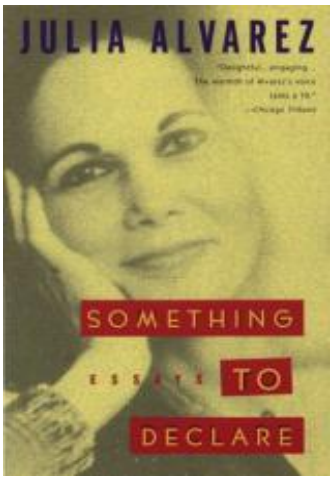
Something to Declare

by Julia Alvarez



About the Book

In this two-part collection of essays, Alvarez chronicles her abiding passions: the drama of family and history, and the art of writing. For Alvarez the two go hand-in-hand. In the first section ("Customs"), Alvarez describes first hearing the strains of the language that would become the lingua franca of her writing in her U.S.-educated diplomat grandfather's perfectly enunciated English. In the essay "My English," she describes how English went from being what her parents spoke to keep secrets from her to her ticket into a new world and a career. Conversely, in the essay, "Family Matters" Alvarez describes how Spanish remains a strong influence on her writing. She writes: "What surprises me is to discover how much of my verbal rhythm, my word choices, my attention to the sound of my prose comes from my native language as spoken by la familia." Alvarez's family is ever present in these essays. Few contemporary authors have written as keenly about the relationships between sisters, and between daughters and fathers and mothers as Alvarez does. Alvarez's doctor father is a lone, proud man among five women; at peace with his family and yet rooted in his culture's code of male privilege and domination. Alvarez's mother tries to keep her four girls from plunging headlong into a culture that mocks the rules of the old world and la familiaóa land of private schools, rebellion, boyfriends, bell-bottoms, marriages, divorces, and careers as farfetched as a that of a writer living in Vermont.

In the second half of Something to Declare ("Declarations"), Alvarez tackles the business of writing itself. She talks openly about the personal sacrifices she has made for writing. She describes how she chooses which story to tell, why some of her projects have been stillborn, and how her career as a well-known writer living in the United States has "played" (and not played) with her extended family in the Dominican Republic. Among the gems in here is a description of Alvarez making a keynote address to the Caribbean Studies Association in Santo Domingo only to receive a tongue lashing from an elderly Dominican writer for writing in English. Alvarez's response is a powerful proclamation of a writer's sense of identity, roots, and the need to live in many worlds at once.

In the essay, First Muse, Alvarez describes her discovery of The Arabian Nights and Scheherazade. Seeing herself reflected in the dark-haired, almond-eyed girl on the book's cover, Alvarez identified with the bright, ambitious girl

stuck in a kingdom that didn't think females were very important. It was Scheherazade who gave Alvarez the courage to explore the cross currents of sexual politics in the Caribbean and introduced her to the power storytelling gave her within her culture and family. The title of Something to Declare captures with typical Alvarez wit the dual dramas she describes in the book's pages. While she often feels like a stranger, passing through customs of a strange world, her passport is the writer's voice: ringing out with clarity, commitment and the will to declare the truth as she sees it, wherever it is to be found. People magazine wrote of Something to Declare: "Reading Julia Alvarez's new collection of essays is like curling up with a glass of wine in one hand and the phone in the other, listening to a big-hearted, wisecracking friend share the hard-earned wisdom about family, identity, and the art of writing."

Discussion Guide

1. Something to Declare is divided into two parts: Customs, and Declarations. Why do you think she structured the book in this way? How are the two sections different from each other, and in what ways do they work together?

2. Although Julia Alvarez writes in English and claims that she "is not a Dominican writer," can comparisons be made between her work and that of other Latin-American writers you have read? What authors come to mind?

3. Throughout Something to Declare Julia Alvarez invokes the names of English language authors to whom she feels a kinship. Are there other English language writers whose influences you see in her work?

4. In Something to Declare Julia Alvarez discusses her own writing techniques and methods of forming stories, as well as her belief in writing as a discipline that must be practiced every day. Do you find Alvarez's discussion of writing and the writing life inspiring, or daunting? What advice do you draw from this work?

5. Alvarez finds the subjects of her poems and fiction in unusual places: the 1961 Better Homes & Garden Sewing Book, the kitchen of a writing colony, etc. How does this approach differ from what you were taught or have come to expect from other writers' descriptions of their writing process?

6. Alvarez uses autobiographical information as a basis for the two essays, Family Matters and Grounds for Fiction. Specifically, how does she incorporate this material and use it to illustrate her points?

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.

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