Sheila O’Connor

AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIA ALVAREZ

Julia Alvarez was born in the Dominican Republic, where her family has a history of political activism. When she was ten years old, her parents moved the family to New York City. She holds a B.A. from Middlebury College and an M.A. in creative writing from Syracuse University. She is the author of six books of fiction, including *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, In the Time of the Butterflies*, and *Saving the World* (with Don Francisco). She has also published a collection of essays, five volumes of poetry, and five books for children. The recipient of many awards for her work, Julia Alvarez lives in Vermont with her husband. She is Writer-in-Residence at Middlebury College.

Sheila O’Connor is an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Liberal Studies at Hamline University. She spoke with Julia Alvarez when her new novel, *Saving the World*, was about to be released. *Saving the World*, a novel within a novel, charts the journeys of two women: Alma Huebner, a Latin American novelist transplanted to the United States, and Isabel Sendales y Gomez, the rectoress of La Casa de Expositós, who accompanied twenty-two orphan boys, all live carriers of the small pox vaccine, on the Balmis expedition in 1803.

O’Connor: Several years ago, I was a resident at Norcroft, a writer’s colony, and I had the great luck of staying in the Julia Alvarez room—which meant I lived in the company of your work. All of the books on my shelf were written by you, so in part, it became my Julia Alvarez retreat.

As a writer, reading the body of your work, I'm interested in your movement between genres. You've written fiction, poetry, picture books, essays, and the young adult novel. Could you talk a bit about the various forms, how they inspire or challenge you?

Alvarez: I don't know how to have an explanation that might make sense. It's intuitive—and not to say the intuition is always right. Sometimes you find you've written a poem that could be a story. A lot of it is trial by error. If you were a singer and sang opera but also liked the blues, and wanted to use your voice to sing country western, all of these ways of using your voice could achieve different things. Given the situation, what's inside you, one form or another becomes a better fit. Poetry is like the scout that goes out, the search, the hot, bright edge of your life where you meet the things that can't be put into words. I think of prose as the settlers with their families, and they need shoes and schools, and you need food.

So often I find myself going to poetry when I've spent three or four years on a novel and I want to get that clean windshield again. To come up for air.

O'Connor: Do you work in different forms simultaneously, or do you tend to limit your focus to one project?

Alvarez: I get obsessed with what I'm working on; I get fully immersed and passionate. It's like being in love. I have a little notebook where I write down other ideas, a journal. Sometimes, as a writer, you have to restrain yourself because you want to do something else on a day when the writing isn't going well. It's important to stay

focused and know that the days when the writing isn' t going well are part of writing the novel.

O'Connor: Do you do a lot of revision work in your novels?

Alvarez: Ah, tons. In fact, I can't change anything now in *Saving the World.* I look at things and think, why didn't I see this? Why didn't I know this? But novels are more forgiving that way. Emily Dickinson said no approximate words in a poem.

O'Connor: You've published fifteen books. For those of us who are less prolific writers, what's your secret?

Alvarez: My first novel came out when I was forty one—I wrote for twenty five years before that. But listen, I quit teaching. That's a job that's really hard to do—to be a full-time teacher who writes on the side.

I take writing seriously. People think that now that I'm a full-time writer, my day is discretionary for whatever people need me to do. I say to people, "I'm working," and they say, "I thought you quit teaching." (Laughter.)

O'Connor: Right. As if the writing isn't work. I've encountered the same. It's so hard for non-writers to understand that writing is work time.

Alvarez: Yes, and the habits of having had a full time job, and a very busy work life, have made me appreciate the time. I teach one course a year now to stay connected to that community, and I tell my students that one of the most important things they can most learn from a workshop is the habit of writing, so that they're not each day having a quarrel with it, about whether or not they're going to do it. You just do it. To stay focused on that is really important.

Part of the reason the book tours are so difficult is that you're out there, but you're not writing. It's like tying a dancer to a chair and then playing her favorite music. You're talking about writing and advising people about writing, but you're not writing.

O'Connor: Actually, that's a conflict Alma, one of your heroines in *Saving the World*, faces. When the book opens, she's suffering from a writer's crisis, but the crisis has less to do with the actual writing than it does with the act of publishing. She is a writer trying to create honestly within the expectations and demands of the industry.

I think sometimes the public has the perception that this is why the writer writes, to be famous, to go on book tours. This isn't true of Alma, and it isn't true of many serious writers.

Alvarez: Yes. The book biz. It used to be you read a book you really liked, you stroked the cover and went to the library and got another book.

One of the dangers for young writers who get lionized young is that many times they don't have the self-discipline. They can get pulled away from the things they're being lauded for—they become writing stars.

O'Connor: In terms of Alma's writer's crisis, part of it is a crisis of self-confidence that has come from a piece of criticism, harsh criticism, and it sends her into a vortex of self-doubt.

Alvarez: I myself don't really read much of the critics. So here we go, my character is not me. But I feel much of the criticism out there is made up of short sound bites in which the critic responds to the book, but s/he's not really responding to the book. He has an agenda, and I can see it when I read it.

My editor and agent might urge me to read criticism that I'll find useful. But I'm getting excellent feedback from my editor and some from my agent, too, so I trust their instincts, and I'm learning with every book I write how to write better.

O'Connor: One of the most interesting things for me as a writer is the way in which Alma comes to make the decisions to tell the story she has to tell. In the novel, she has an "owed" book, a book that the publisher and the public are waiting for, but it isn't the book she wants to write. I was interested in your presentation of the artist 's dilemma, how we might find ourselves on a trajectory with our work—a trajectory defined by the expectations of readers, editors, agents—and in essence, we've lost our artistic integrity. Our freedom.

Alvarez: It's important for writers to stay focused when that happens because we 've ill served the very readers who want the work. It's your job as writer to see it as clearly as possible, to do the best you can at saying the story that only you, with your peculiar combination of all kinds of things, can see and say. Because if I wrote another book like *In the Time of Butterflies,* I wouldn't be doing my job, which is to keep moving, growing, telling the stories I've heard and seen.

O'Connor: Readers love characters. They fall in love with them and they don't want to leave them. Thus, the desire for the book to continue.

Alvarez: Exactly. It's a compliment to the book.

O'Connor: Yes it is, tremendous. But at the same time, many writers have said good bye to the characters, they've lived with them a long time, and they're ready to move on and meet another mystery.

Alvarez: That's a great way to put it. Meet another mystery.

O'Connor: And the mystery that intrigues your character, Alma, is the true story: Isabel Sendales y Gomes, the rectoress who, in 1803, accompanied twenty-two orphan boys, live carriers of the small pox vaccine, on the Balmis expedition. Because there is so little known about Isabel, Alma begins to imagine a story. Who was Isabel? Why did she go? How did she feel about Don Francisco? What were her hopes? Desires? Fears?

Your novel then, alternates between these two stories: the present story of Alma and the novel she's actually writing: the story of Isabel and the small pox expedition. A novel within a novel. Did you begin with the structure or did you discover it?

Alvarez: Oh I never know where I'm going.

O'Connor: So, you didn't set out to write a novel within a novel?

Alvarez: Oh my gosh (laughter), are you kidding? No, not at all. I used to think that's why I wasn't a novelist. I imagined other people got their clean notebooks and wrote from start to finish. Sure, they went through and corrected their spelling. I've come to find out from talking to other writer friends that many of us work that way. It's messy. I've got the boxes to show for it. You're creating something that didn't exist before.

And I could have just told one story, but then the novel wouldn't embody the ideas I wanted to explore.

O'Connor: One of the ideas you explore so beautifully in *Saving the World* is the construct of hope. But in this book, hope isn't a one-dimensional, bright star shining. It compels us to action, but it's complicated. I'm wondering if your own ideas about hope

changed in the course of writing the book, as Alma's did while she wrote hers, or did the book begin with something you wanted to say about hope?

Alvarez: I don't think I can disentangle what I did with an idea that evolved parallel to it. We come out of a novel we've written a different person than the one that started it. Definitely that happens. I think one of the reasons that it's important is that it's below the radar. It's not like polemical writing, or politics with a message. It's filigrees, shifts, and hair's breath changes in our perception, and it doesn't even register on a scale that could be useful to anybody. That's why in dictatorships storytellers who are telling fantastic stories that are fiction, sometimes get away with things. Like Gabriel Garcia Marquez. And yet, what they're writing about is alerting and awakening people in ways that are very dangerous. But they're not measurable.

So, to know who I was when I went in, and who I was when I went out: I don't. But, I do know what we write changes us.

O'Connor: There were points in the book where I felt there was a kind of optimism that began to shift for many of the characters. Hope wasn't sufficient.

Alvarez: You know, as we get older we realize how complex situations can be, and easy solutions that are either or . . . .

O'Connor: All the easy solutions elude everyone in the book. You constantly call upon the reader to consider the complexity of the situation. Every situation.

Alvarez: You always have to act, as if . . . . It's funny, because we have to see the complexity of reality, and yet we're often forced to act out of a reduction of that complexity, in order to do something. Otherwise, we can get ourselves into feeling the world is so complicated it's difficult to know how to act. And for me, both Alma and

Isabel, and the whole true story of the small pox expedition, are stories of people who wanted to do good. But then you turn that a little bit.

And you know, there were twenty two young orphan carriers used for the small pox expedition. What about them?

O'Connor: And Isabel, their guardian, asks: Is it possible to act in this world without hurting someone?

Alvarez: Alma asks that, too, as well.

O'Connor: That's an important question, one the book raises but doesn't directly answer. But there remains a theme of responsibility in the book, a need to act, a need to do good, to make the effort. At the same time there's the acknowledgement that there can be a collision between believing you're acting in the best interest of someone else, and actually doing it.

Alvarez: Yes, but, I wouldn't say, may be a collision. I would say there's usually, not even usually, I would say there *is a* collision. Things can have a variegated result. But, you still have to act as if.

> That wonderful quote of Seamus Heaney that opens the book:
> History says, *Don't hope*
> *On this side of the grave.*
> But then, once in a lifetime
> The longed for tidal wave
> Of justice can rise up,
> And hope and history rhyme.
>
> Seamus Heany
> From "Voices from Lemnos"

One in a lifetime hope and history might rhyme. Very few and far between has that happened. But what would be the alternative? To figure it's impossible and therefore

every man woman and child for himself. No kind of moral compass. Even though you know it's going to quiver and quiver and there is no true north.

O'Connor: In *Saving the World*, you refrain from judgment, from conclusion. At the same time, you ask the reader to consider complex moral dilemmas.

Alvarez: I think one of my favorite quotes by Chekhov is, "The path of the writer is not to solve the problem but to state it correctly." That's why I love stories, they allow for the full complexity of competing realities. If there is anything that is god, it's a force that can contain all the points of view.

O'Connor: One of fiction's great gifts—to explore all points of view.

Alvarez: Exactly. Just the fact that that happens when you read – that a book stretches our capacity for identification and understanding. I've got to believe it's a force for the good. It builds compassion. It allows us to so exquisitely become other people.

O'Connor: It's one of the things I most admire about fiction: the way it calls us to be more than who we are. Which leads me to one of Alma's great realizations: Toward the end of the novel, she comes to the conclusion that as a writer, as a human being, you can't live entirely for your own time. "You have to imagine a story bigger than your own story, bigger than the sum of your parts."

Alvarez: One of the things I kept returning to is that we have to lift ourselves beyond our context, and our particular combination of when we happen to be here in time. To expand.

This has happened with our project in the Dominican Republic. We have wonderful young people who come and teach literacy out in the middle of nowhere. And

I remember early on, one of the young teachers who came, such an idealist, and after her time there, she was depressed. She felt she hadn't gotten that far, she hadn't done much.

It's a kind of moral arrogance to think that it has to happen during our watch. That the work we do, the way we put our hand to what needs to be done, needs results, so we can feel good about what we've done. To believe that it hasn't been useful because results haven't happened in our time. That's living only for your own time.