



Julia Alvarez

Biography

In 1960, at the age of ten, Julia Alvarez arrived in the United States from the Dominican Republic. Uprooted from her native country, culture, and language, Alvarez began writing and made language her homeland. Even as a child, she had a passion for listening to stories. As an immigrant, books provided a world for her in which she did not feel isolated. Although coming from a traditional family where she received no encouragement to pursue a career and was expected to become a housewife, Alvarez's love of words won over. Alvarez claims that being in the United States where she was surrounded by books, and where women were encouraged to discover their talents, contributed to her becoming an author. By the time she was in high school, she knew that she wanted to be a writer.

In college, Alvarez studied literature and writing, and in 1971 she graduated summa cum laude from Middlebury College. In describing her college experience, she says: "When I went to college, we read a little Jane Austen and Emily Dickinson. Like that was really going to help me, a Latina woman. . . . I thought I had to write like them in order to be a writer in English. I didn't know you could put 'amorcito' in a story in English." In 1975 Alvarez received an MA in Creative Writing from Syracuse University. Since then, she has taught literature and writing in schools at all levels, and she is currently a tenured professor at Middlebury College. During this time, Alvarez has also been a prolific writer. In 1984, *Homecoming*, a book of poems, was published.



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1950
- * Works center on Latina/o culture and themes
- * Spent much of her early childhood in the Dominican Republic

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Although poetry was her first love, Alvarez moved on to write prose. In 1990 she published *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. This remains her most recognized novel, for which she won the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Award. It tells of the experience of the four Garcia sisters, who, like Alvarez, came to New York City from the Dominican Republic. In fifteen interconnected stories, Alvarez tells of the girls struggle to find their place somewhere in-between the two distinct cultures to which they belong -- that of the American mainstream and of the country from which they came.

In 1994, Alvarez published *In the Time of the Butterflies*, an American Library Association Notable Book and a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist. In this historical novel, she introduces the American public to the legendary Mirabal sisters who gave their lives defying the oppressive dictatorship that was in place in the Dominican Republic. They were called “Las Mariposas” (The Butterflies). Alvarez went on to publish a second collection of poetry in 1995, *The Other Side: El Otro Lado*. In her novel *Yo!*, published in 1997, Alvarez revisits the Garcia sisters, and in the form of short stories gives voice to those who have been affected by Yolanda Garcia -- Yo for short. Alvarez was up to the challenge of writing from a perspective that was not Latina and not female; she says, “As Flaubert said, ‘Madame Bovary, c’est moi!’ We do become our characters: male, female; old, young; Anglo, Latina. But it might just be that the imaginative challenge is greater when we have to cross that autobiographical line and become the opposite gender.”

Alvarez’s essays, stories, and poems have appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Allure*, *The New Yorker*, *Hispanic Magazine*, and *USA Weekend*. Since 1995, Alvarez has published more works of fiction and a collection of essays. And, after almost a decade of publishing strictly prose, she came out with another book of poetry, *The Woman I Kept to Myself*, in 2004. Alvarez has also authored childrens books, including *How Tia Lola Came to Visit Stay* and *The Secret Footprints*. Her work has been translated into four languages, in addition to Spanish, and has been studied by many contemporary writers and literary critics.



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In a convocation speech delivered at Appalachian State University entitled “On Becoming a Butterfly,” Alvarez says, “I believe stories have this power -- they enter us, they transport us, they change things inside us, so invisibly, so minutely, that sometimes we’re not even aware that we come out of a great book as a different person from the person we were when we began reading it.” While acknowledging this responsibility to her readership, Alvarez also uses storytelling as a tool to give voice to her experience as a woman of two cultures and a woman of color. Nonetheless, she doesn’t believe that her writing is targeted to only one population, and she feels constrained when people label her as a writer for Latinos. Her main goal in writing is to make meaning through the telling of stories and to “remind us.”

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