

In the Time of the Butterflies

Chasing the Butterflies: A Note from the Author

Reading and Discussion Guide



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A Note from the Author

I first heard of the Mirabal sisters four months after we arrived in this country. My father brought home a *Time* magazine because he'd heard from other exiles in New York City of a horrifying piece of news reported there. I am sure my sisters and I were not told the contents of that article because my parents still lived as if the SIM, Trujillo's dreaded secret police, might show up at our door any minute and haul us away.

But years later, doing research for the novel I was writing, I dug up that *Time* article. I stared at the picture of the lovely, sad-eyed woman who stared back from the gloom of the black and white photo. I was sure I had seen that face before. As I read the article, I recovered a memory of myself as I sat in the dark living room of that New York apartment and paged through this magazine I was forbidden to look at.

It was mid-December, 1960. My first winter was fast approaching. The skies were grey and my skin was turning a chapped, ashy color that made me feel infected by whatever disease was making the trees lose all their leaves. Every evening my sisters and I nagged our parents. We wanted to go home. They answered us with meaningful looks that we couldn't quite decipher. "We're lucky to be here," my mother replied. "Why?" we kept asking, but she never said.

We had arrived in New York on August 6. The CIA had helped set up a fellowship for my father. The fellowship was in fact a hoax to get my father safely out of the Dominican Republic. The SIM were on his trail for his participation in an underground plot to kill our dictator.

The CIA, which had originally encouraged the plotters, withdrew its promise of guns at the last minute. The State Department policy was the familiar *he's-an-SOB-but-he's-our-SOB*. Left in the lurch, most of the men in the assassination plot were discovered, captured, tortured, and eventually put to death. It was just a matter of time before his comrades gave out my father's name under the pressures of the horrible tortures "El Jefe" and his SIM loved to devise.

Most men ultimately cracked if they didn't die first in the cells of La Victoria prison or in the torture chamber at La Cuarenta. One of the unlucky ones was Miguel Angel Báez Díaz. Once a military man, Báez had grown disgusted with the growing brutalities of the regime and had joined the plotters. He was found out and hauled away to prison.

Driven insane during the first days in jail Báez was soon giving orders to other prisoners to bring food, cigarettes and coffee as if he were still an important official with the Benefactor's full support.

Naked like the others, Báez had welts all over his body from beatings. He bravely stood up to his torture, which ranged from burnings to experimental sodium pentothal treatment.

One day Báez, with the return of his sanity, found that he was being well-treated and was given a hearty meal. When he thanked them, the jailers said, "Well, you're eating your son's flesh."

Báez, shocked, withdrew into a corner. "You don't believe it?" the jailers prodded, and brought his son's head into the cell on a tray. The faithful, steady Trujillo bureaucrat, stunned beyond belief, had a sudden coronary occlusion and died there in the filthy cell.

—Bernard Diederich, *Trujillo, The Death of the Goat*

My father just barely managed to escape. He found out years later that one of his coconspirators did give out his name. But Alvarez is a common name in our country, and Eduardo no less, and there did happen to be another Dr. Eduardo Alvarez, also in the underground, who had recently escaped to Venezuela. My father's friend delayed his capture by confessing that it was the Dr. Alvarez in Venezuela he meant to

implicate. By the time the SIM came for the other Dr. Alvarez, we were safe in New York, or as safe as anyone could be. Trujillo's arm was long. His mafiosa SIM didn't hesitate to cross oceans.

And so when my father read of the murder of the Mirabal sisters, he must have felt a shocking jolt at what he had so narrowly missed. The sisters were members of that same underground he had left in order to save his life. Here, just four months after we had escaped, they were murdered on a lonely mountain road. They had been to visit their jailed husbands, who had been transferred to a distant prison so that the women would be forced to make this perilous journey.

Trujillo was assassinated himself on May 30, 1961. Dominicans refer to his death as an *ajusticiamiento*, a *bringing to justice*, rather than an assassination. For a brief interim before Trujillo's son returned to seek revenge, the jails were opened and a few remaining victims came back into the light of day. My mother's brother was one of those lucky survivors. He had spent nine months in La Victoria, enduring near starvation. My aunt had found a prison guard willing to smuggle in packages of food, medicines, and clothes to him. My uncle Manuel Tavares kept complaining to my aunt, during her brief and heavily monitored visits, that most of the packages were not getting through. Her contact insisted they were being delivered. When the prisoners were released, a tall, haggard man appeared at my aunt's doorstep in too-short trousers and tight shirt sleeves. He introduced himself as Manolo Tavárez, Minerva Mirabal's husband. "Thanks for dressing and feeding me all these months," he confessed.

Back in New York, my parents followed the first free elections in our country with pride and a promise that soon, very soon, we would go back home to live. But we never did make it back. Nine months after our first freely elected president, Bosch, took his oath of office, a coup headed by some of Trujillo's old military cronies toppled him. Under pressure from the United States, the military agreed to let a three-man team rule the country until another election could be called. One of those men was my uncle Manuel Tavares.

His namesake, Manolo Tavárez, took another path. He and a band of men fled to the hills much like Fidel had done in Cuba. They were

determined to fight until the ousted Bosch was allowed back into the country. The military went after them, bombing the mountains, murdering civilians and guerrillas alike. In an effort to stop the senseless killing, my uncle worked out an agreement with the military. The men would be granted full amnesty if they came down from the mountains and gave up armed struggle. The military agreed, and my uncle broadcast the amnesty promise over the airwaves. A handful of men, including Manolo Tavárez, came down the mountain waving crude flags made of twigs and handkerchiefs. All of them were gunned down. My aunt says my uncle grieved for those men for the rest of his life and rued the day he let himself believe the generals' agreement that amnesty would be granted. It was a tragic and ironic ending for Manolo Tavárez, to be set up, however inadvertently, by the Manuel Tavares whose packages had kept him alive in prison.

These were the ways, then, that my family's story intersected with the story of the Mirabal family. The three heroic sisters and their brave husbands stood in stark contrast to the self-saving actions of my own family and other Dominican exiles. Because of this, the Mirabal sisters haunted me. Indeed, they haunted the whole country. They have become our national heroines, and November 25, the day they were killed, has been declared the Day Against Violence Toward Women.

But I did not become personally involved in their story until a trip I made to the Dominican Republic in 1986. A woman's press was doing a series of postcards and booklets about Latina women, and they asked me if I would contribute a paragraph about a Dominican heroine of my choice. The Mirabal sisters came instantly to mind. Looking for more about them, I visited Dominican bookstores and libraries, but all I found was a historical "comic book." It was disconcerting to see our heroines with balloons conning out of their mouths. On the other hand, any shoeshine boy on the street or *campesino* tilting his cane chair back against a coconut tree knew the story of the Mirabal sisters. "Las muchachas" everyone called them. The girls.

When I complained to a cousin that I couldn't find enough formal information about them, she offered to introduce me to someone who knew someone who knew one of the Mirabal "children." Six orphans—

now grown men and women—had been left behind when the girls were murdered. That’s how I met Noris, the slender, black-haired daughter of the oldest sister, Patria. In her early forties, Noris had already outlived her mother by six years.

Sweet Noris offered to accompany me on my drive north to visit the rich agricultural valley where the girls had grown up. She would take me through the “museum” that had been established in their mother’s house where the girls had spent the last few months of their lives.

What happened on that trip was that the past turned into the present in my imagination. As I entered the Mirabal house, as I was shown the little alcove outside where the SIM gathered at night to spy on the girls, as I held the books (Plutarch, Gandhi, Rousseau) Minerva treasured, I felt my scalp tingle. It was as if the girls were there watching me. Noris and the museum caretaker cum family retainer, Tono, reeled off anecdote after anecdote, and I realized I had been granted entry into the heart of a very special story. Here is a page from the journal I kept on that trip:

In the house: the little clothes that the girls had made in prison for their children are laid out on the beds. Their jewelry—bracelets, clamp earrings, the cheap costume type—lies on the dresser under a glass bell that looks like a cheese server. In the closet hang their dresses. “This one was Mami’s,” Noris says holding up a matronly linen shift with big black buttons. The next one she pulls out she falls silent. It’s more stylish, striped, with wide, white labels. When I look down, I notice the pleated skirt has a blood stain on its lap. This was the dress Patria carried “clean” in her bag so she could change into something fresh before seeing the men.

María Teresa’s long braid lies under a glass cover on her “vanity.” There are still twigs and dirt and slivers of glass from her last moments tumbling down the mountain in that rented Jeep. When Noris and Reina head out for the next room, I lift the case and touch the hair. It feels like regular real hair.

We walk in the garden and sit under the laurel tree where “the

girls used to sit.” Noris says it is too bad that I am going to miss meeting Dedé.

That is the first I hear there is a fourth sister who survived.

Dedé was away in Spain and wouldn’t be back until after I had returned to the States. “Maybe the next trip,” Noris said. “Meanwhile, there are a lot of people you can meet *now*.”

It’s just for a paragraph on a postcard,” I reminded her, for I was a little ashamed to be taking so much of her time.

She waved my politeness aside. “It will inspire you,” she promised me. Indeed.

And so I met the dynamic and beautiful Minou, daughter of Minerva Mirabal, four years old on the day her mother was killed. *I remember her sitting in that chair. I remember her leaning down to kiss me, laughing.* Eventually, Minou would share with me a folder of the love letters her parents had written each other during their many separations. Among them, letters they had smuggled back and forth in prison:

My life, I send you this pencil so you can write me. Tell me everything. Don’t keep a sorrow from me.

And in reply:

Adored one, how many times haven’t I thought about our last night together, how full of presentiments we were. I’ve asked myself a thousand times if I shouldn’t have done something to escape capture. But I was too trusting of the bravery and good conscience of those of our companions who had already been caught. I thought they would keep their vow not to speak even unto death. What a painful experience this has been. *¡Dios mío!* And then, when I knew you and your *compañeras* had been caught, I wanted to die. I asked God fervently to put an end to my misery. I could not bear that large, cruel moral torture of knowing you were suffering what I was suffering. O, what long days, what interminable days. All I can do is fill myself with illusions. To be asleep in your arms, my head on your comely breast,

breathing the fresh smell of your skin, our limbs confused in a tender embrace. ¡Vida mía! Your Manolo.

I also met Marcelo Bermúdez, one of Manolo's comrades who was in the torture prison with him. Again, from my journal:

Marcelo tells the story of the day the girls were imprisoned. The men were already there, naked, packed in cells behind thick walls of stone, silent and afraid. All of a sudden, the girls spoke out in code and the prisoners took heart. "We are the butterflies!" (*Las Mariposas*, their code name.) "We are here with you. If any of you would like to identify yourselves, do so now." Marcelo said that voices started to call out, "I am the Indian of the Mountains." "I am the Hunter of the North Coast." And so on. That's how the group found out that people believed long dead were still alive.

Marcelo also tells about the time he and Manolo and a group of other men were taken to the courthouse to be arraigned. The girls had already been freed, and they were there with a crowd of supporters. As the men were stepping off the police wagon, the girls broke out with the national anthem. The crowd joined them. *Quisqueyanos valientes, alcemos . . .* One of the things that Trujillo had done for the country was to create icons (the flag, the anthem, himself), and the law was that whenever you heard the national anthem you had to stop dead in your tracks, take off your hat, place your right hand over your heart and wait till the song was over to move along. The guards were nervous as hell. They wanted to rush inside the courtroom with their charges and be out of sight of the milling crowd. But suddenly, the anthem rang out, and they were confused, unsure what to do. Should they stop, pay homage? Should they rush the prisoners safely inside? *¡Salve! el pueblo que intrépido y fuerte*, the crowd sang.

Back in the capital, I recounted the story for my aunt and cousin. "What did the guards do?" my aunt asked me.

I had been so caught up in Marcelo's story as we sat under a shade

tree out of the blasting midday sun that I couldn't remember what he had said had actually happened. "Let's see," I told my aunt. And I think that's when I realized that I was bound to write a novel about the Mirabals rather than the biography I had been vaguely contemplating. I don't have the personality of a biographer. I get swept away by my subjects. I get caught up in the drama and spirit of their stories. And when I retell them, I am more interested in capturing this drama and spirit than in subjecting the story to the tyranny of "what really happened."

But after I wrote my Latina postcard paragraph, I put the project away. The story seemed to me almost impossible to write. It was too perfect, too beautiful, too awful. The martyrs' story didn't need a story. And besides, I couldn't yet imagine how one tells a story like this. *Once upon a holocaust, there were three butterflies.* A paragraph of this stuff was quite enough.

What I was forgetting—and not forgetting—was the fourth sister. It was my curiosity about her that led me back to the Mirabal story. In 1992, during my annual trip "home," I met the second of the four girls. Dedé, as everyone calls her, invited me out to the house where she and her sisters had grown up and where she still lives.

This meeting opened up the story for me. It was late afternoon, the light falling just so, a deepening of colors in the garden, the rockers clacking on the wooden patio floor. Dedé, the surviving sister, very modern in black culottes, a hot pink shirt, wire-rimmed glasses, recalled this and that in a bright, upbeat voice as if it were the most normal thing, to have had three sisters massacred by a bloody dictator and live to drink a lemonade and tell about it. I realized this was her triumph. She had suffered her own martyrdom: a living death, the one left behind to tell the story.

It was after this meeting that I decided, once and for all, to write a novel about the Mirabal sisters. I wanted to understand the living, breathing women who had faced all the difficult challenges and choices of those terrible years. I believed that only by making them real, alive, could I make them mean anything to the rest of us.

And so I began to chase the butterflies.

Reading and Discussion Guide

Author

Julia Alvarez was born in New York City in 1950. When she was three months old, her family moved to the Dominican Republic, where she spent the first ten years of her life. Her family enjoyed a relatively affluent lifestyle there but was forced to return to the United States in 1960 after her father participated in a failed coup against the Dominican military dictatorship. This experience would later inspire her first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. After high school, Alvarez continued her education at Connecticut College, Middlebury College, and Syracuse University. Having earned a master's degree, she took on a variety of jobs, including serving as the writer-in-residence for the Kentucky Arts Commission and teaching English and creative writing at California State University, the University of Vermont, George Washington University, and the University of Illinois. In 1996, she was promoted to full-time professor at Middlebury College but resigned the position in 1998 in order to devote her time to writing.

Alvarez's novels have taken advantage of her background and experience. All, so far, have had a strong Dominican element. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* follows a close-knit family (much like her own) from the island to the United States. Its sequel, *Yo!*, examines one of the sisters from multiple perspectives; she turns out to be a Dominican east coast academic and novelist. *In the Time of the Butterflies* was

written between the two García family novels and is built around life and politics in the Trujillo era.

Alvarez lives with her husband in the “Latino-compromised” state of Vermont and travels to the Dominican Republic frequently. She helped create and remains involved with Alta Gracia, a farm and literacy center dedicated to the environmentally sustainable growth of organic coffee and the promotion of literacy and education.

Summary

In the Time of the Butterflies is based on the real lives of the Mirabal sisters, three of whom were slain by agents of the Dominican Republic dictator Trujillo. Their story is told in brief sections, each narrated by one of the sisters. Despite their very strong family ties, the sisters are very different individuals. Patria is the eldest, whose interests are absorbed, initially, by religion and children. Dedé, next in age, is reliable, capable, and eager to please. Minerva, the third, is the family fire-brand—the theorist and the speaker. Maria Teresa (Mate) is the baby who completes the family; she is nine years younger than her closest sister.

The girls live with their mother and father in the country town of Ojo de Agua, where the family has land and a little store. Exposed to the corruption and injustice of the Trujillo regime, eventually all the sisters—starting with Minerva—involve themselves in revolutionary activities. Their husbands are arrested and imprisoned, but that does not keep the sisters quiet. They are murdered during a return trip from their husbands’ prison. They are venerated in death and become legendary figures.

Questions for Discussion

1. Julia Alvarez has said that one of the things that interested her while she was writing the novel was the question, What politicizes a person? What makes a revolutionary risk everything for a certain cause? Alvarez

has also said that one of the things she learned writing this novel was that what politicizes each person is different, and surprisingly, it's not always a big idealistic cause or idea. What do you think politicizes each of the Mirabal sisters, including, ultimately, Dedé? What would politicize you?

2. The Mirabal sisters are very different individuals. Which of them would you most like to have been friends with? Which one do you most admire? Which one is most like you?

3. What about the men in the book? Some male readers have confessed to feeling that the book is focused too much on female characters. How do different key male figures come across in the book? Do you think Alvarez intentionally weighted the book toward the female point of view, and if so, why?

4. Does the father make you feel sympathetic or judgmental? Do your feelings change as the book progresses?

5. Minerva reacts with shock and anger after learning about her father's second family but later chooses to take care of her half sisters. Why does Minerva want to help them? Would you have reacted in the same way?

6. In your opinion, is Jaimito a good man or not? Why?

7. Much is made of Dedé's survival. Why do you think she survived? What is the role she plays in the Mariposas' history? Do you consider her to be equally heroic despite the fact that she did not join the revolution?

8. The book is built around life and politics in the Dominican Republic during the reign of Rafael Trujillo. Is this a time period you knew about before reading this book? Did you gain a greater understanding of this particular time in Hispanic Caribbean history?

9. What does it mean to write historical fiction? Did it bother you that the sisters Alvarez created might not be exact duplicates of the historical Mirabals? Dedé has said when asked about specific details that some

of them Alvarez invented or learned from someone else. But she loved the novel because Alvarez “captured the spirit of the Mirabal sisters.” Does the book encourage you to want to know more about them?

10. The Dominican people, both in the book and in real life, view the Mirabal sisters as heroines and martyrs. Why do you think their legend endures? What makes the story of these particular revolutionaries so captivating?

11. The United Nations has declared November 25, the day of the Mirabals’ murder, International Day Against Violence Against Women, the first day of the international movement “16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence,” which ends on Human Rights Day, December 10 (www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/16days/home.html). Should writers be writing to change the world? What is the role of an author’s politics in a novel? Does politics have any place in fiction?

Other Resources

Julia Alvarez suggests that readers might be interested to know that a virtual tour of the Museo Hermanas Mirabal in the Dominican Republic is available at www.el-bohio.com/mirabal/mirabalC.

Julia Alvarez’s suggestions for further reading:

Vivas en su Jardín, by Dedé Mirabal (coming in August 2009, Vintage Espanol USA, with an introduction by Julia Alvarez)

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, by Juno Díaz

The Feast of the Goat, by Mario Vargas Llosa

The Farming of Bones, by Edwidge Danticat



BILL EICHNER

Julia Alvarez left the Dominican Republic for the United States in 1960 at the age of ten. She is the author of six novels, two books of nonfiction, three collections of poetry, and eight books for children and young adults. Her work has garnered wide recognition, including a Latina Leader Award in Literature in 2007 from the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, the 2002 Hispanic Heritage Award in Literature, the 2000 Woman of the Year by *Latina* magazine, and inclusion in the New York Public Library's 1996 program "The Hand of the Poet: Original Manuscripts by 100 Masters, From John Donne to Julia Alvarez." A writer-in-residence at Middlebury College, Alvarez and her husband, Bill Eichner, established Alta Gracia, an organic coffee farm–literacy arts center, in her homeland, the Dominican Republic.

In 2009, *In the Time of the Butterflies* was selected by the National Endowment for the Arts for its national Big Read program.