

Américas Book Award Winner Book Curriculum

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Before We Were Free (Dominican Republic)

By Julia Alvarez

Summary: In the tradition of Latin American testimonial writing, Julia Alvarez tells the story of a young girl who lives the repressive regime of the dictator, Trujillo, and his equally notorious son. The story's narrator is a twelve-year old girl, Anita de la Torre, whose firsthand account not only speaks of the trials of young adulthood, but also of the disappearance of family members, poverty, and separation.

Themes: Family
Freedom/Human Rights
Political Repression
Poverty
Censorship

Program Ideas:

1. *History* - Before the book is read, students should be introduced to the brief political history of the Dominican Republic to better understand the story being told.
 2. *Culture/Comprehension* - Throughout the reading of the story or once it is completed, students should be walked through the process of retelling the events of the book and talking about how they would feel or how they might react in a similar situation as Anita's. These discussions will also provide the opportunity for rich discussions of the conditions in which other children throughout the world are living.
 3. *Writing* - Students can keep journals expressing their feelings about the struggles and triumphs of Anita and answer periodic questions in their journals provided by guest lecturers of the teacher.
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Behind the Mountains (Haiti)

By Edwidge Danticat

Summary: In this first-person fictional account, Celiane, a 13-year-old girl from Haiti, receives a journal from her teacher. Her thoughts and descriptions of her life show the changes she experiences after her family migrates to New York City where she is reunited with her father.

Themes: Migration
Family
Immigrant Experiences
Urban vs. Rural Life

Program Ideas:

1. *Comprehension* - Edwidge Danticat is a native of Haiti and a very vivid storyteller. Her narration style can be hard to follow, so it would probably be a good idea to guide the students with reading questions for every chapter.

2. *History* - Because Haiti is one of the poorest countries in the region and the world and because Danticat provides great detail in describing the hardships of her people, there will need to be a context provided to explain the political situation in Haiti before the students begin the book or during their reading. This should include a discussion of Haitian the “push/pull” factors of immigration, and Haitian migration.
 3. *Culture* - An opening lecture on the political situation in Haiti might include music and poetry written by other Haitians, and/or images of Haitians living in the US (i.e., Lauryn Hill or Wyclef Jean) and elsewhere so that the students are given an alternative viewpoint where the beauty and creativity of the Haitian people contrasts the constant images of hardship and poverty that we so often see in US news coverage.
 4. *Writing* - Students can keep journals expressing their feelings about the struggles and triumphs of the central character and answer periodic questions in their journals provided by guest lecturers of the teacher.
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The Color of my Words (author – Trinidad; story set in – Dominican Republic)

By Lynn Joseph

Summary: Set in the Dominican Republic, this book tells the story of Ana, a 12-year-old girl with an intense passion for words. Ana dreams of writing down all of the images that come alive in her head about the people of her native island that struggle against “intruders” wishing to destroy their home and way of life to construct hotels and tourist attractions. This story gives great insight to the power and importance of dreams, a central image in many works of Latin American literature, as well as educating the reader about the culture and society of the Dominican Republic.

Themes: Importance of Expression through Words/Writing
Political Repression
Imperialism
Dreams (Fantasy)

Program Ideas:

1. *Writing* - Because of the central theme of the book – an adolescent expressing ideas about her country and her identity through writing and words – a diary and/or creative writing component is essential here.
 2. *History* - Once the book has been read and the diaries written (guided by writing questions provided by the teacher), a guest speaker can help the students use descriptions from the book and their own words and descriptions to draw out images and/or the history of the Dominican Republic.
 3. *Culture* - Writing time can be accompanied by the music of the Dominican Republic in class so the students might imagine what Ana was hearing and/or seeing while she wrote.
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Imagining Isabel (Guatemala)

By Omar Castaneda

Summary: Isabel, a newly married fifteen-year-old who lives in a traditional Mayan village, is invited to join a government-run, teacher-training program, and is thrown into the turbulent

political reality of contemporary Guatemala.

Themes: Native American/Indigenous Cultures
Political Repression/Violence
Racial & Ethnic Discrimination
Rural Life in Latin America

Program Ideas:

1. *History & Context* - Opening lecture to provide context should include images of children living in the Guatemalan highlands so that students are introduced to the way of life of Mayan villagers.
 2. *Culture/Language* – Attempt to expose students to various Mayan languages and modern life in the Guatemalan highlands.
 3. *Context & Comprehension* - Following and/or during the reading of the book, students should be introduced to the basics of the political situation in Guatemala so that they understand the context of Isabel's migration and engagement in the political situation.
 4. *Culture* - Guatemalan cloth weaving demonstration.
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Celebrating the Hero (Colombia)

By Lyll Becerra de Jenkins

Summary: After her mother's death, seventeen-year-old Camila travels to Colombia to attend a ceremony honoring her late grandfather. While trying to learn more about her mother's family, she discovers some disturbing truths. The story explores cross-cultural and cross-generational understanding, the power of family ties and issues of machismo and gender roles, both historically and present day.

Themes: Family
Death/Loss
Cross-Cultural Understanding
Cross-Generational Relationships
Machismo
Migration

Program Ideas:

1. *Context* - Because US news coverage of Colombia unfortunately has focused mostly on drugs and violence, guest lecturers should focus on the rich geographic contrasts (highlands, Amazon, Caribbean), the rich musical traditions, and ethnic and racial diversity of the country. This can all be approached through one of the book's central themes: cross-cultural understanding.
2. *World Affairs* - Following the introduction to Colombian history and culture, the guest lecture should address US-Latin America relations using Colombia as an example, since Camila is living away from her native Colombia and since Colombians make up such a large component of migrants to the US.