

Discussion Questions for *Saving the World*

1. The two stories in this novel-Alma Huebner's contemporary story and Isabel Sendales y Gómez's nineteenth-century story-are narrated from strikingly different points of view. Alma's is told in third-person narration (she did this, she thought that). Isabel's is told in first-person narration (I did this, I thought that). Why do you think Julia Alvarez chose these particular points of view for her two characters?
2. Alma is inspired by Isabel's story. Isabel's courage and strength of character help her cope with her own fears and with the frightening situations she ultimately encounters. What in Alma's character might have impressed and inspired Isabel?
3. Both women are attracted to and influenced by men with visions of helping mankind. What are the other clear parallels between the women's lives and their struggles?
4. What motivates people to try to "save the world"? What has/would motivate you to take up a humanitarian cause?
5. Is there a right way to carry out our humanitarian urges? Should we, like Tara, rant and rave? Should we, like Mickey and Hannah or the "terrorist" boys at the clinic, resort to violence? Should we, like Helen, continually try to calm and soothe? Should we, like Balmis, forge humanitarianism with ego and ambition in order to make progress? Did these characters accomplish their goals?
6. Alma worries about the role of literature in today's world and about the direction book publishing seems to be taking-the focus on author fame and self-promotion. Even so, towards the end of the novel, she hopes she might bring readers to understand the dilemma of the boy-terrorists at the clinic. She also emphasizes Isabel's use of stories to prepare her boys for their unknown futures. What do you think Alvarez is saying about the role of storytelling in our lives?
7. How does Alvarez characterize Don Francisco and Richard Huebner? Are there any similarities between them? Any glaring differences? How does Alvarez illustrate the ways ambition manifests itself in men as opposed to women?
8. One of the epigraphs to *Saving the World* is a passage from Seamus Heaney's poem "The Cure as Troy":

History says, Don't hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed-for tidal wave of
justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.

How do you think this passage relates to Don Francisco's efforts? And to Richard Huebner's?

9. Is it possible to save the world, or do you think Alvarez means the title to be ironic? If you had been asked to help in selecting the title of this novel, what would you have suggested?