The pages of their notebooks are empty. They carry neither pencil nor pen. They stare out the window. They refuse and resist. "Books," I say to them. "Books," I say. I throw my weight against their locked doors. The door holds. I am smart. I am arrogant. I am lucky. I am trying to save our lives.

The Reader's Presence

1. What does literacy mean to Alexie? What are his associations with reading? with writing? How does he use his reading and his writing to establish his ties to the community? What aspects of his identity are bound up with reading and writing?

2. How did the young Alexie use popular culture to educate himself? What did comic books teach him? How does Alexie use the figure of Superman, and aspects of action-hero stories more generally, to give structure and coherence to his essay?

3. Alexie uses the metaphor of "breaking down the door" to describe the act of learning to read. What are the connotations of this metaphor? How does it compare with Frederick Douglass's account of his acquisition of literacy in "Learning to Read and Write" (see page 112) in which he says that he sometimes felt as though "learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing"? As he encountered arguments for and against slavery in the books he read, Douglass felt that reading deepened his already vivid experience of slavery: "It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy" (paragraph 6). Is literacy a means to freedom for Alexie as it was, ultimately, for Douglass? If so, freedom from what and/or freedom to do what?

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Julia Alvarez

My English

Julia Alvarez was born in New York City in 1950 but raised in the Dominican Republic. Because her father, a medical doctor, was active in the underground movement against dictator General Rafael Trujillo, her family was forced to flee the Dominican Republic when she was ten years old, and resettled permanently in New York. She attended Connecticut College, Middlebury College, and Syracuse University. Besides creative writing, she has had a long-standing involvement with education: Alvarez has taught in Kentucky, Delaware, North Carolina, Massachusetts, and Vermont. She is best known for her novels: How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents (1991), In the Time of Butterflies (1994), which was an American Library Association Notable Book and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, iYo! (1997), and In the Name of Salome (2000). She has also written many novels for children and adolescents. She is now a tenured professor at Middlebury College in Vermont.

Alvarez comments, "I came late to the [English] language but I came early into the writing profession. In high school, I fell in love with how words can make you feel complete in a way that I hadn't felt complete since leaving the island. Early on, I fell in love with books, which I didn't have at all growing up."

Mami and Papi used to speak it 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 attending the Carol Morgan School, and we became a bilingual family. Spanish had its many tongues as well. There was the castellano of Padre Joaquín 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, they spoke a liting, animated campuno, as swallowed, endings chopped off, funny turns of phrases. 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 Juncalito and Licey and Boca de Yuma and San
Juan de la Maguana. Those women yakked as they cooked, they storytold, they gossiped, they sang—boleros, merengues, canciones, 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 mother’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 glaring up, when she thought I was lying. Whenever she spoke that gibberish English, I translated the general content by watching the Spanish expressions on her face.

Soon, I began to learn more English, at the Carol Morgan School. 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’ deténio. 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, please pass la mantequilla.” 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. She always 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.

Mix-up, 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. Teacher, 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 that I often misjudged how much I could get away with. Whenever I made a mistake, Teacher would shake her head slowly, “In English, YU-LEE-AH, there’s no such word as *columpio.* Do you mean a *swing*?”

I would bow my head, 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 Teacher’s discerning grammar-and-vocabulary-patrol ears could tell and send them back.

Soon, I was talking up an English storm. “Did you eat 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 breakneck pace. “Huh?” I asked impolitely in English, putting him in his place. *Cat got your tongue? No big deal! So there! Take that! Holy Toledo! (Our teacher’s favorite “curse word.”) Go jump in the lake! Really dumb. Golly. Gosh.* Slang, clichés, sayings, hotshot language that our teacher called, ponderously, idiomatic expressions. Riddles, jokes, puns, conundrums. *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 worshiped 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 often spoke to us in English so that we could practice speaking it outside the classroom. He was a Cornell man, 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. “Be-
cause . . . ,” I answered him. 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 Tio Gus, the family intellectual, put a speck 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!” He enumerated geniuses who had perhaps used two grains, maybe three: Einstein, Michelangelo, da Vinci, Beethoven. 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, at home, Mami said that you had to take what her younger brother said “with a grain of salt.” I thought she was still referring to Tio 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 symbolize both the human brain and a condiment for human nonsense. And it could be itself, too: a grain of salt to flavor a bland plate of American food.

When we arrived in New York, I was shocked. A country where everyone spoke English! These people must be smarter, I thought. Maids, waiters, taxi drivers, doormen, bums on the street, 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 mother tongue was a mother tongue because you got it from your mother’s breast, along with proteins 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 at church 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, whom I imagined standing at the foot of an enormous tower that looked just like the skyscrapers around me. They had been punished for their pride by being made to speak different languages 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 in a lucky line of great English teachers who began to nurture in me a love of language, a love that had been there since my childhood of listening closely to words. Sister Marie Generosa 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 the wimple that framed her face.

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 Maria stood at the chalkboard. Her chalk was always snapping in two because she wrote with such 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 pointed with her chalk, her eyebrows lifted, her wimple poking up. Sometimes I could see wisps of gray hair that strayed from under her headdress. “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, bare fields. On toys children had left out in the yard, and on cars and on little birds and on people out late walking on the streets. Sister Marie filled the chalkboard with snowy print, on and on, handling and shaping and moving the language, scribbling all over the board until English, those verbal gadgets, those tricks and turns of phrases, 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 my new homeland. I was no longer a foreigner with no ground to stand on. I had landed in the English language.

The Reader’s Presence

1. At the beginning of the essay, Alvarez identifies English as “the sound of being left out” (paragraph 2). What is the sound of being left out? Think about conversations in which you have deliberately been left out. How did they sound? Compare your experience of the sound with Alvarez’s. As the story goes on, Alvarez becomes fluent enough in English to leave other people out. What strategies does she use to exclude others? In a similar vein, consider the instances when you have purposely left someone else out of a conversation (parents, friends, teachers, etc.). Did you use similar strategies or different ones? Which did you find most effective? Why?