



Agnes Scott

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Leading Science

AGNES SCOTT CELEBRATES
SCIENCE AS A LIBERAL ART

When Julia Alvarez's husband heads to their farm without her, she gives him a list. He's accustomed to finding H₂O on it. The water goes into a bowl on her writing desk.

Alta Gracia is a 260-acre coffee farm in a poor, mountainous region of the Dominican Republic, Alvarez's native country. This past winter, she canceled a trip in order to join other poets in a reading protesting the proposed war with Iraq.

Such actions reveal much about this writer-in-residence at Vermont's Middlebury College. Also a poet, essayist and fiction writer, she was the keynote speaker at Agnes Scott's annual Writers' Festival this spring.

"One of my favorite venues is to read where there are students and young people," says Alvarez. "Usually there's an openness and a look at literature to answer some of the basic questions we are all

teacher," says Alvarez. "I see this kind of real energy in young people. They are thinking about very, very important things. It is heartening to see this groundswell of generosity and intense compassion. Part of it, I think, is that young people are raised with CNN and a lot of communication, and they early on realize what a complicated world they live in."

Alvarez garners writing material by paying close attention to the world in which she finds herself. Today, she finds hope but she also finds troubling developments.

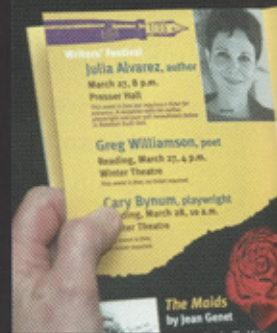
"I'm heartsick with what is happening in terms of the way the world is going right now, in this new millennium where we're grown-up human beings that we haven't found a way to resolve our differences that doesn't cost a lot of innocent lives and a lot of heartaches."

A '60s peace child, Alvarez is troubled because dreams of

H₂O and the Writing Life

*Clues to this writer's life
surface in an unlikely symbol*

by Jennifer Bryon Owen



asking. When you see that hunger out there and you can feel that something you say or write is nurturing that, maybe inspiring somebody to write her own work, it's just a very special kind of feeling. It's what we write for and imagine what happens in the best of circumstances for readers, but our hope is that it happens with an audience."

Much of Alvarez's writing stems from her struggle to find her place in the United States after her family was forced to flee the Dominican Republic when she was 10. Her writing focuses on the human condition, trying to find similarities between cultures. "When I came to this country—you know the old model of immigration—you came, you cut your ties with the past, and you became an American and that was that," says Alvarez. "That might have worked when communication was more difficult and mobility unheard of, but it's not a realistic model for people as mobile as we are. I had the feeling I had to choose; that there was something inferior about my background, culture and traditions."

She proposes a new model for diverse people living together based on curiosity, a form of being respectful and interested. "And giving to the other culture as much credibility and importance as your own is so important."

Alvarez and her husband purchased Alta Gracia as a way to give back. The coffee is grown without chemicals and provides work for some of the 60 to 80 villagers. A new building and a library built by volunteers revitalized the village's practically non-functioning school. Last year, the teacher was a volunteer just graduated from Middlebury College, and this year's volunteer is from Dartmouth College.

"We've got people left and right asking if they can be the next

leaving the world a better place haven't materialized, but she continues her efforts. Alvarez was one of 11 poets in the February "Poets Against the War" reading in Manchester, Vt., to protest U.S. military action in Iraq. The event was organized after a group of poets were un-invited to a White House reading, organized by first lady Laura Bush, because some poets planned to protest military involvement with Iraq.

The poetry reading was not Alvarez's first statement about the current world situation. She was one of 15 writers commissioned by the U.S. State Department after September 11 to contribute to an essay anthology about the American experience, which was to be distributed abroad. However, she distanced herself from the project when asked to travel promoting the work.

"We [the writers] spoke in a complicated and challenging way about what it meant to be an American and its problems and con-

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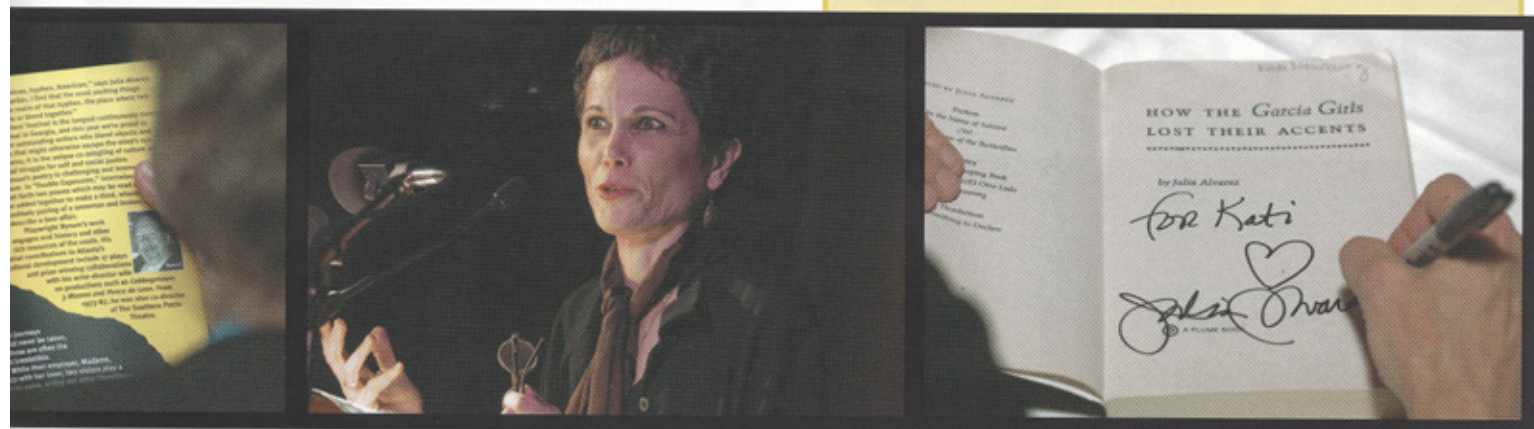
traditions," she explains. "I felt that after 9/11 we could take an evolutionary step as a planet to really start to resolve our problems in different ways. We were shaken, and sometimes, there are moments when things can really happen. Unfortunately, I haven't

seen it happen at all. But this anthology seemed to me a kind of move in that direction, a dialog being started. But, in fact, what ultimately started to happen, it became a cultural propaganda arm for the administration. Given what was going on and the ways in which this administration was moving, I didn't feel that I could be out there promoting, being an American cultural ambassador for a nation that I didn't feel in sync at all with the way it was going."

Citing poet W.H. Auden's statement, "poetry makes nothing happen," Alvarez says poets ask themselves, especially in times like these, what can they do? "The way we do things is through whatever our calling or our talent. Poetry makes just the slightest shift maybe in the way we see the world. It changes our perceptions. We are a different person when we come out of a book from what we were when we started reading it. It is those kinds of transformations in the way in which we are moved through the world,

Books by Julia Alvarez

Before We Were Free
The Secret Footprints
Las Huellas Secretas
How Tía Lola Came to Visit Stay
In the Name of Salome
Something to Declare: Essays
In the Time of Butterflies
En El Tiempo De Las Mariposas
How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents
Homecoming
Homecoming: New and Collected Poems
The Other Side
¡Yo!



CARY MEER

which I think can finally build up to something important and significant. The ways literature changes us are so subtle, so small and seemingly insignificant, but make all the difference in the world."

She says Americans have learned from Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. about the power of nonaggressive, peaceful resistance that involves witnessing to what one believes. "It's the bedrock of a country like the United States—this kind of freedom of expression and this kind of participation. It's so important to keep this thriving, alive in a country that always challenges itself to its own bottom line. I think it is an empowering thing to bear witness to what you think is important."

Alvarez mentions a letter from Hopi elders to the tribal youth during a hard time. "The last line is so amazing: 'You must become the ones you have been waiting for.' We are the ones. It's in our hands, really."

The hardest question she has ever been asked is "Does writing really matter?" She contends it does.

"That is a question you are constantly asking yourself. There are bleak days when I'm not as able to say as brightly as I say today, become the one you've been waiting for. If you give up trying to become the one you've been waiting for, then what hope is there? If you can't, through your vocation and talent, make a difference, what else are you going to do? That is your vocation—to intersect with the larger world."

And that bowl of water on her writing desk? "If I need really extra help, I get some water from down there [Alta Gracia]," she explains. "I don't know what it does, but it works."

Jennifer Bryon Owen is Agnes Scott's director of creative services and editor of Agnes Scott The Magazine.

Awards and Honors

Benjamin T. Marshall Poetry Prize, Connecticut College, 1968 and 1969
 Middlebury College Creative Writing Prize, 1971
 Academy of American Poetry prize, 1974
 Syracuse University creative writing fellowship, 1974–75
 Kenan grant from Phillips Andover Academy, 1980
 La Reina Press poetry award, 1982
 Vermont Arts Council exhibition grant, 1984–85
 Robert Frost Poetry Fellow, Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, 1986, and Fiction Fellow, 1987
 Third Woman Press Award, first prize in narrative, 1986
 General Electric Foundation award for Younger Writers, 1986
 National Endowment for the Arts grant, 1987–88
 Ingram Merrill Foundation grant, 1990
 Josephine Miles Award from PEN Oakland, 1991
How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents selected as a notable book from the American Library Association, 1992
New York Times Notable Book for *In the Time of Butterflies*
 Bachelor of Arts *summa cum laude*, Middlebury College, 1971
 Master of Fine Arts, Syracuse University, 1975

From Alvarez

During her reading at the College, Alvarez shared these ideas:

- For her sister's birthday, Alvarez gave her a book to read each month of the upcoming year.
- Each year, Alvarez selects one author and reads all of that person's works.