

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Diaz

Essay by Jeffrey Mays

Junot Diaz' debut publication was the 1996 short story collection *Drown*. It received wide acclaim for its edgy, streetwise style and provocative themes. But critics and literature circles were beginning to wonder if Diaz could pull off a novel-length piece after a decade of silence from him. Then in 2007 our book was published to great praise.

Oscar Wao, in addition to winning the 2008 Pulitzer Prize, garnered numerous other awards: The John Sargent Sr. First Novel Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize for Fiction, the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award, and the Massachusetts Book Award for Fiction. The book was selected by Time and New York Magazine as the best novel of 2007, and it was chosen for best novel of 2007 list by the St Louis Post-Dispatch, Los Angeles Times, Village Voice, Christian Science Monitor, New Statesman, Washington Post, Publishers Weekly, and over 25 other publications.

Diaz himself has received numerous awards and fellowships and currently a creative writing professor at MIT. And he recently published another short story collection called *This is How You Lose Her*.

I do not wish to review or recap the storyline here as I hope there is no need to do so for a book as brief as and easy to read as this one. I hope tonight we can talk about the book's plot and the important themes it addresses: family dynamics, DR culture, oppression torture and tyranny in 20th century Latin America, and fantasy role-playing games.

But I will rather say a few words in this introductory letter by way of justification for reading this book in case there are any, and by historical precedent there will surely be some, who will express, if not outright protest at being subjected to such post-postmodern tripe, some level of annoyance or at the least the criticism that Athenaeum seems to have wandered away from the wealth of the canon of western literature, and has sunk to wallowing in the mire of less-inspired, less-enduring fiction, fiction that lacks the depth, the personal relevance, the grand themes of books of unanimous approval such as *Death in Venice* or *Invisible Man*.

To such, I would defend the book by saying the following: *Oscar Wao* is indeed new: less than ten years old. But it is experimental and daring in that it uses the vernacular of New Jersey Dominicano street talk. The lusts and aspirations of the characters, their dreams and fears, are all genuine and believable. Insofar as literature is a means to understanding others and a channel into worlds that we do not experience on our own, then this book is as valid and important as any novel. We at this table are no strangers to vulgarity, so if any were disturbed by the language (perhaps more graphic and pervasive than any book we've read) or the sexuality (certainly as blunt and ubiquitous as any we've read, *Gravity's Rainbow* notwithstanding) then I invite such to acquiesce, to participate in the world as it is today, to put on your toughskins and engage (if not physically then at least intellectually) with people, to sup with prostitutes and tax collectors and oppressors, to let them touch you, and not to shy away from narrative that is coarse.

What if this book has been written exactly the same except with a straight narrator's voice? The book would have been passed over as just another immigrant story, losing its uniqueness and special poignancy. Nor would it speak to modern audiences as it does.

To those who lament the absence of any redemptive elements, I say compare the book to the one we just read, *Under The Volcano*, to *Rabbit, Run*, to *American Pastoral*, or to *Blood Meridian*, genius books in which redemptive notes are obscure at best. I have begun to wonder if the longing for “redemptiveness” in fiction is not simply a grown-up, perhaps Christianized version of longing for a happy ending (I am tweaking noses here to stir up our coming discussion.) What we look for in literature need not be redemption all the time. What IS essential is truth: a true sharing of souls, sharing of experiences, by one who has a very different experience from us, so that we can broaden our own horizons, so that we can become better human beings. And by better I mean more able to empathize, having more compassion, understanding situations with greater insight and perspective. Rightly digested, such exposure has the power increasingly to inoculate one against prejudice and insularity, against jingoism, against the shockingly inappropriate pride one can have for one’s own bestial tribe against another of greater morality and virtue. (Would that the expansion-yielding benefits of literature infuse America’s political debate.)

So there is your redemption: not in reading about exemplars of virtue necessarily, but the redemption of the reader as she or he grows in moderation, altruism, and circumspection.

Another reason we read is for pleasure. And this book was delightful. And painful. In the poignancy of the plight of the central characters. Oscar himself is a humorous character as is Yunion the narrator. Lola is the consummate teenaged runaway disconnected from her mother’s suffering, seeing only her mother’s monstrosity. The book bristles with the chilling peril of life under a tyrant, and artfully, blends that setting with a modern urban immigrant culture in a very authentic style and setting. And did any of us not want Oscar to finally get laid in the end with the love of his life Ybon? Maybe it strikes against some sensibilities, but it was without question an enjoyable read on top of its broadening potential.

So I say that not only have we encountered new peoples and cultures in both the immigrant and native Dominicans, but we have observed how circumstances in the case of Belicia, first of poverty and abuse, and later affluence and privilege, formed her personality. In the case of Belicia and Lola we have seen a new portrayal of the age-old problem of how a feminine psyche can be narcissistically molded by her innate gifts of beauty and desirability. We have read about how loneliness, juxtaposed with physical torture, is its own psychological torture. And we have heard a story of love and desire so driven and self-destructive that it overcame distance and beatings and the prostitute’s social stigma, and risking and ultimately finding death, to be realized.

Oscar Wao is a character that we should remember and with whom we should sympathize when we see such characters around us. My thanks to Mr. Diaz for a most enjoyable and enlightening book.