BEFORE WE WERE FREE

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Julia Alvarez

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Julia Alvarez
Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2002

Grade Level
Grades 6-8

Curriculum Area
Language Arts • Social Studies • Art

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. Anita begins to understand the danger involved as she witnesses’ people taking great risks to gain freedom. Anita de la Torre never questioned her freedom living in the Dominican Republic. But by her twelfth birthday in 1960, most of her relatives have immigrated to the United States, her Tio Toni has disappeared, and the secret police terrorize her family for their suspected opposition of the country’s dictator. While her middle school years should only focus around school, boys, big sisters, and puberty, Anita also struggles with code words, close escapes, and assassination plots. Inspired by her family’s perseverance and immeasurable strength, Anita struggles to overcome her fears and to make a dramatic escape to freedom, leaving all she once knew behind.

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.
Activities

Authors Background

Julia Alvarez is originally from the Dominican Republic, but emigrated to this country with her parents at the age of ten. She is the author of four novels: *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, *¡Yo!*, and *In the Name of Salomé*. She has also published four books of poems, including: *Homecoming and The Other Side*; a book of essays, *Something to Declare*; three books for young readers, *The Secret Footprints*, *How Tía Lola Came to Stay*, 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 also 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 following for background in order to introduce the book to young adults.

CIA - The World Factbook – Map - Dominican Republic
Latin American History Resources
BBC World Country Profile of Dominican Republic
Rafael Trujillo: The Dominican Dictator
For over thirty years the Dominican Republic had been under the bloody rule of General Rafael Trujillo. The secret police (SIM) kept tabs on everybody's doings. The least breath of resistance could bring arrest, torture, and death to you or your family. An underground movement began under way in the early 1960’s. 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* takes place during the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic and recounts the story of the three Mirabela sisters, known as the mariposas, or butterflies, who were murdered for their involvement in the resistance. As these brave women were helping to plot the overthrow of Trujillo’s violent and repressive regime, their fourth sister stood by, unable to leave her husband and risk her life. Alvarez carefully portrays the conditions in the Dominican Republic at the time, the great risks these historical figures, the Mirabela sisters, were taking, and the tough choices Dominicans faced in this time of fear.

**Teacher Background Video**

Tell 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 sisters 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
They were—the three who died—the ones who stayed and sacrificed their lives and brought freedom to the Dominican Republic. We were the ones that got away, my father, my mother, my sisters and myself. My father was part of the same group as the Mirabal sisters and we got out and they didn't get out. There's always the responsibility of the survivors to tell the story of those who didn't make it. People ask how long it took to write this book and I say, "all my life." November 25th is the date in all our minds, those who survived. It is an important that for us and to everyone. The United Nations has even declared November 25th the International Day Against Violence Against Women because of the Mirabal sisters.

**Activity**

Based on the Random House Teachers Guide written by Julia Alvarez:

Teachers@Random

http://www.randomhouse.com/teachers/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=0375815449&view=rqg

Julie Alvarez states:

Throughout the book, Anita watches her mother to judge the situation in the compound. Her mother often changes her approach to Anita—sometimes treating her as an adult, sometimes as a child. Why do you feel Anita’s mother does that? How does Anita react, and how do you think she would like to be treated? Do you feel she is old enough to be hearing the truth, or should her mother shelter her more?

In the beginning of the book, Anita’s extended family suddenly flees the country, leaving only Anita and her immediate family behind. The family lives in a compound and is extremely close. What role does the family, immediate and extended, play in this book? Does Anita realize that not everyone has the relationship her family experiences?

Anita is at a stage of her life where questioning authority becomes a common occurrence. In this book, there are several different authority figures that are forcing her to behave in certain ways, such as the government, the opposition army, and her family. How does she deal with this authority? How does she get around some of the rules?

Anita and her sister have a typical relationship that most readers can understand. Does this attitude toward each other represent a determination to keep a certain level of normalcy in a very frightening and often dangerous situation? How do both of their attitudes change once the quinceañera occurs?

Discuss the importance of the compound in this book, specifically the loss of the family's freedom to go outside the gates, as well as the areas inside the compound that were off limits.

In order to shield the rest of the family, Anita's father and the group running the opposition speaks outside of the house, not realizing that Anita’s window is right next to their meeting place. How did hearing these conversations affect Anita? Do you feel she
was better off knowing the truth, or did the whole situation make her grow up faster than necessary?

After the compound becomes unsafe for Anita and her family, Anita and her mother secretly move to a safe house location and live in a closet. Compare this experience to historical events that caused people to go into hiding, to be detained because of their beliefs or nationalities, and to be threatened with death. Is there any particular person that she reminds you of?

Anita befriends an American boy, Sam. At her tender age of twelve, she is divided between her child-like view of the world and her adult emotions. How does her ever-changing view of life affect her relationship with Sam and with her friend Oscar, who is from her country?

What role does American culture play in this novel? Specifically, discuss the quinceañera and the Sweet Sixteen rites of passage and the idea that Anita and her family recognize American holidays, such as Thanksgiving.

At the end of the novel, Anita has lost some of her family to the violence in her native country. How does she feel about the sacrifice that her family had to make? Does she truly understand the impact that her family made on her country’s history?

Activity
Class presentations or research papers. 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.

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. 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
Interview members of the community or families of the students who are from the Dominican Republic.

• related subjects can be researched, such as immigration from Latin America, culture, music, dance, art, relationships between the countries and the United States;
• invite local speakers, for example experts in Latin American studies, various artists, writers, and filmmakers.

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

Internet Links

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

Dominican Republic
CIA-The World Factbook- Dominican Republic
LANIC: Latin American History Resources
http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/region/history/

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

Rafael Trujillo: The Dominican Dictator
http://www.jlhs.nhusd.k12.ca.us/classes/social_science/latin_america/dominican_republic.html

Art and Culture of the Dominican Republic

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

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

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

Caribbean Art from the World Bank Collection

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

Antes del Descubrimiento: La Cultura Taína- Spanish
Resources

Books, Essays, Poems Written by Julia Alvarez