy and realistic understanding of our relationship to the world?

Reviewing the novel for *The Washington Post*, Jonathan Yardley said, “The only cause *The House of the Spirits* embraces is that of humanity, and it does so with such passion, humor and wisdom that in the end it transcends politics…” Do you agree or disagree? If you agree, what aspects of the novel allow Allende to accomplish this? If you disagree, how do you think it falls short of this accomplishment?

What are passages of the novel that you particularly liked? Were you more engaged with the plot, the prose, the imagery, or the combination? How do they work together?

Have you read other books in the magical realism tradition? Has reading this changed your opinion of the style? Why did Allende choose this style for her first novel?

If you were able to attend one of Dr. Lois Zamora’s Zoom lectures, what insight did you gain from her? How did her explanations affect your reading of the novel?

Have you seen the artwork of Remedios Varo? What do you think of it? Does it enhance your understanding of the novel? Why or why not? Does it change your understanding of magical realism? If so, how?

Time is fluid in the novel, and Allende reveals the fate of many of the characters well before the storyline explains the details. What do you think of this technique? How does it relate to the way you experience time?