



A Cafecito Story / El cuento del cafecito

By Julia Alvarez, Bill Eichner, Belkis Ramirez

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A Cafecito Story is a story of love, coffee, birds and hope. It is a beautifully written eco-fable by best-selling author Julia Alvarez. Based on her and her husband's experiences trying to reclaim a small coffee farm in her native Dominican Republic, *A Cafecito Story* shows how the return to the traditional methods of shade-grown coffee can rehabilitate and rejuvenate the landscape and human culture, while at the same time preserving vital winter habitat for threatened songbirds.

Not a political or environmental polemic, *A Cafecito Story* is instead a poetic, modern fable about human beings at their best. The challenge of producing coffee is a remarkable test of our ability to live more sustainably, caring for the land, growers, and consumers in an enlightened and just way. Written with Julia Alvarez's deft touch, this is a story that stimulates while it comforts, waking the mind and warming the soul like the first cup of morning coffee. Indeed, this story is best read with a strong cup of organic, shade-grown, fresh-brewed coffee.

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A Cafecito Story / El cuento del cafecito By Julia Alvarez, Bill Eichner, Belkis Ramirez Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review

Review: "A Better Cup of Coffee" *HippoPress Manchester-*

When Joe stops at the roadside barra outside his Dominican vacation resort, he finds the local coffee comes in a single, perfect denomination, "a dollhouse-sized cup filled with delicious, dark brew that leaves stains on the cup." He takes a sip and tastes a coffee that will change his life forever.

Joe is the main character in the adult fable/parable *A Cafecito Story* by award-winning Vermont novelist Julia Alvarez (*How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1990), *In the Time of Butterflies* (1993), and *In the Name of Salom*© (2000)). Illustrated with wonderful, imaginative woodcuts by celebrated Dominican artist Belkis Ramirez, the book comes in three parts: The "Cafecito Story" of the books title; an afterward by Bill Eichner, Alvarez's spouse and co-owner of their organic coffee farm; and a surprisingly rich and sensible resource section.

"The Cafecito Story" unfolds through the eyes of Joe, a Nebraska native with farming in his blood. Joel feels increasingly displaced from the natural world, so he takes a getaway vacation to the Dominican Republic.

What's so special about the cafecito he finds there? The beans were grown in the traditional way, on a shaded farm in the Dominican's mountainous interior. When Joe visits a coffee farm in the hills, the farmer Miguel tells him that the old ways are fast disappearing as farmers rent their plots to "La compania" to grow coffee quickly in full sun, for better short-term yields. The result is the destruction of a sustainable way of life through deforested mountains, depleted soils, and pesticides and chemical fertilizers that wash into the rivers. And for the coffee drinker half a world away, notes Miguel, "The sprayed coffee tastes just as good if you are tasting only with your mouth. But it fills you with the poison swimming around in that dark cup of disappointment."

I'm drinking a cup of certified organic coffee as I write this. How could I drink anything else? This book is meant to be more than light summer reading. It's meant to change your thinking, and it's likely that it will. Eichner and Alvarez's real-life story picks up where the fable leaves off. Eichner writes in the afterward about Alta Gracia, their organic coffee farm established with them campesino neighbors in the Dominican Republic. Where the fiction is simple and prose sometimes choppy, the afterward is much more lyrical. It clearly conveys the rewards of helping to renew a landscape scorched by agribusiness, the joys of seeing the

songbirds return and the literacy rate rise, and the fulfillment in transforming the dream of sustainability into a reality.

Like a young tree, the parable and the real-life story intertwine and take root in the reader. In part three, an extensive and imaginative list of resources will help coffee drinkers participate in fair trade, a set of marketplace practices that create a better future for half a million family coffee farmers around the world.

In an age when we often want to make a difference but are uncertain of where to begin, drinking a better cup of coffee doesn't seem like much to ask. After all, writers Eichner, "Anyone can begin by planting a tree, or a hundred trees.... The future does depend on each cup, on each small choice we make."

Eichner and Alvarez manage to tell a complex story with global consequences without being preachy of heavy-handed. They intend to inspire, and they do.

(Karen Marzloff)

Language Notes

Text: English, Spanish (translation)

Original Language: English

About the Author

Julia Alvarez has bridged the Americas many times. Born in New York and raised in the Dominican Republic, she is a poet, fiction writer, and essayist, author of world-renowned books in each of the genres, including *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, and *Something to Declare*. She is the recipient of a 2013 National Medal of Arts. She lives on a farmstead outside Middlebury, Vermont, with her husband Bill Eichner. Visit Julia's Web site www.alvarezjulia.com to find out more about her writing.

Julia and Bill own an organic coffee farm called Alta Gracia in her native country of the Dominican Republic. Their specialty coffee is grown high in the mountains on what was once depleted pastureland. Not only do they grow coffee at Alta Gracia, but they also work to bring social, environmental, spiritual, and political change for the families who work on their farm. They use the traditional methods of shade-grown coffee farming in order to protect the environment, they pay their farmers a fair and living wage, and they have a school on their farm where children and adults learn to read and write. For more information about Alta Gracia, visit www.cafealtagracia.com.

Belkis Ramrez, who created the woodcuts for *A Cafecito Story*, is one of the most celebrated artists in the Dominican Republic.

Daisy Cocco de Filippis, who translated *A Cafecito Story* into Spanish, is originally from the Dominican Republic. She has taught Hispanic literature and culture at York College of The City University of New York since 1978, where she directs the Department on Foreign Languages, ESL and Humanities.

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