

# VAMOS A LEER

*teaching latin america through literacy*



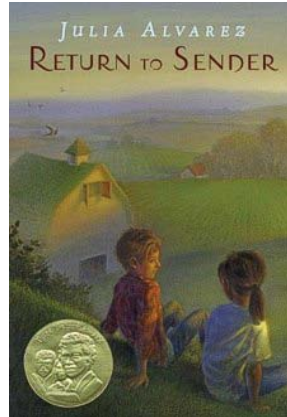
# VAMOS A LEER

Educator's Guide

RETURN TO SENDER

Written by Julia Alvarez (Yearling, 2010).

ISBN: 0375851232



## BOOK SUMMARY

After Tyler's father is injured in a tractor accident, his family is forced to hire migrant Mexican workers to help save their Vermont farm from foreclosure. Tyler isn't sure what to make of these workers. Are they undocumented? And what about the three daughters, particularly Mari, the oldest, who is proud of her Mexican heritage but also increasingly connected to her American life. Her family lives in constant fear of being discovered by the authorities and sent back to the poverty they left behind in Mexico. Can Tyler and Mari find a way to be friends despite their differences?

## AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS

- 2010 Américas Award Winner
- 2010 Pura Belpré Award Winner

AUTHOR'S  
CORNER

Julia Alvarez's thoughts on writing *Return to Sender*. . . .

"The seed for the novel came when I got involved translating at local schools for the children of Mexican migrant workers who have now made their way up to Vermont. (And boosted our compromised Latino population!) These workers are now doing the milking on many of our dairy farms. Without them, many of our small farmers could not survive, as they, too, are being squeezed by the high cost of farming and a dearth of workers."



"Seeing how baffled the Mexican children and their classmates were about how to understand this situation that had thrown us all together, I thought: we need a story to understand what is happening to us! The title comes from a dragnet operation that the Department of Homeland Security conducted in 2006, named, Return to Sender. Work places were raided and undocumented workers were seized. Their children were the biggest casualties of this operation -- left behind to be soothed and reassured until they could be finally reunited with their parents" (<http://return-to-sender.juliaalvarez.com>)

Check out [Julia Alvarez's website](#) for more information and helpful resources for using *Return to Sender* in your classroom like...

- Resources on Immigration—Lists and links of articles, books, films and more used by Alvarez as she was researching *Return to Sender*.
- Alvarez's own soundtrack for *Return to Sender*.
- News stories from Vermont related to immigration and 'illegal' workers.
- Free teacher's guide published by Random House Children's Books.

USING *RETURN  
TO SENDER*  
IN THE  
CLASSROOM

**"I call my type of inspiration 'the pebble in my shoe' inspiration, that little pebble I can't seem to shake out of my mind! Life gives me a lot of them." (Alvarez, "In her own words" p.5).**

*Return to Sender* tells the story of two children coming to terms with the realities of life within the context of immigration and the United States. In her review of the book Sonja Bollee writes, "There is a great deal of recent children's fiction about immigration, but it tends to the earnest rather than the artful. Alvarez. . . focuses on the children and their dawning comprehension of the complexities of the adult

world” (Sonja Bollee, January 25, 2009, LA Times). This is what makes the book such a valuable resource. The reader gets to see through the eyes of the children how they come to grips with the complicated choices we must make when faced with this issue of immigration and how we decide what it really means to be a citizen.

*Return to Sender* might not go into great depth in terms of the complicated nature of immigration law and reform, but for our students it will begin to unveil the complexity of the issue of immigration. It shows that many things we thought we could understand in black and white, can really only be understood in shades of grey. Notions of right and wrong aren’t always easy to pin down, but instead become the “pebble in our shoe” that we just can’t seem to get rid of, that we may struggle with throughout our lives.

Not only will the book encourage our students to be critical thinkers, but it will help them begin to negotiate the complex spaces they may have once thought quite simple. That is the power of good literature. In a quote about the book, Alvarez writes, “This is the wonderful thing about stories. The impossible is possible. . . There are no borders” (*Return to Sender*, p. 323). Stories like this push our students to think beyond their own world, or their own borders, and thus posit solutions to the problems the adult world poses. Hopefully, they learn that “by understanding another point of view we bridge the differences between ourselves and another human being” (Alvarez “In her own words” p. 8)

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## LESSON PLANS & ACTIVITIES

The following lesson plans and activities are grouped thematically into the following sections: Citizenship, Immigration, History, Art and Culture, and Literary Interpretation. Relevant Common Core Standards for Reading and Writing have been listed at the beginning of each activity.

**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**

- 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.
- 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.

**The Law and Civil Disobedience**

This lesson is meant to help students connect to Tyler's struggle with the idea of breaking the law and whether or not it was right for his family to hire Mari's family even though her parents had immigrated illegally. This activity encourages your students to engage with the idea of civil disobedience, thinking about what it means, how it is different from breaking the law, and if it is ever an acceptable means of protest. After a guided class discussion on the topic, the students will participate in a structured debate on the issue

Engage your students in a discussion of this idea of civil

disobedience. Depending upon the age group of your students, you could read excerpts from *Civil Disobedience* by Thoreau or use the Stanford Encyclopedia Entry on Civil Disobedience found here (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/civil-disobedience/>).

In this discussion it is important to be specific about what civil disobedience means. You could start by asking students to brainstorm possibilities for the definition of civil disobedience. Then, provide them a standard or widely accepted definition for the term. Below is an example taken from the entry on Civil Disobedience in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. It's quite lengthy, the first sentence could be sufficient, or you may want to go into a more in-depth discussion using it in its entirety. The key is to make it clear that breaking the law and civil disobedience are not always the same. There are important differences, most importantly that the breach of law is done in order to bring about a change in law or policy and those who commit it are willing to accept the consequences.

“. . .civil disobedience is a public, non-violent and conscientious breach of law undertaken with the aim of bringing about a change in laws or government policies. On this account, the persons who practice civil disobedience are willing to accept the legal consequences of their actions, as this shows their fidelity to the rule of law. Civil disobedience, given its place at the boundary of fidelity to law, is said to fall between legal protest, on the one hand, and conscientious refusal, revolutionary action, militant protest and organized forcible resistance, on the other hand” (paragraph 1, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/civil-disobedience/>).

With a definition in mind, continue the discussion, asking students if they can think of anyone they've learned about that have participated in acts of civil disobedience. Possible suggestions: Henry David Thoreau (who coined the term, civil disobedience); the Boston Tea Party; the suffragette movement; the resistance to British rule led by Gandhi; the U.S. civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks and many others; resistance to apartheid in South Africa; and student sit-ins against the Vietnam War.

Next, have students discuss if it is ever right to break the law. Is civil disobedience ever an acceptable means of protest? Once students have started thinking and talking about the issue there are two activities you can do as forms of closure or assessment: a class debate or a persuasive essay.

### **Class Debate**

This activity is designed to have students use the information they've learned through the previous discussion, in order to come to a real

understanding of both sides of the issues. Regardless of the side students represent, through the debate they will come to an understanding of the pros and cons of both sides, realizing that it is a complex issue with no easy answers. At the end of this guide are two activity sheets created for use with this activity.

For this activity, the class is divided into three groups: In favor of civil disobedience; Against civil disobedience; Judges. How the groups are formed is up to the teacher. Students can count off by 3s to form the groups. This simplifies the process, ensures the groups are equal in size, and reinforces the idea that it is important to know both sides of a debate, regardless of one's personal opinion. The timeframe for completing this activity is up to the teacher—largely depending upon the age group and the teacher's expectations for the level of information produced by each group. It could be a one day activity, or stretched out into multiple days for a more in-depth activity.

This activity can also be expanded, especially for older students, by including a final writing assignment where they must write their own persuasive essay, supporting the side they believe is correct. After the debate has been completed, students must pick a side of the debate and write a persuasive essay supporting the side they chose and critiquing the opposing view. Depending upon the age level, students can be required to cite primary or secondary sources to support their argument.

When it is time to actually conduct the debate, the structure below works well. You may need to adjust it—making it shorter, longer, adding rounds, etc. to make it work for your own class. A coin toss can be used to decide who goes first. Remind students that there is no talking during the other group's turn—they cannot respond to that group's comments until it is their turn.

**Round One: Introduction to argument**

Each group gets 5 minutes to introduce their main points.

**Round Two: Response**

Each group gets 4 minutes to respond to their opponents' claims and add any relevant information to their argument.

**Round Three: Response**

Each group gets 3 minutes to respond to their opponents' claims and add any relevant information to their argument.

**Round Four: Closing Remarks**

Each group gets 5 minutes to make any final arguments and closing remarks to the judges.

## Immigration

### 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.

Begin with a map of North America (including Mexico). Find Chiapas on the map. Place a sticker or some other marker on Chiapas. Then find North Carolina. Place another marker there. Next find Vermont. Place another marker there. Using string, yarn, stickytape, etc. mark the path from Chiapas to North Carolina, to Vermont. Discuss how far Mari had to travel. Ask your students how many of them have travelled that far before. What would it be like to be so far from the rest of your family—grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins? Would they want to leave behind everything that is familiar and safe to them and move to another country?

To expand the activity, research Chiapas using books, internet resources, etc. This can either be done by individual students, small



## History

groups, or as a whole class. Write a paper or create a poster that tells important facts about Chiapas--the culture, the history, the people. Then have students complete a Venn Diagram and/or write a compare and contrast essay on Chiapas and the United States (or Vermont, or their own city).

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#### **K-12**

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Tyler makes reference to a number of important historical events and compares them to current events. The two activities below expand

Literary  
Interpretation

upon this. You could have students complete both, use just the activity that fits best with your needs, or have half of the class complete one activity while the other half completes the second activity. Then have them present their findings

### **Mexican Migration and the Trail of Tears**

Tyler compares the Mexican migration to the Trail of Tears on page 14. Re-read this section. Then, research what the Trail of Tears is. Do you agree with Tyler? Are the two similar? How are they the same? How are they different? Can what happened during the Trail of Tears inform or educate us about the current situation of Mexican migration? Write an essay or create a poster presentation to share your thoughts with the class.

### **Homeland Security and the Underground Railroad**

Tyler compares creating an escape plan for the Cruz family to the Underground Railroad on page 117. Re-read this section. Research the Underground Railroad. What was the Underground Railroad? What did it accomplish? Why do you think he compares the two? How are they the same? How are they different? Write an essay or create a poster presentation to share your thoughts with the class.

### **Common Core Standards Addressed:**

#### **K-12**

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- 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.

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**Symbolism and La Golondrina**

This lesson is designed to encourage students to think about the importance of symbolism in the novel and what it represents. The swallow is an important symbol throughout the book (Mari and Tyler discuss it for the first time on page 53). This lesson builds upon the excerpt of the poem “La Golondrina” found at the beginning of the book, but for a more in depth lesson, students could read the entire poem. It is an activity that can be done once the entire book has been read, but it may be useful to note the multiple references to the swallow as the class progresses through the book.

Begin by reading the excerpt of the poem La Golondrina found at the front of the book after the title page. Discuss with students the following questions: What do you think the swallow symbolizes for the story? What does it represent? What does the poem La Golondrina mean? How do you interpret it? It would be interesting to have this discussion twice—once before students have read the book and then after they have read the book. Students could do a quick write response after the first discussion and a more in-depth reflective essay once they have finished the book.

**Letter Writing**

Discuss the following questions with your class:  
 Letter writing plays a prominent role in the book. The students write letters as part of class assignments, but Mari also writes letters that are an important part of the story. Why do you think the author uses letters to tell the story? Why do you think Mari chooses to write so many letters? Why are the letters important to her? What do they

Art &  
Culture

provide for her? Why do you think we don't write as many letters today, as people did in the past? See the link below for a blog entry on how the letters in *Return to Sender* represent a space for border crossing.

<http://wowlit.org/blog/2011/03/07/the-space-between-a-beginning-journey-into-border-crossing/>

Once students have discussed the role of letter writing in the book, have them write their own letter to anyone they would like. Give them the option to share their letter with the class.

**Common Core Standards Addressed:**

**K-12**

**Writing:**

**Text Types and Purposes:**

- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

**Production and Distribution of Writing:**

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

An interest in stars is one of the first things that Tyler and Mari find they have in common. Create a constellation (using crayons, construction paper, star stickers, etc.) that would be significant or meaningful for Mari and/or Tyler. Tell the story of the constellation and why it's important to Mari and/or Tyler. Another option would be to have students create a constellation that is meaningful to them, that tells an important part of their life story. Then, they could write the story of that constellation and its significance to them.

## RESOURCES

### **“No Human Being Was Born Illegal.”**

<http://www.niot.org/nios-video/no-human-being-was-born-illegal>

Produced by Not in Our School ([www.niot.org/nios](http://www.niot.org/nios)), this is a short documentary about a high school history class that chose “to conduct a lunch-time demonstration to draw attention to the use of the word ‘illegal’ to describe undocumented immigrants.”

### **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.

### ***The Line Between Us* by Rethinking Schools Publications**

<http://www.rethinkingschools.org/ProdDetails.asp?ID=9780942961317>

*The Line Between Us* explores the history of U.S-Mexican relations and the roots of Mexican immigration, all in the context of the global economy. And it shows how teachers can help students understand the immigrant experience and the drama of border life.

### **“First Crossing” by Pam Muñoz Ryan**

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/first-crossing-donald-r-gallo/1013704651>

Featured in *The Line Between Us* and the book *First Crossing: Stories about Teen Immigrants*, this short story tells of a young teen boy from Jalisco’s first trip across the border in Tijuana. The story tells of the *coyotes* - the people who take illegal immigrants across the border, how much people pay for the crossing and the dangers involved in doing so.

**“The Space Between: A Beginning Journey Into Border Crossing”** by Julia López & Lillian Reeves, University of South Carolina.

<http://wowlit.org/blog/2011/03/07/the-space-between-a-beginning-journey-into-border-crossing/>

An interesting blog entry that rationalizes using *Return to Sender* in the classroom and explores the possibilities for student responses.

**“ ‘Return to Sender,’ by Julia Alvarez.”** Review by Sonja Bolle published in L.A. Times (25 Jan 2009).

<http://articles.latimes.com/print/2009/jan/25/entertainment/ca-julia-alvarez25>

## 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 site at <http://teachinglatinamericathroughliterature.wordpress.com/>. For more materials that support teaching about Latin America in the classroom, visit the LAI online at <http://laii.unm.edu/outreach>. This guide was prepared Feb. 2012 by Katrina Dillon, LAI Project Assistant.

## Debate Activity Sheet #1

### **Topic of Debate: Do you think that civil disobedience is an acceptable form of protest?**

**Group 1:** This group will argue that civil disobedience is an acceptable form of protest and means to bring about change.

**Group 2:** This group will argue that civil disobedience is wrong, is illegal, and should not be used as a means to bring about change

**Group 3:** This group will be the judges of the debate. This group must judge who wins the debate and determine what the criteria of success will be—What will each group be judged on? How will they earn points? This group must put together a rubric to score each group. The teacher will help you.

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