

*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*



My English: A Note from the Author

Reading and Discussion Guide





## My English



### *A Note from the Author*

Mami and Papi used to speak in English when they had a secret they wanted to keep from us children. We lived then in the Dominican Republic, and the family as a whole spoke only Spanish at home, until my sisters and I started school at Carol Morgan and we became a bilingual family. Spanish had its many tongues as well. There was the *castellano* of Padre Juaquín from Spain, whose lisp we all loved to imitate. Then the educated *español* my parents' families spoke, aunts and uncles who were always correcting us children, for we spent most of the day with the maids and so had picked up their "bad Spanish." *Campesinas*, theirs was a lilting animated *campuno*, *s*'s swallowed, endings chopped off, funny turns of phrase. This *campuno* was my true mother tongue, not the Spanish of Calderón de la Barca or Cervantes or even Neruda, but of Chucha and Iluminada and Gladys and Ursulina from

Published, 1989, in the *Proceedings of the Ollantay Center Conference*.

Juncalito and Lacey and Boca de Yuma and San Juan de la Maguana. Those women yakked as they cooked: they story-told, they gossiped, they prayed, they sang—boleros, merengues, mangulinas, mariachis, salves. Theirs were the voices that belonged to the rain and the wind and the teeny teeny stars even a small child could blot out with her thumb.

Besides all these versions of Spanish, every once in a while another strange tongue emerged from my papi's mouth or my mami's lips. What I first recognized was not a language but a tone of voice, serious, urgent, something important and top secret being said, some uncle in trouble, someone divorcing, someone dead. *Say it in English so the children won't understand.* I would listen, straining to understand, thinking that this was not a different language but just another and harder version of Spanish. *Say it in English so the children won't understand.* From the beginning English was the sound of worry and secrets, the sound of being left out.

I could make no sense of this "harder Spanish," and so I tried by other means to find out what was going on. I knew my mami's face by heart. When the little lines on the corners of her eyes crinkled, she was amused. When her nostrils flared and she bit her lips, she was trying hard not to laugh. She held her head down, eyes glancing up, when she thought someone was lying. Whenever she spoke that gibberish English, I translated the general content by watching the Spanish expressions on her face.

Soon, at the Carol Morgan School, I began to learn more English. That is, when I had stopped gawking. The teacher and some of the American children had the strangest coloration:

light hair, light eyes, light skin, as if Ursulina had soaked them in bleach too long, *to'deteñío*. I did have some blond cousins, but they had deeply tanned skin, and as they grew older, their hair darkened, so their earlier paleness seemed a phase of their acquiring normal color. Just as strange was the little girl in my reader who had a cat and a dog that looked just like *un gatito y un perrito*. Her mami was Mother and her papi Father. Why have a whole new language for school and for books with a teacher who could speak it teaching you double the amount of words you really needed?

*Butter, butter, butter, butter.* All day, one English word that had particularly struck me would go round and round in my mouth and weave through all the Spanish in my head, until by the end of the day the word did sound like just another Spanish word. And so I would say, "*Mami, por favor pásame la butter.*" She would scowl and say in English, "I'm sorry, I don't understand. But would you be needing some butter on your bread?"

Why my parents didn't first educate us in our native language by enrolling us in a Dominican school, I don't know. Part of it was that Mami's family had a tradition of sending the boys to the States to boarding school and college, and she had been one of the first girls to be allowed to join her brothers. At Abbot Academy, whose school song was our lullaby as babies ("Although Columbus and Cabot never heard of Abbot, it's quite the place for you and me"), she had become quite Americanized. It was very important, she kept saying, that we learn our English. Always she used the possessive pronoun: your English, an inheritance we had come into and must

wisely use. Unfortunately, my English became all mixed up with our Spanish.

Mixup, or what's now called Spanglish, was the language we spoke for several years. There wasn't a sentence that wasn't colonized by an English word. At school, a Spanish word would suddenly slide into my English like someone butting into line. Mrs. Buchanan, whose face I was learning to read as minutely as my mother's, would scowl, but no smile played on her lips. Her pale skin made her strange countenance hard to read, so I often misjudged how much I could get away with. Whenever I made a mistake, Mrs. Buchanan would shake her head slowly, "In English, Jew-LEE-AH, there's no such word as *columpio*. Do you mean a *swing*?"

I would bow my head, embarrassed, humiliated by the smiles and snickers of the American children around me. I grew insecure about Spanish. My native tongue was not quite as good as English, as if words like *columpio* were illegal immigrants trying to cross a border into another language. But Mrs. Buchanan's discerning grammar-and-vocabulary-patrol ears could tell and send them back.

Soon I was talking up an English storm. "Did you eat an English parrot?" my grandfather asked one Sunday. I had just enlisted yet one more patient servant to listen to my rendition of *Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers* at break-neck pace. "Huh?" I asked impolitely in English, putting him in his place. *Cat got your tongue? No big deal*, I could quip. *So there! Take that! Holy Toledo!* (Mrs. Buchanan's favorite "curse word"). *Go jump in the lake! Really dumb. Golly. Gosh.* Slang, little tricks, clichés, sayings, hotshot language

that our teacher labeled ponderously: idiomatic expressions. Riddles, jokes, puns, conundrums, little exchanges. *What is yellow and goes click-click? Why did the chicken cross the road? See you later, Alligator.* How wonderful to call someone an alligator and not be scolded for being disrespectful. In fact, they were supposed to say back, *In a while, Crocodile.*

There was also a neat little trick I wanted to try on an English-speaking adult at home. I had learned it from Elizabeth, my smart-alecky friend in fourth grade whom I alternately worshipped and resented. I'd ask her a question that required an explanation, and she'd answer, "Because . . ." "Elizabeth, how come you didn't go to Isabel's birthday party?" "Because . . ." "Why didn't you put your name in your reader?" "Because . . ." I thought that such a cool way to get around having to come up with answers. So I practiced saying it under my breath, planning for the day I could use it on an unsuspecting English-speaking adult.

One Sunday at our extended family dinner, my grandfather sat down at the children's table to chat with us. He was famous, in fact, for the way he could carry on adult conversations with his grandchildren. He always spoke to us in English so that we could practice speaking it out of the classroom. He was a Cornell man, a world traveler, a United Nations representative from our country. He gave speeches in English. Perfect English, my mother's phrase. That Sunday, he asked me a question. I can't even remember what it was because I wasn't really listening but lying in wait for my chance "Because . . ." I answered him, the way Elizabeth said it. Papito waited a second for the rest of my sentence and then

gave me a thumbnail grammar lesson: "*Because* has to be followed by a clause."

"Why's that?" I asked, nonplussed.

"Because," he winked. "Just because."

A beginning wordsmith, I had so much left to learn; sometimes it was disheartening. Once Tío Gus, the family intellectual, put a tiny grain of salt on my grandparents' big dining table during Sunday dinner. He said, "Imagine this whole table is the human brain. Then this teensy grain is all we ever use of our intelligence!" His face kept getting redder, his voice louder and louder as he enumerated geniuses who had perhaps used two grains, maybe three. Einstein, Michelangelo, da Vinci, Beethoven. "It's been scientifically proven," Tío Gus argued when his older brother told him to stop exaggerating. We children believed him. It was the kind of impossible fact we thrived on, proving as it did that the world out there was not drastically different from the one we were making up in our heads.

Later, driving home, Mami said to Papi that Manuel was right, their younger brother Gus loved to exaggerate. "You have to take everything he says with a grain of salt," she concluded. I thought she was still referring to Tío Gus's demonstration, and I tried to puzzle out what she was saying. Finally, I asked what she meant. "Taking what someone says with a grain of salt is an idiomatic expression in English," she explained. It was pure voodoo is what it was—what later I learned poetry could also do: a grain of salt could both symbolize the human brain and be a condiment for human nonsense. And it could be itself too, a grain of salt to flavor a bland plate of American food.



WHEN I WAS TEN, we emigrated to New York. How astonishing, a country where everyone spoke English! These people must be smarter, I thought. Maids, waiters, taxi drivers, doormen, bums on the street, garbagemen, all spoke this difficult language. It took some time before I understood that Americans were not necessarily a smarter, superior race. It was as natural for them to learn their mother tongue as it was for a little Dominican baby to learn Spanish. It came with mother's milk, my mother explained, and for a while I thought a mother tongue was a mother tongue because you got it from your mother's breast, along with nutrients and vitamins.

Soon it wasn't so strange that everyone was speaking in English instead of Spanish. I learned not to hear it as English, but as sense. I no longer strained to understand, I understood. I relaxed in this second language. Only when someone with a heavy southern or British accent spoke in a movie or when the priest droned his sermon—only then did I experience that little catch of anxiety. I worried that I would not be able to understand, that I wouldn't be able to "keep up" with the voice speaking in this acquired language. I would be like those people from the Bible we had studied in religion class, at the foot of an enormous tower that looked just like the skyscrapers all around me. They had been punished for their pride by being made to speak some slightly different version of the same language so that they didn't understand what anyone was saying.

But at the foot of those towering New York skyscrapers, I began to understand more and more—not less and less—English. In sixth grade, I had one of the first of a lucky line of great English teachers who began to nurture a love of the

language, a love that had been there since a childhood of listening closely to words. Sister Bernadette did not make our class interminably diagram sentences from a workbook or learn a catechism of grammar rules. Instead, she asked us to write little stories imagining we were snowflakes, birds, pianos, a stone in the pavement, a star in the sky. What would it feel like to be a flower with roots in the ground? If the clouds could talk, what would they say? She had an expressive, dreamy look that was accentuated by her face being framed in a wimple. Supposing, just supposing . . . My mind would take off, soaring into possibilities, a flower with roots, a star in the sky, a cloud full of sad sad tears, a piano crying out each time its back was tapped, music only to our ears.

Sister Bernadette stood at the chalkboard. Her chalk was always snapping in two because she wrote with so much energy, her whole habit shaking with the swing of her arm, her hand tap tap tapping on the board. "Here's a simple sentence: *The snow fell.*" Sister Bernadette pointed with her chalk, her eyebrows lifted, her wimple poked up. Sometimes I could see little bits of gray hair disclosed by her wobbly habit. "But watch what happens if we put an adverb at the beginning and a prepositional phrase at the end: *Gently the snow fell on the bare hills.*" I thought about the snow. I saw how it might fall on the hills, tapping lightly on the bare branches of trees. Softly it would fall on the cold cold fields. On toys children had left out in the cold, and on cars and on little birds and on people out late walking on the streets. Sister Bernadette filled the chalkboard with snowy print, on and on, handling and shaping and moving the language, scribbling all over the

board until English, those little bricks of meaning, those little fixed units and counters, became a charged, fluid mass that carried me in its great fluent waves, rolling and moving onward, to deposit me on the shores of the only homeland. I was no longer a foreigner with no ground to stand on. I had landed in language.

I had come into my English.



## Reading and Discussion Guide



### *Author*

Julia Alvarez was born in New York City in 1950. When she was three months old, her family moved to the Dominican Republic, where she spent the first ten years of her life. Her family enjoyed a relatively affluent lifestyle there but was forced to return to the United States in 1960, after her father participated in a failed coup against the Dominican military dictatorship. This experience would later inspire her first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. After high school, Alvarez continued her education at Connecticut College, Middlebury College, and Syracuse University. Having earned a master's degree, she took on a variety of jobs, including serving as the writer-in-residence for the Kentucky Arts Commission and teaching English and creative writing at California State University, the University of Vermont, George Washington University, and the University of Illinois. In 1996, she was promoted to full-time professor at Middlebury College but resigned the position in 1998 in order to devote her time to writing.

Alvarez's work is strongly informed by her own experiences, in particular her movement between the Dominican Republic and the United States and the resulting feelings of displacement and alienation. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* is widely regarded as the first major novel in English by a Dominican author. Like much of Alvarez's writing, it explores the immigrant experience and the ways in which it is shaped by gender and class. Her work also illuminates the cultural divides between the United States and the Caribbean world. These cultural tensions shape how she sees writing and the role of the storyteller:

As storytellers we belong to the human family, but as individuals we belong to families, particular communities, we live in relationships, bound to individuals, and they often want us to tell stories that promote and affirm their point of view or their "take" on the world. But we fail in our mission as storytellers if we try to be spokespersons or apologists for any one point of view. Our task is to tell the truth, "manifold and one"—a quote by Joseph Conrad I've always loved! And this means that we often present not just the one truth, our tribe's truth, but the manifold truth, which includes the complexities, competing realities of any situation. That may feel like a betrayal of what we "owe" our families, communities, our particular tribe. (<http://labloga.blogspot.com/2007/08/interview-with-julia-alvarez.html>)

Alvarez lives with her husband in the "Latino-compromised" state of Vermont and travels to the Dominican Republic frequently. She helped create and remains involved with Alta Gracia, a farm and literacy center dedicated to the environ-

mentally sustainable growth of organic coffee and the promotion of literacy and education.

### *Summary*

This novel is structured in three sections, which are arranged in reverse chronological order. Part 1, which takes place between 1989 and 1972, focuses on the adult lives of the García sisters. Yolanda, who narrates several of the stories in first person, becomes the focus of the book. The first chapter, "Antojos," deals with Yolanda's return to the Dominican Republic as an adult and her interactions with her family there. "The Four Girls" introduces the sisters and their relationships more thoroughly and establishes their deep sense of family unity as they gather to celebrate their father's birthday. "The Kiss" focuses on Sofia, when their father discovers a collection of love letters addressed to her from a stranger. Outraged, he confronts her, and she runs off with her German lover. "The Rudy Elmenhurst Story," the last of part 1, is also narrated by Yolanda, as she tells the story of her first real relationship and the difficulties she faced in trying to find someone who understood her immigrant background and personal identity.

Part 2, set between 1970 and 1960, deals with the family's experience as recent immigrants to the United States. "A Regular Revolution" describes the sisters' initial reaction to life in the United States. While they initially find it uncomfortable and foreign and regularly pray to return home, they soon adjust and actually find themselves dreading summers in the Dominican Republic. "Daughter of Invention" is about

Mami, her frustrated creativity, and her dreams for Yolanda's future. The third story, "Trespass," is about Carla's experience dealing with racist attitudes at school as well as being confronted with some of the more seedy and unsavory aspects of urban life. "Snow," the shortest story in the book, is about a young Yolanda's fears during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The final story, "Floor Show," takes place during dinner with friends at a Spanish restaurant, during which Laura witnesses an odd interaction between her father and the host's wife.

Part 3 presents the sisters as young children during the period between 1960 and 1956. While they live a life of privilege in the Dominican Republic, trouble brews as their father becomes involved in a plot against the military dictatorship that runs the country. "The Blood of the Conquistadores" opens with government agents bursting into the García home in search of Carlos. His antigovernment activities have made his family a target, and while they escape immediate danger, they are forced to emigrate quickly to New York. "The Human Body" contrasts Yolanda's childhood education and creativity with the brutality of the political regime running her country. "Still Lives" deals with Sandi's artistic talent and the ways in which creativity is shaped during childhood. Taking place during the Christmas holidays, "An American Surprise" tells the story of the Christmas gifts Papi brings back from New York for his girls and the impressions they get of the United States based upon the gifts. The final chapter, "The Drum," is told by Yolanda. She recalls her own Christmas gift, a drum, the discovery of a litter of stray cats, and the ways her life changed when the family moved to New York.



*Questions for Discussion*

1. The storyline in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* is arranged in reverse chronological order. How does this structure affect the overall narrative?
2. Part of the heading for each chapter is the name of the daughter or daughters who provide the focus and viewpoint. How does this affect the way you read the book and the ways the characters develop?
3. What does the book have to say about the relationships between men and women? Is this affected by time and geography, that is, the Dominican Republic vs. the United States, or the 1950s as compared with the 1970s?
4. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* addresses generational differences among the girls, their parents, and their grandparents. How do these appear in individual episodes and in the overall narrative?
5. Love, marriage, and the many manifestations thereof appear throughout this story. Is there an overall message or theme that stands out?
6. Due to the structure of the book, the reader first encounters the adult García sisters, who struggle with Spanish during trips to the Dominican Republic and are far more comfortable with life in the United States. As the novel progresses backward through time, their younger selves are gradually

revealed, and you see them struggle with life in the United States and dread immigration to the new country. What messages does the book have about the immigrant experience? Does the book's organization affect that message?

7. Sexuality remains a complex, and often unspoken, part of many of the stories in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. How does it manifest itself? Why does it remain unspoken or, alternately, burst to the surface?

8. Why did Alvarez choose *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* as the title? Is "losing one's accent" a metaphor for the immigrant experience? Does "losing one's accent" perhaps also include self-definition and individual identity?

9. The parents of the girls work very hard to ensure that their family remains close, and close to its roots. How do the girls react to these efforts? Do Mami and Papi necessarily succeed the way they intend?

10. Both as an abstract and in reality, the United States looms large in this book. How do the characters' impressions of and ideas about the United States change throughout the book? What causes these changes?

11. The girls' father undergoes as many changes and challenges as the other characters. How is he presented throughout the book? How does he change, and why? In what ways does his changing character affect the life of the family?

12. History—of the family, of the Dominican Republic, and of the United States—is a large part of the subtext of the stories. How do the characters react to these various histories, both familial and national? How does history shape the lives of the family members?

13. The García girls are assigned a wide variety of nicknames throughout the book. What are the sources of these nicknames, and how do they affect the characters who bear them? In particular, how does Yolanda react to some of the names that are given to her?

### *Further Reading*

#### Fiction

SANDRA CISNEROS, *Caramelo* (2003)

Cisneros follows the lives and fortunes of the Reyes family, from their origins in Mexico through their immigration to the United States and the lives they shape for themselves there. Told as a series of stories collected by Celaya Reyes, a first-generation Mexican-American girl, *Caramelo* combines these diverse tales into a comprehensive story that deals with ethnic and gender identity and the process of self-definition. The book is steeped in the history of both nations, and includes many footnotes and a timeline of U.S.-Mexican history.

JUNOT DÍAZ, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007)

On the surface, Díaz's novel is the story of the eponymous hero, an overweight, "lovesick ghetto nerd" Dominican boy growing up in New Jersey. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes the story of three generations of a family as well as an exploration of cultural identity. Steeped in the history and myth of the Dominican Republic, and reflecting the experiences of Dominicans in both the United States and their home country, this novel offers insights into the immigrant experience that complement Alvarez's story.

CRISTINA GARCÍA, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1993)

García's first novel weaves together strands of story and memory to explore the life of a Cuban family both at home and in exile in the United States. Three generations of del Pino women and their often-troubled inner lives are explored against the backdrop of revolution and change in two countries. *Dreaming in Cuban* offers insight into the lives and challenges of Cuban women and their immigrant experience.

JHUMPA LAHIRI, *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000)

Lahiri's collection of short stories deals with many of the same themes found in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. The characters, displaced from their homeland, find themselves struggling to adapt to new circumstances while dealing with the weight of their own history. Love, tradition, illness, and family are among the ideas Lahiri explores in *Interpreter of Maladies*.

## Nonfiction

EDWIDGE DANTICAT, *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007)

One day in 2004, Danticat learned that she was pregnant with her first child and that her father was terminally ill. Using these events as a framework, she begins a memoir that explores the story of her family, from her parents' life in Haiti and her own childhood there to the family's immigration to the United States. Both personal and political, *Brother, I'm Dying* touches on family history, national tragedy, and the nature of identity.

The Reading and Discussion Guide was provided by EBSCO Publishing readers' resource NoveList—all rights reserved. NoveList is available at most public libraries.



BILL EICHNER



Julia Alvarez emigrated to this country with her parents at the age of ten. She is the author of six novels and has also published three books of poems, two nonfiction books, and eight books for young readers. A writer-in-residence at Middlebury College, Alvarez established with her husband, Bill Eichner, Alta Gracia, an organic coffee farm–literacy arts center, in her homeland, the Dominican Republic.

*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, her first novel, originally published in 1991, has received many honors, including the 1991 Pen Oakland/Josephine Miles Award and selection as a notable book by both the *New York Times* and the American Library Association. The book was later selected as one of twenty-one classics for the twenty-first century by New York librarians and was one of four texts chosen for the national reading project, “A Latino National Conversation,” by the Great Books Foundation. In 2008, the Roundhouse Theatre in Bethesda, Maryland, held the world premiere of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, a play by Karen Zacarías based on the novel.