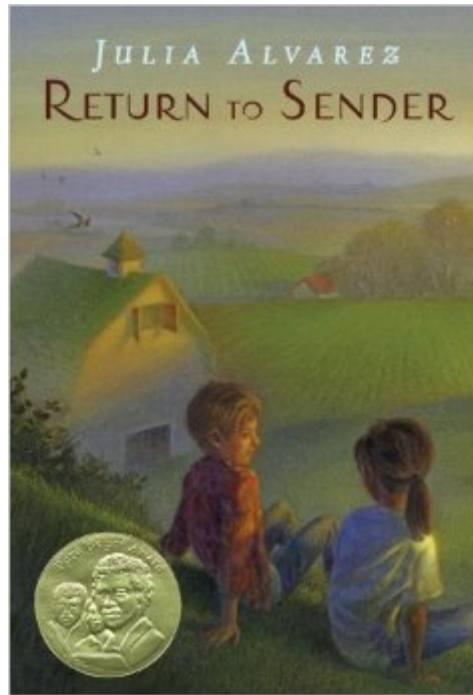


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Return To Sender



Synopsis

An award-winning, moving, and timely story about the families of undocumented workers by renowned author Julia Alvarez. 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? In a novel full of hope, but with no easy answers, Julia Alvarez weaves a beautiful and timely story that will stay with readers long after they finish it. Winner of the Pura Belpré Award Winner of the Américas Award An NCSS-CBC Notable Children's Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies A must-read. "Kirkus Reviews Communicates in compassionate and expressive prose the more difficult points of perhaps the most pressing social issue of our day." "San Antonio Express-News This timely novel, torn right from the newspaper headlines, conveys a positive message of cooperation and understanding." "School Library Journal The plot is purposive, with messages about the historical connections between migrant workers today and the Indians' displacement, the Underground Railroad, and earlier immigrants seeking refuge. . . . The questions raised about the meaning of patriotism will spark debate." "Booklist A tender, well-constructed book." "Publishers Weekly

Book Information

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Geography & Cultures > Multicultural Stories > Hispanic & Latino #93 inÂ Books > Children's Books > Growing Up & Facts of Life > Fiction

Age Range: 8 - 12 years

Grade Level: 3 - 7

Customer Reviews

To the parents of eleven-year-old Tyler Paquette, the family of Mexican workers who have come to live in the trailer on their Vermont dairy farm are angels. Tyler had actually seen the tractor roll over, trapping his father underneath. He's had horrible nightmares about it ever since. If Tyler had not been there to call 9-1-1, his father wouldn't be alive today. Nevertheless, his father may never recover the full use of his arm and leg and -- given that Tyler's big brother is heading off to college at the end of the summer and his teenage sister is about as likely to help with the cows as my teenage daughter is to help me tend to my dairy goats (NOT!) -- it had been looking like Tyler might never have the opportunity to grow up to become a fifth-generation Vermont family farmer."I remember the fear of serpents, the sharp rocks, the lights of la migra. And always, the terrible thirst...I am not sure even this paper can hold such terrifying memories."Mari is Tyler's age. She is an illegal alien. She has arrived on a bus from North Carolina with her illegal alien father, her two illegal alien uncles, and her two little sisters who were born in North Carolina. Last winter Mari's mom suddenly returned to their homeland in southern Mexico because her mother -- Mari's Abulita -- was dying. Now the family has lost contact with Mama who is hopefully still alive and presumably still trying to sneak across the border and return to North Carolina. Fearing potential repercussions, Mari's father has persuaded her not to try to actually mail any of the long letters that she has been writing to Mama. But how, then, might the family ever become reunited?"That is why I am writing, Mama. Not only to tell you where we are moving to, but also because I have nowhere else to put the things that are in my heart. As you always used to tell Papa when he found you writing letters, or just writing in a notebook, 'El papel lo aguanta todo.' Paper can hold anything. Sorrows that might otherwise break your heart. Joys with wings that lift you above the sad things in your life."Told from the perspectives of Tyler and Mari -- two sixth graders living on a dairy farm in small town Vermont in 2005 -- RETURN TO SENDER is a story of families and hope and opportunities offered by the country I love and am sometimes so proud of -- and opportunities withheld by the country I often haven't understood and have sometimes been embarrassed by. Why is it that it is a crime for one of these sixth graders to have been born in Mexico? How will it affect things for Tyler to be classmates with Mari, to be in the position of knowing Mari is an illegal alien and -- at the same time -- to

recognize that his future as a farmer is so dependent on keeping knowledge of that legal status well hidden? When is it okay -- even admirable -- to participate in breaking laws and when have American heroes participated in doing so? On the lighter side, RETURN TO SENDER frequently plays with language -- illustrating repeatedly how literal translations of English to Spanish or Spanish to English can lead to amusing misunderstandings. Just in the past couple of weeks, I have perceived a heightening of fear-based anger related to the economic woes facing so many of us. During an era of panic and fear, a book that so vividly and lovingly illustrates how diverse families are far more similar than they are different is particularly welcome and essential.

Julia Alvarez knows how to characterize the blur in the line between right and wrong. She knows how to make it clear that reality and morality are continuums and not dichotomies of this or that, up or down, or yes or no. There are no absolutes. (Now, there's an oxymoron.) We have a long way to go. Alvarez begins with a young man, her protagonist, Tyler, the younger eleven-year-old son in a family who has survived and thrived by running a dairy farm in Vermont. The family's farming heritage is at risk. Tyler's older brother is away at college, mostly unavailable to help out on the farm without jeopardizing his education and eventual career, and Tyler's father has been injured and disabled, perhaps permanently, in a farming accident. Tyler's father can't do the work he normally did. It is unclear when and if he ever will be able to do the work again. Extended family also can't adequately help out. So paying the bills and keeping the farm is at risk. The family needs help or to change their dynamics: selling the farm, moving from their land, doing something entirely different than farming. Tyler's parents eventually hire undocumented immigrants --- a couple of men --- to assist with the dairy work. One of the immigrant men is married and has three daughters. The oldest, Mari, slowly becomes Tyler's friend and ally, an unfolding as miraculous as springtime. Mari's mother has disappeared in the murky criminal element that arose to fulfill the void created by ambiguities in United States immigrant policies, underfunded policies that for years tacitly approved of undocumented immigrants coming to the United States to work in jobs that citizens in better times didn't want to do. The analysis of various notions is tenderly at play in Alvarez's book: What is a family? What does it mean to be honest? What good is it to have a law without compassion, or without implementing it and adequately funding its substantial enforcement? What does it mean to be a good neighbor and a friend? What sacrifices are appropriate and necessary of good neighbors and friends? And does all of that that apply only to individuals and not to communities and to nations? What is charity? Is it a weakness or strength? What about religion and the mystical, and gazing into the heavens? Hope?"... life is about change, change, and more change. 'When you're

born as a child, you die as a baby. Just like when you're born as a teenager, you die as a child.'...
'But there are good sides even to bad or sad things happening,' my mom reminds me...."This is a coming of age adventure where a boy and a girl have more love and compassion than the men and the women do, where a couple of families have greater diplomacy toward each other than the greatest nations on earth do for each other. So it would be good to take their advice and look into the heavens and contemplate the beauty of the night before flying apart. Not just one star but five.

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