Nonfictional fiction

When art mirrors this family's life, the results can be messy

Fiction writers are supposed to write about what they know, but how much of what they know should be put down on paper?

In Julia Alvarez's ¡Yo!, writer Yolanda García—one whose nickname gives the novel its title—pens a fictionalized account of her family. To the family's chagrin, Yo includes intimate details of their lives.

Yo's mother threatens to sue her. Two of her three sisters won't speak to her, and one of them, who is pregnant, forbids anyone to tell Yo about it, for fear that her baby will also be "fictionally victimized."

"She has this whole spiel about art and life mirroring each other and how you've got to write about what you know," one sister tells another after seeing Yo on television. "I couldn't listen to it; it was making me sick."

The sister who still talks to Yo describes her efforts to console the outcast while dealing with her own feelings of betrayal: "Hey, I say, putting the best face on this messy situation, 'I bet there were a lot of people mad at Shakespeare, but aren't we all glad he wrote Hamlet'?...But still,' I go on, getting everyone's point of view in, 'imagine how you'd feel if you were her mother."

¡Yo! is Alvarez's third novel. Named a 1995 Best Book by the American Library Association. Her first, How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, won the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Award for literary excellence in books that reflect a multicultural view. The novel recounts the flight of the García family from the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo, known as El Jefe. Alvarez shifts narration among family members who, in reverse chronological order, tell how they adjusted to their new lives in New York City.

In ¡Yo!, a sequel to García Girls, Alvarez uses the same shifting perspective. Here the narrators are Yo's family, friends, and acquaintances, the people who provided the fodder for her novel. Each speaks his or her mind—sisters, mother, father, cousin, former lover, teacher, student, even a stalker—and together their stories bring Yolanda García into focus. The only character who is not permitted to speak in the first person is Yo.

In ¡Yo!, as in García Girls before it, Alvarez writes about what she knows. Her family emigrated to New York in 1960, fleeing El Jefe's regime. Yo teaches writing at a small New England college; Alvarez is an English professor at Middlebury College in Vermont. And Yo's novel sounds a lot like Alvarez's own García Girls. Interestingly, Alvarez chose the Spanish word for "I" as her character's nickname.

As a young girl in the Dominican Republic, Alvarez found a gun hidden in her father's closet. Unaware of the danger to her family—her father had ties to the underground opposing Trujillo—she spoke about the gun in school. When her parents learned what she had done, they reacted in fear and anger, severely punishing her. ¡Yo! contains a similar scene, shown first from Yo's mother's perspective, then from her father's. Frightened by the possibility of arrest, Yo's father beats her, telling her, "You must never ever tell stories!"

Yet it is the father who gives his blessing to Yo's book: "We left everything behind and forgot so much....My grandchildren and great-grandchildren will not know the way back unless they have a story. Tell them of our journey. Tell them the secret heart of your father and undo the old wrong. My Yo, embrace your destino...."

—Gary Pallassino
Other Alumni Books

Soaring with the Schweizers: The Fifty-Year History of Their Aviation Adventures
By William Schweizer '41
241 pp. RivaBo Books. $24.95
One of three brothers who founded the Schweizer Aircraft Company, William Schweizer chronicles the transformation of the family business from a small but essential manufacturer of gliders and sail planes to a production company for turbine helicopters. Aviation aficionados will enjoy this historic and informative account of a lifetime in the sky.

Dog People: Native Dog Stories
By Joseph Bruchac G'66
63 pp. Fulcrum Kids. $14.95
Find out what happens to Cedar Girl and her dog, Azeban, when they try to outwit a stranger. Meet Muskrat and his dog, Kwanivibid, who cannot resist following bear tracks deep into the woods. In Dog People, a great Abenaki storyteller takes the reader back 10,000 years to the days when Native American children and their dogs used their wits to survive the dangers of the natural world.

Audrey Hepburn's Neck
By Alan Brown '72
290 pp. Pocket Books. $21
Toshi Okamoto, a 23-year-old comic illustrator living in Tokyo, has been fascinated by all things American ever since his mother took him as a boy to see the film Roman Holiday starring Audrey Hepburn. This book details how Okamoto and his circle of American friends travel through life in search of their own identities amid the culture clash between expanding commercial America and traditional Tokyo.

City Lights: Urban-Suburban Life in the Global Society
By E. Barbara Phillips G'69, G'75 et al.
392 pp. Oxford University Press. $39.95
The second edition of this successful urban studies text has been fully updated to highlight issues facing cities in an ever-changing global society. Skillfully blending perspectives from the social sciences with insights from the visual arts and humanities, this lively and imaginative book provides a comprehensive introduction to cities and how they work.

Drew and the Bub Daddy Showdown
By Robb Armstrong '85
87 pp. Boyds Mills Press. $15.89
Cartoonist Robb Armstrong takes his writing and illustration talents in a new direction with this novel for children in grades two to five. In this book, young Drew Taylor creates comic books that have his whole school talking. He's got friends, money, and two bullies after him. He also has an older brother who has a secret he'll do anything to hide. Want to know more? Read the book.

Mr. Lincoln's Whiskers
By Karen B. Winnick '68
32 pp. Boyds Mills Press. $15.95
Abraham Lincoln was the first president of the United States to sport a beard. What gave him the idea to grow whiskers may have been a letter from an 11-year-old girl named Grace Bedell. Illustrated with oil paintings that capture the look and feel of 19th-century America, this book tells the true story of a little girl who changed the face of an American president.

Books for Younger Readers

I'm a Girl!
By Lila Jakes; illustrated by Susan Keeter '85
30 pp. Cool Kids Press. $13.95
An important book for every child of the nineties, I'm a Girl! explores the strength, courage, power, and independence of young girls. Children will recognize these features in themselves as they read about the characters affirming their own value in daily life.