



## THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO

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JUNOT DÍAZ

2007

339 pp.

### SUMMARY

Winner, 2008 National Book Critics Circle Award & Pulitzer Prize for Fiction

This is the long-awaited first novel from one of the most original and memorable writers working today.

Things have never been easy for Oscar, a sweet but disastrously overweight, lovesick Dominican ghetto nerd. From his home in New Jersey, where he lives with his old-world mother and rebellious sister, Oscar dreams of becoming the Dominican J. R. R. Tolkien and, most of all, of finding love. But he may never get what he wants, thanks to the fukú – the curse that has haunted the Oscar's family for generations, dooming them to prison, torture, tragic accidents, and, above all, ill-starred love. Oscar, still waiting for his first kiss, is just its most recent victim.

Díaz immerses us in the tumultuous life of Oscar and the history of the family at large, rendering with genuine warmth and dazzling energy, humor, and insight the Dominican–American experience, and, ultimately, the endless human capacity to persevere in the face of heartbreak and loss.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Junot Díaz was born in Villa Juana, a barrio in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. In December, 1974, at the age of six, Díaz and his family immigrated to Parlin, New Jersey.

He attended Rutgers College in 1992, majoring in English; there he was involved in a creative-writing living-learning residence hall and in various student organizations and was exposed to the authors who would motivate him into becoming a writer: Toni Morrison and Sandra Cisneros. After graduating from Rutgers he earned his MFA from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York in 1995, where he wrote most of his first collection.

Díaz is active in the Dominican community and teaches creative writing at the *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, and is also the fiction editor for the *Boston Review*. He is a founding member of the *Voices of Writing Workshop*, a writing workshop focused on writers of color.

His fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker* magazine which listed him as one of the 20 top writers for the 21st century. He has also been published in *Story*, *Paris Review*, and in the anthologies *Best American Short Stories* four times (1996, 1997, 1999, 2000), and *African Voices*. He is best known for his two major works: the short story collection *Drown* (1996) and the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). Both were published to critical acclaim.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. 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 Díaz had stopped to provide English translations at every turn? Why does Díaz not italicize the Spanish words (the way foreign words are usually italicized in English-language text)?
2. 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 Díaz waits for so long at the beginning of the book to reveal who the narrator is?
3. Díaz, in the voice of the narrator, often employs footnotes to explain the history or context of a certain passage or sentence in the main text. Why do you think he chose to convey historical facts and anecdotes in footnote form? How would the novel have read differently if the content of the footnotes had been integrated into the main text? What if the footnotes (and the information in them) had been eliminated altogether?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. Yunior characterizes himself as a super macho, womanizing jock-type—and yet in narrating the book, his writing is riddled with reference to nerdy topics like the Fantastic Four and Lord of the Rings. In other words, there seems to be a schism between Yunior the character and Yunior the writer. Why do you think that is? What could Díaz be trying to say by making Yunior’s character so seemingly contradictory?
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?

(Questions issued by Litlovers)

Author’s website <http://www.junotdiaz.com>



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