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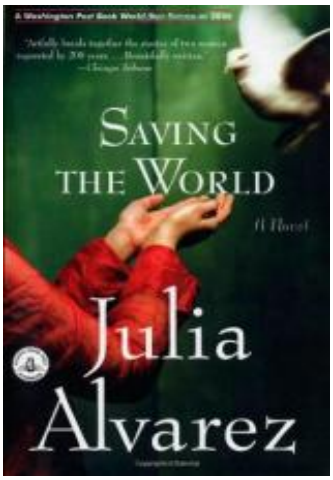
Saving the World

by Julia Alvarez



About the Book

Alma, the narrator of **Saving the World**, discovers a small historical footnote while doing research for a novel: In 1803, a Spanish doctor crossed the Atlantic with twenty-two orphan boys?live carriers of the small-pox vaccine?to inoculate the population of Spain?s American colonies. Accompanying them on the two-year voyage was a mysterious woman, Isabel Sendales y Gómez, the rectoress of the orphanage. Captivated by Isabel?s courage, Alma decides to tell the grueling story of their journey.

Meanwhile, Alma?s husband, working with an organization committed to eradicating AIDS in developing countries, travels to the Dominican Republic. When his life is threatened, it is Isabel?s strength and resolve that arouse Alma?s unexpectedly heroic action.

This novel within a novel presents the radiant stories of two women swept up in campaigns against the scourges of their day.

Discussion Guide

1. The two stories in this novel?Alma Huebner?s contemporary story and Isabel Sendales y Gómez?s nineteenth-century story?are narrated from strikingly different points of view. Alma?s is told in third person (*she* did this, *she* thought that). Isabel?s is told in first person (*I* did this, *I* thought that). Why do you think the author chose these particular points of view for her two characters?

2. Alma is inspired by Isabel?s story. Isabel?s courage and strength of character help Alma cope with her own fears and with the frightening situations she ultimately encounters. What in Alma?s character might have impressed and inspired Isabel?

3. Both women are attracted to and influenced by men with visions of helping mankind. What are the other clear parallels between these women?s lives and struggles?

4. Which character do you most identify with and why? Would you make the same decisions as that character?

5. After Don Francisco finishes dictating a letter addressed to his wife, Doña Isabel begins to cry, moved by his gentle words (page 204). ?Some day,? he says to Isabel, ?someone will write you such a letter, Doña Isabel. And you will think of me, perhaps.? Why do you suppose he says that to her, and how would you describe their relationship?

6. Helen is the only person to whom Alma confides about being unable to finish the novel. Why do you think Alma is able to entrust Helen with her doubts and fears? Is there something special about Helen that allows Alma to divulge her secrets?

7. What motivates people to try to ?save the world?? What has/would motivate you to take up a humanitarian cause?

8. Is there a right way to carry out our humanitarian urges? In this novel, many characters try, in their own ways, to better the lives of the people around them. How did Tara, Mickey, and Hannah, the ?terrorist? boys at the clinic, and Helen try to bring about change? Did these characters accomplish their goals in the end? Did Don Francisco, who forged humanitarianism with ego and ambition, achieve *his* true objective?

9. Saving the World suggests that there is a distinction between storytelling in our culture (the publishing business) and storytelling in our personal lives: as Alma worries about the significance of literature today?about modern publishing?s emphasis on fame and selfpromotion?she also uses Isabel?s story as a kind of mantra or guide as she navigates tricky, scary waters in her own life. How do you think the business of publishing affects the role of storytelling in our culture? What role can stories play in helping us change our own lives?

10. How would you characterize Don Francisco and Richard Huebner? Are there any similarities between them? Any glaring differences? What role does ambition play in the lives of the male characters? Does ambition take the same form for the female characters?

11. The first epigraph is taken from T. S. Eliot?s ?Gerontion?: ?Unnatural vices / Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues / Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.? Why do you think the author chose those particular lines from Eliot?

12. Is it possible to save the world, or do you think the title **Saving the World** is meant to be ironic? If you had been asked to help in selecting the title of this novel, what would you have suggested?

Author Bio

Julia Alvarez left the Dominican Republic for the United States in 1960 at the age of 10. She is the author of six novels, three books of nonfiction, three collections of poetry, and 11 books for children and young adults. She has taught and mentored writers in schools and communities across America and, until her retirement in 2016, was a writer-in-residence at Middlebury College.

Her work has garnered wide recognition, including a Latina Leader Award in Literature from the Congressional

Hispanic Caucus Institute, the Hispanic Heritage Award in Literature, the Woman of the Year by *Latina* magazine, and inclusion in the New York Public Library?s program ?The Hand of the Poet: Original Manuscripts by 100 Masters, from John Donne to Julia Alvarez.? IN THE TIME OF THE BUTTERFLIES, with over one million copies in print, was selected by the National Endowment for the Arts for its national Big Read program, and in 2013 President Obama awarded Alvarez the National Medal of Arts in recognition of her extraordinary storytelling.

Critical Praise

?**Saving the World** is wise and spellbinding as it ponders the difficulty of the human condition in any era, and the ways the actions and decisions of a few individuals can make things better or worse.?

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