The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao
by Junot Diaz, 2007

Penguin Group USA
352 pp.

Biographical Information

Junot Diaz was born December 31, 1968 in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. He immigrated to New Jersey in 1974. He was a voracious reader as a kid, and one of the only ones in his neighborhood as he recalls. Diaz described his childhood to a reporter after winning the Pulitzer as long hard years that marked him deeply: “I grew up super-poor, welfare, section 8 and food stamps all the way, in a community where us boys worried all the time about getting jumped and where made people got recruited by the military.”

Diaz graduated Rutgers College as an English Major, and then went to Cornell University for his MFA. Diaz is currently a professor at M.I.T. and fiction editor at the Boston Review. His first collection of short stories, Drown, was published in 1996.

According to Diaz’ website, www.junotdiaz.com, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao won not only the 2008 Pulitzer Prize, but also the John Sargent Sr. First Novel Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. Diaz’

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Discussion Questions

1. Readers’ reactions to this novel since it emerged in 2007 have been extreme, extremely in favor and extremely against making the effort to get at and understand Oscar’s life story. Are there things that as a reader you were turned off by as you read the text? What motivated you to keep going? Choose one aspect of the novel that appealed to you and discuss. Choose one that did not appeal to you and discuss.

2. Throughout the novel, Spanish words and phrases appear unaccompanied by their English translations. What is the effect of this seamless blending of Spanish and English? How would the novel have been different if Diaz had stopped to provide English translations at every turn? Why does Diaz not italicize the Spanish words (the way foreign words are usually italicized in English-language text)?

3. The book centers on the story of Oscar and his family—and yet the majority of the book is narrated by Yunior, who is not part of the family, and only plays a relatively minor role in the events of the story. Yunior even calls himself “The Watcher,” underscoring his outsider status in the story. What is the effect of having a relative outsider tell the story of Oscar and his family, rather than having someone in the family tell it? And why do you think Diaz waits for so long at the beginning of the book to reveal who the narrator is?

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does Diaz not italicize the Spanish words (the way foreign words are usually italicized in English-language text)?

5. In many ways, Yunior and Oscar are polar opposites. While Yunior can get as many women as he wants, he seems to have little capacity for fidelity or true love. Oscar, by contrast, holds love above all else—and yet cannot find a girlfriend no matter how hard he tries. Is it fair to say that Yunior is Oscar’s foil—underscoring everything Oscar is not—and vice versa? Or are they actually more alike than they seem on the surface?

6. The narrator says “Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena. How else could we have survived what we survived?” (p. 149). What does he mean by that? Could Oscar’s obsession with science fiction and the “speculative genres” be seen as a kind of extension of his ancestors’ belief in “extreme phenomena”? Was that his method of coping?

7. For Oscar, his obsession with fantasy and science fiction becomes isolating, separating him from his peers so much so that he almost cannot communicate with them—as if he speaks a different language (and at one point he actually speaks in Elvish). How are other characters in the book—for instance, Belicia growing up in the Dominican Republic, or Abelard under the dictatorship of Trujillo, similarly isolated? And how are their forms of isolation different?

8. We know from the start that Oscar is destined to die in the course of the book—the title suggests as much, and there are references to his death throughout the book (“Mister. Later [Lola would] want to put that on his gravestone but no one would let her, not even me.”) Why do you think Diaz chose to reveal this from the start? How does Diaz manage to create suspense and hold the reader’s attention even though we already know the final outcome for Oscar? Did it actually make the book more suspenseful, knowing that Oscar was going to die?

9. The author, the primary narrator, and the protagonist of the book are all male, but some of the strongest characters and voices in the book (La Inca, Belicia, Lola) are female. Who do you think
makes the strongest, boldest decisions in the book? Given the machismo and swagger of the narrative voice, how does the author express the strength of the female characters? Do you think there is an intentional comment in the contrast between that masculine voice and the strong female characters?

10. While Oscar’s story is central to the novel, the book is not told in his voice, and there are many chapters in which Oscar does not figure at all, and others in which he only plays a fairly minor role. Who do you consider the true protagonist of the novel? Oscar? Yunior? Belicia? The entire de Leon and Cabral family? The fukú?

11. During the course of the book, many of the characters try to teach Oscar many things—especially Yunior, who tries to teach him how to lose weight, how to attract women, how to behave in social situations. Do any characters not try to teach Oscar anything, and just accept him as who he is? How much does Oscar actually learn from anyone? And in the end, what does Oscar teach Yunior, and the other characters if anything?

*(Questions issued by publisher.)*
Questions for Junot Díaz

An interview with the Pulitzer Prize-winning author.

By Meghan O'Rourke  Posted Tuesday, April 8, 2008

Meghan O'Rourke is Slate’s culture critic and an advisory editor. She was previously an editor at The New Yorker. She is the author of Halflife, a book of poems

_Slate_: What drew you to the character of Oscar, a fat, nerdy kid from New Jersey?

_Díaz_: It's hard to remember precisely. Been 11 years since I started the book. I know I wanted to challenge the type of protagonist that many of the young male Latino writers I knew were writing. But I also wanted to screw with traditional Dominican masculinity, write about one of its weirder out-riders. And then there was just the fact of Oscar, this kid who I could not get out of my head, whom I felt strongly attached to because he was such a devoted reader and because he had this imagination that no one had any use for, but which gave him so much enjoyment and sense of purpose.

Oscar was the end point (for me) of a larger, almost invisible historical movement—he's the child of a dictatorship and of the apocalypse that is the New World. I was also trying to show how Oscar is utterly unaware of this history and yet also dominated by it.

_Slate_: The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao isn't just about Oscar Wao's life; it spans the course of many decades and tells the stories of several people related to Oscar. The effect is of fragmentation rather than linear progression. Why did you choose to structure the story like this?

_Díaz_: I'm a product of a fragmented world. Take a brief look at Dominican or Caribbean history and you'll see that the structure of the book is more in keeping with the reality of this history than with its most popular myth: that of unity and continuity. In my mind the book was supposed to take the shape of an archipelago; it was supposed to be a textual Caribbean. Shattered and yet somehow holding together, somehow incredibly vibrant and compelling.

_Slate_: You use a relatively unconventional plot device in the book. What the reader initially takes to be a standard omniscient narrator is actually a specific person, Yunior, Oscar's college roommate—but we don't know precisely who that person is for quite some time. How did you come upon on this approach, and why?

_Díaz_: This narrative approach is nothing new. Look at Rick Moody's _The Ice Storm_ and you'll see the tactic. As we all know: All stories are told for a reason. And all narrators have a stake in the story they're telling. In _Oscar Wao_, one of the questions that a reader has to answer for themselves is: Why is Yunior telling this particular story? One might say that for him the telling of this story is an act of contrition, but that's too simple—it's something else, I would argue.
One should also remember that in places like the Caribbean, which has suffered apocalypse after apocalypse, it's rarely the people who've been devoured by a story that get to bear witness to its ravages. Usually the survivors, the storytellers, are other people, not even family. In the United States you only get to visit a sick person in a hospital if you're immediate family; where I come from the idea of family is far more elastic, far more creative, far more practical, far more real. Yunior's telling of this story and his unspoken motivations for it are at the heart of the novel and can easily be missed.

Slate: As I mentioned above, much of *Oscar Wao* isn't only about its protagonist, a nerdy kid from New Jersey, but about the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo in the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961. Can you tell us what drew you to Trujillo?

Díaz: Trujillo was one of the U.S.'s favorite sons, one of its children. He was created and sustained by the U.S.'s political-military machine. I wanted to write about the demon child of the U.S., the one who was inflicted upon the Dominican Republic. It didn't hurt that as a person Trujillo was so odd and terrifying, unlike anybody I'd ever read or heard about. He was so fundamentally Dominican, and for a Dominican writer writing about masculinity, about dictatorship, power, he's indispensable.

I've always been drawn to dictators. My father was a Little League dictator. That really affected me, his control-freakery, his impunity, his arbitrary unreasonable power. So there was that. Also, my book required a Dark Lord, and what better dark lord than a real life dictator? Trujillo exemplifies the negative forces that have for so long beleaguered the peoples of the New World. Seemed the perfect foil for Oscar. This novel (I cannot say it enough) is all about the dangers of dictatorship—Trujillo is just the face I use to push these issues—but the real dictatorship is in the book itself, in its telling; and that's what I think is most disturbing: how deeply attached we all are to the institution of dictatorship.

Slate: What do you mean when you say the "real dictatorship is in the book itself"?

Díaz: We all dream dreams of unity, of purity; we all dream that there's an authoritative voice out there that will explain things, including ourselves. If it wasn't for our longing for these things, I doubt the novel or the short story would exist in its current form. I'm not going to say much more on the topic. Just remember: In dictatorships, only one person is really allowed to speak. And when I write a book or a story, I too am the only one speaking, no matter how I hide behind my characters.

Slate: One could, of course, have written a more straightforward "political" novel about the depredations of Trujillo's dictatorship. How—or why—in your mind do the stories of Trujillo and Oscar fit together?

Díaz: I guess the question for me is, how are they not related? It's like the history of the Dominican Republic. You can't tell the history of the U.S. without the history of the Dominican Republic, and yet people do so all the time. Oscar, like Lola, like Yunior, is one of Trujillo's children. His shadow, his legacy, is upon them all in ways that none of them understand. Trujillo is a local version of the legacy of the New World, which all of us who live in this hemisphere carry upon our heads. The novel's question is: How do you deal with this legacy? Do you run from it? Do you ignore it, deploy existential denial?
These are strategies that add to the legacy's power, that guarantee its perpetuation. Or do you look into the silence and actually say the words that you have to say? And as a footnote: No one can write a straightforward political novel about the Trujillato and capture its phantasmagorical power. That's another reason I had to go hard-core nerd. Because without curses and alien mongooses and Sauron and Darkseid, the Trujillato cannot be accessed, eludes our "modern" minds. We need these fictional lenses, otherwise It we cannot see.

Slate: The book is full of footnotes, especially at the beginning, forcing the reader to break away from the narrative to take in information that may or may not be "external" to the story. What made you decide to put footnotes in the novel? How does the presence of "factual" footnotes affect the fiction of the novel, in your mind?

Díaz: The footnotes are there for a number of reasons; primarily, to create a double narrative. The footnotes, which are in the lower frequencies, challenge the main text, which is the higher narrative. The footnotes are like the voice of the jester, contesting the proclamations of the king. In a book that's all about the dangers of dictatorship, the dangers of the single voice—this felt like a smart move to me.

Slate: You once said that "you build your entire work on a series of failures." Can you talk a little bit about what you meant?

Díaz: I've never had the good fortune of getting a clear idea in my head and then writing the damn thing down in one go. The only success I've had as a writer is by screwing up over and over and over. I'll write a story or a chapter 20 times before I start approaching what I think the story should be. And it is in that process of writing what I'm not supposed to be writing that I find my way to what I am supposed to be writing.

This is a tiring and demoralizing way to go about writing. But I don't know any other approach. One of the reasons I guess I take so long to write. Not only is the process hard but it takes a lot to get back to the computer, when I know that chances are good that I'm only going to screw up again.

Slate: Your first book, Drown, a collection of short stories, was published to critical acclaim. Was it very different to write a novel?

Díaz: I've only written one story collection (of a sort) and one novel, so my perspective is rather limited. Drown was nothing like Oscar Wao. I felt like I was in two different worlds. When you write short stories, you are a laser, cutting, cutting with precision and ruthlessness. A novel was all about the embrace. Trying to get my arms around as much material, as many characters, as possible.

Slate: Much of the press about your work speaks about the fact that you are a "Latino writer." Do you think of yourself as a Latino writer? If so, what might that mean? If not, why not?
Díaz: We're in a country where white is considered normative; it's a country where white writers are simply writers, and writers of Latino descent are Latino writers. This is an issue whose roots are deeper than just the publishing community or how an artist wants to self-designate. It's about the way the U.S. wants to view itself and how it engineers otherness in people of color and, by doing so, props up white privilege. I try to battle the forces that seek to "other" people of color and promote white supremacy. But I also have no interest in being a "writer," either, shorn from all my connections and communities. I'm a Dominican writer, a writer of African descent, and whether or not anyone else wants to admit it, I know also that Stephen King and Jonathan Franzen are white writers. The problem isn't in labeling writers by their color or their ethnic group; the problem is that one group organizes things so that everyone else gets these labels but not it. No, not it.

Slate: Do you feel you have a duty to be representative?

Díaz: I've been asked to be "representative" for as long as I've been a Dominican. As a person of color living in the U.S. you're often considered an extension of your group—individualism is hard to come by. So this is nothing new. But I'm just one person, writing about one tiny set of (imagined) experiences. Sure, you can use what I write about to open a discussion about larger issues, about the communities in which my set of experiences is embedded, but that doesn't make me any expert on anything or the essence of the Dominican Republic.

Slate: Oscar Wao, like Drown before it, is characterized by a kind of hybrid dialect of English and Spanish—what critic Michiko Kakutani called "a streetwise brand of Spanglish" when she reviewed the book in the New York Times. Did you always make use of this hybrid style, or was this style a discovery along the way?

Díaz: Since I can remember, English was present in my Spanish. And clearly Spanish was always present in my English. It may have taken me a while to systemize this at the level of narrative. But the technique, the mixture, has always been within me. An accident of immigrant history, but one that I've pursued relentlessly and rigorously.

Slate: What about the fact that in certain stretches of Oscar Wao, readers who don't speak Spanish won't be able to understand? Do you expect them to pick up a dictionary? Or is the specific sense less important than the sensation of the language?

Díaz: I've almost never read an adult book where I didn't have to pick up a dictionary. I guess I participate more in my readings and expect the same out of my readership. I want people to research, to ask each other, to question. But also I want there to be an element of incomprehension. What's language without incomprehension? What's art? And at a keeping-it-real level: Isn't it about time that folks started getting used to the fact that the United States comprises large Spanish-speaking segments?

Slate: And did you get any push back from your publisher, I wonder?

Díaz: My publishers were just happy to get anything after 11 years. And my editor understood my project. Otherwise the final months would have been hell.