

# Isabel Allende Defends ‘House of the Spirits’ to North Carolina School Board

[slj.com/2013/11/censorship/nc-school-board-to-consider-author-letter-in-review-of-allendes-house-of-the-spirits/](http://slj.com/2013/11/censorship/nc-school-board-to-consider-author-letter-in-review-of-allendes-house-of-the-spirits/)

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Isabel Allende’s acclaimed novel *The House of the Spirits* (Knopf, 1982), which faces the first of two reviews on Wednesday evening, November 20, by a school district-wide committee of North Carolina’s Watauga County Board of Education due to a parental complaint, now has another high-profile advocate: the author herself.

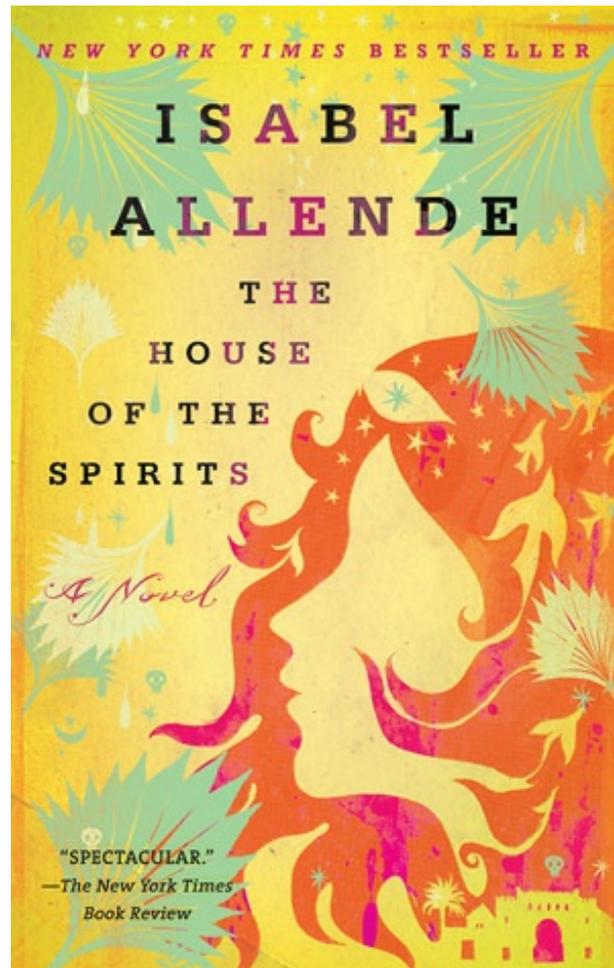
Earlier this month, Allende emailed an impassioned letter to the school board members, the district superintendent, and the principal of Watauga High School, then mailed them print copies of the letter along with her book, the author’s assistant tells *School Library Journal*.

The district committee—a group of school board members who are specifically appointed to review a challenged work—will meet again to discuss the book on November 27, where testimony will be accepted from those opposed to and in support of retaining the book. The committee does not include the high school principal, the school’s librarian, or any members of the English department.

The parent’s complaint to the school board on October 14 claimed that the book was too graphic and too violent for use in the classroom with high schoolers, but a Watauga High School advisory committee reached a unanimous decision on October 25 to retain it as part of its tenth-grade honors English curriculum, taught by Mary-Kent Whitaker, Watauga County’s 2010–2011 Teacher of the Year.

North Carolina’s Common Core curriculum includes the book—which boasts a high Lexile score for its literary complexity—as recommended reading for tenth graders, its supporters note, but despite this, the parent appealed the advisory committee’s decision on November 6.

From the beginning, the parent’s challenge and subsequent appeal were met with national opposition from reading freedom advocates, with public support expressed by advocacy



organizations and such luminaries as Joseph Bathanti, North Carolina's Poet Laureate. However, the local debate has slowly heated up in the interim as the district review committee was formed.

Last week, several of Watauga County's commissioners even stepped into the fray. Commissioner David Blust, called for a book rating system and argued that the book offered no life lessons. "It's filth.... Honestly, what normal family is like this book? The Manson family, maybe, Ted Bundy? I think this is just so wrong," he told the local *Watauga Democrat*.

Another, Chairman Nathan Miller, said the book's inclusion in the curriculum was such an "egregious violation" that he recommended the district dispense with its usual book review policy. And Commissioner Perry Yates called the book "despicable."

In Watauga County, the process for challenging educational texts has three steps: a review by a school advisory committee, a review by a Board of Education advisory committee, then a review by the entire Board of Education. Decisions made by the board apply to all schools in the system.

The heightened rhetoric has many educators and parents in the community concerned, and they have spoken out in support of the book's literary merit—and in favor of preserving intellectual and reading freedom—in their online comments and to the local media.

Meanwhile, the text of Allende's letter, in its entirety, is as follows:

Dear Watauga County Board of Education,

I find myself in the unusual and awkward position of having to "defend" my novel *The House of the Spirits* that risks being banned from a high school in Boone, North Carolina. Banning of books is a common practice in police states, like Cuba or North Korea, and by religious fundamentalist groups like the Taliban, but I did not expect it in our democracy.

No student is forced to read the book. Teachers like to teach it because they believe it gives the students insights into Latin American literature, history, politics, social issues, and customs. They usually offer their students other options but most students choose the book, they enjoy it and often they write to me. Their comments prove that they have understood the story and they are curious to learn more. The novel seems to open their minds to other places and peoples in the world.

Although it may look like an exercise in vanity, I need to explain a few facts about myself as an author and about the *The House of the Spirits* in order to make my point. I will be brief, please bear with me.

I have written 20 books, translated into 35 languages, and sold more than 60 million copies worldwide. Two movies have been made of my novels, *Of Love and Shadows* and *The House of the Spirits*, released in 1995 with an international cast that included Meryl Streep, Jeremy Irons, Winona Rider, Glenn Close, and Vanessa Redgrave.

I have 14 honorary degrees, 12 of them from US universities and colleges, and 50 awards in more than 15 countries. I am a member of the Academy of Arts and Letters in the US since 2004, of the Academy of Arts and Sciences of Puerto Rico since 1995, of the Academy of Language in Chile since 1989, and Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France, 1994. (At [www.isabelallende.com](http://www.isabelallende.com) you can find my extended bio.)

*The House of the Spirits* is my first novel, published in Spanish in 1982 and in English in 1985 to stellar reviews, including the cover of the *New York Times Book Review*. It has been in print for over 30 years, it is considered a classic of Latin American literature and it is taught in high schools, colleges, and universities in all Western countries, including the USA for more than two decades. It has received many awards. To mention just a few: Best Novel of the Year (Chile, 1983), Author of the Year (Germany, 1984), Book of the Year (Germany 1984), Grand Prix D'Evasion (France, 1984), Best Novel (Mexico, 1985), Point de Mire (Belgium, 1985), XV Premio Internazionale I Migliori Dell'Anno (Italy, 1987), Best Foreign Novel (Portugal, 1987), Books to Remember Award, American Library Association (USA, 1996), and The New York Public Library (2000). *The Times* (London) named *The House of the Spirits* one of the best 60 books in the past 60 years (UK, 2009).

As you know, it takes just one parent who disapproves of a book to pressure the school and eventually the Board of Education. In this case one person has circulated fragments of the novel—taken out of context—among parents who probably have not read the book. The fragments refer mostly to sexual content. The plan is to gather support to ban the book completely, even as optional reading. Since today TV series, movies, videogames and comics exploit sex and violence, including torture and rape, as forms of entertainment, I don't think that young adults will be particularly offended by the strong scenes from *The House of the Spirits*, which are always part of the historical and political content of the novel.

I have become aware of this unfortunate situation, and I am sending you a copy of *The House of the Spirits* by mail, although I realize how busy you are and I cannot expect you to read it,

Sincerely,  
Isabel Allende  
writer