



How Tía Lola Saved the Summer

Written by Julia Alvarez
Alfred A. Knopf, 2011, 160 pp
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Julia Alvarez's *How Tía Lola Saved the Summer* (2011) marks the third in the series of Tía Lola stories for children and has the title character continuing to bring sunshine and a Dominican cultural flair into the lives of her Vermont relatives, Linda and her two children, Miguel and Juanita. Linda is recently divorced and needs help with her children, so Tía Lola (in the previous books in the series) moves to Vermont to help raise the children. In this book of ten chapters, Lola has many more lives to brighten, as Linda's new boyfriend, Victor, brings his three daughters to Vermont to see if they might like it (and Linda's family) enough to be willing to move there if

love blooms and he wins the heart of Linda.

Linda and Lola welcome the houseguests with open arms, but the children have reservations about this summer's experiences. The week begins with Lola giving each family member a sword, telling them its magic will help them overcome any obstacle that blocks their way to happiness. In *Mary Poppins* fashion, Lola works her "magic," as chapter by chapter, each child and even some adults find that their lives are made better through the self-confidence they gain from talking with Tía Lola. The chapters are arranged beautifully, so that each separate chapter deals with a specific family member's issue or fear, which gets resolved by the end of the chapter. However, the chapters also build on each other, as the book has an over-arching frame: Will Victor and his daughters move to Vermont? The book, then, is a wonderful experience, as readers enjoy each chapter and learn a new story but also get to enjoy the deeper pleasures of reading all ten stories, so that the final page feels like the ending of a feel-good novel.

Alvarez carefully weaves a variety of themes throughout the stories, many of which will appeal to adult readers, although the reading level is most suited for intermediate readers. Children will certainly understand that Tía Lola functions a little like Oz in *The Wizard of Oz*—her "magic" really manifests itself in the ways she helps the characters find their true selves. The theme of each chapter is self-discovery and the realization that life is what you make it. The theme of the work as a whole deals with the more grown-up issue of combined families dealing with the aftermath of divorce, relocation, and even death. These are heavy themes for a children's book, but today's children deal with these, or similar problems, almost every day, and the book doesn't shy away from showing characters struggling with how to relate to a potential new step-parent or other tricky social issues, like breaking away from an over-protective parent.

Another interesting element is the cultural backgrounds of the characters. Tía Lola, Linda, Miguel and Juanita have roots that go back to the Dominican Republic, and Tía Lola frequently uses phrases in Spanish and sometimes struggles to find the correct English word to express her thought. But beyond the inclusion of Spanish words like “Abuelo” and “especial” the book is infused with a sense of family and extended family. For example, in one chapter of the book, the house is filled with guests from at least three different family groups. Twelve people share living space, not counting the dog, conveying an appreciation of a cultural background that welcomes large gatherings rather than finding them an invasion of personal space.

Alvarez is in a good position to write about cross-cultural concerns. Born in New York, but raised in the Dominican Republic for ten years before returning to the United States, she has lived the life of her characters Tía Lola and Linda. She knows what it is like to fit into a culture when one has a heart in two countries. Her fiction for adults, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), shows just how deeply she understands the world of a first generation immigrant, trying both to hang on to the culture one has left behind while also trying to acculturate into the ways of the new homeland. In *How Tía Lola Saved the Summer*, these concerns are barely visible but still add an element of authenticity to the work.

A natural pairing of this book would be with the other Tia Lola stories by Alvarez: *How Tia Lola Came to Visit* (2002), *How Tia Lola Learned to Teach* (2011), *How Tia Lola Ended Up Starting Over* (2012) as well as other stories that reflect the Dominican Republic life, such as *The Color of My Words* (Lyn Joseph, 2001) and *Before We Were Free* (Julia Alvarez, 2004). Other book pairings might be titles that include different Latino cultures such as *Return to Sender* (Julia Alvarez, 2009), *My Name is Maria Isabel* (Alma Flor Ada, 1995), *Salsa Stories* (Lulu Delacre, 2000) or *The House on Mango Street* (Sandra Cisneros, 1991).

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