

>> This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. Each year thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capitol to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. Cochaired in 2009 by President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama. Now in its ninth year, this free event held Saturday, September 26th, on the National Mall in Washington DC, will spark readers' passion for learning as they interact with the nation's best selling authors, illustrators and poets. Even if you can't attend in person, you can still participate online. These prerecorded podcasts with well-known authors and other materials are available through the National Book Festival website at www.loc.gov/bookfest. It's now my pleasure to talk with the renowned author Julia Alvarez. Ms. Alvarez first emerged on the writing scene with her award winning poetry collection "Homecoming." Her first critically acclaimed novel, "How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents," was published in 1991. And her second novel, "In the Time of the Butterflies," was adapted into a popular film starring Salma Hayek and Marc Anthony. Ms. Alvarez's honors and distinctions include the Third Women Press Award. A PEN Oakland-Josephine Miles Literary Award. And a Notable Book designation from the American Library Association. Ms. Alvarez most recently published a children's novel, "Return to Sender." Ms. Alvarez, thank you so much for joining us.

>> Thank you for having me.

>> We're definitely looking forward to seeing you at the National Book Festival. Let's start with talking about your latest book "Return to Sender." What can you tell me about that?

>> Well, that -- you know, I often say that my -- the stories come to me. I don't go out searching for them. They just -- if you live a sort of a committed curious life, where you stay awake and pay attention, things happen. And what's -- what I started noticing here in Vermont, which I often joked when I first moved here in 1988, is that it was the -- the Latino compromised State of Vermont. Because there were hardly any Latinos around. Well, about eight, nine years ago, some of my farmer neighbors were calling me. Because they wanted me to translate into Spanish. Because they had Mexican workers who were doing the milking on the -- all the dairy farms. And so I thought, well, that's strange. So, you know -- I mean, this happens on the border in the Southwest. It's an old story, but it was a new story in Vermont. And then I got asked to come to the schools and talk to the kids because Mexican kids were showing up in the classroom. And the farm kids were being told by their parents that they weren't to talk about these Mexican workers on the farm. And they didn't know what was going on. And the Mexican kids were themselves, you know, undergoing culture shock. And that's when I thought, we need a story to understand what is happening to us here. And that was the seed of "Return to Sender."

>> Was it a challenge to relay the experiences of migrant workers into a book that young people could relate to?

>> No. Because they were living the story. And the story is told from the point of view of a young boy. The son of one of the dairy farmers, an American boy. And a young girl, the daughter of one of the Mexican

workers on the farm. And I was dealing with these kids in the classroom all the time. So it didn't seem -- it seemed actually a really wonderful way to get around just the polemics of it. And, you know, ideologues. Talking about it. And the policy and the politics. And look at the human -- at the human element, which is, you know, what novels do. I mean, novels are the truth according to character. So that's what -- that's what they do best. So it was great to be able to just put the issue as an issue aside and look at the human situation.

>> How do you create your characters? Is it mostly based on real people that you know? Or how much of it is just completely fictional?

>> You know, people that find themselves in my novels think that it's -- that it's them. But, you know -- because they sometimes will find their nose on a character. Or something they said at a dinner party at my house. And -- but it's not. You know, characters -- you might start from the seed of someone that you observed. Or someone in a situation. Or something you've heard of. But characters take on their own dimensions in a story. In part because, as the story develops, it has certain requirements in the way that the action is going for a certain kind of character. And at the same time, it's an interesting dynamic. At the same time this character is -- you know, has a personality of its own. And you can't just make that character do X if it's not in the personality. So they're sort of mutually shaping each other. And so the characters assume their own life and aren't -- you know. They're not photographs of the people that -- that might even have been the seed for the -- for the character. They become their own -- their own characters. And they often tell me where they're going. And I'm constantly surprised, which I'm very happy about. Because that's part of the excitement of writing. You know Robert Frost, who's one of our Vermont treasures, used to say, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader." So, you know, you constantly have to be surprised for the juice -- that energy to get into the -- into the writing.

>> Going back in time a little bit, you were a child in 1960. And your family came to the United States from the Dominican Republic to escape the Trujillo regime. How did that shape who you are today, particularly, as a writer?

>> Oh, my gosh. It's what made me into a writer. I -- you know, I was basically growing up without books around or, you know, libraries or writing for heavens sake. It was an oral culture. I mean, it wasn't -- there were storytellers, wonderful storytellers all around me. But the whole idea of separating myself from community to engage in the solitary act of writing, that was -- I -- you know. That was unheard of. So it was not -- I don't think I would ever have become a writer unless I come into this culture. But, you know, maybe I would have been a storyteller. So the seed was there. But it was coming to this country, having to learn a new language in a really intentional way. Which, even if you're a native speaker, I'm constantly telling my students that they have to relearn their own language as a writer. So I think that made me very -- very aware of language and word choice. And how things were said and syntax. So I -- you know, learning the new language. And also, you know, there's the culture shock. The being suddenly in a world where I was marginal.

Where I didn't belong. Where I felt left out. Lead me to look internally for resources there. And then, you know, the wonderful legacy of this -- of this country with its public libraries. Where I could go and get books out. And books turned out to be interesting. They turned out to be places where storytellers stored what they had said. But I had never made that connection growing up in the Dominican Republic. So it really was -- you know, the coming to America, as painful as it was, that really lead me to -- to want to be a writer.

>> All right. Well, we appreciate the plug for libraries. You do.

>> Well.

>> You do focus quite a bit on issues such as assimilation and identity. Is part of the message that you're trying to convey that others are not alone in this experience?

>> Well, I think that's the great message of all stories in literature. That, you know, we're not alone. We feel a feeling and suddenly we discover it in a character. In a story written by someone, you know, generations ago in another country. Maybe even in another language. So, you know, the great message is that you aren't alone. That, as Terence, the Roman playwright who was a slave and freed himself with his writing said. You know, "I am a human being. Nothing human is alien to me." And I think that's really -- if you want to call it -- the message of literature. But, you know, I don't think stories actually have messages. I think -- I think they're much more complex and ambiguous and multi-faceted than a particular message. But if I were to pick the one [inaudible] message of literature, I would say that it is -- you know, it is that -- that deep connection that we have as a human family.

>> You said that, when you were growing up, you found refuge in books. Which ones in particular? And why?

>> Well, once we came to this country -- although, I must say -- and here I'm going back on what I said before. There was one storybook that, as a kid, I really liked. And my aunt had given it to me. And it was of the -- of the "Arabian Nights." And Scheherazade who saved herself and all the women in her kingdom by telling the cruel sultan stories that kept him from killing her. Because he wanted to hear the endings. Every night she'd start a new one and at dawn she'd be in a cliff hanging moment. And so he'd spare her another night and another night for 1001 nights. So that to me was, oh, such an intriguing story. That -- that stories could have this kind of power. That they could keep you alive. That they could save people. Because she saved all the women in her kingdom. Plus she was a heroine that wasn't just, you know, someone from another culture, blue-eyed, blonde little princess. It was a brown girl who -- who was -- her picture was on the cover. So I was very taken with Scheherazade. I thought -- I thought, you know, too young to put it into these kinds of words or understand it that way. But just this luminous little bit of information got in my head that, you know, that stories do have this kind of power. And then, once we came this country, it was like a -- it was like a marathon. I wanted to catch up with so much that I had missed. Anything from the classics. You know, Winnie the Pooh. Even as a 10, 12-

year-old, I was reading. When we were -- what was it? When we were six and Winnie the Pooh. The -- the "Little Women" was another favorite. Reading, you know, about Nancy Drew. I fell in love with this young woman that didn't have a mommy telling her what to do. And she could go out and solve mysteries. Another form of Scheherazade. So I really became -- I didn't become a reader till I came into English. And then it was -- you know, I was -- I was, you know, always with a book in hand.

>> Yeah. Now, before you became a professional full-time writer, you taught creative writing. What kinds of lessons of your own did you incorporate into your writing?

>> Well, you know, I -- I just -- I just thought one of the best things that I could do for my students was to teach them the habit of writing. You know, because I think it's -- maybe because of the romantic poets. You know, the poets of -- I'm thinking of Wordsworth and Keats and Shelley. You know, this idea of inspiration. And of poet touched by divine -- you know, by being a, sort of, you know, separate from regular human beings of deep emotion and inspired. That it sort of undermines the whole idea of just hard work. And, you know, I really stress to my students that, like any other craft that you take up, practice makes you a much better writer. So, you know, I tried to -- to stress that they should write every day. That revision was important. I tended to stress the craft things. Because I can't put talent in them. That's something that's a, you know, a propensity in a person that is there or isn't there. And even if they didn't have the talent, ultimately, to become, you know, a professional writer. To be -- to be aware. And to be paying attention. And to be sensitive to the the, you know, capabilities of language is something that makes them better readers. And I think better human beings. So I think that's the thing I stressed the most, the craft. The craft of writing.

>> We started out in the late 60's and early 70's at a time when Latino literature and writers weren't nearly so visible as they are today. Is that part of what drove you to persevere in your craft?

>> Well, it's actually what many times lead me to think that I was fooling myself. Because you're right. When I started writing literature about Latinos or by Latinos, it was just considered sociology. It wasn't considered part of American literature. And, you know, I saw the opening of the can in terms of African-American literature. Women's literature. I've been lucky to live at a historical moment when the canon, you know, became open. And we realized that, you know, it -- that the diversity of our stories is part of the richness of literature. But it wasn't happening when I first started to write. So I often thought, can I be an American writer and be writing about a Tia Rosa instead of an Aunt Rose. And be -- having a mother and father that are called Mommy and Poppy instead of Mom and Dad. So I -- you know, this was -- this was something that had -- that happened. And I think, you know, part of the reason that my first novel wasn't published till 1991 when I was 41. Is that it really was still, you know, not an easy market for Latino literature when I started writing. You know, and then it sort of like took off. And then publishers were looking for diverse voices. And Latino literature. And Asian-American literature. And all kinds of hyphenated literatures as

they realized that this was also part of our -- of our American literature. So I think -- I think -- you know, I've been lucky in that way. Because it could have been that I would have been writing and it never would have been an open canon. And I might have ended up like, I don't know, Emily Dickinson. Putting all my little packets of writings in a drawer to be discovered later by someone or maybe [inaudible].

>> Now, you achieved great success in your early 40's. I -- you know, some would say maybe a little bit later in life than -- than others. Do you think that helped prepare you better for the success at that age?

>> Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. You know, I think sometimes, when a young writer is lionized and it's, like, you know, so many lights in his or her eyes that it makes it difficult for them to get back to work. You know, it just can be -- you're so malleable. And you maybe still haven't yet firmly, you know, gotten that habit of writing so that you can be taken off course. And I think by the time success came to me, you know, in my 40's, I had already been doing this for 25 years. Because I couldn't stop. It's something I had to do for myself. And it was my way of understanding experience and making meaning of things. So it -- you know, when it came, you know, it came. But I had already -- I had already claimed it as my own calling. And I think that was helpful. Because, you know, the other thing you find out once you're, you know, in this book biz. Which is not the same as being a writer. Is that, you know, the flavors come and go with every year. And, you know, the writer lionized today might not be so tomorrow. And a new best seller comes in. And you have to be at this -- at doing this work because it's -- it's the thing that is in you to do.

>> Yeah.

>> And so I think it did actually help me stay focused. And it also helps to be in Vermont. I mean, you know, there's -- there aren't a whole lot of book parties and publishers this or hobnobbing.

>> Yeah.

>> Or receptions or anything like that. My greatest compliment from my neighbor sheep farmer was after about 12 years of knowing me. When he said to me one day, "I seen your books in the bookstore." I thought, yeah, that's -- thank you. And I've seen your sheep in the field. And so you're doing your work, and I'm doing mine. And that's, you know, that's just fine.

>> Yeah. Not a lot.

>> I like to -- yeah.

>> I was just saying not a lot of artifice in a place like Vermont.

>> Actually, we do have a lot of writers, but they're all sort of, you know, doing their work.

>> Yeah.

>> And it's very -- you know, there's something very -- very hospitable about, you know, the quiet. And the -- and the small size of things. And the hands-on in the community. So you really are staying in touch with -- with the important rhythms. And you're not distracted as much. But -- but, you know, you face what every writer faces. You know, the challenges of -- of trying to -- trying to write well.

>> Yeah.

>> You know, and it's not -- it's not easy. And it doesn't -- it doesn't get any easier. Because each book has to -- you have to learn how to write that one.

>> Yeah. One of the questions I'd like to ask relates to the National Book Festival itself. And I think one of the most significant things about it is the direct interaction between the authors and the fans and, particularly, the younger people. What kind of advice do you offer them if they want to, say, follow in your own footsteps?

>> Well, I do tell them, you know, that one of things, one of the important things, if you want to be a writer, is you have to be a reader. A lot of times, you know, I think a young person sees a writer up on stage. And thinks that's glamorous. And, you know, they're getting all this attention. And they're going off on book tours. Now, that sounds like a lot of fun. But, you know, I think reading -- those are going to be your real teachers. To really immerse yourself in the kinds of books -- if you want to write fiction, nonfiction. In any book, you know, and look at the thing and how it's made. And start to read it like a writer. And so I think that's important. And I think also, if you feel this is the thing you must do, not to let anybody talk you out of it. Because you're not going to be a happy human being otherwise. And then the thing with craft, you know. I make the analogy that, if you're a dancer and you only dance with you feel like it. And you don't practice, say, at the bar for weeks. And then you get inspired. And you hear a piece of music, and you want to dance. You're going to pull a muscle. You have to -- you have to, you know, develop and keep up that agility with your craft. And that involves a lot of hours of practice. So I encourage them to keep a journal. It doesn't have to be, you know, writing a piece that's, you know, formal like a story or a novel. Writing in journals. Writing letters, a lost art.

>> Yeah.

>> I might add. I guess writing blogs is a new -- is a new form of that. But to keep up with the writing. You know, to really practice it. It is a craft you have to learn.

>> Well, before I let you go, are there any other projects or novels that you're working on?

>> Well, I -- I'm -- I'm working on some books for young readers. I have really -- you know, I guess with doing this literacy project that my husband and I have in the Dominican Republic. On a -- it's actually a

sustainable coffee farm that also has a little school on it for the community. I've really become interested in, you know, in books for young readers. And young readers of all ages, as I say. So I'm working on a series of books for young readers. And then who knows. You know, I'm always open to the stories that will walk into my life and knock on my door for sure.

>> At the -- the project you mentioned, that is Altagracia; is that correct?

>> Yeah. It's a coffee farm up in the mountains of the Dominican Republic.

>> Okay. Julia Alvarez, thank you so much for your time today.

>> Well, I'm glad we connected.

>> Yes.

>> And thank you.

>> Absolutely. Well, we appreciate it. And the new book is "Return to Sender." And we are definitely excited to hear more from you at the national Book Festival on Saturday, September 26th, on the National Mall in Washington DC from 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. The event is free and open to the public. For more details and a complete list of participating authors, visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. From the Library of Congress, this is Matt Raymond. Thank you so much for listening.