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Isabel Allende: What's the Mystery?

Julie Dolcemaschio · Wednesday, February 26th, 2014

Literary author [Isabel Allende](#) seems to know what she likes. Mystery fiction apparently does not top her list. Her latest novel, *Ripper*, is a mystery—her first. And of it, she said in a recent [NPR interview](#):

“The book is tongue in cheek. It’s very ironic ... and I’m not a fan of mysteries, so to prepare for this experience of writing a mystery I started reading the most successful ones in the market in  2012...”

Not a bad approach. In researching BDSM themes for *50 Shades of Grey*, E.L. James researched whips and chains on the Internet.

Allende goes on to say:

“I realized I cannot write that kind of book. It’s too gruesome, too violent, too dark; there’s no redemption there. And the characters are just awful. Bad people. Very entertaining, but really bad people. So, I thought, I will take the genre, write a mystery that is faithful to the formula and to what the readers expect, but it is a joke. My sleuth will not be this handsome detective or journalist or policeman or whatever. It will be a ... 16-year-old nerd”

Okay. An author who thinks outside the box. Well done.

Not everyone feels the same. Mystery-genre fans and authors alike weighed in on the opinions of the diminutive 71-year-old novelist who is famous for *The House of the Spirits*, *City of the Beasts*, and about 20 others. Her literary awards are too numerous to mention. God forbid she should have an opinion, or write what she wants. One [independent bookstore owner](#) sent copies of Allende’s book back to the publisher. She explained why:

“Mystery and genre writers deal with this all the time from so-called literary authors. But for her to have gotten paid to write a mystery when she doesn’t even like the genre – how would she expect mystery readers to react to that?”

Erm, not buy the book? And I’ll be honest; I’ll write the phone book in Latin if I’m being paid—and I *hate* the phone book. Don’t care much for the phone, either. Oh, crap! Hey, AT&T...don’t cut off my phone...please?

Mystery author [Val McDermid](#) had this to say:

“It’s great to see the crime-writing community rising up in its own defense. For years we’ve been the butt of ignorant prejudice from the literary genre and we’ve taken it on the chin, muttering in corners and up our sleeves about how misunderstood we are. But clearly we’re not going to stand for it any longer.”

Clearly. Sort of like a Bouchercon mad-as-hell-and-we’re-not-going-to-take-it-anymore rally cry. Being a crime fiction writer myself, I had no idea our collective had been so befouled by the literary community. I must have been too busy writing. Unfortunately, Ms. McDermid has been peeved for quite some time.

“The great thing about this backlash,” she continued, “is that it’s coming from readers as well as writers – it can’t just be written off as wounded *amour propre*. (Is that a bit too literary? Using French?)”

Not at all. And backlash is always great. We writers like to get in a stew about other writers, and it doesn’t take much. As a sometime romance writer, I got quite *outré* over *50 Shades of Grey*, even before I read it. In order to lend credence to my opinion, I read the book, and then ran from the house screaming, “My eyes! My eyes!” Then I got positively *fou furieux*. The book wasn’t good—at all. Oh...and I couldn’t put it down. I tried to figure out why it worked for so many people, but in the end I realized that it did not matter what I thought, or why it worked. E.L. James is a gazillionaire, and someone hot will be playing Christian Grey in the movie. Is Allende’s book, *Ripper*, good? I have no idea. I’ve not read any of her books. I wonder if other mystery writers have read the book. Probably not, since Ms. Allende holds all mysteries in such low esteem.

In trying to get worked up over Ms. Allende’s alleged dis on our esteemed genre—and for the record, all she said was she wasn’t a fan of mysteries—I tried to put myself in E.L. James’s shoes. One either loves her work—and by extension, her—or they hate it/her. That Ms. James admits in interviews that the BDSM scenes in “The Red Room of Pain” (you have to read the book to understand) were taken off the Internet gets whole dungeons full of erotica authors yanking off their ball gags and getting out their suede floggers. They are the same ones, by the way, who praise the book as the ‘gateway’ to erotica—meaning *their* books. We’re a fickle bunch, yes? But, really, who cares? The woman is laughing her ass off all the way to the bank. If she laughs her way to the Oscars, I’m moving to the Northumberland coast with Ms. McDermid. She says it’s lovely there, and I believe her.

In the end, it was this comment from author [Mark Billingham](#) that cracked me up, and then sent me to freshen my martini in salute to Ms. Allende:

“Those poor, ignorant reviewers are simply not getting her fantastic ‘joke’,” said Billingham, in reference to the notion that Allende called her attempt at mystery-writing ‘a joke’ only after reviewers began skewering the book. He goes on to say, “Allende claims that she’s not a fan of mysteries, which is her prerogative, but she happens to be married to a mystery writer. I’m guessing it’s been an interesting Valentine’s Day in the Allende household.”

God, I sure hope so. Someone should be having fun over this. Cheers, Isabel.

Top: Photo of Isabel Allende, © Lori Barra.

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