Before We Were Free
Julia Alvarez
Alfred A. Knopf 2002

Grade Levels
6-8

Curriculum Areas
Language Arts • Social Studies • Art

National Language Arts Standards
NL-ENG.K-12.8
DEVELOPING RESEARCH SKILLS
Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

National Social Studies Standards
NSS-G.K-12.2 PLACES AND REGIONS
Students should understand how culture and experience influence people’s perceptions of places and regions.

Objectives
To gain knowledge of literature, art and history of the Dominican Republic culture.

To explore life in the Dominican Republic during the General Rafael Trujillo regime.

To learn how to relate literature to important social issues.

Overview
Twelve-year-old Anita de la Torre’s life changes suddenly when her cousins and friends must abruptly leave the country. What’s more, she learns the extent to which members of her own family, particularly her uncle and father, are involved as leaders in the plot to overthrow El Jefe, dictator of the Dominican Republic. Using her keen powers of observation, Anita begins to understand the danger involved as she witnesses people taking great risks to gain freedom. Julia Alvarez’s portrayal of a courageous female protagonist brings to life for young readers the hardships endured by families who participate in democracy’s struggle.

Activity
Author’s Background
Julia Alvarez is originally from the Dominican Republic, but emigrated to the United States with her parents at the age of ten. She is the author of: How the García Girls Lost Their Accents, In the Time of the Butterflies, ¡Yo!, In the Name of Salomé, and Saving the World. She has also published books of poems, including: Homecoming, The Woman I Kept to Myself, and The Other Side; a book of essays, Something to Declare; several books for young readers: The Secret Footprints, How Tía Lola Came to Stay, A Gift of Gracias, Finding Miracles, and Before We Were Free; as well as A Cafecito Story, a "green" fable based on a sustainable farm-literacy project she and her husband, Bill Eichner, have set up in her native country. She is currently a writer-in-residence at Middlebury College.

http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display. pperl?isbn=1400085284&view=qa
Activity
Start developing a background on the Dominican Republic prior to reading the book. Using the websites sited in the Internet Links, research the background of the Dominican Republic.

As a teacher you can gain valuable background by reading In the Time of the Butterflies, written for adults or viewing the video based on the book written by Julia Alvarez.

CIA - The World Factbook Map
Dominican Republic

Teacher Background Information on the Video
Tells the real-life story of the Mirabal sisters, courageous revolutionaries known covertly as las Mariposas ("the Butterflies"). The sisters' years of dissent during the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic led to their eventual murder in 1960, a brutal crime that signaled the beginning of the end for Trujillo. Told through the eyes of Minerva Mirabal (Salma Hayek), the story follows as the sister's progress rapidly from naive to idealistic to victimized and on to resolved, as they become leaders in an elaborate plot to assassinate the dictator. Edward James Olmos, as Trujillo, does a remarkable job of conveying the unique mixture of political intuition and ruthlessness needed to maintain a dictatorship for thirty years, while Hayek delivers a spirited lead performance. -- Fionn Meade

Activity
See the Random House Reader’s Guide written by Julia Alvarez and explore the discussion questions with your students:
http://www.randomhouse.com/teachers/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=0375815449&view=rgg

Activity
Teaching research skills can help students find answers for themselves. "Examining Electronic Sources," taken from a research skills unit, is a step towards the students completing a written
report on a state symbol. The students will examine and rate the relevance of electronic sources, not only learning another part of the research process but also experiencing it first hand. This activity can be done as class presentations or research papers.

Research Building Blocks: Examining Electronic Sources:  
http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=149

Inquiry on the Internet: Evaluating Web Pages  
http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=328

Activity  
Role-playing the author as though in an interview of her life in the Dominican Republic. Dramatizing life stories provides students with an engaging way to become more critical readers and researchers. In this lesson, students select the author, Julia Alvarez to research, create timelines about their author, and then collaborate in teams to design and present a panel presentation where they role-play as their authors. Students can also dramatize an incident from the book.

A Biography Study: Using Role-Play to Explore Authors’ Lives  
http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=398

Activity  
Having a panel discussion can help students to engage in critical discussions of complex issues of race, class, and gender. They “show how people can begin to take action on important social issues . . . on issues of human rights, colonialism, government censorship and repression, the disappeared”. They challenge students to confront the injustice of barriers that separate human beings from one another and to examine the role of prejudice and stereotypes in sustaining these barriers.

In the past, Amnesty International has fought the cases of Nigerian novelist and human rights campaigner Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was hanged in 1995 despite an international outcry; Olusegun Obasanjo, who was a political prisoner but who is now the democratically elected president of Nigeria; and Julio de Pena Valdez, a trade union leader in the Dominican Republic.

CNN - Human rights champion marks 40 years  

Lesson Plan  

Activity  
Have students use context clues as they read to figure out the meanings of difficult words or vocabulary within a cultural context. As they encounter new vocabulary in Spanish create a word list.

Resources  
Books, Essays, Poems Written by Julia Alvarez  


**Internet Websites**

Amber World Museum
http://www.amberworldmuseum.com/

Antes del Descubrimiento: La Cultura Taínas-Spanish

Julia Alvarez Official Author Website
http://www.juliaalvarez.com/

BBC World Country Profile of Dominican Republic
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/country_profiles/1216926.stm

Caribbean Art from the World Bank Collection

Carnival Masks of the Dominican Republic
http://www.dominicanmasks.com/

Dominican Republic CIA-The World Factbook-Dominican Republic

LANIC: Latin American History Resources
http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/region/history/

Rafael Trujillo: The Dominican Dictator
http://www.jlhs.nhusd.k12.ca.us/Classes/Social_Science/Latin_America/Dominican_Republic.html

Taino Art: Metropolitan Museum of Art
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/08/canc/hod_1997.35.3.htm

Taino: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean
http://www.elmuseo.org/taino/