Novelist and poet Julia Alvarez was born on March 27, 1950, in New York City, but her parents returned to their native Dominican Republic when she was just three months old. Alvarez's parents were politically connected to Rafael Leonidas Trujillo's dictatorial regime, but when her father fell out of favor, he took the family into exile in New York City when she was ten years old. Alvarez graduated summa cum laude as an English major from Middlebury College in 1971 and in 1975 earned a master's degree in creative writing from Syracuse University. She went on to develop a career as a poet and fiction writer and became a tenured professor at Middlebury College.

Alvarez's narratives are loosely based on growing up between the two cultures of the United States and the Dominican Republic, although her perspective has always been one of growing up in privilege as the daughter of a successful doctor and politically connected exile. As a creative writer, she has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ingram Merrill Foundation. After publishing poems and stories in literary magazines, she published a book of verse, *Home-coming* (1984), and her first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991). In so doing, she joined a wave of Hispanic writers breaking into mainstream presses with their tales of immigration and growing up within the United States.

In 1994, she published the novel *In the Time of Butterflies*, which was later made into a feature film, and, in 1995, another collection of poems, *The Other Side/El Otro Lado*. In 1995, Alvarez published the collection of autobiographical essays *Something to Declare: Essays*. Among Alvarez's other novels are *In the Name of Salomé* (2001), *Before We Were Free* (2002), and *Saving the World* (2006). In the latter, Alvarez compares and intertwines the lives of two Dominican women separated by a century: one is a nineteenth-century missionary and the other a Dominican female writer in Vermont chronicling the struggle of the former in battling smallpox in the Dominican Republic. In 2002, Alvarez joined many of the leading Hispanic novelists in writing for young readers with the publication of her young adult novel, *Before We Were Free*, centering on a plot to overthrow Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, as seen through the eyes of a teenager.

Alvarez has also been a productive poet. In 1998, Alvarez penned twenty-four autobiographical essays to answer some of the most frequent questions of her readers: *Something to Declare*. Among her poetry books are *Homecoming: New and Collected Poems* (1996) and *The Woman I Kept to Myself* (2004), a collection of seventy-five autobiographical poems chronicling the major events in her life: love, marriage, divorce, religious, and so on. Alvarez's latest work is a nonfiction study of the *quinceañera* custom, or “sweet fifteen” celebration for Latinas: *Once upon a Quinceañera: Coming of Age in the USA* (2007). For this book, Alvarez worked much like a social scientist, traveling the country and interviewing families, analyzing the costs and financing of the extravagant affairs and recalling some of her own experiences as a teenager. Alvarez's awards include the Benjamin T. Marshall Prize in Poetry (1968 and 1969), the American Academy of Poetry Prize (1974), the National Book Critics’ Award, and others. Alvarez, who has taught creative writing at Middlebury College for years, was promoted to full
professor in 1996.

Further Reading


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