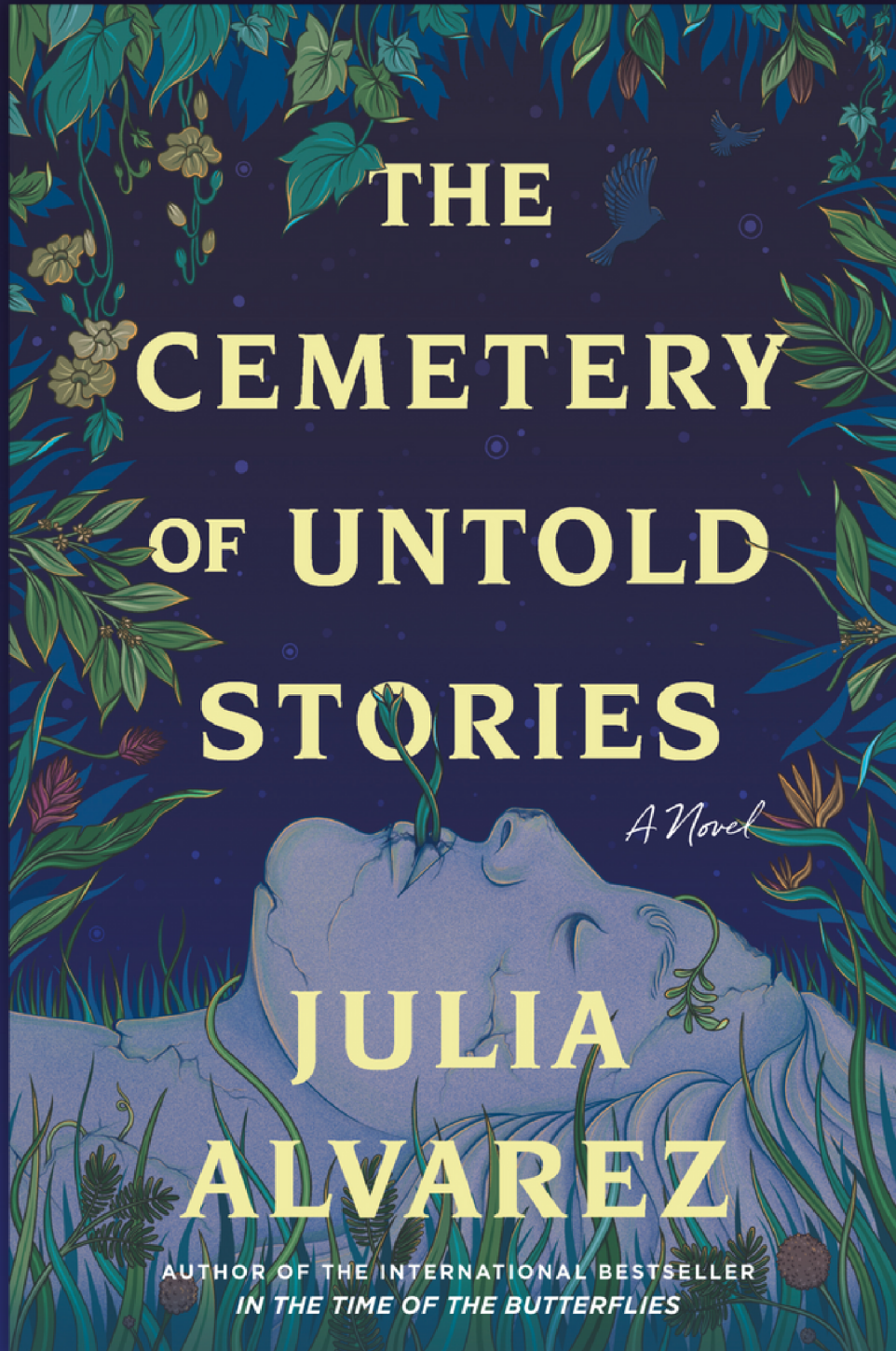




# BOOK CLUB KIT



# A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

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Dear Reader,

I've always wanted to set a novel in a graveyard. Just imagine the contained and silenced drama of the lives we only know from the "haiku" on their tombstones. Who was this beloved mother or cherished boy buried with his dog or fallen soldier with his war medals? When I dreamed of becoming a writer, I knew one of the first places I'd go for my material would be the cemetery to unearth some of the lived stories that lie buried in everyone's family, community and imagination.

I come from a culture where the dead are very much a part of life. We celebrate Día de los Muertos, not with wreaths and oratory, but concretely, viscerally, as if our dead were still alive, which we believe they are. We make their favorite dishes, picnic at their gravesite, sing them their favorite songs and tell stories about them. It's not a heavy-hearted replay of a funeral but an all-out fiesta. We don't want our dead to rest in apartheid peace. We want them to be part of our turbulent, lively lives.

My first job as a young writer was in Kentucky, traveling the state as a poet in residence in a Poetry in the Schools program. With only a few weeks in each community, I wanted to learn all I could about its residents. At my first posting in Frankfort, a local architect gave me some advice. If you really want to get to know a community, visit its cemeteries. The way we treat our dead, like the way we treat the other bookend of life, our children, says volumes about who we are.

During a period of all our lives—the pandemic—when the world itself seemed a vast graveyard, I began thinking again of that long-buried desire to set a story in a graveyard.

Of course, the cemetery in my novel *The Cemetery of Untold Stories* is a little odd: it isn't for dead people but for the unfinished stories my main character, an aging writer, Alma, realizes she will never be able to complete in what's left of her life. She wants both to honor her unrealized characters and exorcise their stories from her imagination.

In researching the novel, I visited many cemeteries both in the United States and in the Dominican Republic, where there is a wealth of lore and ritual associated with them. The presiding Spirit, el Barón del Cementerio, claims the gravesite of the first



person buried in the cemetery as his seat of power. Daily, but especially on Tuesdays and Fridays, at noon and midnight, or on Día de los Muertos, santeros and Voodoo practitioners visit that first grave and burn candles, make offerings, chant prayers and petitions. No one wants their loved one to be the first interment in a new cemetery, as that gravesite will be overrun by believers and followers of el Barón.

One story I heard was that on the day that Cristo Redentor opened in Santo Domingo two burials were booked on opening day. The family of one deceased paid the driver of the hearse to fake a flat tire so that the other cortege would arrive there first.

Since some of the characters in my novel are historical, I made research pilgrimages to their graves in the Dominican Republic. I was stumped, however, in searching for the grave of Bienvenida Inocencia Ricardo de Trujillo, the ex-wife of our bloody dictator, who discarded her in favor of his mistress. Although she had been First Lady with many schools and streets and centers named after her, overnight, the mistress-now-wife insisted that Bienvenida's name be erased from public mention and history books.

When she died, Bienvenida's family buried her in the graveyard outside her hometown of Monte Cristi. I spent a hot afternoon dutifully going row by row searching for her marker without success. Later, I learned from her surviving relatives that no one dared put her name on a gravestone. Even though the dictatorship was long over when she died (1974) the family was afraid that her grave would be desecrated by victims of the bloody regime. Bienvenida was erased in death as she had been in life.

It's stories like hers, and so many others that I've failed to tell—and that now, as an older writer with less creative stamina and time I might never get to—that compelled me to create *The Cemetery of Untold Stories*. After all, what better place than a novel to keep those stories alive after I am gone?

Yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read "Julia Alvarez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 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?



# FROM JULIA ALVAREZ'S PHOTO ALBUMS

**CEMETERY LORE:** Julia spent a lot of time researching the culture of cemeteries, including Monte Cristi Cemetery, where Bienvenida Trujillo is buried in an unmarked grave. El Barón, depicted below, is the legendary lord of cemeteries.



**El Barón**



**Monte Cristi**

**BIENVENIDA TRUJILLO:** Bienvenida Inocencia Ricardo Martinez Trujillo was the second wife of Rafael Trujillo, the dictator who ruled the Dominican Republic from the 1930s to 1960s. Bienvenida inspired the character of the same name in this novel. She is pictured below with her husband in both photos, and they are with Eleanor Roosevelt during a 1934 state visit.



**Bienvenida Trujillo**



**Eleanor Roosevelt  
with Bienvenida**



# FROM JULIA ALVAREZ'S PHOTO ALBUMS

**ART THAT INSPIRES:** Two works by Belkis, a Dominican artist—her work displayed in Museo del Barrio in NYC—who did huge life-size figures, primarily of women, and prints which captured the ambiance of Julia's cemetery of untold stories. "Pensamientos de Julia" (referencing Julia de Burgos) hung for a while in her little casita.



**Belkis Brava**



**Belkis women figures**

## **LIKE HER MAIN CHARACTER:**

Julia stores boxes and boxes of unfinished drafts, novels, and stories.



**Julia's archive boxes**