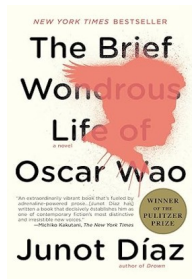




Lambda Sci-Fi

DC Area Gaylaxians



The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao
By Junot Díaz
Discussed August 2009

Main Players

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oscar de Leon, aka Oscar Wao • Lola – Oscar's sister • Hypatia Belicia Cabral – Oscar and Lola's mother • La Inca – DR family member who took in Beli as a wounded girl and raised her 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yunior – Oscar's friend and one-time roommate • Abelard Luis Cabral • Trujillo – dictator of the DR • Fuku and zafa • Ybon – Oscar's last girlfriend
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Novel Structure

The novel is divided up into different sections that center around specific relatives of Oscar Wao's family:

- 1974-1987 - "GhettoNerd at the End of the World" - Oscar Wao
- 1982-1985 - "Wildwood" - Lola
- 1955-1962 - "The Three Heartbreaks of Belicia Cabral" - Hypatia "Belicia" Cabral
- 1988-1992 - "Sentimental Education" - Oscar Wao and Yunior
- 1944-1946 - "Poor Abelard" - Abelard Luis Cabral
- 1992-1995 - "Land of the Lost" - Oscar Wao
- "The Final Voyage" - Oscar Wao
- "The End of the Story" - Oscar Wao and Yunior

Discussion Questions

1. I read somewhere that this novel takes Geek Chic to a new level. Do the references to D&D, Lord of the Rings, Comic Books, etc. make it more exciting or real for SF aficionados? Does it detract from the mundane crowd? Or is there something there for everyone? Is this a Geek Chic novel?

2. Throughout the novel, Spanish words and phrases appear unaccompanied by their English translations. Did this work? 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)?
3. 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?
4. 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? Did you read them? Did you like them?
5. 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?
6. 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? Is there a parallel with growing up nerdy in today's society?
7. 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? Why is Yunior “writing” this book? What is zafa?
8. 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? How are they the same?
9. 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? Any parallels with “Chronicle of a Death Foretold” by Gabriel García Márquez?
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, Beli, 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? How does Yunior or Lola know what happened? Is Oscar's family really cursed? Do you think that believing you are cursed affects how you live and what happens to you? Could either Beli or Oscar have escaped their fate? Why does La Inca constantly remind Beli that she is a Cabral, her father was a doctor, her mother was a nurse? How does the fuku figure in La Inca's life?
13. The image of a mongoose with golden eyes and the 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? (BTW, Mongooses were introduced in the early 1800s to control rats in the sugar fields, and quickly got out of hand. Fuku?)
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? Yunior? Belicia? The entire de Leon and Cabral family? The fukú? What internal story did you like best, and was one more important than another?
15. 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?
16. During the course of the book, many of the characters try to teach Oscar many things—especially Yunior, 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 Yunior, and the other characters if anything?
17. This novel riffs off of Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" in more ways than the title. Is it lucky to die fulfilled at the top of your form? What does that say about the fuku? Does this have anything to do with the foreshadowed package to end the fuku that never arrives? Why didn't it arrive?
18. Do you think this book deserved the Pulitzer Prize?