

# Trying too hard in the wrong places: Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is Dominican-American writer Junot Díaz's much-anticipated first novel. His previous collection of short stories, *Drown* (1996), about the lives of Dominican immigrants and their US-raised children, met an enthusiastic reception from readers and critics.

In the presentation of his characters as they went about their everyday lives in Washington Heights in Manhattan or across the Hudson River in New Jersey, Díaz treated the problems of immigration, poverty and the legacy of the brutal Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. The best stories were honest and unpretentious, while the lesser productions often exhibited a writing-workshop posturing that seems almost inevitable among younger contemporary American fiction writers.

Nevertheless, *Drown* offered something that is usually unavailable in American culture: bulletins about what is happening with the bottom 80 percent of the population. It had a marketing niche as an "immigrant" work, as well, with all the American Dream self-congratulation that that implied. But still, the stories were complex confrontations with people who normally come into public view only when the police arrest them.

The stories imagined life with "the bitter sense of the irrevocable which was almost an every-day experience" (George Eliot). Díaz told about jobs delivering pool tables to the wealthy and attempting, out of necessity, to walk from Miami to New York; and the character Yunior, who tries to take care of more than people's addictions. Judging by its presence on several best-seller lists and its inclusion in college and high-school curricula, *Drown* seems to have penetrated into the thoughts and feelings of readers.

*Drown's* characters sometimes question their lives or try to figure out the nature of the world they live in, although social awakening is not a notable theme. Morally, the characters in *Drown* confine themselves to an uneasy endurance of life's conditions. The world outside the neighborhood echoes occasionally, but overall, Díaz fails to survey his characters from a distance.

What would characters like this do and be if the author allowed them room to grow and breathe? Could Díaz infuse more precise social insight into relations among a variety of human beings? The challenge was to put Dominican life in the US into a graspable frame, to be somewhat more Olympian and universal in his art.

Díaz has made the attempt in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which was recently named as a finalist for the National Book Critics' Circle Award. The protagonist, Oscar de León, is an overweight and intellectually inclined kid living in a Hispanic neighborhood of Paterson, New Jersey, some 20 miles west of New York City. His mother is severe and tyrannical, his father, absent. Everyone around him struggles with poverty, crime and drug abuse.

Oscar is deeply frustrated and withdraws into a world of science fiction

and fantasy literature. "His best moments were genre moments," the narrator says. The novel is filled with obscure references to dozens of authors from these genres.

Díaz could not have chosen a better subject as a character. The sensitive Oscar suffers for his oddness and nonconformity. He makes efforts both to belong in and to escape from the life in which he is trapped, but unfulfilled sexual desires dominate him and render him even more isolated.

The novel follows Oscar from childhood to adulthood as the conditions of his life change far too little. This paralysis seems typical of many people's lives over the last two decades, when few have made progress or felt reason to be optimistic about the future, and this gives Oscar great potential as the protagonist of the work.

Díaz has also created other credible characters: Oscar's sister Lola, who survives her own difficult experiences, and comes to thrive, and especially Oscar's mother, Beli, and the people with whom she grows up in the Dominican Republic. Yunior—perhaps the same Yunior from the stories in *Drown*—narrates the story.

Scenes of Oscar's growing up in Paterson alternate with those of his sister's overt acts of rebellion against her mother. Oscar and Lola both end up at Rutgers (New Jersey's state university), where the narrator, Yunior, emerges as an active character.

Some of the most affecting scenes depict Beli's youth and her family in the Dominican Republic. These are tightly interwoven with the history of the island, during the *Trujillato*—the period from 1930 to 1961 when Rafael Trujillo, the US-backed tyrant, ruled the country. Trujillo is a minor character whom Díaz depicts as a serial rapist and sociopath, and the novel touches on his downfall.

Díaz presents his Dominican characters with a care and sympathy—and a certain feeling for the life of the island—that the author does not always extend to his American-raised creations. Portions of the novel move between the life of Beli's father, Abelard Cabral, a doctor who defies the dictator, and visits by Lola and Oscar to the island and their inappropriate loves there. All three are cared for by Beli's aunt, La Inca.

The Dominican scenes shape Beli's character—the most developed in the novel—in particular; she is the one whose personal history is most integrated with events of the twentieth century in the Caribbean island nation.

To a lesser degree, Díaz situates Oscar, Lola, and Yunior in the America of the Reagan-Bush and Clinton years, and, all in all, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* covers a period of some 50 years. An ambitious effort! The novel brings together many strands of Dominican and American life, and attempts to reveal, often successfully, the texture of this period.

Nevertheless, given the great political and ideological confusion that abounds, virtually any writer of Díaz's generation would find it

challenging to consider the last half-century and grasp its impact on the thoughts and emotions of people living among us today. His attempt to relate general political and social history to his characters' histories ultimately defeats the novel.

To begin with, Oscar himself never rises above the stereotype of the nerd. While choosing to write about one of the millions of young people suffering from the conformity and dullness of official American culture is praiseworthy, Díaz has not worked out Oscar's internal life sufficiently, and the latter does not strike the reader as fully individualized.

Why is he is obsessed with science fiction and fantasy, and what does it give to him that he can't find in daily life? This novel makes a good deal out of fantasy, but Díaz fails to explore the waking dream of ambitions and desires that most people have. Oscar does not seem to identify or empathize with particular characters in particular books or movies. He (and Yunior) constantly refers to the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, but it would tell us more if we knew whether he saw himself as Aragorn or as Frodo.

In his spoken language, Oscar uses "a lot of huge-sounding nerd words like indefatigable and ubiquitous." But he wouldn't find these in most science fiction, so he must read other things—history, science, the *New Yorker*—to acquire these words, and these works must have an effect on him. But a fuller intellectual life isn't even hinted at, and what it might do to his personality isn't apparent. There ought to be some internal consistency to his tastes—Oscar is writing science fiction and fantasy from his teenage years. By the time he goes to college, surely he would have come across the socially critical element in the genre, represented by Kurt Vonnegut and other writers. It seems possible at least that he would apply that to life in Paterson.

Díaz doesn't make enough of the world of Paterson, New Jersey (a community with a fascinating history). Lola and Oscar attempt to escape without really understanding why. "She wanted what she always wanted, to escape...but where she wanted to escape to, she could not tell you." Their mother, Beli, is the obvious source for some of the pain, but something beyond that, a broader social bleakness, produces Lola and Oscar's need to forget and escape.

A related problem: Oscar's life is told through Yunior's eyes, and Yunior's internal intellectual and emotional life is just as mysterious as Oscar's. He has been involved with Lola and meets Oscar at Rutgers, where he rooms with him in a dormitory. Both characters want to be writers, but, strangely, they never connect on this level.

Yunior peppers his narrative with arcane references to works of fantasy and science fiction. And yet he does not appear to be particularly interested in literature of any kind. His relationship with Oscar does not strike one as being intellectual or artistic. In fact, there really aren't any such relationships in the book. Yunior's voice belongs to an educated person, but he speaks in a working-class, Dominican-American dialect mingled with Spanish and elements of African-American vernacular English.

In and of itself, the dialect rings true, but it does not feel entirely plausible that an educated person, let alone a writer, would speak in this manner. Overall, Díaz's representation of Yunior's voice strikes one as posturing. In fact, one wonders why it was necessary to make a character out of him at all.

The characters in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are, in Díaz's words, "grounded by the hurricane winds of history," but the approach to this history is perhaps the most problematic aspect of the novel.

The sections of the novel set under the rule of Trujillo are, without question, powerfully done. Díaz uses footnotes to round out the details of this period and the unbreathable social atmosphere that afflicted the Dominican Republic for more than 30 years. The tortures and lecheries of *El Jefe* (the Chief) move one to sorrow and anger. There is tragedy to the sweep of the years following the extinguishing of part of Beli's family.

To a certain extent, the sponsorship of Trujillo and his successors by

successive US administrations from Hoover to Johnson goes undiscussed. But this only serves to emphasize that history in this book stops at the Miami airport. Characters are formed only by a Dominican social reality. The bitterness of the dictatorship and the pathos of the failed attempts to resist oppression and degradation are also exclusively Dominican.

This goes some way toward explaining why Oscar's internal being remains unexplored. Many aspects of American life in the years 1975 to 1995 remain unexcavated by fiction, poetry and other arts. Enormous changes in economy and politics would have had a profound effect on Oscar, Lola and Yunior's generation. A cultural shift occurred with the Reaganite worship of success and money. A great deal of social water has flowed under the bridge in the past three decades. It affected fiction, but fiction, by and large, has failed to approach and deal with it consciously.

Díaz makes a strong effort to create a multiplicity of characters and reproduce their feelings authentically, but there is a gap between what he knows of his individual creations and what he knows of the general history of the Dominican Republic and the United States. Díaz seems to sense this and look for a solution in two places: aesthetically, in the narrative voice of Yunior, which has serious problems, but also, intellectually, in mysticism and fatalism.

He prefaces the novel with a discussion of *fukú*, the Dominican word for curse, and indeed a curse is transmitted in Beli's family from her father to her children, if growing up under Trujillo and coming to live in poverty in the United States mean one is cursed, metaphorically at least.

Díaz, however, goes beyond that. At key points in his characters' lives, usually in scenes of intense violence or despair, animal familiars intercede. They not only save the individuals concerned, but they more than hint at a supernatural direction of events. At the very least, they constitute an avoidance of looking social life straight in the face. This does terrible damage to the novel.

The problems in Díaz's book are the problems of contemporary literature. Publishers flood the market with good but inadequate writing on the immigrant experience, which overly particularize and fail to address the most common and burning questions. The simplest ones, which are always the most difficult: Why is the world the way it is? Why do people act as they do?

The writers' inadequate engagement with history and society, and with the answers that a serious study of history and society would provide, leaves too many of them at the mercy of coincidence (or even mysticism) or simply overwhelmed. The results, all too often, are half-accomplished novels that fail to meet the ambitious goals of the authors themselves.



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