

IN HER OWN WORDS-
A CONVERSATION WITH JULIA ALVAREZ

Q: Although this is a fictional account, you mention in your author's note that the situation it describes is very real. What brought this issue to your attention and inspired you to write a book about it?

A: Since moving to Vermont in 1988, a lot of my Latino family and friends would say that I was moving to the "Latino-compromised" state of Vermont. They were right: in the 2001 census there were 5,504 people of Hispanic origin in *all* of Vermont. In fact, we were the state with the smallest Latino population.

But about eight years ago, this started to change. First, in terms of background, our Vermont dairy farms were in trouble. Many farmers were going out of business because the price of milk was at an all-time low. It was also difficult for them to find local help, since farm work is hard and doesn't pay as much as other jobs. So in order to survive, many farmers started hiring undocumented Mexican workers, many of whom brought their families along and also started having children here. Suddenly, just in our county alone, there was an unofficial count of five hundred Mexicans. Because they were undocumented, they were an "underground" population. Many didn't go out in public: they just stayed working on the farms. They were afraid that the authorities would spot them in lily-white Vermont and deport them.

Because I know Spanish, my farmer neighbors, the hospital, and the schools would call me up whenever they needed help with translation. I soon became acquainted with many of the Mexican families and their employers. In the schools, I met many Vermont farm kids who didn't understand what was going on. Why were their parents telling them to keep these workers a secret? What did it mean that their farms might be raided and people carted off, just like the Japanese Americans during World War II? The Vermont kids were upset and full of questions.

And so were the Mexican and Mexican American kids. What if they got home and their parents were gone? Why couldn't they have friends come over? Why did they have to keep their parents a secret?

That's when I realized that we needed a story to help us understand what was happening to us.

Often that is the inspiration for my books: something happens in my life, and I can't stop thinking about it. I call my type of inspiration "the pebble in my shoe" inspiration, that little pebble I can't seem to shake out of my mind! Life gives me a lot of them.

Q: To what extent are the characters in *Return to Sender* based on people you have met or known? Is there a real-life Mari or Tyler? Where did you take creative liberties and why?

A: There are many real-life Tylers and Maris. Part of a writer's **research-even when she is writing nonfiction-is to immerse** herself in the material that inspires her. Since I was helping out in the schools, I got to hang out with "my material" the whole day. As soon as I got home, I'd furiously write up all my notes: little bits and pieces of conversation, the look on someone's face, the question a student had asked, what the lunch menu was for that day. Talk about homework! And maybe I ended up using one percent of all this material. Doesn't matter. A writer has to create a whole imaginary world inside her head in order to tell a story that occurred in that fictional world. When the time came for Mari to be walked into her classroom, I knew exactly what she was seeing, and those little details I had noted were right there for me to insert like little puzzle pieces in my story.

As for the characters themselves: they, too, are little bits and pieces of observed real people. There was a young farm boy, Michael, whom I shadowed as he did his chores. He taught me a lot about farming that I didn't know! Michael doesn't look like my Tyler, but his curiosity and freshness became part of my character. There was another little Mexican girl, Arelis, who was really spunky, and she actually inspired my Ofie. But part of Arelis's story-she "disappeared" one night with her family, who were afraid of a raid and fled back to Mexico-became part of my character's life as well. Another Mexican girl, Marfa, did have one American-born sister, Lorenza. She didn't understand why she was "illegal" and why her sister had every right to be in this country. That went into Mari's story.

See what I mean? A writer takes different bits and pieces from real life to create her characters and their world. But as you write, your characters start to assume their own shape and personality, and then they start telling you, the writer, which way their story should go. Each one wants to take over. So it's a balancing act: as the writer, you have to listen to them but you are also the one in charge, guiding the story to a satisfying conclusion.

Q: Do you think most people would react the way Tyler and his family did to the influx of immigrants into their community? What has experience shown you about our cultural ability or inability to accept strangers?

A: What I learned from researching this story is that even within one family, there might be different opinions about immigrants in a community. Tyler, at first, is the one who doesn't like the idea about breaking the rules. His dad also agreed with that stance, until he had an accident and was about to lose his farm. So, finally, he went along with what his own brother was already doing, hiring undocumented workers.

I think it's natural to be unsure about strangers and to think *they* are different from *us*. But all the farm families I interviewed said that once they got to know these immigrants, they became friends. The Mexican families were moving in with the farm families, and both were sharing so much of their lives and discovering they weren't so different from each other. In fact, many of the Mexican workers had been farmers back in Chiapas, but they couldn't earn enough to keep farming. So here they were, in Vermont, helping out farmers who are in the same situation, only not as dire: on the brink of losing their family farms.

We are one human family, after all.

Q: Why did you choose to tell this story in alternating view- points and, occasionally, through letters?

A: At first, I was just going to write a story from Mari's point of view. We had a lot in common. After all, I came to this country from the Dominican Republic when I was a ten-year-old, with Spanish as my first language. I know how difficult it was for me and my family, and I wish I had had books about immigrant girls back in 1960 that would have helped me understand what was happening to me. So I'm naturally drawn to an immigrant story.

But as I did the research and got to know a lot of farmers and farm kids, I thought, hmmm, this is the other side of Mari's story that completes the picture. What is it like for these farm families to be struggling to survive and have to break the law? I wanted both stories in my book.

But ultimately, this is a story about friendship, how we have more that unites us than divides us as a human family. How by understanding another point of view we bridge the differences between ourselves and another human being.

I also wanted each voice to sound different: Mari's and Tyler's, because they are two different characters. And I thought Mari might be afraid to openly tell her story. So writing letters seemed more natural for her. She could keep her story private and just tell it to one particular person. When Mari had to go into hiding with her sisters, I thought, now what? Then I realized she could write letters to her diary: Dear Diary!

Q: What led you to choose *Return to Sender* as the title?

A: Readers ask me if I named the novel *Return to Sender* in reference to the post office stamp on letters with incorrect addresses. Well, actually, that situation does apply to the characters in my book. But the name comes from the dragnet operation carried out by the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement in 2006. They named their operation Return to Sender, and the idea was to raid work- places and seize undocumented workers and send them back to their home countries. Under Operation Return to Sender, some farms in Vermont were raided, the undocumented workers were taken away, and in some cases, the children were left behind with farm families who didn't know what to do. This was very frightening to the children and upsetting to everyone involved.

Q: Many of your books deal with social or political controversies but emphasize the human side—showing how people are affected on a personal and emotional level. What role, if any, do you think fiction plays in politics? Can a good story change minds? Can it change the world?

A: Wow, these are huge, important questions and concerns. One thing I can tell you is that I try not to think about *huge* and *important* concerns or political issues while I am writing. I want to listen to the human side of the story, to my characters. Because when you come right down to it, all those controversies or political issues or laws or policies or opinions trickle down to a human being.

This is something the world of story teaches us: how an action or situation affects a specific life. At the heart of a story there is a character. At the heart of any political issue there is a person who is not very different from us. I don't think stories can change the world, but they can change a mind. And that is how we can change the world, one reader at a time!

Q: What do you hope readers will take away from this book?

A: What I most want is for readers to fall in love with my book! A book is like your child. You put her out there and you want her to find friends who will give her a home in their hearts and imaginations.

I want my readers to enter into the story and come out a slightly different person than they were before reading it. I don't think books change us in huge, drastic ways, but they do change us invisibly and importantly. When you read a book and get lost in it, you become someone else. You understand the world from another person's point of view. After all, for several hundred pages you've been that character! And that means your one-self has been expanded to include someone else. That's awesome! If we could only do that with every person we meet, imagine their lives and feelings, have compassion for their struggles!

I also hope that through understanding my characters, my readers understand themselves a little better. You explore another character's world, and then you start noticing more surprises and interesting things in your own life and self. Books don't just help us discover other people, they help us discover ourselves as well.