



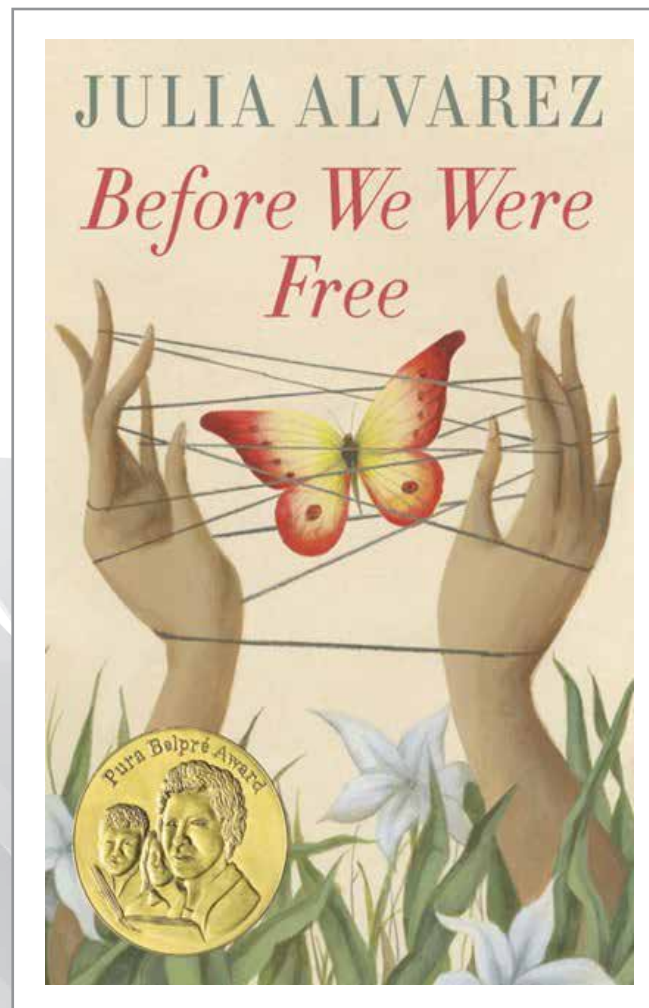
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 6-8**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# Before We Were Free

Julia Alvarez



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

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Julia Alvarez

## TEACHER GUIDE

### NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Thinking

Interpreting evidence,  
compare/contrast, forming  
opinions, identifying  
stereotypes, paradox,  
pros/cons, research

### Comprehension

Cause/effect, classifying,  
details, generalizing,  
inferencing, main idea,  
predicting, summarizing

### Writing

Article, description, list,  
poem, narrative, letter,  
report, editorial

### Listening/Speaking

Discussion, interview, oral  
report, role-playing

### Vocabulary

Compound words,  
context clues

### Literary Elements

Analogy, characterization,  
descriptions, foreshadowing,  
plot development, setting,  
point of view, simile, theme

### Across the Curriculum

Art—architecture, drawing;  
Science—agriculture,  
weather, botany; Social  
Studies—maps, culture,  
history, politics, laws;  
Math—survey statistics

**Genre:** young adult fiction

**Setting:** The novel begins in 1960 in the Dominican Republic under the dictatorship of General Rafael Molino Trujillo. The final chapters are set in New York City.

**Point of View:** first-person, from twelve-year-old Anita de la Torre's viewpoint

**Themes:** coming of age, accepting change, dealing with terror and grief, political unrest, freedom, hope

**Conflict:** person vs. person, person vs. society, person vs. self

**Style:** narrative

**Date of First Publication:** 2002

## Summary

Anita de la Torre turns twelve during the Trujillo totalitarian regime in the Dominican Republic. Many of her family members have already fled the country for the United States, but Anita's father and uncle remain to lead the resistance in a coup. Anita is protected from many aspects of the planned overthrow, but she soon learns that her father plans to kill the dictator and that her family is in danger. During this time, she becomes a *señorita* (woman) when she has her first menstrual period, and develops feelings for Sam, the son of the American consul.

After General Trujillo is assassinated, everything falls apart for the conspirators. Anita's father and uncle are taken to prison, and Anita and her mother hide in a house next to the Italian embassy for over a month. Anita and her mother are secretly flown out of the country to join family members in New York City. Anita vows to return to her country, but when the family learns of her father's execution, they decide to stay in the United States where they can be free.

## Teacher Note

This novel addresses sensitive issues such as suicide, a young girl's first menstrual cycle, political dissent, assassination, death of a parent, rape, and torture. It also provides a forum to discuss resilience, hope, freedom, courage, and religion. Please consider your class and community before discussing these themes.

## About the Author

Julia Alvarez was born in New York City on March 27, 1950. Her parents took her to their homeland, the Dominican Republic, when she was an infant. Her father became involved in the insurgent movement against the dictator, and he and his family escaped from the island shortly before he was to be arrested. At age ten, Alvarez returned to New York City. As a young girl who had learned limited English by attending American school in the Dominican Republic, she was frustrated in a city where English was spoken as a first language. She turned to books, learned the language, and lost herself in stories. By high school she knew that she wanted to be a writer, but it was not until much later that she realized there was a publication market for her personal experiences, bridging the cultural gap between the Dominican Republic and the United States.

## Using Predictions

We all make predictions as we read—little guesses about what will happen next, how a conflict will be resolved, which details will be important to the plot, which details will help fill in our sense of a character. Students should be encouraged to predict, to make sensible guesses as they read the novel.

As students work on their predictions, these discussion questions can be used to guide them: What are some of the ways to predict? What is the process of a sophisticated reader's thinking and predicting? What clues does an author give to help us make predictions? Why are some predictions more likely to be accurate than others?

Create a chart for recording predictions. This could be either an individual or class activity. As each subsequent chapter is discussed, students can review and correct their previous predictions about plot and characters as necessary.

```
graph TD; A[Use the facts and ideas the author gives.] --- D(( )); B(Use your own prior knowledge.) --- D; D --- C[Apply any new information (i.e., from class discussion) that may cause you to change your mind.]; C --- E[Predictions Chart];
```

Use the facts and ideas the author gives.

Use your own prior knowledge.

Apply any new information (i.e., from class discussion) that may cause you to change your mind.

Predictions

## Chapter Nine, pp. 101–107

Anita is terrified as she waits for the men to return. She vows to stay “one step ahead of being scared.” She learns that Pupo is the head of the army. Finally she sleeps, but her dreams are mixed up. Chucha shakes her awake as the SIM rush in yelling “traitors” and ransack the room. The leader is nicknamed little Razor Blade. When El Jefe’s body is found in the trunk of a Chevy in the garage, the SIM arrest Papi and Tío Toni. Mami makes calls, and Mr. Mancini comes over. He tells them to pack their bags quickly. Anita is paralyzed with fear, but Chucha throws some clothes and Anita’s diary in a laundry bag for her. Chucha says, “It’s time. Fly, fly free!”

### Vocabulary

liberation (102)  
denounce (102)  
ransacks (104)  
scouring (104)  
profiles (105)  
confiscated (105)  
monogram (106)  
paralysis (107)

### Discussion Questions

1. Why does Anita change her plan to commit suicide? How does she hope to get away? (*She decides to take Papi and Chucha’s advice: fly and be free.*)
2. How is Anita going to stay “one step ahead of being scared.” (*She decides on an escape plan to the market through the back of the compound. p. 101*)
3. The official radio station does not announce El Jefe’s death. Instead it plays organ music, which reminds Anita of an endless funeral. What does the music mean? (*It represents two funerals: the death of El Jefe and the death of the independence movement. Answers will vary. pp. 102–103*)
4. Why would Papi put El Jefe’s body in his own garage, ignoring the possible risks it places on his family? (*Answers will vary. p. 104*)
5. Little Razor Blade tells Mami that they are taking Papi and Tío Toni “to the place where they took El Jefe.” What does he mean? (*He means the SIM will kill them. Answers will vary. p. 104*)
6. **Prediction:** Will Chucha go with Mami and Anita to Mr. Mancini’s home?

### Supplementary Activity

1. Writing: Have students write a paragraph describing Anita’s state of mind while she is in her room trying to pack.

## Anita’s Diary, pp. 108–137

Anita finds her diary among the clothes Chucha packed and writes about her life in hiding at the Mancinis’ home. She and Mami hide in the walk-in closet. In case of a raid, their emergency plan is to hide in the crawl space in two small closets in the bathroom. They are smuggled food by the Mancinis (Tía Mari and Tío Pepe) who are the only ones in the household who know they are there. There are close calls. The SIM make a surprise visit and kill the Mancinis’ two pet dogs when they are let outside. Oscar discovers Anita and her mother hiding in the closet, and he and Anita communicate by sending the queen of hearts card back and forth in books. Before Mundín is smuggled aboard a ship bound for America, he comes disguised as a girl to say goodbye to his mother and sister. In her diary, Anita writes about the freedom movement. Her last entry is written while hiding in the crawl space. After hearing a loud crash downstairs, she thinks the SIM are coming to take her away.