A Promise Kept: A Conversation With Julia Álvarez

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Julia Álvarez, called the “one-woman cultural collision” by the Los Angeles Times Book Review, weaves together memory, history, and identity in her most recent book, A Wedding in Haiti (2012). The same elements are present in her internationally renowned novels How the García Girls Lost Their Accents (1991) and In the Time of the Butterflies (1994), both also concentrating on identity and self-representation. This time around, however, Álvarez does not approach these same general themes through fictional narrative, turning instead to memoir form. Álvarez’s personal relationship with a young Haitian boy she met years ago in the Dominican Republic forms the book’s core, but there are numerous other “love stories” and relationships that appear in the text. Examples include Álvarez’s relationship with her husband, Bill, as well as the unbroken connection between her parents that remains, even as they both battle Alzheimer’s Disease. Perhaps the most important underlying relationship is that of two conflicted and troubled countries who share one island, the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Though these countries are geographically “close,” they rarely exhibit any “closeness” regarding political or cultural ties. They are two nations with anything but a sisterly relationship, leading Álvarez to label Haiti “the sister I never got to know.” Yet, it is a “sister” she got to know better during the process of writing A Wedding in Haiti, a story recounting her two recent trips to the country bordering her native Dominican Republic, one before and one after the 2010 Haitian earthquake. A Wedding in Haiti provides a snapshot of Haiti we do not see in the news, a Haiti filled with hope, resilience, and determination.

Megan Myers: Could you begin by giving some background information on the promise you made to Piti many years ago, a promise that serves as the backbone of A Wedding in Haiti.

Julia Álvarez: Well, in the beginning of the book I tell the story of how we met and how Piti came to work at Alta Gracia. So, one night we were up at the farm, and we had all eaten dinner together and Piti, who is usually so friendly and exuberant, looked kind of forlorn and quiet and, I thought, homesick. And so I tried to cheer him up. I told him, “Piti, I see your future. You are going to meet this wonderful love of your life, a beautiful Haitian girl, and you are going to get married and start a family.” He just looked at me like I was crazy. Where was he going to meet a nice Haitian girl in the mountains of the Dominican Republic in an all-male work crew?
But I insisted: “No, Piti, I see it in your future. You are going to meet her, and you
know what? I am going to be the godmother of the wedding, and I am going to be
there.” He just laughed, and I really thought that was that: one of those promises
you make at a party and you never think you are going to be called on to keep. We
still knew him over the years, but fast-forward eight years later we get a call in
Vermont one summer from Piti: “I’m getting married in Haiti in a week. Are you
coming madrina?” As I explain in the book, my first reaction was, “Piti, I am a busy
person. I’ve got commitments. I just can’t drop everything. You have got to give me
advance warning.” He wasn’t pushy about it, but I got off the phone and it was like
the pebble in my shoe . . . so many people had let down this kid over the years.
And not just people, the whole situation he had been born into—an impoverished
family, poverty that had forced him to leave home as a teenager and enter another
country without documents to work. It’s a promise that we, as human beings,
should be making—and keeping!—to all the kids in the world: that they can all
have certain opportunities, that they can all be able to develop their talents. I
thought: I am not going to be one more person on the list of people who have
failed this kid. I couldn’t live with myself. But this is a perfect example of how
storytelling gets me in trouble!

MM: I think we see in the book your inability, or unwillingness, to say “no” when
it comes to Piti: when he says, “My family is coming back with us to the Dominican
Republic” (with or without papers), and then again when you decide to take him
back to Haiti after the earthquake. You feel like it’s almost a maternal response to
say “yes” and to fill a certain role in his life.

JÁ: I think of it as having to earn that “e” at the end of human in order to be a
humane human being. That is part of the question and the query in the book.
There is a haunting phrase in the book that comes from a friend describing her first
encounter with extreme poverty in Brazil. She was just blown away by what she
was seeing. And she asked herself, “When you have seen a thing, what then is the
obligation?” It is not just when we have seen a certain situation, like the aftermath
of an earthquake, but also when we see, really see, a person. A Wedding in Haiti is
a book about seeing. One of the stories I recount is about meeting a guy in a bakery
in Port-au-Prince after the earthquake. He thanks us for coming to help, and so I
sheepishly have to tell him that we aren’t there with a mission trip. “We just really
came to see.” I was so astonished by his response: “Haiti needs to be seen.” I think
he was talking about the kind of seeing I was just talking about, seeing into the
heart of a country, so often maligned, misrepresented, misunderstood. So when
someone has that really clear, sharp, whole vision, what then is her obligation to
that person, that friendship, that neighbor country, to the other human being in
the human family? And I don’t have answers. I do hold with Chekhov that the task
of the writer is not to solve the problem, but to state it correctly. When you impose
your answers on your readers, you become a sort of moral imperialist, telling them what to think and do. The real value comes from letting your readers live their answers, as Rilke might say. They need to puzzle and question their own lives and figure out ways to solve the problem that I hope through my writing I've helped them see correctly.

MM: I love that quote in the book, that Haiti needs for people to “see” it. Would you agree that through your publication of the book, Haiti also needs to be “told” or “shared,” and that Haiti's culture and people and its reality needs to be uncovered with words and pictures?

JÁ: When I felt the real urgency to make this into a book was after the earthquake. We kept hearing about the huge numbers [of deaths and injuries]—overwhelming numbers, you could not even compute them—and we kept hearing about Haiti, this impoverished nation, this failed state. And all of that was heartbreakingly true. But I had also seen another Haiti that wasn't ever getting in the news. A Haiti with an amazingly rich culture, rich in oral tradition, and rich in values. A Haiti with extraordinary hope and resilience. A Haiti that has much to teach us in the First World, where we've forgotten certain valuable values, which we are going to need to relearn if we want to survive on a planet of diminishing resources. The people in that part of Haiti that we visited have an amazing solidarity: they take care of each other; they know how to get by with very little. There is very little waste. Talk about recycling! Here in the United States we have to struggle to convince people to recycle. Even in the Dominican Republic, everywhere you turn there is trash. In Haiti there was a use for everything that could be thrown away, and it was used. We keep talking about the poverty of Haiti—not to minimize the very real poverty and the devastation of the earthquake—but there are really some amazingly rich and resonant and luminous people there, art and culture. So, I think, what scale are we using here? Only the development scale of the First World?

MM: Let's talk about why you chose to use the memoir form. As you say in the essay in the advance copy, you refer to the book as an “us-moir” rather than a “me-moir.” I love that.

JÁ: I'm glad. You know, they wanted a subtitle. The publisher said, “People know you as a novelist, and we need to let people know with a subtitle what this is about. Let's call it a memoir.” And I said, “No! This is not a ‘me-moir.’ It's not about me, it's about us. Call it an ‘us-moir.’” They didn't think that was a great idea. Not many books would sell in a genre that people didn't know what it was. But this is not a story about just me; it's about Piti and Eseline. It's about the troubled relationship between two countries, about some people who step outside the box of that history and “see” each other and become friends. And these very small,
under the radar, but grassroots ways of people really finding each other are the way forward, how we are going to build a new kind of world.

MM: What are some of these other “things,” these other relationships that the book explores?

JÁ: It wasn’t just about one love relationship, a new young love, but also about the other book-end, a love relationship between my elderly parents, both afflicted with Alzheimer’s disease, but the bond continues. Also, the relationship between my husband Bill and me and the tussle and struggle to live a meaningful life together. For me, a book becomes even more interesting when it has a large root system, when it connects with all the things que me están preocupando, that are stirring in my head and heart at that moment in my life. So, the story of Piti sort of grabbed all of those things inside of me. And why write non-fiction? It seems like the longer I live, the more baffling and strange life becomes. I don’t have to go to fiction to muse and dwell in mystery. It’s right here in the day to day. And for me, writing has always been a way to understand experience, whether it’s my experience or an experience in history, which has captivated me. And so, all of the things I am struggling to understand are captured in what I call that root system of A Wedding in Haiti.

MM: I think the subtitle you did choose, “The Story of a Friendship,” proves this same point in a way. That it is not just the story of two friends, of you and Piti, it’s one that possibly exists between two troubled, conflicted countries—Haiti and the Dominican Republic—and also one between you and your husband, your parents.

JÁ: One of the things that I have been saying as I travel around the country with this book when people ask me about Haiti and the Dominican Republic now, is “I really think that we of the diaspora have a really important role to play.” When you are embedded in the culture and raised with certain habits of thinking, and certain prejudices, and certain defensive postures, it’s hard to see the other. But you leave, you come to the United States, and here you become the other! A Dominican friend told me, “I didn’t know I was black until I came to the United States.” I mean up until recently, the Dominican cédula would never describe a dark skinned Dominican as black; the term that would be used was indio oscuro. The blacks were the Haitians. But then we come to the United States and slowly we become conscientizadas, we see ourselves, we feel empowered to embrace our Afro-Caribbean roots, and when we go back, we begin to change the dialogue. Many times people look up to us because we’ve come from los Estados Unidos, “where everything is better.” So I do think a lot of the race dialogue is changing in the Dominican Republic because of the diaspora people and the conversations that they have brought back. And I think that the same thing can happen with the Haitian-Dominican division. It’s going to take time, but I think it can happen. So
much of the world is now interconnected, and we the diaspora people, we are the shuttle of the loom, we go back and forth, weaving this part and that part of the world together.

MM: The idea of homecoming, I think, is very present in *A Wedding In Haiti*. So, what is homecoming like for you? Or rather, where do you consider your home to be?

JÁ: That's interesting. And also, thank you. It's an astute insight or comment on the book, because, you’re right: there is Piti, wanting to go back to Haiti and Eseline wanting to go back, and then both wanting to go back to the Dominican Republic, which has become a sort of home for them. And then there's my mother with the preoccupation of wanting to go home, because she can't remember that the place she is in is her home. I would say that home for me is probably both the Dominican Republic and the United States, and I can feel the imbalance when I have been here too long, and there's a longing to go back. But once I've been in the Dominican Republic a few weeks, I feel something missing, my life in the States.

I was just in Miami, one of the book-tour stops, and I was walking around one afternoon when I had one hour that was my own. All around me people were speaking Spanish, Dominicans and cubanos, people from all over the southern Americas, but there were also North Americans, speaking English, and I felt some tension released, this wonderfully relaxed feeling that both parts of me were here. And I came back saying to Bill, “Maybe we should move to Miami.” He said, “I'm not moving to the city, no way!” Usually this kind of fluidity happens for me only on paper, when I write. Remember, I live in what I call the “Latino-compromised state of Vermont.” It's a pretty homogenous place. But when I am writing, I get to transcend that situation. I can write a story with Dominican characters, Dominican-American characters, American characters, and although I am writing in English, some of my characters are speaking their Spanish in English.

MM: And I think Piti in the book has a conflicted sense of homeland as well. Because even when he is “home,” in Haiti's capital of Port-au-Prince, he just seems lost . . . like he feels more at home in the Dominican campo than he does in his own country.

JÁ: Exactly. He comes from a rural area. Also, Port-au-Prince really did look like the end of the world had happened, and there is so much left to rebuild. A post-apocalyptic city. It really shook us all up to see that.

MM: I want to ask you about your five-day blog for Powell's earlier this May.

JÁ: They made me do that. The publisher was looking for any way to get a little extra promotion on the book.
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**MM**: Even including the pictures that are black and white in the book, and in color on your website? How important do you think it is to connect with your readers through these various media?

**JÁ**: Well, I have been reluctantly dragged into the new technology, kicking and screaming, because my generation really didn’t grow up with it. With writing a blog, people would say, “Oh, you just write for five days, whatever comes in your head,” I don’t know how to write that way. I craft whatever I write. I spent over a week writing and revising those blogs beforehand. I didn’t grow up writing in this new way that people write. In my generation it would be more, “Let’s brainstorm, or let’s do a free-write,” and then you always went back and sharpened and crystallized the writing. For me it’s hard work to try to write in a way that’s not the way that I have become the writer I am today.

The reason we ended up posting the pictures in color on my website was that late in the game, I got bad news that because of cost, the publisher could only reproduce the photos in black and white. So, the technology was a great resource in this instance. People would be able to go online and see the originals in color. But I was relieved that I was able to keep the photos, even in black and white, because for me they are visual punctuation, a sort of pacing of the prose. Another idea, which would have been cheaper, was to gather them all in a clump in the center. And then I would have lost that rhythm I talked about. A place for the eye to rest before the printed text started again. Again, it is a book about seeing.

**MM**: So, how do readers connect with you as an author, with your stories?

**JÁ**: I am aware that my readers are also younger readers, and [the use of alternative media] is a way that they connect, and it used to be that people would just connect with the text, with the book. I remember reading a book and then stroking the cover because I loved it so much, and then running to the library to get another book from that author in order to stay connected. But now you can go on the web, you can Google the author, visit her website, read her blogs, read interviews. You have to stay true to what works for you, but you also can’t be a dinosaur. For me it comes down to my desire to reach readers, because as we all know a book is only half finished when the author is done with it. We need readers to bring it alive in their imagination. But this hyper-connectivity is changing the nature of publishing and how books are marketed. I think we’re going to see the idea of book tours falling by the wayside. My experience tells me that readers will go to a bookstore the first time because they want to see the author in person. But again with so much connectivity on the web and with so many events at bookstores every night—especially in the big ones like Powell’s and Elliot Bay and Northshire—people are so over-saturated. I was telling my publisher this, and she
said, “When your next book comes out, two or three years from now, we are going to be doing a whole new way of marketing. We are trying to figure it out; we are trying to figure out how to get readers, how to get stories out. And it might not be a print version, or that might not be the primary version anymore.” So we are all trying to understand how to use this amazing resource. This great democracy of access—well, for many, not all folks. But by the same token, how are authors going to get paid, so they can earn a living? That is a huge question. I’m on the older end of the spectrum, but we are on the cusp, actually already past it, of a big sea change in how we are going to get the stories out. I go to conferences where people wring their hands and say, “oh this is the death of reading, the death of the book,” and I say “Maybe to the book as we know it, but the stories are not going to go away. We need narrative in order to understand what’s happening to us.”

**MM:** What would you say are good books to possibly read alongside or after *A Wedding in Haiti?*

**JÁ:** On the book tour they asked me to write something for publication online on the week.com. Every week a writer is asked to select six books, and only six books, with an explanation of why. It's really interesting. I chose books that really helped me to write. Here's my list: <http://theweek.com/article/index/227759/julia-alvarezs-6-favorite-books>. Not all the books were about Haiti or directly related to Haiti. But, they were books that were preoccupied with the same things I am preoccupied with. I definitely include all of Edwidge Danticat's books, particularly her latest book of essays, *Create Dangerously*. I love Tracy Kidder's book about Paul Farmer, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. Michelle Wucker's *Why the Cocks Fight* is an invaluable history of the relationship between the two countries. Also, Madison Smart Bell's trilogy, historical fiction about the Haitian revolution, provides not just to learn, but to live the history of the only successful slave revolt in history.

**MM:** Is Haiti still the sister you never got to know?

**JÁ:** Oh, definitely.

**MM:** Did you get to know “her” better through writing this book?

**JÁ:** Oh, yes. And I'm not saying that writing this book makes me an expert on Haiti, but Haiti is in my heart, Haiti is under my skin. I want to continue the connection. Why hadn't I gone before? There was, first, all the bureaucratic difficulties of crossing the border. Then, I was ashamed about the history of the massacre in 1937, when up to about 20,000 Haitians living on the Dominican side were slaughtered in the course of a week under orders of the dictator, a racial “cleansing” little known about, and a shameful incident never addressed or rightly redressed by the Dominican government. So I felt that I would be unwelcome. If I
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were a Haitian, I would feel a weariness of a Dominican coming in. And until Piti invited me, I had never gotten a personal invitation to come to Haiti. I'm glad I accepted.

And because of writing the book, I was able to connect with other diaspora Dominicans and supporters, like you Megan, in this movement we are calling “Border of Lights.” We've decided to gather together on that border between the two countries this coming October, which will be the seventy-fifth anniversary of the massacre, commemorate those who fell, and collaborate on several projects like planting trees, cleaning up the border parks, and finally celebrate the very real solidarity that has been there in the past and that we want to build on in the future. I should note without the technology to spread the word and allow us to communicate and build this dream together, this movement would not have been possible.

Note

1 Taped Interview. Nashville: May 19, 2012. While revisions were made to update some information and fill gaps not audible in the recording, the transcription represents the style and phraseology of Álvarez's original verbal responses. It also reflects Álvarez’s review of the spoken interview after the first transcription.