



### **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*, *iYo!*, *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.

[Before We Were Free-Question and Answer-  
Julia Alvarez

<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.



CIA - The World Factbook Map 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.

### In the Time of the Butterflies



### 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=rqq>

### 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](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](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](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  
<http://cnnstudentnews.cnn.com/2001/fyi/news/05/28/amnesty/>

Lesson Plan

<http://cnnstudentnews.cnn.com/2001/fyi/lesson.plans/05/28/amnesty.da/index.html>

### **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**

*Before We Were Free*. Julia Alvarez. New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2002.

*A Cafecito Story*. Julia Alvarez. White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishers, 2002.

*Finding Miracles*. Julia Alvarez. New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2004.

*A Gift of Gracias*, Julia Alvarez. New York: Knopf, 2005.

*Homecoming: New and Collected Poems*. Julia Alvarez. New York: Plume, 1996.

*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Julia Alvarez. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1991.

*How Tía Lola Came to Visit Stay*. Julia Alvarez. New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2001.

*In the Name of Salomé*. Julia Alvarez. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2000.

*In the Time of the Butterflies*. Julia Alvarez. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1994.

*The Other Side/El Otro Lado*. Julia Alvarez. New York: Dutton, 1995.

*Saving the World*, Julia Alvarez. New York: Algonquin, 2006.

*The Secret Footprints*. Julia Alvarez. New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2000.

*Something to Declare*. Julia Alvarez. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1998.

*The Woman I Kept To Myself.* Julia Alvarez.  
Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2004.

*iYO!* Julia Alvarez. Chapel Hill: Algonquin  
Books, 1997.

### **Internet Websites**

Amber World Museum

<http://www.amberworldmuseum.com/>

Antes del Descubrimiento: La Cultura Taína-  
Spanish

<http://www.dominicana.com.do/cultura/epocaprecolombina.html>

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](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/country_profiles/1216926.stm)

Caribbean Art from the World Bank Collection

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/LACEXT/DOMINICANEXTN/0,,contentMDK:20084026~menuPK:337775~pagePK:141137~piPK:141127~theSitePK:337769,00.html>

Carnival Masks of the Dominican Republic

<http://www.dominicanmasks.com/>

Dominican Republic CIA-The World Factbook-  
Dominican Republic

<https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>

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](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](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/>