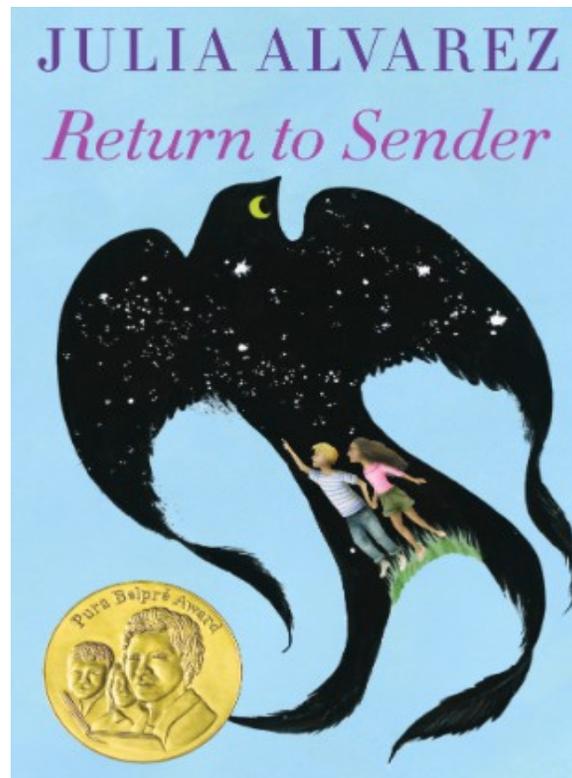


Literature in Context:
A Community-Based Education Guide
for
Return to Sender



by Robin Huntley
© Dirigo Learning 2018



Summary

Tyler has grown up in rural Vermont on his family's dairy farm – like many New England dairy farms, the Paquette family has been farming their land for generations. The farm struggles with the same challenges that every small New England dairy encounters, but the real challenge comes when Tyler's father is seriously injured in a tractor accident and is unable to work. Without the help of his late grandfather to run the farm, Tyler's family find themselves in a difficult position: hire migrant workers to keep the farm running, or lose the farm – and their family history with it.

The Paquettes find three men to come work and live on the farm, hoping that paying for labor will be worth it if it means they'll get to keep the farm. It comes as a surprise when the three men – all brothers – bring three young girls with them, too. Readers learn early on that the family are undocumented immigrants from Mexico, and that the girls (Mari, Luby, and Ofie) have come to the farm because their mother is missing. Having travelled back to her hometown in Mexico and not returned, the girls have been forced to move on without knowledge of their mother's whereabouts.

Throughout the story, readers are challenged to think critically about immigration policy, human rights, empathy, and ethics as the story evolves. The community in which the Paquettes live does not welcome the new workers, and Tyler is singled out at school for his family's decision to hire Mexicans. Mari, the oldest of the girls, learns more and more about the fate that her mother may have met at the hands of the “coyotes,” the human smugglers trusted with returning her to the United States to rejoin her family. Both families are challenged when ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) find their way to the farm.

Julia Alvarez's *Return to Sender* was published in 2009, but highlights themes that remain incredibly relevant today. The story calls upon readers to have empathy for all characters, and shows readers how to see undocumented immigrants as humans – just as human as they themselves are. Additionally, the story sheds light on the complex relationship that our country has with immigration. Despite national policy that dictates the undocumented immigrants in the story be arrested, detained, and sent back to Mexico, the role that they and many others like them play within the agricultural industry is essential. Farms of all sizes across the country rely on labor from migrant workers, including some who are undocumented immigrants. Without these workers, many farms – just like the Paquettes' – would not stay afloat. These ethical dilemmas, found at the heart of the story, guide readers to develop their own way of understanding this complex and important topic.

Critical Thinking Questions

Given that *Return to Sender* addresses some very dense and complex themes, it's important to provide readers with opportunities to discuss not only the ways in which these themes impact the story, but their real-life application as well. Included below are questions that can be used to support readers in this endeavor. Rather than centering around events and specific details, these questions challenge readers to develop their own thoughts and opinions using the text as a catalyst for thought.

Questions for Discussing "Return to Sender"

- The Paquettes' farm is their family legacy – they have run it for generations. What do you think it feels like for them to have to hire outside help for the first time?
- Mari, Luby, Ofie, and their father have to leave North Carolina, even though their mother hasn't returned. What do you think that experience must feel like? What kind of impact do you think it would leave on you if it happened to your own family?
- Mari's father explains that part of the reason they're going to Vermont is because of inconsistent work where they live in the south, but Mari also mentions the fear that her father feels while waiting on street corners to find work. What is he afraid of? Do you think it's a fear that humans should be made to experience? Explain.
- Do you think that the Paquettes know that the workers they've hired are undocumented immigrants initially? Explain.
- There could have been legal consequences for the Paquettes for not reporting the undocumented immigrants working on their farm. Why do you think the Paquettes chose not to report the workers ?
- Tyler is made fun of at school for his family's use of Mexican workers, especially once word gets out that the family are undocumented immigrants. Why do you think people in the community feel the workers inherently wrong or bad? What does Tyler think? What do *you* think?
- Mari's family came to the United States for a very good reason, but it seems like the Paquettes' community think they're there for malicious or sinister purposes. Why do you think they see things this way? Why do you think they're unaware of the real reasons why undocumented immigrants come to the United States? How do you think they would feel if they knew the whole story?
- Mari's mother's experience is unfortunately not unusual. What kind of impact do you think that kind of experience leaves on a person? What kind of impact might it have on the rest of the family?
- Being an undocumented immigrant is not a crime in the United States. Why do you think the ICE agents in the story act like it is? Why do you think undocumented immigrants are treated like they've committed a crime? Do you think it *should* be considered a crime to come to the United States without being documented?

Community-Based Learning Map

The themes found within *Return to Sender* easily connect to a host of community-based learning resources in western Massachusetts. Web-based resources and community organizations have been sorted based on their purpose. Some of the resources here require adult support and/or supervision for young readers to access.

Web-Based Resources

Literature Guide for “Shy Mama's Halloween”

<https://hilltownfamilies.wordpress.com/2017/10/09/hf-666/>

Spotlighting a family of European immigrants, *Shy Mama's Halloween* gives readers a glimpse into the slow and challenging process of understanding and adjusting to a new and unfamiliar culture. Accessible to readers young and old alike, this picture book puts an important theme into a friendly and matter-of-fact context.

Poor Huddled Masses Not Welcome: A Very Brief History of US Immigration Policy

<https://pvworkerscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/A-Very-Brief-History-of-Immigration-May-2017.pdf>

Written and distributed by the Pioneer Valley Workers Center, this pamphlet details US immigration policy from the founding fathers until today. This resource is especially useful for considering the contrast between what our country advertises (“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...”) and what it practices.

Berkshire Immigrant Stories

<https://yourstory.tenement.org/groups/berkshire-immigrant-stories/explore>

A project of Berkshire Community College (which is also part of the NYC Tenement Museum's “Your Story, Our Story” project featuring objects and stories from immigrants around the US), Berkshire Immigrant Stories is a collection of immigration stories told to match important objects from each person's life. Not all of the stories come from Berkshire residents, but all share similar themes: adjusting to a new life, leaving home, etc.

Nearby Resource (Field Trip!)

WE ARE. A Nation of Immigrants

<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/connecticut/articles/2018-06-10/photo-exhibit-on-new-haven-green-celebrates-immigrants>

WE ARE is a photography exhibit displayed outdoors on the green and its surrounding buildings in the heart of New Haven, CT. The exhibit features the work of Joe Standart, shown on large panels printed with portraits of immigrants, many of which are marked with a QR code that can be scanned to hear each subject talk about their experience. The exhibit is free to visit, and will be displayed through August 15, 2018.

Community Organizations

Please visit each organization's website to learn more about their specific mission and the ways in which you can get involved.

Center for New Americans, Northampton

<https://www.cnam.org/get-involved>

Pioneer Valley Workers Center, Northampton

<https://pvworkerscenter.org/get-involved/>

Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA), Boston

<http://miracoalition.org/get-involved>

Arise for Social Justice, Springfield

<https://www.arisespringfield.org/get-involved>

Berkshire Immigrant Center, Pittsfield

<http://berkshireic.com/164-2/>

Sojourner Truth School for Social Change Leadership, Northampton

<https://truthschool.org/classes/>