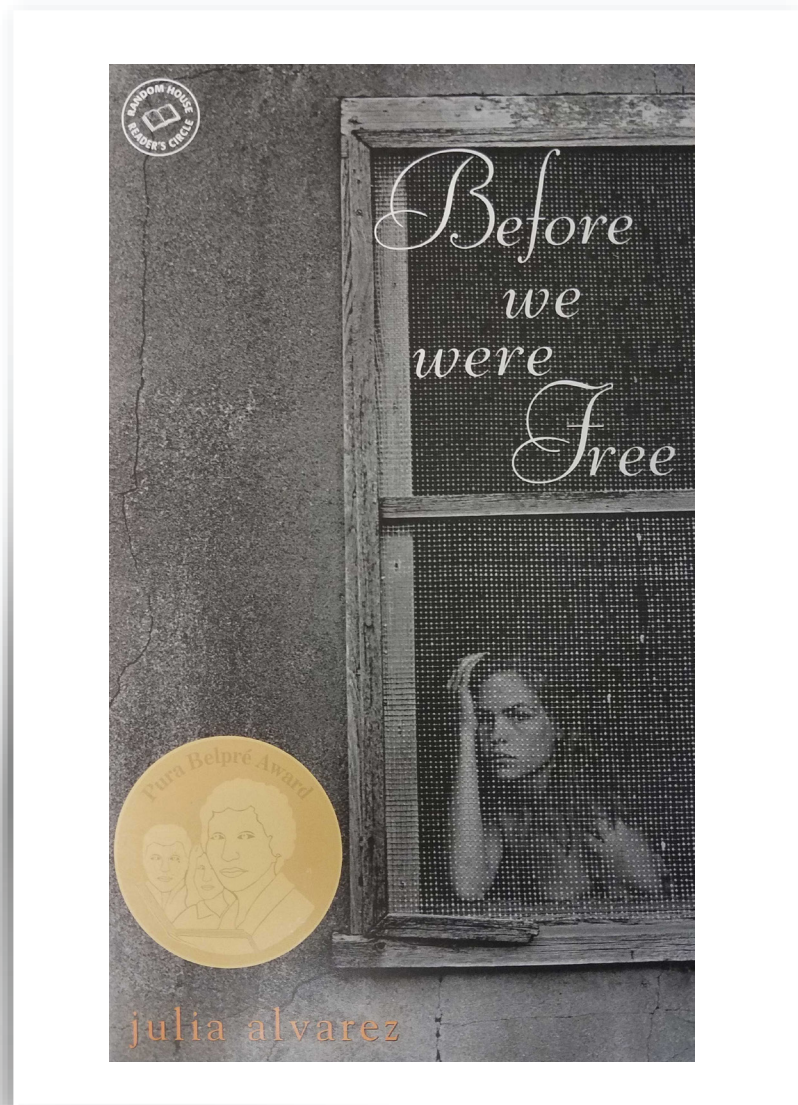


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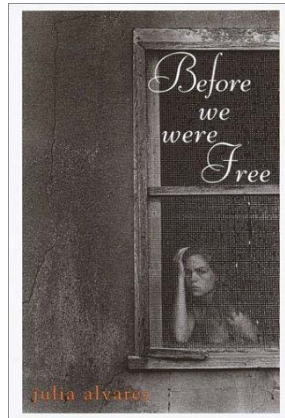
Educator's Guide

BEFORE WE WERE FREE

Written by Julia Alvarez

Knopf Book for Young Readers, 2002

ISBN: 044023784X



BOOK SUMMARY

Anita de la Torre never questioned her freedom living in the Dominican Republic. But by her twelfth birthday in 1960, most of her relatives have immigrated to the United States, her Tío Toni has disappeared, and the secret police terrorize her family for their suspected opposition of the country's dictator. While her middle school years should only focus around school, boys, big sisters, and puberty, Anita also struggles with code words, close escapes, and assassination plots. Inspired by her family's perseverance and immeasurable strength, Anita struggles to overcome her fears and to make a dramatic escape to freedom, leaving all she once knew behind.

AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS

- ALA Best Books for Young Adults (2003)
- ALA Notable Children's Book (2003)
- Pura Belpré Narrative Award (2004)

AUTHOR'S CORNER

Julia Alvarez's thoughts on her own history influencing into *Before we were Free*

“My father was involved in the underground against the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. When members of his immediate “cell” were rounded up, we had to leave in a hurry for the United States. But my uncle, who was also involved in the underground, and his family remained. Some members of the group who assassinated the dictator went to my uncle’s house to hide. When they were caught, my uncle was also taken away. My aunt and cousins lived under house arrest for nine months, not knowing if my uncle was dead or alive. He survived, but the members who had hidden in his house were killed by the dictator's son. These men were very close friends of my family. In fact, growing up, I called them tíos, uncles; their kids were my playmates. So you see, I had some connection to what actually happened. In writing the book, I conducted interviews with survivors, and I also read a lot of the history. I was particularly interested in the sons and daughters of those who had been tortured, imprisoned, or murdered—kids like my cousins and my childhood playmates. So it was a composite both of doing research and of remembering family stories.”



Check out [Julia Alvarez's website](#) for more information and helpful resources for using *Before we were Free* in your classroom like...

- [A full transcript of interview with Julia Alvarez about *Before we were Free*](#)
- [Free teacher's guide published by Random House Children's Books.](#)

USING *BEFORE WE WERE FREE* IN THE CLASSROOM

In Julia Alvarez's first young adult novel, *Before we were Free*, we meet 12-year-old Anita de la Torre. Like many young children, she is curious and talkative. Having lived a comfortably protected life thus far, Anita is sweetly innocent and naïve. Her life seems rather normal. She annoys her older sister and has a crush on her new American neighbor Sam. However all of this will change quickly. The story takes place in the Dominican Republic during the months leading up to the assassination of the infamous dictator Trujillo. As the events of

the story unfold, Anita's life is forever changed.

Anita comes to realize that "El Jefe" is in fact, not the hero she believed him to be, but a dictator who threatens her family and friends, disappearing and torturing many Dominicans. She is forced to grapple with what is right and wrong, as family members flee the country, while others are forced into hiding. Her life is literally invaded by El Jefe's Secret Police, the SIM.

Anita's diary, a place where she once could pour out her heart, becomes a danger. She is forced to erase all she has written so that it will not give anything away if found by the SIM. It is here that we encounter one of the most powerful parts of the novel. As Anita tries to deal with the fact that her world is crumbling around her, she loses her words. She falls into a silence she can't seem to break. She finds she can't remember words anymore, she can't speak. The curious young girl nicknamed *cotorrita* (literally a chatterbox or parrot) is silenced by what happens around her. When forced into hiding with her mother, Anita goes back to her diary, writing again so that if they don't survive, their story is left behind. As Anita begins to write again, sharing their story, her voice comes back.

Anita survives, eventually making her way to the United States to join other family members in New York City. The overthrow of the Trujillo regime cost her dearly. She's no longer the innocent child we met at the beginning of the story, but instead a survivor--an example of how we must fight to find our voices again, how we can persevere to put the pieces of our life back together again.

While Anita's life is much different than the average child in the United States, students will have no trouble identifying with the engaging character that Alvarez offers us. Her beautiful imagery, literary style, and historical content make it a book well worth reading in our classrooms.

LESSON PLANS & ACTIVITIES

The following questions and activities can be used in a number of ways, depending upon how the book is being implemented in the classroom. They can be given as individual writing activities or research projects, small group collaborations, or just as whole class discussion questions to guide the use of the book. The majority of the activities and questions below support literacy standards through reading and/or writing. The activities are divided into the following categories: Geography, History, Social Studies/Citizenship, Literary Study, Author Study, and Guided Reading Questions

Geography

Common Core Standards Addressed:

K-12

Reading

Key Ideas and Details:

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational text independently and proficiently.

Writing

Text Types and Purposes:

- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge:

- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Haiti and the Dominican Republic

Anita discusses Haiti, where Chucha is from, saying, “they do things different from us” (p. 10). Find Haiti and the Dominican Republic on a map. Are they close to each other? Do you think that it makes sense that the two countries would be so different from each other?

Research Haiti and the Dominican Republic using appropriate online resources. Write an expository essay or create a poster presentation on one or both countries. Students could work in groups, finding information on both countries and create their own compare and contrast study. Or, students could focus on just one country, then after the entire class has presented, the class could discuss the similarities and differences of the two countries that share an island.

History

Common Core Standards Addressed:

K-12

Key Ideas and Details:

- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- Integrate and evaluate the content presented in diverse media formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
- Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational text independently and proficiently.

Writing

Text Types and Purposes:

- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Production and Distribution of Writing:

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge:

- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Who is El Jefe?

Anita refers to the dictator of the Dominican Republic as “El Jefe.” “El Jefe” is a real person. Who was he? Use appropriate online resources to research who he was, how long he was in power, and important facts about his role in the Dominican Republic.

Who were “The Butterflies”?

On page 18 the novel alludes to “The Butterflies.” They are mentioned again on page 28. Who are “The Butterflies?” Using appropriate online resources research who “The Butterflies” were. To expand this project, read Alvarez’s novel “In the Time of Butterflies” or watch the movie based on the book. Write a report or create a poster explaining who they were, why they were important, and how they relate to this story.

Social Studies

Anita de la Torre and Joan of Arc

Anita refers to Joan of Arc a number of times in the story. Research Joan of Arc. Who was she? Why do you think Anita is so drawn to Joan of Arc? How are the two girls the same and how are they different? Write a short essay to answer these questions.

The Diary of Anita de la Torre

Towards the end of the story, Anita and her mother must go into hiding in a small closet. Here, Anita can write in her diary without having to erase it. This part of the story is quite similar to another book, *The Diary of Anne Frank*. If you are familiar with the story, explain how you think Anne and Anita are the same. What are the major differences between Anne and Anita? Or, read the book *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Compare and contrast the two stories and the main characters, Anne and Anita. Write a short essay to explain your thoughts on the similarities and differences.

History Vocabulary

The novel references a number of important terms or vocabulary words related to the history of many Latin American countries (and other countries around the globe). Define the following terms. Explain their significance for this story and the Dominican Republic in general.

Embargo (referenced page 32-34)

Dictatorship (referenced repeatedly)

Disappearance, disappearing (referenced pg. 14, 17, 48)

Common Core Standards Addressed:

K-12

Key Ideas and Details:

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
- Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational text independently and proficiently.

Writing

Text Types and Purposes:

- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Production and Distribution of Writing:

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge:

- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Civil Disobedience

Unfortunately, throughout history people have had to choose between obeying the law or standing up and fighting for what’s right or just. Often times people choose to participate in civil disobedience—breaking the law and accepting the consequences in order to stand up for their freedom or the freedom of others in their own country. This is never an easy decision. Anita struggles with this. Read the following passage where she discusses this, then answer the questions that follow.

“I admit I feel mean participating in this scheme—but I also understand that our lives are in danger. A tip from Lorena could wipe us out. It’s so unfair to have to live in a country where you have to do stuff you feel bad about in order to save your life. It’s like Papi and Tio Toni planning to assassinate Mr. Smith when they know that murder is wrong. But what if your leader is evil and rapes young girls and kills loads of innocent people and makes your country a place where not even butterflies are safe? I feel sick to my stomach all over again just thinking about all this.” (pg. 75).

What do you think? Do you think what Anita’s family did was right? Would you do the same? How would you feel?

Personal Sacrifice and Civic Duty

Having read the entire book, think of all that Anita’s extended family sacrificed for their country. Some of the family had to flee early on, abandoning their homes, their possessions, their family and friends and the country they knew as their home. Others, like Anita’s father and uncle, died as a result of their attempt to re-claim their country from the Trujillo dictatorship. Would you be willing to sacrifice all of this for your own country? Do you think what Anita’s father and uncles did in trying to overturn the Trujillo dictatorship was right? What would you do if you had been in their situation?

Common Core Standards Addressed:

K-12

Key Ideas and Details:

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to

Literary
Interpretation

make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

- Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text relate to each other and the whole.
- Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational text independently and proficiently.

Writing

Text Types and Purposes:

- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Production and Distribution of Writing:

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge:

- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Foreshadowing

The following activities cite specific parts of the story that demonstrate foreshadowing.

Chucha frequently talks in riddles. Oftentimes her riddles serve as foreshadowing of events to come. Below are some of examples of these. Your students may find others. Pick your favorite(s). Explain what they mean and what event (if any) they foreshadow.

- “You will see them before they come back but only after you are free” (pg. 11).

- “No flies fly into a closed mouth” (pg. 26).
- “Things will be happening soon for which there is no protection. No protection but silence, no protection but dark hiding places, wings, and prayers” (pg. 50).
- “The shrimp who falls asleep is carried off by the current” (pg. 61).
- “With patience and calm, even a burrow can climb a palm” (pg. 61).

At the beginning of the novel Anita gets a scare when she thinks she feels a scorpion or a cockroach in her bed. Instead, she finds that it is Carla’s eraser in the shape of the Dominican Republic. Knowing how the story ends, do you think this was foreshadowing something? Think about Anita’s experience in the Dominican Republic—what happens to her there, how does it change her, what does she lose?

Once you have finished the story, think about what this statement foreshadows:

“Recently, she [Chucha] told me of a dream she had in which first Lucinda, then Munding, then Mami and I sprouted wings and flew up into the sky. ‘What about Papi?’ I asked worriedly. ‘Not everyone can be a butterfly,’ Chucha replied” (pg. 66).

What was Alvarez telling us there? What was she preparing us for?

Character Study:

Who is your favorite character in the book? Why? How do they change or develop throughout the story?

As you read through the novel, think about how you would compare and contrast Sammy and Anita. Keep in mind that they are the same age. How are they the same? How are they different? How do they change or develop over the course of the novel? Do you think one grows more than the other? Is one more mature than the other by the end of the story? Who would you rather be?

Symbolism:

To take flight, or flying, takes on an important symbolic role throughout the book. Chucha often refers to flying in her conversations with Anita. Re-read pages 100, 101, and 124. What do you think flying symbolizes? Do you think Alvarez is making a connection between flying and freedom? Why would flying and freedom be connected?

Similes and Metaphors

Alvarez uses quite descriptive similes and metaphors throughout the novel. These often paint a vivid picture in the mind of the reader, or help the reader to feel what is going on in the story at a much deeper level. Below are listed a number of these similes or metaphors. The

meaning of these can be discussed as a class, especially if the book is being used as a read aloud. There are also a number of other activities that can be done with them. Some examples are listed below.

Choose your favorite simile or metaphor. Explain what it means and why it is your favorite.

Draw a picture of the image painted in your mind by one of the similes or metaphors below.

- “A look passes from one adult to another as if they are playing musical chairs with their eyes, trying to decide who’ll be the one stuck answering Yo’s question” (pg. 6).
- “. . .I feel the sadness stir up again like a storm inside me” (pg. 12).
- “A boy follows them, his hair so blond it looks almost white, as if it sat in a bucket of bleach overnight” (pg. 22).
- “So whenever I write down something personal, I let it stay written for the rest of the day, like savoring a piece of hard candy before biting down on it. Then, at night, I erase that page to be on the safe side” (pg. 42).
- “For now, we have to be like the little worm in the cocoon of the butterfly. All closed up and secret until the day. . .’ She spreads her arms as if they were wings” (pg. 53).
- “I feel relief to hear that my sister will be safe, even though it means Lucinda has to go away. It’s like one of those operations where they save your life but take out some big part of you” (pg. 74).
- “Mami’s face is a china cup someone has dropped on the floor” (pg. 99).
- “I want to say good-bye to him, but the words are stuffed inside my mouth like a gag keeping me from talking” (pg. 99).
- “The organ music plays on, like a funeral that will not quit” (pg. 103).
- “But the panic is stirring inside me, like a big black moth of sacredness flapping around inside my chest that can’t get out” (pg. 105).
- “. . .and now it’s even less than a nuclear family, just Mami and me, like survivors after a bomb drops, a fallout family” (pg. 112).

Author Study

- “When I write in it, I feel as if I’ve got a set of wings, and I’m flying over my life and looking down and thinking, Anita, it’s not as bad as you think” (pg. 124).
- “To be free inside, like an uncaged bird. Then nothing, not even a dictatorship, can take away your liberty” (pg. 160).

Common Core Standards Addressed:

K-12

Reading:

Key Ideas and Details:

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational text independently and proficiently.

Writing:

Production and Distribution of Writing:

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

Compare *Before we were Free* and *Return to Sender*

Before we were Free and *Return to Sender* were both written by Julia Alvarez. Compare and contrast the two novels. Write an essay to share your thoughts on the following: How are they the same and how are they different? Think about where the two stories take place. Who are the main characters? What do the main characters have in common? Aside from dialogue or conversation, how does Alvarez allow the reader to get inside the heads, to know the thoughts, of Anita and Mari?

Guided Reading Questions:

Only some chapters have guided reading questions here, as the questions or activities for specific chapters were more appropriately grouped into another category.

Chapter One:

What do you think of the exchange between the teacher and the students as they discuss Thanksgiving in the first scene of the book? Is what they are doing historically accurate?

Hint: Think about what the Indians are wearing. Is it really called the United States at that time in history?

What do you think of the statement “Mrs. Brown always gives the not so good parts to those of us in class who are Dominicans”? (p. 1) Have you ever felt like that in school?

(pg. 9) What are the cultural differences between Anita’s family and the typical family in the United States? Anita discusses what she’s learned in school: “Overnight, we’ve become what Mrs. Brown calls a nuclear family, just my parents and my sister and brother, instead of a large familial of uncles and aunts and cousins and my grandparents who were living in the compound only a few months ago.” What is your family’s living situation like? Is it more like the nuclear family or the large familia? Which would you prefer? What are the benefits to living as a large familia?

Chapter Two:

(Pg. 13) How do we know that the SIM are not good characters? Think about the imagery and language that Alvarez uses to describe them. How are they personified? How are they described? What are their actions? (p. 13-18).

Hint: “crawling up our driveway” “In their dark glasses, they look like gangsters in the American movies”

(Pg. 19) This is the first time that Anita hears that El Jefe is a dictator, and in fact realizes that he’s not a good person. How is this different from what Anita thought at the beginning of the novel? Re-read pages 4 and 9. How have Anita’s feelings for El Jefe changed.

Chapter Three:

On page 31 Anita says “Oscar is actually only half Dominican on his mother’s side. His father, who’s originally from Italy, works at the Italian embassy, which is why Carla and I always thought Mrs. Brown is more patient with Oscar than with the rest of us ‘natives.’” What does this statement tell us about Anita’s interpretation of race relations between the U.S. and the Dominican Republic? What does this allude to in terms of U.S. opinion about the Dominican Republic? Think back to the beginning of the novel—what parts did Mrs. Brown assign to the Dominicans?

Chapter Four:

On pages 47 and 48 Anita, Oscar and Sam have a discussion about freedom. What does Anita conclude—are they free? Why does Anita come to this conclusion?

(Pg. 52) What do you think Anita’s mother means when she says “At first, your father didn’t want to endanger his family...But sometimes, life without freedom is no life at all”? Do you agree—is life without freedom really life?

Chapter Seven:

In this chapter, Anita realizes something about Sam—that he is quite different than she is. She learns this as she listens to him talk about his sister: “All the way to school, he’s been talking about what a great time he’s going to have now that his bossy older sister is leaving. It makes me feel even sadder that his feelings are so different from mine” (p. 78). How are Sam and Anita different? Think about the things that Anita has to worry about. What is her life like in comparison to Sam’s? Who do you think is the more mature of the two? Why?

Chapter Eight:

How do you think Sam and his father, Mr. Washburn, are representative of the U.S. involvement with the Dominican Republic? On page 92, Anita writes “Sam had grinned when Charlie made fun of me. Why hadn’t he defended me? Maybe he just hadn’t been brave enough to stand up for me? Not being brave is easier to understand than being plain mean.” Then, on page 95 we learn that Mr. Washburn was given orders to leave the compound and “have no further dealings with any dissident elements. He has moved to the consulate downtown, where he’ll be staying until his return to the United States in June.” Does either demonstrate real support of the Dominican Republic? In the end, what do both father and son end up doing?

What do you think the statement means “You can’t be brave if you’re not scared”? (p. 93)

Chapter Nine:

What do you think is the relationship between the diary writing and Anita finding her words again? On page 111 Anita writes, “. . .Tía Mari told her to let me be, that it’s a good thing that I’m writing, that ever since I started keeping this diary, I’m talking a lot more.” Do you think there is a connection between the diary and Anita talking more? Why would the diary affect Anita’s silence?

Chapter Ten:

What do you think of Anita’s experiences in school—both in the Dominican Republic and the United States? Think back to her experiences with Mrs. Brown—Thanksgiving and how Mrs. Brown treated Oscar differently. Now she’s in New York at the Catholic School with Sister Mary Joseph in a class with second graders. How would you feel about school if you were Anita?

Right before Anita hears about her father, she describes how she is feeling: “My heart is on the edge of a very high place, and I am waiting, breathlessly, for it to either fall down into a thousand pieces or be rescued by good news at the last minute” (p. 150). What does she mean here? Have you ever felt this way?

When Mr. Washburn comes to tell Anita's family the bad news about her father and uncle, he seems to not want to share the information in front of the entire family. But, the following exchange occurs: "Tell us!" Mami orders. "I want to know how they died. I want my children to hear this. I want my country to hear this. I want the United States to hear this" (p. 151). What does she mean or what is the underlying message here? Why does she want her country and the United States to hear this?

RESOURCES

Vamos A Leer blog

<http://teachinglatinamericathroughliterature.wordpress.com/>

The online accompaniment to the LAII's Vamos a Leer teacher-oriented book group, this blog provides a space for exploring how to use literature to teach about Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latinos in the United States. In addition to promoting discussion, the blog also shares relevant resources and curriculum materials.

Latin American & Iberian Institute outreach

<http://laii.unm.edu/outreach>

The Latin American & Iberian Institute (LAI) receives resources from the U.S. Department of Education to support K-12 teachers teaching about Latin America. Our goal is to provide a supportive environment for teachers across grade levels and subject areas so they can bring regional and linguistic knowledge of Latin America into their classrooms. As such as we provide curriculum materials, professional development works, and many more resources - nearly all of which are available on our website.

Dominican Republic Country Study

<http://countrystudies.us/dominican-republic/>

Resources on the history, society and environment, economy, and government and politics of the Dominican Republic From Richard A. Haggerty, ed. *Dominican Republic: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1989.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE



Written by staff at the UNM Latin American & Iberian Institute (LAI), **Vamos a Leer Educator's Guides** provide an excellent way to teach about Latin America through literacy. Each guide is based upon a book featured in the Vamos a Leer book group. For more on Vamos a Leer, visit our blog at bit.ly/vamosaleer. For more materials that support teaching about Latin America in the classroom, visit the LAII online at <http://laii.unm.edu/outreach>. This guide was prepared 02/ 2012 by Katrina Dillon, LAII Project Assistant, and Kathryn Peters, LAII Graduate Assistant.