

Writing a New Homeland

Julia Alvarez explores the ripple effect of illegal immigration in her young adult novel *Return to Sender*

by Dave Korzon

It's not long into my conversation with award-winning author Julia Alvarez that the two of us are able to share a small laugh together. In speaking about her new young adult novel, *Return to Sender* (Knopf, January 2009), I mention how refreshing it is to read a book for young people not involving a wizard or a vampire or any fantasy-driven narrative for that matter.

Julia chuckles and tells me in her distinctly Dominican accent, "I am so tired of that! I go to my local library and speak to the children's librarian and I ask, 'What are kids reading?' The answer I get is, 'One fantasy after another.' And I think, But the real world is so interesting!"

This is a shared sentiment between us when it comes to young adult literature and a lovely way to start things off today. Alvarez's *Return to Sender* is indeed a novel that will challenge young readers with its smartly drawn characters, complex interactions, and cultural interplay. It's a story about a Vermont farm family that is on the cusp of needing to sell off their dairy farm and find a new way of life. The only way for the farm to survive is to hire Mexican workers who are here in this country illegally. These workers are farmers themselves that had to leave their own country because their

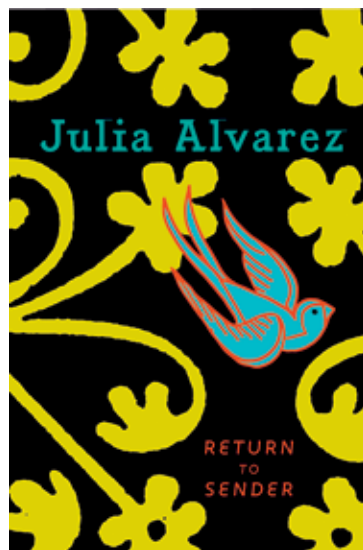
farms were not sustainable in this age of corporate globalization and agribusiness.

Alvarez is a keen storyteller with the innate ability to take a huge political issue such as illegal immigration and show its reality through characters we as readers can invest ourselves in. We are given two points of view in *Return to Sender*: Tyler, a sixth grader who is dealing with watching his family surrender their way of life, and Mari, a young Mexican girl whose father is one of the workers who allow Tyler's family to keep their farm going. It is through the friendship between these two young people that Alvarez shows us the rippling emotional effect the issue of illegal immigration can have not only for immigrants themselves, but also for those who know and care about them.

And while some may think that the issue of migrant Mexican workers here illegally in the United States might be too much reality for a young reader to handle, Alvarez chose to write about this subject without hesitation, in part because it's an

issue that hits close to where she lives in Vermont.

"It's happening here in my county," she tells me when I ask about her inspiration for *Return to Sender*. "Just in Addison



County alone there are five hundred undocumented Mexican migrant workers.” As someone born and raised in New England and who admittedly thinks of Vermont as the land of maple syrup, skiing, and fall foliage, I’m amazed to hear this statistic, and just as sobered to think of the family upheavals and, in some cases, tragedies, that must go along with it.

Julia Alvarez knows firsthand about family upheaval in times of uncertainty. Although she was raised in the Dominican Republic until the age of ten, she was actually born in New York City during her parents’ first stay in the United States. Her parents left the United States to return to the Dominican Republic in 1950, when Julia was only three months old, as part of the wave of returnees following dictator Rafael Trujillo’s announced amnesty for Dominicans living abroad. For the first ten years of her life, Alvarez lived comfortably in the Dominican Republic surrounded by a large and well-heeled extended family. It was her father’s involvement in the Mirabal sisters’ underground anti-Trujillo movement that forced the family to flee the Dominican Republic and return to the United States in 1960, three months before the Mirabal sisters were killed by the Trujillo regime.

Alvarez has no problem recalling the shock of coming to this country—for all intents and purposes for the first time—as a ten-year-old. She especially remembers being stunned by the English language she heard spoken even though she knew English from her Dominican schooling: “The astonishment to me was English. This was not classroom English. This was the ‘barbaric yawp’ as Whitman called it. The rolling, huge waves of the language!”

Books and storytelling quickly became important to the young Alvarez, who faced daily bullying at school because of cultural differences. When I mention her humble beginnings in this country and ask Alvarez to connect them to her distinguished career as a writer and educator, she says simply, “I was a driven soul.”

By 1991 she had earned tenure as a professor in the English department at Middlebury College in Vermont and also had her first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, published by Algonquin Books. Her novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*,

based on the Mirabal sisters, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in fiction in 1995. Later, the book was adapted into a movie starring Salma Hayek and Edward James Olmos. Today, Alvarez is considered to be one of the world’s most important Latino writers. Her writing covers many genres including novels for both adults and young people, nonfiction, and poetry. Many of the subjects she chooses to write about have to do with bridging the cultural worlds of the United States and the Dominican Republic.

To list all of Julia Alvarez’s honors and awards for both her writing and her work within the Latino arts community would take up most of this introduction. The Fundación Finca Alta Gracia, which includes a cooperative farming community in the Dominican Republic, was founded by Alvarez and her husband, Bill Eichner, and gives

back farming plots to the local community and also teaches the local farmers to read and write. Here we find Alvarez’s love of the Dominican Republic, the environment, and the power of language coming together under the umbrella of local sustainability.

Julia Alvarez and I don’t talk much straight politics in connection with her new book, although it certainly isn’t far from my thoughts. Today in this country there is a 670-mile fence along the Mexican border under construction to stop the flow of illegal border crossings. The issue of immigration continues to be tossed back and forth on talk radio and debated heavily in Washington. And it’s yet to be seen exactly how the Obama administration will deal with this ongoing and volatile issue. But today I’m more interested in Julia Alvarez, the writer. After all, she has chosen to bring her generous writer’s heart and her storytelling ability to shed some light and understanding to this problem. *Return to Sender* doesn’t give us answers, but



it does illustrate and bring to life the problem of illegal immigrants coming over the border in a way the op-ed pages of the local paper cannot. “We need stories to understand what’s happening to us,” Julia tells me. “Because it’s storytellers who will tell us the truth we need to remember.”

DAVE KORZON: Julia, I was surprised that your inspiration for *Return to Sender* had much to do with Mexican migrant workers in Vermont.

JULIA ALVAREZ: It started with my husband, Bill, who is an ophthalmologist, at his office. A local farmer had called—actually he had a young man call for him who knew some Spanish—to bring in this worker who had gotten some chemical in his eyes. Some chemical, some spray used on the cows, I guess. And Bill came home—this was about seven years ago—and said, “You know there are Mexican workers on the local farms!” And you know I live in the Latino-compromised state of Vermont [*laughs*], where you don’t see that many Latinos. So my reaction was, “You’re kidding.” I mean, I didn’t believe it at first.

KORZON: I don’t blame you. Vermont doesn’t seem to be a setting most people would associate with this issue.

ALVAREZ: Actually, I can take it back even before then. About ten years ago we had just landed at the airport in Burlington and there were these two young boys, they couldn’t have been out of their teens. They had landed there and some patron, as they call it, some boss, was supposed to pick them up. They didn’t know where they were, what they were doing, and so we called this number they had been given and it put us through to the person who was going to be picking them up the next day. There had been some mistake. So we took these boys to a local motel and left them there and called this person again and told them where they were. The next morning I called the hotel owner and everything was fine—they had been picked up. But then I thought, What was that all about? Then a couple of years after that there was the incident with my husband at his office.

KORZON: Did you become directly involved with the Mexican community you were discovering?

ALVAREZ: Where I live we have an open door medical clinic, where it’s free. The people who run the clinic were informed that they needed somebody Spanish-speaking there for translation when the farmers brought in their workers for treatment. That’s where I started meeting the local farmers. From that point they knew if they ran into a problem with a worker or a worker didn’t understand something, that they could call me on their cell phones [*laughs*].

KORZON: I’m sure you became popular very quickly.

ALVAREZ: But then it happened that some of these Mexican workers had come here to the area with their girlfriends or wives and they were having kids here. Or they had showed up here with little kids that were suddenly at the local school. So then I was called to see if I would come to the classrooms

and help explain both to the children and the parents about what was happening: walk them through what was being done in the classroom, because they had come from Chiapas in Mexico—out in the middle of nowhere—and were uneducated farmers. That’s when I started to realize that most of the workers who were coming here were interconnected, and that they came from Chiapas, which has a farming community. They had stopped being able to farm there. So here they were now in Vermont, helping small farmers, who themselves were

I grew up in the midst of a horrible dictatorship, but I was very lucky because my parents managed to give us a really wonderful childhood and it was in part because we were part of a clan. We had family—we lived surrounded by cousins and my grandparents.

not making it because they couldn’t afford to keep farming. They just couldn’t afford labor, and none of the kids of these local farmers were staying on the farms. So you had these two separate groups of farmers but it was the same story for both of them, separated by a line called a border, at different stages of the same sad situation. So that’s how it all began with *Return to Sender*.

KORZON: Your instincts for storytelling took over.

ALVAREZ: I realized that the kids who had grown up in this area of Vermont, some of them the sons, and many of them grandsons, of former farmers, were wondering who these Mexican kids were that had all of a sudden showed up at their school. What were they doing here? I could see them not quite understanding. That’s when I thought, We need a story to understand what’s happening to us. For me that’s really one of the keys of any story. Chekhov says that the task of a writer is not to solve the problem but to state it correctly, to understand it. And to participate, at least through the imagination, in the reality of another person. A person different from ourselves.

KORZON: In North Carolina, where I live, the Latino community has a strong presence, their own community within the community. Is this the case with the Mexican workers in your part of Vermont?

ALVAREZ: They’re there, five hundred undocumented Mexican migrant workers. But you don’t see them because, well, that’s part of the problem. They can’t go out in public because they don’t sort of blend in with everyone else. They can’t go to Mexican neighborhoods, where there could be any number of Mexican Americans to socialize with, because these neighborhoods don’t exist here. So this is one of the problems, the solitude and the loneliness, how these people are confined

to these farms, which, in a sense, creates a very intimate relationship with a farmer and their family because the workers are totally dependent on their employers to take them food shopping, to help them enroll their kids in school, etc.

What's happened is that a lot of these Vermont farmers are dyed-in-the-wool patriots and Republicans, but ironically in this one arena, they are really rebels, because they become very close to their workers and these workers are helping them survive and they naturally become champions of these workers' rights and now realize the need to change the immigration law. You know, it's kind of sad too that these farmers are put in this position where, in a sense, they are defying the law because it's a law that hasn't kept pace with the reality of their lives as farmers.

KORZON: Why did you write this story as a young adult novel? Why this genre?

ALVAREZ: I was at school helping with the kids when the idea for this story surged. It was written totally to understand what is happening to us, because these were the questions and the quandaries and the confusions I was seeing from the local children: who are these people and why are they here? And then the confusion from the point of view of the little Mexican kids: what's my place here? The Mexican kids are living such a different reality—that of an underground life, of being afraid—from these other kids whom they're at school with. So I think telling the story this way has to do with where the story found me. People always ask me, "Where do you get your ideas?" And I think, Oh my gosh, if an idea came toward me I'd run screaming in the other direction [*laughs*]. I don't get ideas. Stories find you. Stories find you and for me, they are like a pebble in my shoe that I can't shake off, a kind of disturbance that just won't go away. I suppose it's like the grain of sand in the oyster—a pearl gets constructed around it.

I love the way stories allow us to understand things not just with our brains or reasoning or intellect. Stories allow us to understand things in all their mysteriousness and complexities. I remember when my book *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* got banned down in Richmond, Kentucky. Some parents there wanted to ban it because it was required reading in the high school, and they managed to get it off the list. One of the parents was interviewed about why they were so against this book, and she said, "Well, young people need to know what's right and what's wrong. They need black and white and books like this one are full of gray areas." And I thought, Well, welcome to literature! It's all about gray areas! I felt like saying back to her, You're absolutely right, if that's what you think a book is supposed to do, then yup, your son or daughter has no business reading Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Mark Twain, Dickens, all down the line.

KORZON: You do have some adult subject matter that surfaces in *Return to Sender*. The character Mari has knowledge of her mother being kidnapped and abused for a long period of time by someone hired to help her back into the United States illegally. Were there times in the writing of the book where you felt you might be challenging young readers a bit too much regarding content they could handle?

ALVAREZ: I don't dumb down a book that I'm writing for young readers. On the other hand, if I'm writing in the point of view of a child, like Mari, I have to describe the reality at the level of which she sees it. Otherwise I'm just imposing and colonizing my characters with my own point of view. So there are things, for instance, that Mari doesn't understand about what her mother has been through.

As a matter of fact, the Mari story and what happens with her mother in the book is based on something that happened to a young Mexican girl where she got abducted by a coyote, a person who transports Mexicans over the border, when she was eleven. The story was from the *Dallas News*, a series they did call "Yolanda's Crossing." After about six years of bondage this girl ended up in a hospital. Eventually the authorities found out what had happened to her. This was happening to an eleven-year-old. So it *is* happening. These little kids that I go to school to help—the Mexican kids—they've crossed the desert. They're not too young to have had the experience. So it's interesting that we think our kids aren't ready to begin to understand what we feel is okay for the rest of the world to have undergone. Not that we feel okay about it, but the reality is it *is* happening out there. And kids are exposed to this stuff, this kind of subject matter, on television, on the Internet, and from peers. So what better way than a story to help them understand and make sense of information that otherwise is very frightening, devastating, shocking. A story gives a kind of parameter in which to take in reality. So I think my responsibility as a writer is to render what fiction does: the truth according to that character.

KORZON: Julia, you came to the United States after being raised until the age of ten in the Dominican Republic. You were part of a large, well-positioned family there. Were those ten years of privilege where you could sense your family's advantage?

ALVAREZ: Well, it's funny because in a third world country you're either a have or a have-not. But it's not as simple as you're living a life of privilege if you're a have. Brought over here to the United States, a have would be middle class. We didn't have a middle class in the Dominican Republic back then—we had those who had and those who didn't have. The growth of the middle class has happened only in more recent history. I grew up in the midst of a horrible dictatorship, but I was very lucky because my parents managed to give us a really wonderful childhood and it was in part because we were part of a clan. We had family—we lived surrounded by cousins and my grandparents. I come from two very different traditions in the sense that my mother came from what you would probably call an upper-middle-class family—doing well—but never were part of the dictatorship. Not because they were rebels, they just were very apolitical—had no taste for politics, and kind of stayed out of it. The boys in the family were educated in the United States, they went to college, and then went back into the family business.

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