



Yo! by Julia Alvarez

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(Back of the Book):

1. The one-word title, ¡Yo!, has three definitions: the first-person singular pronoun, I, in Spanish; an exclamation used as a greeting, to express excitement, or to attract attention; and a nickname, short for Yolanda, the character on whom all of the other characters' stories are focused. It seems a particularly intriguing title, especially since Yolanda herself never has the opportunity to use the personal pronoun. Discuss the ironic nature of the title. Why doesn't Yo ever have a chance to speak for herself?
2. From time to time, Yolanda García makes a big deal about being Latina. How important do you think her ethnicity is to her sense of herself as a person and a writer? Do you think she uses this ethnicity to protect herself from accountability in either culture? Does she use her calling as a writer in the same way?
3. What is the significance of each of the literary terms in the titles of the sixteen narratives? Why do you think the author chose to include them?
4. Expatriated from the Dominican Republic at the age of ten, Yolanda García, daughter of upper-class exiles, finds herself driven to improve the circumstances of the servants and campesinos back on the island. She goes to extremes, trying to share her U.S. education and ideals with those who are hired as servants by her extended family. How does this impulse fit with her sisters' notions of her personality? With the way her stepdaughter sees her? And the way her stalker imagines her? Which of these visions of Yolanda do you think she would most resent? Most appreciate?
5. Yo claims that men don't understand her bicultural self, that they prevent her from being a writer. Do you agree with her analysis? Half of the stories in this book are from the points of view of men. How successful is Alvarez in presenting the points of view of male characters?

6. Why do you think Yolanda, unlike her sisters, has never had children?
7. The various images of womanhood Yolanda García embodies in the minds of her various biographers range from aggressive competitor to sexy glamour puss to frightened prey. Having read all sixteen versions of Yo, how would you characterize her? Which of the storytellers do you believe sees her most clearly as she really is? What do you think Julia Alvarez believes is truest of Yolanda García?
8. Her various biographers accuse Yo of many transgressions in her pursuit of a writing career, from her sisters who claim that she has exposed their personal lives to the public eye to her former student who believes she has plagiarized his work. What do these accusations say about where a writer's real life stops, and her fiction begins? Is truth what really happened? Or is it something else altogether? What's the use of fiction, anyway?
9. Julia Alvarez has defined truth as "all the points around the circle" and plot as "a quilting," which is, she says, "closer to the way I think women experience plot, as opposed to a hero directed on his singular adventure . . . against all odds, doing what he needs to do." How does the form of this character novel illustrate her image of plot direction as relational as opposed to directional?
10. How do the various portraits of Yolanda García and their different layers of meaning add to one another? How do they build to a crescendo in her father's narrative?

Other Discussion Questions:

11. Throughout the story, it seems that Yolanda and many of the other characters suffer from imposter syndrome in many of the chapters. In what ways do these relationships influence Yolanda's writing? How does that contribute to the revelation in the "The Student" that she plagiarizes?
 - a. (i.e. – The Suitor and lying to her family)
12. Let's discuss lying to family in order to appear as though we are who they want us to be. What happens when we realize they'll get over it? Do you think Yolanda ever comes to this conclusion?
13. In what ways are the other characters foils for Yolanda? How does Dominican heritage play a role in telling stories not your own?

14. In “The Teacher,” Alvarez juxtaposes the familiarity and safeness of English Classics with the liveliness, unpredictability and contemporariness of Yolanda Garcia’s writing. What is the effect of this juxtaposition?
15. Throughout the novel, Yolanda is described many times as being a skinny and **malnourished** woman, though lively in spirit. Why do you think Alvarez makes it a point to distinguish between body image and character?
16. Yo’s issues with commitment and relationships (especially with men) stem from a fear that she will lose her voice. How is that connected to the revelation made by her father at the end of the novel?
17. What was the effect of presenting common Dominican phrases in English? (i.e. – “You’re the one who knows”)?