

## A Reading and Discussion Guide

### *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

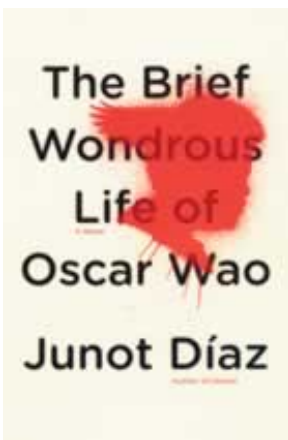
by Junot Diaz

Riverhead Books

Prepared by Deborah O. Doulette  
Neilson Library, Smith College



#### PRELIMINARIES



Oye! Listen up! And hold on to the edges of your book because Junot Diaz has written this *buenmoso historia* that is *muy, muy importante*. And if you don't speak Spanish/Spanglish, it doesn't matter; this *historia* moves so fast, you might not want to take the time for translation. You'll just be a little bit disoriented, a little bit of an immigrant in a new novel world.

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* considers the story of one Dominican family's confrontation with the *fuku* curse, a mythical doom in the atmosphere that can attach itself to a person and rip the happiness out of a whole string of future offspring. Oscar de Leon, born in the Dominican Republic in the early 1970s, later transplanted to New Jersey, grapples with a *fuku* that goes back to his grandfather who suffered at the hands of the Dominican Republic's mid twentieth-century dictator, Rafael

Leonidas Trujillo.

Diaz fronts his novel with a poem by Derek Walcott, Nobel Prize-winning Caribbean writer. The poem's last lines, "...either I'm nobody or I'm a nation," could be poor Oscar's epitaph. You know already just by Diaz' title that Oscar is not destined to live long. What you don't know is why. Walcott's poem gives you the first clue, but from then on you're in Diaz' hands.

Oscar is a nobody in many ways: an overweight, science-fiction-obsessed black Dominican virgin – and as Diaz makes clear, the virgin part is the real oddity -- making his way through life in the suburbs of Paterson, New Jersey. But *leer de nuevo*, read it again. He's Dominican and he's black; so he's carrying around in his body layers of stories that make up a nation's past and present.

Diaz' text commands you to sit up and pay attention and do some d\*\*\* work to get at these stories inside Oscar Wao. Pay attention! To what? To language, especially the dialogue that bubbles out of the characters, but also to the storyline, to the somewhat mysterious narrator, and to the underpinnings of historical dirt that made this particular *hombre* protagonist possible. Historical dirt, loads of it. And if you're not well-versed in Caribbean history, you will be soon. And you'll thank Diaz for opening your eyes.

## A WAY TO START

Diaz divides his book into geographical and chronological parts. Only the parts don't move in a predictable orderly way. Instead you shuttle back and forth from the Dominican Republic to New Jersey, and from Washington Heights in the northern reaches of Manhattan—enclave of Dominican-Americans--back to the island. Plus you move forward and backward in the twentieth century.

The sometimes unsettling and rapid leaps might make you feel a bit jet-lagged. It's a smart move by Diaz, because pretty quickly you're experiencing a diaspora moment, trekking between old home and new and back again.

As the chapters unfold you trace Oscar's, and his antecedents, path out of the Dominican Republic to points in the United States. More importantly, you start to understand his family tree, way back to his grandfather Abelard Luis Cabral, a surgeon in the 1940s and the first target of the mythical fuku curse. Abelard and nurse/wife Socorro's third daughter Beli is Oscar's mother. Beli has her own tale of pain and migration that Diaz weaves in and out of Oscar's narrative. And sister Lola? She's large in Oscar's life, a protectress and guide. And Diaz tells her story, too.

It's Lola's on-again off-again boyfriend, Yunior, who narrates the story, although he doesn't reveal himself until mid-way into the book. Yunior was Oscar's roommate at Rutgers and serves as a sort of macho guardian angel, keeping Oscar from sinking into depression, from throwing himself at the many girls he develops mad crushes on.

## BOOK DISCUSSION TOOLKIT

1. Spanish dictionary or translation website consultation at your fingertips  
For example: <http://www.wordreference.com/> -- free online translation, includes a variety of Spanish-English dictionaries, including Oxford.
2. Maps, a detailed map of the Dominican Republic and of New York and New Jersey  
For example: <http://geography.about.com/library/maps/blindex.htm> (About.com's map site with an index of printable country maps)
3. Big sheets of paper and markers – this book is negotiated more easily with notes and diagrams, see Discussion Questions and Activities below

## GROUP ACTIVITIES

- A. Use a large sheet of paper and choose a way to diagram the main characters of the tale, and their relationships to each other, as you learn about them. You could use a series of interlocking circles, a Venn diagram approach. Or, try a timeline. Ask each group participant to include what he or she remembers about the character in question. Try to build the diagram as you read. You'll put together a series of story fragments, building your understanding of Oscar, for example, by using perspectives of many readers.
- B. What and where is Oscar's home, the Jersey/New York suburbs or the Dominican Republic? Divide your group in half and hold a debate with one side defending home as the United States, the other half arguing for the Dominican Republic. Back up arguments with exact

- events or dialogue from the text. Any dissenters who from the outset argue that the question can't be answered?
- C. Oral History Project: ask members of your group to choose one relative or friend who has a migration/immigration story to tell. Prepare a set of interview questions as a group, and record interview results. You could create a blog or a website and invite others in your community to contribute to it.
  - D. Family Migration map: use a world map (or just a map of the Americas, depending on your group) to mark all the routes your members' families have traveled in their various migrations. Decide in advance how broadly or narrowly to define migration – will you include only movements from a home country? Or what if you mark moves between states? Between schools?
  - E. Science Fiction narratives: as a group brainstorm a brief plot summary for a science fiction narrative that Oscar might have written, given his fascination, for example, with Tolkien. Or, with his quest for love.

## 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. Diaz makes Dominican history central to the book, almost a character itself. What do you think the stream of history-related footnotes running below the fictional narrative provides for the reader? Who seems to be writing the footnotes? The narrator? The author?
3. Can you think of other countries besides the Dominican Republic that have a similar relationship to the United States, a similarly strong connection between the families that remain in the home country and those that left? What can Diaz' work tell a reader today about other contemporary immigrant cultures? Or, immigrant experiences in the past?
4. The reader never meets Oscar face-to-face, instead his story emerges piece by piece from other sources, namely from Yunior. When Diaz was asked why he chose this narrative style he replied in part, "I felt like one of the biggest absences was hiding in plain sight, which is that we actually never meet directly the protagonist. The protagonist, Oscar, is always filtered through this other narrator, Yunior. Part of it was this desire to make Oscar simultaneously present but also entirely invisible. It was a strategy to talk a lot about how do you put a story together from fragments and how you put a story together from absences." What absences in the story would you like to read more about? Oscar's father? La Inca's childhood? Yunior's own experiences in the Dominican Republic?
5. Is Yunior a trustworthy narrator? Where does he get his information? What's his motive in telling Oscar's story? Why do you think Diaz doesn't reveal Yunior's exact name and role until mid-way through the book?
6. Is Diaz's tale about Oscar? Or is it about Yunior?

7. How would you classify this novel: Coming of age story? Immigrant fiction? Historical fiction? What difference does a classification make to a reader? In what category do you think Diaz would put his novel?
8. Diaz draws particular attention to the situation of black Dominicans, black by skin color, descended from Africa, but living in a culture that vilifies the physical traits of Africans, from kinky hair to dark skin. How did Oscar and Lola deal with their blackness? What about their mother, Hypatia Belicia Cabral?
9. Oscar Wao is a name his peers at college give him after an episode in which he dresses up as Doctor Who for Halloween, resembling oddly Oscar Wilde in Yuniór's opinion. Oscar Wao, what do you think Diaz hoped to establish by using this name in the title? What do you think "Wao" means to Oscar?
10. Nuevo York is, according to La Inca as she ponders sending Beli away: "...nothing more and nothing less than a pais overrun by gansters, putas, and no-accounts. Its cities swarmed with machines and industry, as thick with sinvergueneria as Santo Domingo was with heat..." Why then is New York appealing to her as a place for Beli to go?
11. Diaz plays with stereotypes of Dominican male virility, with Oscar asking roommate Yuniór one night, for example, "I have heard from a reliable source that no Dominican male has ever died a virgin. You who have experience in these matters--do you think this is true?" What do you think Diaz' motive is in emphasizing such stereotypes? What do you think the ending says about these stereotypes, when Oscar finally loses his virginity?
12. Oscar and other members of his family have recurring dreams of a faceless man. Why do you think Diaz uses this motif? Is there anyone in the narrative who is faceless?
13. Oscar's death is no surprise, or is it? Did you expect Oscar to die the way he does? If not, what did Diaz' narrative lead you to expect?
14. When asked whether he was making direct political statements about contemporary America in the book, Diaz replied, "I just can't imagine that one is a writer in the Americas and not in some way directly confronting the enormous, the tremendous, the colossal power of the United States and the consequences of that power. Even if you're writing a comedic novel, something of this is going to leak in somewhere. I think for me, it's not so much that any more political or any less political than anyone else. My problem was that I was writing a book in the Americas. And no matter how much you try, you are eventually going to graze against that question, what it means to live in a world where there's one country that is so asymmetrically powerful and what are the consequences of that power? It's a hard question to avoid." Did you make any connections between Diaz' text and today's political climate?

## **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 mad 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](http://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’ fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *African Voices*, *Best American Short Stories* (1996, 1997, 1999, 2000), in *Pushcart Prize XXII* and in *The O’Henry Prize Stories*, 2009.

## **AUTHOR LINKS AND INTERVIEWS** (through October 2008)

[www.junotdiaz.com](http://www.junotdiaz.com) official author website

Rutgers University’s brief on 1992 graduate Diaz’s successes:

<http://ur.rutgers.edu/archive/spotlight-diaz/>

*Omnivoracious*’ interview in April 2008, just after Diaz learned he had won the Pulitzer:

<http://www.omnivoracious.com/2008/04/junot-diaz-youv.html>

February 2007 article on Diaz’ lecture at Penn State:

<http://www.collegian.psu.edu/archive/2007/02/02-13-07tdc/02-13-07dnews-02.asp>

An interview with Diaz at a New Zealand authors and writers festival:

<http://library.christchurch.org.nz/Guides/GoodReads/WritersandReaders/2008/Auckland/JunotDiaz/>

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

### **Contemporary Dominican Literature**

Angie Cruz, author of *Soledad* (2001), and *Let it Rain Coffee* (2005), a self-described New York City Dominican, writes about the push-pull of race and homeland identity. Cruz is writing a screenplay for *Soledad*.

Julia Alvarez, raised in the Dominican Republic, writes broadly about Dominican-American culture, her family’s flight from Trujillo’s dictatorship in the 1960s, and her recent efforts with an organic coffee farm in the D.R. Alvarez, a professor at Middlebury College, writes across genres, from poetry to children’s books to novels. See [www.Juliaalvarez.com](http://www.Juliaalvarez.com) for a complete list of titles, including the well-known *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991).

### **Dominican Geography/History**

The Dominican Republic is on the eastern end of the island of Hispaniola, bordered by Haiti on the west, and the North Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea on the north and south respectively. The Dominican Republic is about twice the size of the state of New Hampshire and as of 2005, had a population of approximately 8.9 million. The ethnic breakdown of the population is 16% white, 11% black, and 73% mixed. See the online CIA factbook for more information.

Diaz' first footnote of the novel alerts you to the import of the history lessons he is about to impart, with evident sarcasm and a playful voice: "For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history," he begins, "Trujillo, one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality. A portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulatto who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era Haberdashery..."

Rafael Trujillo took over control of the Dominican Republic in 1930, leaping swiftly from leader of the armed forces to President in the wake of a revolution, and quickly emerging as, in Diaz' words, an almost supernatural dictator. He was assassinated in 1961, snapping a forty-year long streak with no democratic elections.

### **Websites for further study**

*Lonely Planet* Travel Guide for the Dominican Republic offers a short readable history:

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/dominican-republic/history>

A timeline from the BBC offers a chronology that begins with Christopher Columbus' visit in 1492 and ends in the present <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1217771.stm>

Find links to Dominican newspapers at <http://www.dominicanrepubliconline.net/>

A news site for Dominican expats carries Dominican news and information

<http://www.theadscene.com/>

### **Selected recent books/articles on Dominican History and Culture**

*The Imagined Island: History, Identity and Utopia in Hispaniola*, by Pedro L. San Miguel, 2005.

*A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York after 1950*, by Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, 2008.

For scholarly recent works on the Dominican Republic, check out the Library of Congress *Handbook of Latin American Studies* at <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/hlas/>

*Miami Herald*, 2007 series, A Rising Voice: Afro-Latin Americans, "Black Denial," June 13, 2007

Black Dominicans in America discuss their learned rejection of black traits, from hair to body shape. Online at <http://www.miamiherald.com/multimedia/news/afrolatin/part2/index.html>

*New York Times*, "Now Boarding, Dreams," Nov. 18, 2001

Reporter Seth Kugel looks at the flood of Dominican-Americans who board airplanes every holiday season to return to the island, bearing gifts from New York City. American Airlines flight 587 was headed to Santo Domingo from JFK Airport in New York when it crashed in early November 2001, killing all 260 people on board, 90% of them were of Dominican descent according to Wikipedia's entry on the crash.



The Massachusetts Book Awards are a program of the Massachusetts Center for the Book, the Commonwealth Affiliate of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress. Visit us on the web at [www.massbook.org](http://www.massbook.org).