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Reader Resources

In the Time of the Butterflies

by Julia Alvarez

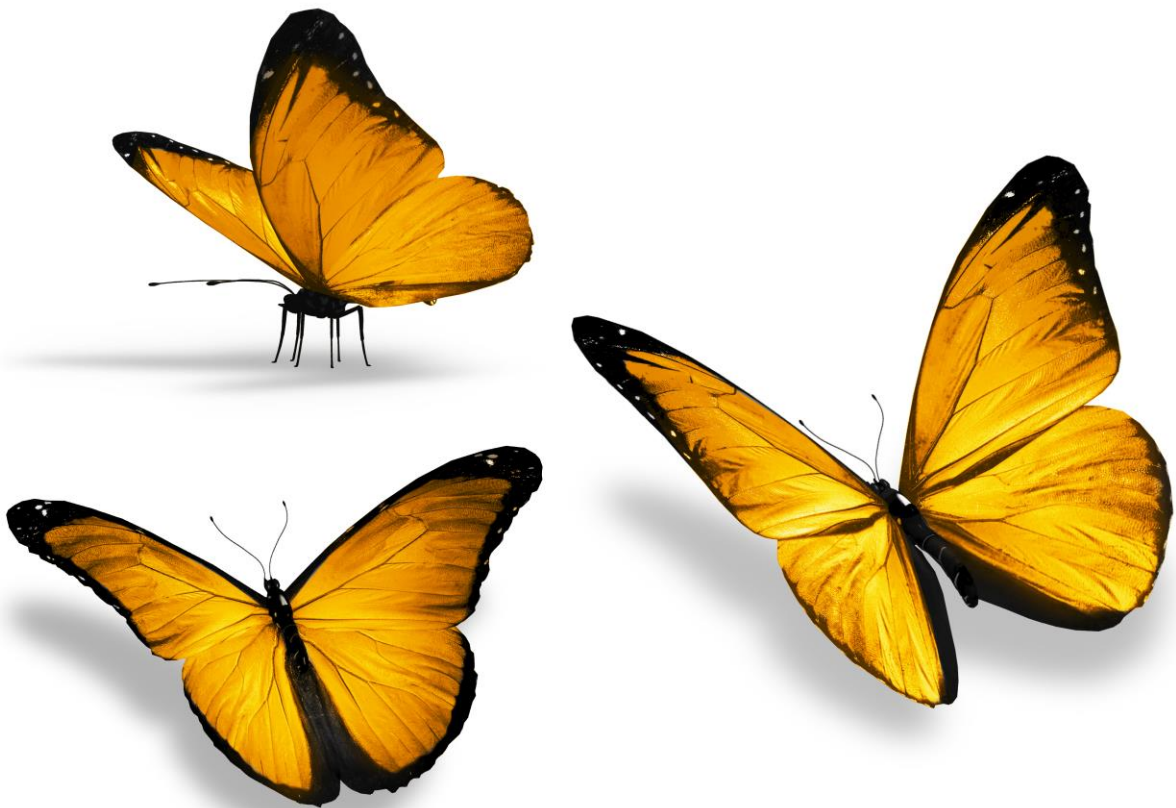


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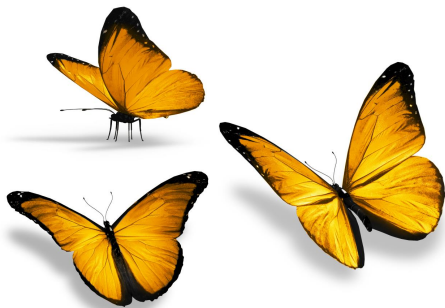
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Preface

In the Time of the Butterflies by Julia Alvarez transports us to the Dominican Republic in the mid-twentieth century when the country struggled under the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. A work of historical fiction, the novel honors the lives of Patria, Minerva, and María Teresa Mirabal, who became icons of freedom and women’s rights when they were assassinated in the autumn of 1960 for their role in the underground movement against Trujillo’s regime.

The murders of the three women inspired many in the Dominican Republic to denounce the regime publicly and marked the beginning of the end for Trujillo’s reign. In 1999 the United Nations General Assembly designated the date of the Mirabal sisters’ deaths, November 25, as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.



“I found in literature a place where the table was set for all. Everybody was welcome. I found true democracy in reading.”

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

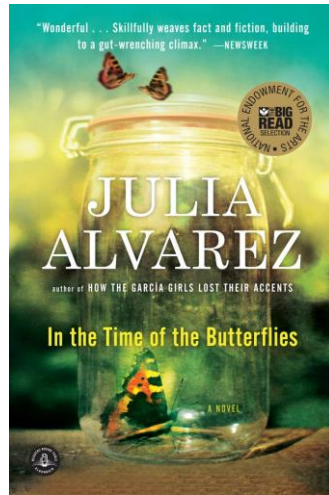
A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you’re a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) is a work of historical fiction based on the lives of the four Mirabal sisters, who participated in underground efforts to topple Rafael Leonidas Trujillo's three-decade-long dictatorial regime in the Dominican Republic. Three of the sisters—Patria, Minerva, and María Teresa—were slain on Trujillo's orders on November 25, 1960. Their story haunted Alvarez, whose own family had fled the Dominican Republic just three months earlier in fear that her father's participation in the resistance would make him a target of Trujillo.



The novel is both an homage to the bravery and sacrifice of the Mirabal family and a literary work of high grace. The first chapter begins in 1994 when a young Dominican-American writer, a *gringa dominicana*, visits the surviving sister, Dedé Mirabal, at the sisters' childhood home, which has been turned into a museum. Exhausted by the steady stream of pilgrims who have visited her in the thirty-four years since her sisters' deaths, Dedé reluctantly begins to tell the story of a family entwined with the political turmoil of their country.

In the body of the book, narrated in turn by each of the four sisters, Alvarez brings them to life, skillfully telling the story of four young girls who come of age wanting the same things most young women hope for: love, family, and freedom. Each of the sisters chooses to join the revolution in her own time—even Dedé, the one who lives to tell the tale and admits she only got involved "when it was already too late."

Scattered through the girls' stories are glimpses of a nation under siege, where the simplest liberties have been stripped away. We learn the details of the Butterflies' martyrdom slowly and, as it emerges from its chrysalis, readers find a story that spreads its wings, pauses to breathe the air of freedom, and gently takes flight.

Major Characters in the Book

Minerva Mirabal

Independent, outspoken Minerva is determined to get an education but, even after finishing law school, is prohibited by Trujillo from practicing. She is the first to join the revolution—*la primera mariposa*, the first Butterfly. Her husband Manolo is also a leader in the underground.

"They marveled at my self-control and so did I. But by now in my life I should have known. Adversity was like a key in the lock for me."

María Teresa (Mate) Mirabal

María Teresa, young and naïve, communicates primarily through journal entries. She becomes aware of the underground after she questions Minerva about both the strange, coded language she uses and a crate of guns that is delivered to the house. She marries Leandro and both join the resistance.

"I've lost all interest in my studies. I just go to classes in order to keep my cover as a second-year architecture student. My true identity now is Mariposa (#2), waiting daily, hourly, for communications from up north."

Patria Mirabal

The eldest sister, Patria, toys with the idea of becoming a nun before falling in love at sixteen with Pedrito González, a handsome young farmer. She becomes involved with the underground after witnessing a battle in the mountains between government forces and anti-Trujillo rebels on the fourteenth of June, 1959.

"Coming down that mountain, I was a changed woman. I may have worn the same sweet face, but now I was carrying not just my child but that dead boy as well."

Dedé Mirabal

In the novel's opening chapter, Dedé's father foretells her future, saying, "She'll bury us all [. . .] in silk and pearls." Until after her sisters' deaths, Dedé obeys her husband Jaimito's orders not to get involved in the revolution.

"I see them all there in my memory, as still as statues, Mamá and Papá, and Minerva and Mate and Patria, and I'm thinking something is missing now. And I count them all twice before I realize—it's me, Dedé, it's me, the one who survived to tell the story."

About the Author

Julia Alvarez (b. 1950)

Although Julia Alvarez was born in New York City, her family moved back to the Dominican Republic when she was only three months old. The family was relatively wealthy and lived comfortably until 1960, when authorities discovered that Alvarez's father belonged to an underground effort to overthrow Trujillo's regime. Fearing for their safety, the Alvarezes fled back to the United States. Just three months later, the Mirabal sisters—founders of the underground—were murdered.



Julia Alvarez, 2000 (Courtesy of Caleb Kenna)

Alvarez, her parents, and her three sisters made their home in a small apartment in New York City. Despite the racism of some classmates, Alvarez enjoyed learning English and credits the experience with helping her become a writer. As she explains, "Not understanding the language, I had to pay close attention to each word—great training for a writer. I also discovered the welcoming world of the imagination and books."

After high school, Alvarez earned her bachelor's degree from Middlebury College, and her master's degree in creative writing from Syracuse University. She had been teaching at Middlebury College for three years when her first novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), was published. The book received widespread acclaim and enabled her to pursue writing as a full-time career. She was 41 years old.

Alvarez lives with her husband, Bill Eichner, in Vermont. In 1998, the couple founded Finca Alta Gracia, a farm and literacy center located east of Pico Duarte, the highest peak in the Dominican Republic. Workers there cultivate environmentally sustainable shade-grown organic coffee, the sale of which supports a school on the farm where children and adults can learn to read.

An Interview with Julia Alvarez

On October 15, 2009, Josephine Reed of the National Endowment for the Arts interviewed Julia Alvarez. Excerpts from their conversation follow.

Josephine Reed: Your family left the Dominican Republic in 1960, when you were ten. What was that shift like for you? What was school like for you?

Julia Alvarez: I had never been on an escalator or in an elevator, or those doors that open by themselves when you went to the grocery store. We had learned that we were coming to the land of liberty, the home of the brave, the land of the free, and this was going to be great. And what I found was that in the school yard, the kids were not very nice. They were calling us names, telling us to go back to where we came from. So I felt unwelcome. And in a way that was really the hardest moment up to then in my life, because I knew that we couldn't go back, yet I didn't want to stay here. But thank goodness that I had a good sixth grade teacher and that I found the public library, because they put books in my hand and I discovered that there were worlds I could enter where everybody was welcome.

JR: What is *In the Time of the Butterflies* about for you?

JA: *In the Time of the Butterflies* is a book that helped me understand my country's story and my parents' story. It was a book that I had to write, because it was a debt that I owed. We were the family that got out and came to the United States, and here I am—an American writer. And what is the responsibility of those who survive? To remember, and to remind. It's through telling the story that we really understand the full complexity of what happened to us. Not just the facts, not just the either/or, but the full, textured complexity of a dictatorship and how we got out of it.

JR: Did your parents know the Mirabal sisters?

JA: Everybody who was in that group knew of them, but my father didn't know them personally. My mother didn't get involved in the underground at all.

JR: I'd like to talk about the intersection of history and fiction in this book. For example, did Minerva really slap Trujillo at a dance?

JA: I talked to many people who experienced the Mirabal sisters from different points of view. Some things other people said were corroborated by Dedé, but others were not. When I asked her about the slap at the dance, she said, "Julia, there was not a slap. At the dance, he was making advances that she was finding invasive and repugnant." She said there were words and a confrontation, but there was never a slap. However, other people who were at the same party swear they saw and heard the slap. There's even a famous merengue about the slap. In writing the book, I had to decide what truths to privilege, balancing different points of view. Ultimately, what is important in a novel is the truth according to the character telling or living out the story. In

many ways fiction more closely approximates how we ourselves live our own historical moment than an objective record of facts does.

JR: Julia, why do you read? Why does one read?

JA: There are very few people who you ever know with the intensity and profundity that you know a character from a novel. I think that the muscles that you're stretching when you're reading are the same muscles you use for compassion and understanding. To be able to become a reader is to become sensitized and aware of things. It develops that capacity to be compassionate, to understand, to see, and to be a fuller human being.

Historical and Literary Context

The Dominican Republic under Trujillo

1930s

- 1930: Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina becomes president of the Dominican Republic through rigged elections; in the same year a terrible hurricane hits the country.
- 1937: Trujillo orders the massacre of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic.
- 1939: World War II begins.

1940s

- 1941: The Dominican Republic declares war on Japan, Germany, and Italy.
- 1942: Trujillo arranges to repay all the foreign debt due to the United States.
- 1945: World War II ends and the United Nations is established, with the Dominican Republic as one of its founding members.

1950s

- 1950: Julia Alvarez is born in New York City.
- 1955: Trujillo orders every household in the Dominican Republic to display a gold plaque that reads, "In this house, Trujillo is chief."
- 1957: Dominican intelligence and secret police are combined to create the State Security Secretariat for surveillance and control of the population.
- 1959: Exiled Dominicans stage a failed invasion that spawns the Fourteenth of June Movement opposing Trujillo's regime.

1960s

- 1960: Julia Alvarez's family is forced to leave the Dominican Republic for New York after her father's participation in the underground movement is discovered.
- 1960: Government agents ordered by Trujillo murder Patria, Minerva, and María Teresa Mirabal on November 25.
- 1961: Trujillo is assassinated.

The Dominican Republic and Hispaniola

The Dominican Republic is located about 700 miles southeast of Miami, Florida, on the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola. The Atlantic Ocean laps the island's northern shore, and the Caribbean Sea washes its southern coast. Christopher Columbus landed on Hispaniola on his first voyage to the New World in 1492, when he was trying to reach the Indies in Southeast Asia. This new Caribbean region, composed of many islands, was soon named the West Indies and became a gateway for European conquest of the Americas.

Since the time of Columbus's landing, the island has suffered from tumultuous periods of political instability and corrupt regimes. The indigenous people, the Taíno, were eradicated by brutal treatment from the Spanish settlers and diseases from Europe. As the Taíno perished, the Spanish began bringing enslaved Africans to the islands to serve as laborers.

In the 17th century the French established a colony on Hispaniola and fought with the Spanish over control of the western third of the island. This area became Haiti in 1804 after Toussaint L'Ouverture, a former slave, had previously led a successful rebellion of enslaved Africans, winning freedom from the rule of Napoleon I. Haitians controlled the entire island from 1822 until 1844, when nationalists seized control of the Spanish portion, declared independence, and formally created the Dominican Republic. Political unrest and a series of brutal dictatorships ravaged the nation until democracy was finally established in 1978.

Most Dominicans consider themselves multiracial, a blend of European and African heritage, and were historically Roman Catholic. Though the nation's economy used to be based heavily on agriculture, tourism became a growing industry as the country's political situation stabilized. Today most Dominicans work in service-related jobs such as the hospitality industry, tourism, and banking.

Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina (1891-1961)

Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina was born to a lower-middle-class family in San Cristóbal in the southern part of the Dominican Republic west of the capital, Santo Domingo.

In 1916, fearful that the Dominican Republic's faltering economy might destabilize the region, the United States sent Marines to occupy the island and protect shipping approaches to the Panama Canal, completed only two years earlier. During the American occupation, Trujillo was a cadet in the Dominican Army. He was trained by U.S. Marines, and rose quickly through the ranks. By 1925, he was the army's commander-in-chief.

In 1930, President Horacio Vásquez resigned after a revolt against his government. The seizure of power in 1930 confirmed Trujillo as the most powerful man in the Dominican Republic; control of the country was now in his hands. He ran unopposed in a bogus election. For the next three decades, he ruled as an absolute dictator who controlled both the government and the army either directly or through a series of hand-picked puppets.

Trujillo and his family also dominated every aspect of the country's economy, and amassed a great fortune while the masses of the Dominican people suffered from deprivation and political repression. Critics were subjected to torture, loss of property, and harsh prison sentences. In 1937, Trujillo ordered the massacre of thousands of unarmed black Haitians living in the Dominican Republic to racially homogenize the region, avenge old animosities with Haiti, and establish firm control of the country's borders.

By the 1950s, Trujillo's regime faced criticism from home and abroad. On June 14, 1959, with the help of Fidel Castro, Dominicans exiled to Cuba led a failed invasion of the Dominican Republic. Venezuelan President Rómulo Betancourt had been an outspoken critic of Trujillo, and the Dominican ruler despised him for it. Two assassination attempts orchestrated by Trujillo against Betancourt proved to be serious miscalculations, and fueled international outrage against Trujillo. The Organization of American States (OAS) voted to sever diplomatic ties with his regime and impose economic sanctions on the country.

Meanwhile, the underground revolutionary movement in the Dominican Republic continued to gain strength. As leaders in the group, the Mirabal sisters won admiration throughout the country for their efforts to restore democracy. Ironically, their murder on November 25, 1960, ordered by Trujillo, signaled the end of the dictator's power: six months later, Trujillo was assassinated on the road outside Ciudad Trujillo

(now, again, Santo Domingo) by a group of gunmen, some of whom had been members of Trujillo's inner circle.

Other Works/Adaptations

Alvarez and Her Other Works

Attention to word choice marked Alvarez's entrance into the world of reading and writing. Newly learned English words formed the books and stories that helped 10-year-old Alvarez assimilate to life in America. She wondered why one would choose to use "friendly" instead of "amiable" or "slender" rather than "skinny."

Alvarez became a poet, essayist, novelist, and translator. She explains, "Readers ask me how come I jump around so much in terms of genres: writing poetry and children's books and stories and novels and essays. I blame my life. Something happens which sends me in a new direction...and the telling requires a different form, rhythm, voice."

Alvarez felt as though the immigrant's experience was missing from American literature until she read Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975), which she calls "a beautiful, lyrical memoir about coming from somewhere else and reinventing yourself, while still bearing the burden of the past."

Alvarez's first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), is a series of interwoven stories about four sisters and their parents. In circumstances similar to that of Alvarez's own family, the Garcías flee the Dominican Republic for America during the Trujillo era and struggle to adapt to American life. *¡YO!* (1997)—a title that plays on the Spanish word for "self" and the name of the book's main character—follows Yolanda García after she has written a novel based on the lives of her family and friends.

Like *In the Time of the Butterflies*, two of Alvarez's other novels have a basis in historical events. *In the Name of Salomé* (2000) is based on the life of one of the Dominican Republic's most celebrated poets, Salomé Ureña, and her only daughter Camila, who taught Spanish during the summers at Middlebury College, where Alvarez is now a writer-in-residence. The inspiration for *Saving the World* (2006) was a footnote Alvarez noticed while researching Ureña. In 1804 a Spanish expedition sailed around the world with the smallpox vaccine. Because there was no refrigeration, orphan boys were conscripted and vaccinated sequentially during the ship's passage to keep the virus alive.

In addition to her best-selling novels, Alvarez has published several books for young readers including *Before We Were Free* (2002) and *Finding Miracles* (2004). A fable for all ages, *A Cafecito Story* (2001) was inspired by the organic coffee farm Alvarez and her husband, Bill Eichner, founded in the Dominican Republic. She has also written works of nonfiction: a collection of essays, *Something to Declare*

(1998), *Once Upon a Quinceañera* (2007), a memoir that examines the customary celebrations for young Latinas coming of age in America, and *A Wedding in Haiti* (2012), a chronicle of her visit to attend a friend's wedding.

Alvarez has received numerous awards for her work including the Hispanic Heritage Award in Literature (2008), the F. Scott Fitzgerald Award for Outstanding Achievement in American Literature (2009), and the National Medal of Arts (2013).

Alvarez's stories examine what it means to be a part of a family, a nation, and a culture while maintaining one's own identity. Through her novels, poetry, and books for young readers, Julia Alvarez's voice adds depth and harmony to the chorus of American literature.

Other Works by Julia Alvarez

Novels

- *Saving the World*, 2006
- *A Cafecito Story*, 2001
- *In the Name of Salomé*, 2000
- *¡YO!*, 1997
- *In the Time of the Butterflies*, 1994
- *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, 1991

Poetry

- *The Woman I Kept To Myself*, 2004
- *Seven Trees* with Sara Eichner, 1998
- *Homecoming: New and Collected Poems*, 1996
- *The Other Side/El Otro Lado*, 1995

Nonfiction

- *A Wedding in Haiti*, 2012
- *Once Upon a Quinceañera*, 2007
- *Something to Declare*, 1998

Children and Young Adult

- *How Tía Lola Ended Up Starting Over*, 2011
- *How Tía Lola Saved the Summer*, 2011
- *How Tía Lola Learned to Teach*, 2010
- *Return to Sender*, 2009
- *The Best Gift of All: The Legend of La Vieja Belén/El mejor regalo del mundo: la leyenda de La Vieja Belén*, 2008
- *A Gift of Gracias: The Legend of Altagracia*, 2005
- *Finding Miracles*, 2004
- *Before We Were Free*, 2002
- *How Tía Lola Came to Stay*, 2001
- *The Secret Footprints*, 2000

Discussion Questions

1. The novel begins with a writer, “a gringa dominicana,” visiting Dedé at the childhood home of the Mirabal sisters. Who or what is the primary focus of the first chapter? How does opening the narrative this way give structure to the book?
2. Discuss the novel as historical fiction. How much license may an author take in recreating past events, especially those so significant to a country's national identity? What can be gained by presenting the Mirabal sisters as characters in a novel, instead of simply telling the facts of their involvement in the revolution?
3. Most of the novel takes place from the 1930s to the 1960s in the Dominican Republic. What traits are considered appropriate for women living there at that time? Which women defy these social customs, and why?
4. Compare and contrast the personalities of the Mirabal sisters. In what ways are they alike? How do they differ?
5. Despite her anger over her father's infidelity, Minerva insists on meeting her half-sisters and insists after his death that they get the opportunity to have an education. Why do you think she does so?
6. What prompts Patria to become involved in the revolution? How does her commitment differ from Minerva's and María Teresa's?
7. Why does Dedé shy away from involvement with the underground? What does her reluctance tell us about her priorities in life? What does Dedé value most?
8. Each of the sisters has different motivations for her involvement in the underground and tolerates different amounts of risk. Discuss when each sister decides to become politically active. What specific event triggers each woman's decision?
9. The real-life Mirabal sisters are viewed as heroines and martyrs in the Dominican Republic. Discuss what makes a person a martyr. Is it necessary for martyrs to act heroically? How do the actions of the Mirabal sisters compare to other famous people who have died for important causes?

Additional Resources

If you would like to read books that inspire Julia Alvarez, you might try:

- *The Arabian Nights* (collected works, various authors/translators)
- Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, 1855
- George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, 1871-1872
- Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, 1975
- J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, 1999

If you would like to read books about immigrants to America:

- Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, 1918
- Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*, 1989
- Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, 1989
- Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, 1999
- Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, 2003

Credits

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Acknowledgments

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Cover image: "Three yellow butterfly, isolated on white background" by suns07butterfly. Shutterstock.



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