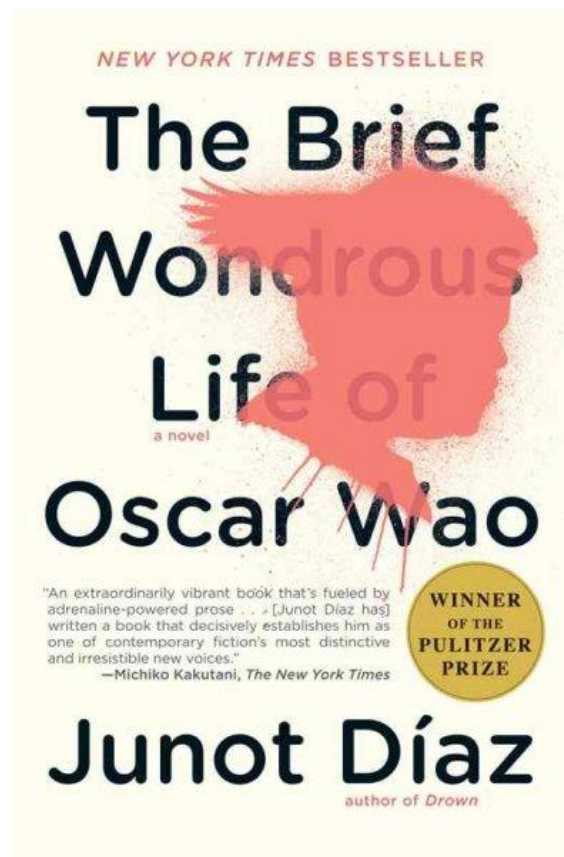


About the book...



Oscar is a sweet but disastrously overweight ghetto nerd who—from the New Jersey home he shares with his old world mother and rebellious sister—dreams of becoming the Dominican J.R.R. Tolkien and, most of all, finding love. But Oscar may never get what he wants. Blame the fukú—a curse that has haunted Oscar’s family for generations, following them on their epic journey from Santo Domingo to the USA. Encapsulating Dominican-American history, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* opens our eyes to an astonishing vision of the contemporary American experience and explores the endless human capacity to persevere—and risk it all—in the name of love.

About the author...

http://us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/brief_and_wondrous_life_of_oscar_wao.html



Born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, and raised there and in New Jersey, Junot Díaz graduated from Rutgers and received an MFA from Cornell. He lives in New York City and Boston, and is a tenured professor at MIT. His first novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2008. The novel also won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Best Fiction of 2007, the Mercantile Library Center’s John Sargent Prize for First Novel in 2007, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award and was nominated for an NAACP Image Award and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* was also a *New York Times* Notable Book of 2007 and *Time* magazine’s Book of the Year.

Junot Díaz has had his fiction published in *The New Yorker* and *The Paris Review*, and four times in *The Best American Short Stories*. His critically praised, bestselling debut book, *Drown*, led to his inclusion among *Newsweek's* "New Faces of 1996"—the only writer in the group. *The New Yorker* placed him on a list of the twenty top writers for the twenty-first century. Díaz has won the Eugene McDermott Award, the Lila Wallace–Reader's Digest Writers' Award, the PEN/Malamud Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study Fellowship, a U.S.-Japan Creative Artists Fellowship from the NEA, and most recently the Rome Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Awards:

Pulitzer Prize for Fiction
Hurston/Wright Legacy Award
National Book Critics Circle Award
John Sargent Sr. First Novel Prize
Anisfield-Wolf Book Award
Dayton Literary Peace Prize
Massachusetts Book Award for Best Fiction
NAACP Image Award Finalist
I.M.P.A.C. Dublin Award: Shortlist 2009
Amazon Best of the Month, September 2007

Reviews

Amazon.com Review

It's been 11 years since Junot Díaz's critically acclaimed story collection, *Drown*, landed on bookshelves and from page one of his debut novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, any worries of a sophomore jinx disappear. The titular Oscar is a 300-pound-plus "lovesick ghetto nerd" with zero game (except for Dungeons & Dragons) who cranks out pages of fantasy fiction with the hopes of becoming a Dominican J.R.R. Tolkien. The book is also the story of a multi-generational family curse that courses through the book, leaving troubles and tragedy in its wake. This was the most dynamic, entertaining, and achingly heartfelt novel I've read in a long time. My head is still buzzing with the memory of dozens of killer passages that I dog-eared throughout the book. The rope-a-dope narrative is funny, hip, tragic, soulful, and bursting with desire. Make some room for *Oscar Wao* on your bookshelf--you won't be disappointed.

Publishers Weekly

Reviewed by Matthew Sharpe: A reader might at first be surprised by how many chapters of a book entitled *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are devoted not to its sci fi-and-fantasy-gobbling nerd-hero but to his sister, his mother and his grandfather. However, Junot Diaz's dark and exuberant first novel makes a compelling case for the multiperspectival view of a life, wherein an individual cannot be known or understood in isolation from the history of his family and his

nation. Oscar being a first-generation Dominican-American, the nation in question is really two nations. And Dominicans in this novel being explicitly of mixed Taíno, African and Spanish descent, the very ideas of nationhood and nationality are thoughtfully, subtly complicated. The various nationalities and generations are subtended by the recurring motif of *fukú*, the Curse and Doom of the New World, whose midwife and... victim was a historical personage Diaz will only call the Admiral, in deference to the belief that uttering his name brings bad luck (hint: he arrived in the New World in 1492 and his initials are CC). By the prologue's end, it's clear that this story of one poor guy's cursed life will also be the story of how 500 years of historical and familial bad luck shape the destiny of its fat, sad, smart, lovable and short-lived protagonist. The book's pervasive sense of doom is offset by a rich and playful prose that embodies its theme of multiple nations, cultures and languages, often shifting in a single sentence from English to Spanish, from Victorian formality to Negropolitan vernacular, from Homeric epithet to dirty bilingual insult. Even the presumed reader shape-shifts in the estimation of its in-your-face narrator, who addresses us variously as folks, you folks, conspiracy-minded-fools, Negro, Nigger and plataneros. So while Diaz assumes in his reader the same considerable degree of multicultural erudition he himself possesses—offering no gloss on his many un-italicized Spanish words and expressions (thus beautifully dramatizing how linguistic borders, like national ones, are porous), or on his plethora of genre and canonical literary allusions—he does helpfully footnote aspects of Dominican history, especially those concerning the bloody 30-year reign of President Rafael Leónidas Trujillo. The later Oscar chapters lack the linguistic brio of the others, and there are exposition-clogged passages that read like summaries of a longer narrative, but mostly this fierce, funny, tragic book is just what a reader would have hoped for in a novel by Junot Diaz. Matthew Sharpe is the author of the novels *Jamestown* and *The Sleeping Father*. He teaches at Wesleyan University.

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?

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." (p. 36)). Why do you think Díaz chose to reveal this from the start? How does Díaz 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. In one of the footnotes the narrator posits that writers and dictators are not simply natural antagonists, as Salman Rushdie has said, but are actually in competition with one another because they are essentially in the same business (p. 97). What does he mean by that? How can a writer be a kind of dictator? Is the telling of a story somehow inherently tyrannical? Do you think Díaz actually believes that he is in some way comparable to Trujillo? If so, does Díaz try to avoid or subvert that in any way?

10. 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?

11. There are a few chapters in the book in which Lola takes over the narration and tells her story in her own words. Why do you think it is important to the novel to let Lola have a chance to speak for herself? Do you think Díaz is as successful in creating a female narrative voice as he is the male one?

12. How much of her own story do you think Belicia shared with her children? How much do you think Belicia knew about her father Abelard's story?

13. The image of a mongoose with golden eyes and the a man without a face appear at critical moments and to various characters throughout the book. What do these images represent? Why do you think Díaz chose these images in particular? When they do appear, do you think you are supposed to take them literally? For instance, did you believe that a mongoose appeared to Belicia and spoke to her? Did she believe it?

14. 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? Yuniór? Belicia? The entire de Leon and Cabral family? The fukú? Oscar is very far from the traditional model of a "hero." Other characters in the book are more traditionally heroic, making bold decisions on behalf of others to protect them—for instance, La Inca rescuing young Belicia, or Abelard trying to protect his daughters. In the end, do you think Oscar is heroic or foolish? And are those other characters—La Inca, Abelard—more or less heroic than Oscar? During the course of the book, many of the characters try to teach Oscar many things—especially Yuniór, 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 Yuniór, and the other characters if anything?

Read Alikes (from One Read New Jersey:

<http://www.onebooknewjersey.org/adult-selection/resources.html?cat=alike>)

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents by Julia Alvarez

In the 1960s, political tension forces the García family away from Santo Domingo and towards the Bronx. The sisters all hit their strides in America, adapting and thriving despite cultural differences, language barriers, and prejudice. But Mami

and Papi are more traditional, and they have far more difficulty adjusting to their new country.

In the Name of Salome by Julia Alvarez

Inspired by real events, this sweeping novel spans 100 years & the lives of a heroic woman whose poetry inspired one Caribbean revolution, and her daughter whose dedication to teaching strengthened another.

Yo! by Julia Alvarez

The American odyssey of Yo, a Dominican woman writer whose family arrived in the U.S. as refugees from a dictatorship. The novel follows her youth, with its energy and optimism, and the setbacks as she grows older, including two divorces.

Let it Rain Coffee: A Novel by Angie Cruz

Flashing between past and present, this is a sweeping novel about love, loss, family, and the elusive nature of memory and desire, set amid the crosscurrents of the history and culture that shape our past and govern our future.

Drown by Junot Diaz (short stories)

Stories set in the Dominican Republic and in New Jersey. In "Ysrael," a boy is disfigured by a pig, "No Face" is on his trip to America to undergo plastic surgery, and "How to Date" is on the art of dating interracially.

Muddy Cup: A Dominican Family Comes of Age in New America by Barbara Fischkin (nonfiction)

Traces the challenges faced by four generations of a Dominican family after leaving their poverty-stricken country under the dictator, Trujillo, and arriving in Queens, New York.

Geographies of Home by Loida Maritza Perez

A Dominican family with fourteen children tries to succeed in the United States.

Song of the Water Saints by Nelly Rosario

A debut novel chronicling the lives of three generations of remarkable Dominican women ranges from the early 1900s to the present day as it follows Graciela, who flees the strictures of her poverty-stricken rural life; her daughter Mercedes, who builds a new life in New York City; and Leila, a restless young woman coming of age in the high-spirited 1990s.

Other titles that take place during Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship:

In the Time of Butterflies, Before We Were Free by Julia Alvarez

Based on real events, this is the story of the life and death of three revolutionary sisters in the Dominican Republic, told by a surviving fourth. One by one the Mirabal Sisters, as they were known, join the opposition to the Trujillo dictatorship in the 1950s, suffering imprisonment and torture while their men watch powerless.

General Sun, My Brother by Jacques Stephen Alexis

A novel on the exploitation of the poor in the Caribbean. Forced to work as a sugar-

cane cutter in the Dominican Republic, a Haitian peasant participates in a strike which ends in a massacre.

The Farming of Bones: A Novel by Edwidge Danticat

In 1937, on the Dominican side of the Haiti border, Amabelle, an orphaned maid to an army colonel's wife, falls in love with Sebastien, an itinerant sugarcane cutter, but their relationship is threatened by the violent persecution of the Haitians.

The Feast of the Goat by Mario Vargas Llosa

Returning to her native Dominican Republic, forty-nine-year-old Urania Cabral discovers that Rafael Trujillo, the depraved dictator called "the Goat" by the Dominicans, still reigns over his inner circle, which includes Urania's father, with brutality and blackmail, but soon an uprising against him will result in a revolution that will have profound consequences.

Autumn of the Patriarch by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

The discovery of a South American dictator's rotting corpse in the deserted tangle of his crumbling palace prompts a search through his past and a colorful chronicle of his progression from popular, beloved, unafraid ruler to isolated, frightened despot.

Massacre River by Rene Philoctete

A tale set against a backdrop of 1937's massacre of thousands of Haitians under the orders of power-mad generalissimo Trujillo finds the loving interracial marriage of Dominican Pedro and Haitian Adèle shattered when a group of soldiers arrive in their Dominican border town intent on murdering Haitian citizens.

They Forged the Signature of God by Viriato Sencion

A chilling picture of internal politics in the Dominican Republic, became that country's best-selling ever work of fiction. Tracing the lives of three seminarians persecuted by Church and state, allegory and gallows humor portray political power gone awry.

And read-alikes from other cultures:

I'll Steal You Away by Niccolo Ammaniti

Growing up in an Italian village, Pietro is ignored by his parents and suffers the torment of bullies, but the arrival of an aging playboy, Graziano Biglia, helps Pietro realize that only by leaving home can he become the man he should be.

The Dew Breaker by Edwidge Danticat

A scarred Brooklyn resident remembers his past life as a Haitian torturer in the 1960s, a period during which he waged personal and political battles before moving to New York, where his past continued to haunt him.

Celestial Harmonies by Peter Esterhazy

The novelist chronicles the history of his own remarkable family, the Esterházy, within the framework of a historical narrative that captures the emotional ties between generations of the aristocratic dynasty and the history of Europe,

especially within the context of the twentieth century, as the Esterházy family dealt with the Communist takeover of Hungary.

Knots by Nuruddin Farah

Returning to her native home in Somalia after being raised in North America and suffering a failed marriage, self-reliant Cambará struggles to reclaim her family's home from a warlord and finds support from a group of women activists.

The Sound and the Fury by William Faulkner

Complicated family history, experiments with language and means of expression, cultural alienation, storyline moving back and forth in time, racial issues. The more one reads in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the more various aspects of the novel seem to echo another work. If you have not read Faulkner's novel about the Compson family (could they have been afflicted with a fukú?), now might be a good time to immerse yourself in the richness and complexity of the Mississippi Delta.

Consumption by Kevin Patterson

Spanning countries, generations, and cultures, this is an epic novel of the Arctic, and a penetrating portrait of generational division and cultural dissonance.

A Fraction of the Whole by Steve Toltz

After his father's death, Jasper reflects on Martin Dean, the man who had raised him in intellectual captivity and who had spent his entire life analyzing absolutely everything, and describes his father's failed battle to make a lasting impression on the world.