

China from the unenviable position of having the most mining-related deaths in the world. While this move hurts certain businesses and raises prices, it addresses some of the leading causes of China’s social unrest.

The effects of this strategy have been acutely felt by renewable energy, consumer electronic, and defense industries worldwide. The high prices have also opened up new horizons of mining possibilities, such as the northern Brazilian Amazon, where reserves have been known about for decades but were, until recently, considered too remote and too ecologically sensitive to extract. Not anymore: Brazil’s Rousseff administration recently declared the goal of making the country self-sufficient in REEs — and eventually controlling a third of the global supply.

While a greater supply would bring welcome price relief to industries around the world, it comes at a cost. Brazil’s REEs — like China’s — are located in ecologically sensitive regions, some of which are populated by indigenous peoples. As China takes steps to reign in environmental degradation and mining fatalities in this strategic sector, it displaces the problem elsewhere, to places willing to look the other way while new mining concessions flout national labor and environmental protection laws.

But within this problem lies tremendous potential for international collaboration around sustainable REE production, which should include expanding specialized recycling facilities to recapture these important elements. The greatest untapped reserve may not lie beneath the forests and deserts of the world but instead in our mine tailings and electronic waste. REEs have long been a waste product in iron, silver, and phosphate mines. Before prices went through the roof, it wasn’t economically feasible to filter through mine tailings for these precious resources. The game has changed.

Expanding recycling facilities and filtering for REEs in existing mine tailings will reduce the demand for China’s REEs and help bring prices down. If we can afford to buy these elements from the Mongolian steppe and the high Amazon, surely we can afford to invest in advanced recycling facilities a little closer to home.

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Rare earths on display in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Museum, Hohhot, China.



Photo by Julie Klinger.



Photo by Peg Skorpinski.

Isabel Allende signs copies of her new book at UC Berkeley.

LITERATURE

Maya’s Notebook

by James Lamb

Perhaps the most powerful moments of best-selling author Isabel Allende’s recent public appearance at UC Berkeley centered on her own family’s experiences with drug addiction and tragedy. She shared with the audience the pain caused by the addiction and recent death of her husband’s son, Harley, just “four weeks ago,” the second child in the family to be lost to drug dependency. “My family is grieving right now... it has touched us in terrible ways,” the author explained. These personal experiences deeply inspired her most recent novel, *Maya’s Notebook*. Referencing this tragedy she said, “All the experience of Maya is what Harley lived.”

Allende’s revelations came in the context of an event marking the release of *Maya’s Notebook* in English that took the form of a public conversation with UC Berkeley Professor Beatriz Manz. In the course of the conversation, Allende, who has been called “the world’s most widely read Spanish-language author” and who once taught creative

writing at UC Berkeley, reflected upon many aspects of her creative process, from how she gets to know the geographic areas she writes about to her relationship with the literary and artistic genre known as magical realism.

*Maya’s Notebook* tells the story of a Chilean-American teenager raised by her grandparents in Berkeley, California, whose promising path as a good student and athlete is traumatically re-directed by the death of her grandfather and her grandmother’s subsequent depression. In the wake of this blow, Maya begins a descent into drug use, delinquency, and crime that leads her to a school for troubled teens in Oregon and ultimately to the streets of Las Vegas, where she ends up homeless, addicted, and fighting for her life. Maya finds herself running away from her past as well as from hardened criminals, the police, and the FBI. In a climactic moment when Maya is near death on a restroom floor, the voice of her deceased grandfather gives her the motivation

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Photo by Megan Kang.

Isabel Allende's latest novel *Maya's Notebook*.

to keep living. Eventually, Maya is rescued by her grandmother who sends her first to rehab and then to the remote island of Chiloé, off the southern coast of Chile. It is a place that is the complete opposite of Las Vegas in terms of modern stimulation, entertainment, and lifestyle, according to Allende.

The two principal locations in which the novel takes place, Berkeley and Chiloé, were the subject of an early question from Professor Manz, who inquired about the inspiration for using these places and the method of knowing them as an author. Allende recounted her many trips to Chiloé and the personal relationships she cultivated with residents of the island during nights spent listening to the stories and myths of the archipelago while drinking tea around a traditional wood-burning stove. She also took a special research trip with a skillful guide who helped her get to know the culture more deeply. Similarly, although she knew Berkeley as a long-time San Francisco Bay Area resident, she told the audience that she spent time “hanging out” in the park across from Berkeley High School, a popular social gathering

spot for local youth and a key setting in the novel. It is through spending time in a place and hearing the everyday stories and gossip of its residents that a person can really begin to know a community, Allende suggested.

Asked by Professor Manz what made this novel different from her other works, Allende emphasized both the immediacy of her emotional bond with the characters as well as the story’s contemporary, rather than historical, setting. Maya “made me suffer as no other of my characters” according to the author, who acknowledged that there is much of herself in Maya’s grandmother and would-be savior. Another important factor is that the book is set in the current decade, written in 2010 when Allende’s own teenage granddaughters were a constant presence in her life. Their struggles with contemporary youth culture are likewise represented in Maya’s character. This focus is a notable departure for an author whose works have often featured historical themes. Indeed, Allende joked that the three years that have elapsed since the book was released in Spanish made it a “historical novel.”

The writer also shared some of her thoughts on magical realism, an artistic genre of Latin American origin with which Allende has frequently been associated. She embraced the term and its relationship to the novel. “Magic realism is everything that we cannot explain, or buy, or control... it is accepting all that we don’t know,” and it is also a “great literary device,” said Allende. In *Maya’s Notebook*, this element is most strongly present in the mythologies of the island of Chiloé. There, few would claim to believe in traditional magical stories and superstitions, yet they seem to have a deep influence on the island’s people nonetheless. Reflecting on how beliefs of other cultures are often dismissed as superstitious, Allende emphasized that she is open to the reality and importance of “dreams and prophetic visions,” adding “there are no boundaries between the other world and this world.”

A later question from the audience referred to these dreams and prophetic visions with reference to Allende’s writing and creative process. Allende related that as she works, she is “quiet, silent, alone for long periods of time, like a monk” and that in this context, she hears the voices of her characters. She said that she often dreams of babies during her writing process, a pattern of imagery that she has learned reflects the journey of writing the stories themselves. For Allende, magical realism is simply listening deeply, whether to nature or to her characters’ voices or to her own unconscious as it might appear in dreams. This manner of listening and thinking is, for her, opposed to a world that is “rational and that we can control.”

Allende also addressed questions about how complex contemporary social issues around race, ethnicity, and gender have influenced her life and work as well as her characters.

Asked about Maya’s ethnic self-conception and Berkeley’s complicated multicultural environment, Allende described the varied ethnic tapestry of Maya’s world. She noted that Maya’s grandmother is a Chilean immigrant who falls in love with an African-American man, that Maya’s father is a Chilean pilot and her mother a Danish woman, that Maya looks Scandinavian but has a Chilean mentality strongly influenced by her grandmother, and finally, that Maya ends up among the indigenous people of Chiloé. Allende emphasized that the novel is multicultural with “all kinds of interracial stories in the book.”

Reflecting on an audience member’s question regarding how she deals with machismo as a Chilean woman, Allende ruminated upon changes over the course of her life. As “a feminist before the word was invented,” Allende said that there have been many important changes since her realization as a five-year-old child that her mother was fundamentally oppressed, “a victim... of the males in the family of the society.” While she has seen improvements for women, she also noted how much more needs to be done in terms of gender equality, particularly with regard to violence against women, and in this regard, she noted that she has set up a foundation for the empowerment of women and girls. Allende also expressed her belief that

A house on Chiloé.



Photo by Carlos Cerulla.

her granddaughters have much better opportunities than she did and that there has been more progress for women authors in the U.S. literary world than in Latin America.

Responding to a question about the legacy she would like to leave behind, Allende initially argued that this consideration is a male preoccupation. “I think legacy is,” she then added, “the contribution to the collective culture, to the collective unconscious, to our collective dreams. We all contribute somehow, and that is the legacy we have. The rest is just vanity.”

Finally, the event closed with a moving video made by students in Chiloé thanking the author for the touching representation of their home conveyed in the novel.

Isabel Allende is an international best-selling author and a winner of Chile’s National Literature Prize. Beatriz Manz is a professor in the Departments of Geography and Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley. They spoke for CLAS on April 25, 2013.

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VIDEO AVAILABLE AT [CLAS.BERKELEY.EDU](https://clas.berkeley.edu)