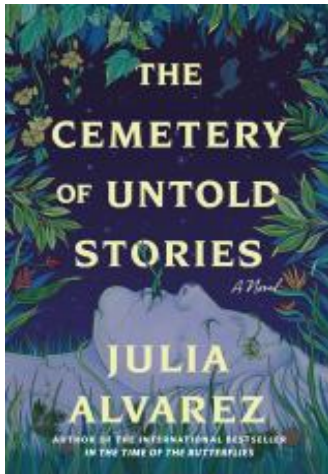


# The Cemetery of Untold Stories

by Julia Alvarez

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## About the Book

**Literary icon Julia Alvarez, the bestselling author of *IN THE TIME OF THE BUTTERFLIES* and *HOW THE GARCIA GIRLS LOST THEIR ACCENTS*, returns with a luminescent novel about storytelling that reads like an instant classic.**

Alma Cruz, the celebrated writer at the heart of *THE CEMETERY OF UNTOLD STORIES*, doesn't want to end up like her friend, a novelist who fought so long and hard to finish a book that it threatened her sanity. So when Alma inherits a small plot of land in the Dominican Republic, her homeland, she has the beautiful idea of turning it into a place to bury her untold stories --- literally. She creates a graveyard for the manuscript drafts and the characters whose lives she tried and failed to bring to life and who still haunt her.

Alma wants her characters to rest in peace. But they have other ideas and soon begin to defy their author: they talk back to her and talk to one another behind her back, rewriting and revising themselves. Filomena, a local woman hired as the groundskeeper, becomes a sympathetic listener to the secret tales unspooled by Alma's characters. Among them are Bienvenida, dictator Rafael Trujillo's abandoned wife who was erased from the official history, and Manuel Cruz, a doctor who fought in the Dominican underground and escaped to the United States.

*THE CEMETERY OF UNTOLD STORIES* asks: Whose stories get to be told, and whose buried? Finally, Alma finds the meaning she and her characters yearn for in the everlasting vitality of stories. Julia Alvarez reminds us that the stories of our lives are never truly finished, even at the end.

## Discussion Guide

1. The characters who are "buried" in Alma's cemetery reveal parts of their lives that their "creator" didn't know about.

What do you think that says about the role of a novelist and the limitations of a storyteller?

2. Consider these two lines from the novel: "We don't get free until we write our stories down" and "Some stories don't want to be told. Let them go." Can both statements be true? How so?
3. Some people waiting at the gate to Alma's cemetery are allowed in; others are not. What makes one storyteller gain access and another not? In our world, what does this say about whose stories get to be told? (Think of bestseller lists and school curriculum lists.) Whose stories are not getting told in Alma's cemetery?
4. The Latin American writer Eduardo Galeano once remarked, "Scientists say we are made up of atoms. But a little bird told me we are made up of stories." What are the stories that make you up? Are all of them stories you've told, or are some secret and untold? What would happen if you told them?
5. Alma's sisters learn that their father kept secrets from them --- but they will never know the whole truth about those secrets. If they had discovered the truth, how do you think that would change their memories of their father? Is there someone in your life whose story dramatically changed for you? How did that affect your relationship?
6. How do you think the lives of the women in this novel were hurt by the men they loved?
7. Did you feel sympathy for Perla, and do you think her punishment was just?
8. Alma's pen name is Scheherazade. How is Alma's story both similar to and different from that legendary storyteller?
9. Does a story need an audience to be fully realized? And once it's told, who do you think "owns" it?
10. Do you think Alma was ever able to "escape" her characters? Do you think the creative life is ever over? Do you think we can ever bury the past?
11. Will Pepito write the stories that Alma couldn't? Will they be different stories?

## 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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