Zorro Strikes Again

By Kirsten Sehnbruch

Photo by Dionicia Ramos.

Isabel Allende speaks to a packed auditorium at UC Berkeley.

Isabel Allende's new Zorro is clearly a creation in which the author has put much of herself, of her dreams and her own values. Having frequently used her pen to portray the injustices perpetrated during the Pinochet dictatorship in her native Chile in the 1970s and 1980s, in novels such as *The House of the Spirits* and *Of Love and Shadows*, Allende has now used her pen to portray the fight for justice of one of fiction's most popular and enduring heroes: Zorro.

Allende fell in love with the character and legend of Zorro at an early age, when Guy Williams played the romantic hero in a TV series, which was broadcast in Latin America in the early 1970s. Laughing, she remembered how her stepfather, then serving as Chilean ambassador to Buenos Aires, would leave important meetings in order to watch the latest episode. Her fascination with the character was heightened by the 1998 portrayal of Zorro by Antonio Banderas, whom she describes as the perfect man: immensely attractive, athletic, with a sense of humor and who can act, sing and dance.

During the spirited and often hilarious discussion of the birth of a new Zorro that took place in Berkeley between Isabel Allende and Sandy Curtis, both authors agreed that the Zorro

character has lasting appeal to audiences around the world, not least because of his tremendous entertainment value. But in Latin America the character has special appeal as the concern for social justice is still very present today. As Allende put it: "There is always a hope that someone will step up and fight for the underdog." She drew a parallel between the enduring appeal of the Zorro legend with the historical figure of Che Guevara, whose idealism equally fascinates Latin Americans.

Commissioned by the company Zorro Productions, which is represented by Sandy Curtis, to write her book *Zorro: A Novel*, Allende for the first time in her life had to sketch out the complete story of the book she was about to write before actually writing it. Her task was to fill in the gaps in the Zorro story. The author of the original Zorro stories, Johnston McCulley, never gave his readers an explanation as to why a 15-year-old boy from an aristocratic Spanish family, born and raised in California in the latter part of the 18th century, would be interested in Native Americans or the poor, let alone seek justice for the abused. All we know from the original novels is that as a 15-year-old, Diego de la Vega saw priests and Indians being abused by the soldiers of the Spanish army and determined to do something about it. So the question that guides the book is: How did Diego become the masked man, Zorro, whom we have all come to know so well?

Thus, Isabel Allende set about inventing the story that answers this question. Her only limitation was the final character that Johnston McCulley had invented, but she was completely free to fill in the gaps that McCulley had left wide open.

When she was researching the period, Isabel Allende came across the story of a 20-year-old female warrior by the name of Toypurnia, who for the first and only time united the various native Indian tribes in California under her command and fought the Spanish army. Although she eventually lost her battle, Toypurnia was not executed but instead converted to Christianity and married a Spanish soldier. Using this historical anecdote as background material, Allende created Diego de la Vega as the child that sprang from this union — a child who inherited plenty of warrior spirit from both his parents.

One thing that had always bothered Allende about the Zorro stories was that this hero who fought for the rights of poor Indians should have an Indian manservant, Bernardo, who, to make matters worse, was generally portrayed as rather foolish and stupid. To make her story more coherent with Zorro's ideals, she reinvented Bernardo as Diego de la Vega's *hermano de leche* (a boy who shared the same wet-nurse). This allowed the author to create a strong bond between the two boys as they grow up and become men, so that towards the end of the book they become almost indistinguishable as characters. Allende also added a maternal grandmother to the story who is an Indian shaman to justify further Diego's deep bond with native Indians, thus adding another dimension to the story.

Of course, romance also had to be included. The fifteen-year-old Diego is sent by his father to Barcelona to be educated, where he falls unhappily in love with the beautiful Juliana, one of two daughters of the family he stays with, but who unfortunately sees him as an uneducated brat from California. As Allende pointed out, beautiful women are not very useful in developing a story. Normally, she would kill them off by page 60. But in this case she used a beautiful woman to create a tale of unrequited love, which also makes for a good story line.

Allende explained that the most difficult part of writing Zorro was to write about fencing. First of all, she knew very little about fencing herself, but she also assumed that her readers would not know very much about it either. This meant that she could not freely use fencing terms to describe the fights in the book but had to describe them. In order to help herself, and to the bewilderment of her grandchildren, she acted out dueling scenes in front of a mirror, even using a mask to make the enactment more authentic. At some point during these practice sessions, somebody sketched a picture of her with a mask, which is the drawing that appears

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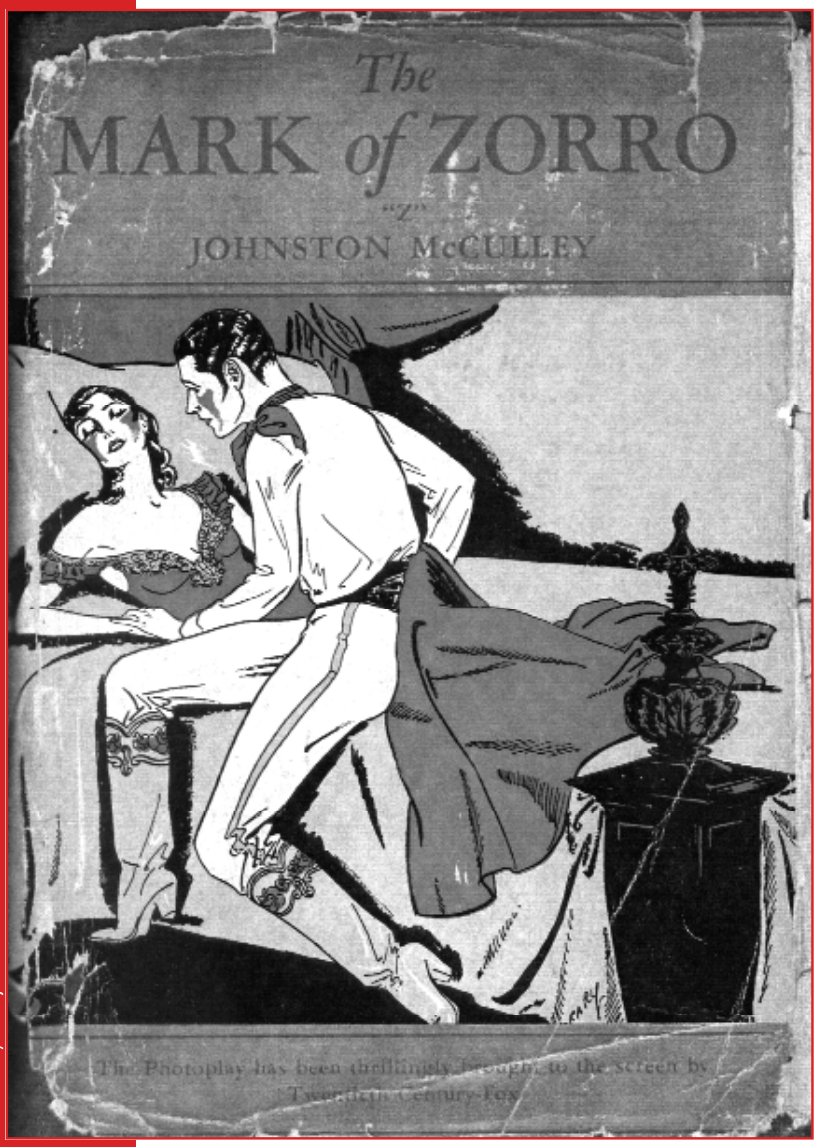

Photo courtesy of Sandy Curtis.

The cover of an early version of the Zorro story.

on the back cover of the book.

During the conversation, Isabel Allende also satisfied her own curiosity by asking Sandy Curtis why she chose her as the author for this job. Curtis replied that over the years Zorro Productions had been approached by many writers who wished to add to Don Diego's story, none of whom she felt ever did the legend justice. She explained that the character, Zorro, deserved a grand story told by a grand story-teller, who ideally had to be somebody who would be able to connect with the story's Native American roots as well as with its historical element of Spanish colonial power, and who had to be able to speak for and to Latinos. Curtis felt that Allende was perfect for the job.

But while both authors agreed that the larger-than-life hero Zorro represents the stuff that dreams are made of, they also concurred that there are many little Zorros whom we encounter in our daily lives who make the world a better place. Whether it be the thousands of people who were involved in helping the victims of the recent hurricane Katrina that devastated the city of New Orleans and much of the Gulf Coast, or whether it be the thousands of people who helped others during the bloody military coup that transformed Chile overnight and that Isabel Allende lived through as a young woman: they are the often silent, unsung heroes of our real lives. The good that is represented by the stories of these people probably takes us a long way towards explaining the enduring appeal of the Zorro character for these authors as well as for their readers and cinema audiences worldwide.

Isabel Allende is the author of several novels and a short fiction collection as well as plays and stories for children. Sandy Curtis is the head of creative development for Zorro Productions and has written seven Zorro novels as well as *Zorro Unmasked: The Official History*. They spoke at UC Berkeley on September 22, 2005.

Kirsten Sehnbruch is a visiting scholar at the Center for Latin American Studies.