



The Woman I Kept to Myself

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The works of this award-winning poet and novelist are rich with the language and influences of two cultures: those of the Dominican Republic of her childhood and the America of her youth and adulthood. They have shaped her writing just as they have shaped her life. In these seventy-five autobiographical poems, Alvarez's clear voice sings out in every line. Here, in the middle of her life, she looks back as a way of understanding and celebrating the woman she has become.

The Woman I Kept to Myself Details

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Author : Julia Alvarez

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ThePhoenix93 says

This was a very pleasant and wholesome read. I really enjoyed her writing, even in poems I didn't relate to. This felt like an open invitation into someone's house, life, head and most importantly heart, and I felt very welcomed all the way through reading it.

Blue says

This collection of poetry is a great addition to the American immigrant experience shelf, in particular the Spanish-speaking, Latin American immigrant experience shelf, perhaps right next to Ana Menendez's "In Cuba I was a German Shepherd." It is a collection of carefully distilled observations and autobiographical confessions of growing up and being Dominican-American.

But do not be fooled, that's just a bit of what's in here. There is also a lot about being a writer, choosing words, working words, polishing and obsessing about words. Then what becomes interesting, at least to me, is that this particular collection contains poems that could have been written in paragraph format (some people refer to this as prose poetry, though there are different kinds, and this kind is certainly much more prose than other prose poetry I have read) and you'd have a collection of half-page long diary entries or super short (flash) fiction. And I have not read all of Alvarez' poetry to know if she writes only like this or not, but this kind of prose poetry does not give me the impression that every word was obsessed over and every line was revised endlessly to capture that one particular way of saying something. So that can be amazing craft, or none at all, and in the end it does not matter. But it is certainly not the kind of poetry that you would have to read and re-read in amazement of how those words fit together to give you not a narrative but a feeling. This collection is much more about the narrative, some predictable, but very many surprisingly fresh. It is more about a few well-put words lingering as an afterthought once you are done with a poem. Apart from the immigrant experience and the writer's woes and joys, Alvarez explores family relations, marriage, nature, career woes (as can be applied to any career, not just writing,) and self-analysis.

I would recommend this collection to those who have trouble with poetry, those who think poetry does not make sense, those who claim "poetry is too hard." I would also recommend it to those who find solace in literature and poetry.

Alisa Wilhelm says

These poems are not dense or hard to understand. They are very easy to read before bed, like Billy Collins (she even refers to him in one poem)

All the poems are 3 stanzas of 10 lines with 10 syllables per line (I don't know the special term for this structure). Sometimes there are rhymes or clever turns of phrase within lines ("saucy salsa songs"), but it's not often. Alvarez is more concerned with the structure.

There are some poems about trees (meh), growing up as an immigrant in NYC (interesting! With some

Spanish words sometimes!), a few poems about being an adult woman (meh), and her love of words and poetry (her love is honestly contagious).

My favorite poems in this collection are:

- MY BOTTOM LINE
- TONE
- "POETRY MAKES NOTHING HAPPEN"?

Hold on tight! could be the first commandment / for this life, and the second, Let it go! / Only the empty hand is free to hold.

Judy says

While reading free verse poetry
I often yawn and ho hum,
push it aside, missing the rhyme
and syncopation of traditional forms.
But as is often the case,
I find myself retracting,
rethinking what I *knew* so well!
I find I have the woman I kept to myself
who shyly relishes the glimpses
of Alvarez's life she freely shares.

Ah, this conversion from rhyme to free verse
isn't complete. Its of a selective sort.
I perceive my enjoyment of the newer style
is prejudiced to a few. Auden, Frost,
Alvarez, the Queen of All New Prose.
Her work swallows me in its beauty
of written word, the little snap shots
of her life that I relate to,
laugh about or mourn.
I see her life through her eyes.

When I put down this book,
sad at its end, happy with
the idea that a volume of poetry
could effect me so that
I walk side-by-side
through another's existence
I feel I gain an ally, friend.
The idea that our lives as women
converge more than we think.

There is hope for them to be better.

metaphor says

[...] sadness is too mild a word for the grief
I went through, and grief too noble-sounding
for the dull hopelessness I'll call despair
for lack of a better word.

*

We have to live our natures out, the seed
we call our soul unfolds over the course
of a lifetime and there's no going back
on who we are—that much I've learned from trees.

*

I wanted the world and words to match again

*

I spent my lunch hour in the library,
feeding the poet starving inside me.

*

It's snowing hard
for days now in the thicket of my heart

*

Words I read years ago keep coming back
to calm me at the most opportune times.

*

I love
the way words say what can't be said in words.

Taylor says

The Woman I Kept to Myself

4 stars

This poetry collection was a delight to read. Written as a catalog of her personal experiences, each piece fits and flows individually as well as in relation to each other. Alvarez has a great ability in creating vivid images with sparse prose. All of her language is direct and conversational, which I thought grounded even her most whimsical pieces. I would recommend this collection to someone who is hesitant about reading poetry, as well as anyone who has enjoyed Alvarez's novels.

Steph says

Why do I feel like such a back stabbing Chicana for not gushing over this memoir? I've sent a goal for myself during the 2017-2018 year of reading all works by, about, and for Chicanxs, Latinxs, Hispanics. I call it my own mini-Professional Development. And I want so desperately to love this collection of poetry. But

after her "tree" collection, the memoir goes down hill into catalog of clichéd lines.

I think I value the diligence she takes to compose each line, but then at the exact same time that I write this, I want to know how someone who takes such care with each line writes such clichéd expressions.

I don't know what to say other than it was ok.

Chanté says

This book of poetry reads more like a novel. Alvarez is in her element writing poetry.

Sayantani Dasgupta says

I don't often read poetry but when I do, it's only by the very best. Alvarez is one of those writers who can write beautifully (and win huge awards) in every genre. This particular collection contains 75 autobiographical poems and subjects include her Dominican-American identity, family, teaching, books, environment among others. Loved this book!

Brina says

Julia Alvarez has long been one of my favorite authors. Her autobiographical fiction has been a solid mixture of historical events and humor. Before Alvarez established herself as a novelist, she taught creative writing at various universities while penning poetry to keep her name current. While the poems in *The Woman I Kept to Myself* reappear in Alvarez' novels, the poetry came first and let readers into a window of her soul.

Alvarez moved from the Dominican Republic to New York with her family in the early 1960s, fleeing the Bautista regime. A number of the poems in this volume focus on her growing up as an outsider at a time when she was one of few children of color in her neighborhood. She was called a "spic," her parents pined for a backyard, the four girls were unaware of what snow was, and despite the father's success as a doctor, they longed to return to the island. Alvarez imagery is thorough and heartfelt. As a reader I share her pain growing up. These emotions change as she enters adolescence and emerges as a writer.

As we later discover in her second novel *Yo!*, Alvarez and her sisters attend Abbot Boarding School for high school. Their mother hopes that this all girl yankee institution will refine them into all-American young ladies. Julia found an ally in her ninth grade English instructor Ruth Stevenson, who was to be a lifelong friend. Yet, she was hardly molded into a proper young lady. Her time at Abbot made Alvarez aware of herself as a Hispanic woman. Despite all of the hair straightening, her hair would always be kinky. On school vacations, she and her sisters desired to visit their family on the island, as a safety zone. These experiences reveal themselves in both poetry and novels.

Alvarez came of age during the feminist movement, and her experiences and politics are reflected in her later poems. She writes of a visit to her female doctor as well as her failed marriage and eventually finding love again at age forty. Her poetry reflects on her place as a Hispanic woman writer when as a group they were just making inroads in the writing world. While I am used to the style from her novels, I found the poems to

be Alvarez' usual blend of wit and humor. Her visit to the doctor I found to be uniquely poignant.

Today Julia Alvarez is an accomplished writer as well as instructor at Middlebury College. Her poems in *The Woman I Kept to Myself* reflect on her early experiences in both life and as a writer. I enjoyed seeing her familiar work in another writing form, and found her to be a gifted writer across many platforms. Even though the topics were repetitive to me, I enjoyed the subject matter because it felt like visiting with an old friend. *The Woman I Kept to Myself* was a quick yet poignant read, rating 4 solid stars.

Coral says

4 stars: I am usually not a fan of poetry, but I found myself actually wanting to keep turning the pages. Alvarez's unique style drew me in and her usage of subtle rhyming and stresses creates an interesting phonetic texture when read aloud. I believe these poems can appeal to everyone in different ways and would recommend this collection to anyone interested in reading something thoughtful yet concise.

Logan says

3.5 stars

If you're into free-verse poetry (and I do mean in bulk), I'd definitely recommend this rather long collection. These honestly read more like narratives or short stories than poetry in the traditional sense, especially since the structure of each poem—three stanzas, a plot line, some biblical undertones—stays the same for the entire book. I was originally going to give this a solid four stars, but the writing style just gets a bit bland after a while (*a while* being more than 150 pages!).

Overall, these poems function as a memoir of sorts, cataloging her experience in moving to the United States from her native Dominican Republic and general reflections on the writing process. It's certainly not bad by any means, and lovers of free verse ought to give this one a try.

Tristan says

Actual Rating 4.5 (rounded up, since I couldn't decide which way to go)

Alvarez' poetry is compelling and powerful. She opens with a sequence entitled "Seven Trees", seven poems in the same thirty-line arrangement as the rest of the book that capture some of the most important and affecting moments of her life, including her move to the United States by describing trees that were present or evoked in the moment. The final section, "Keeping Watch" is a series of meditations on awareness in various guises.

The center section has poems about all sorts of things, from her experience as an immigrant, to her relationship with the English language as both a learner and a writer, to her interactions with her family. Some of the best poems are "Spic", "All-American Girl", "Love Portions" and the poems about poetry, art, and language, especially "Why I Teach" and "Leaving English".

The (mostly) free verse is musical and elegant. A sample from "Poetry Makes Nothing Happen"?:

while overcome by grief one lonesome night
when the house still held her husband's pills, May Quinn
took down a book by Yeats and fell asleep
reading "When You Are Old," not the poet's best,
but still, poetry made nothing happen,
which was good, given what May had in mind."

"Signs" also captures Alvarez's voice perfectly:

My friend said what was hardest were the signs
her mother left behind: a favorite dress
misbuttoned on a hanger

The occasional use of rhyme is very effective and each poem seems to be at once a discrete entity and part of a cohesive whole. Thematically, this collection (like most) explores wide areas, touching on a whole host of ideas, but mostly on the power of language, the importance of identity, the effects of change, and assorted other pieces, good and bad, of the human condition. A well-written and highly enjoyable collection of poetry that manages to be both simple and thought-provoking.

Angie Fehl says

It's hard for me to know where to start when reviewing a collection of poetry, but I guess I start with saying that I found these poems to be absolutely gorgeous, even when talking about not-so-pretty topics! As one might guess from the title, these poems cover the span of Alvarez's life up to the time of this collection being written. She speaks of the struggles of trying to find her space in the world as a Dominican child being transplanted to New York City. The poems speaking on this also give a nod of pride and respect to her parents who seemed to remain solid and vigilant, their everyday actions promoting perseverance through adversity, even as young Julia would watch them falter and rebuild time and time again.

She also gets real about her adult years, with poems that only give a whispering reference to a failed marriage and what that taught her. Briefly she writes of the doubts she had about herself during that time, questioning whether or not she understood love. Choosing not to linger with the negative moments, she instead focuses on finding love again later in life, writing poems of gratitude for all that life has taught her -- about herself, her family, her roots, even her connections with the natural world.

Not every poem was an absolute hit for me -- I didn't entirely connect with "Anger & Art", for instance -- but that didn't diminish my enjoyment of the collection one bit. This is one I will definitely be referring back to in years to come, and I am curious to see, as I read some of Alvarez's novels, where connections can be made between her writings within the two genres.

Stacy says

Poetry is not my genre, but I enjoyed this. I learned a lot about the author from her poems.

For example, she got in trouble in school a lot, when she went to her fourth grade class in bright red cowboy

boots with tassels and asked to be excused from her homework. Later, when her and her siblings were labeled "spics" on the playground, her parents tried to make them feel better by saying that they were being asked to "speak up". Her mother used to threaten her and her sisters that they were going to send her to Bellevue through their misbehavior.

"I wanted stockings, makeup, store-bought clothes; I wanted to look like an American girl; to speak my English so you couldn't tell I'd come from somewhere else."

"Yet as I write in English I murmur the words in Spanish to be sure I'm writing down the truth of what I feel."

"...the next day for English class I was assigned to Miss Ruth Stevenson who closed the classroom door and said, 'Ladies, let's have ourselves a hell of a good time!'

And we did, reading Austen, Dickinson, Eliott, Woolf, until we understood we'd come to train - not tame - the wild girls into the women who would run the world."
