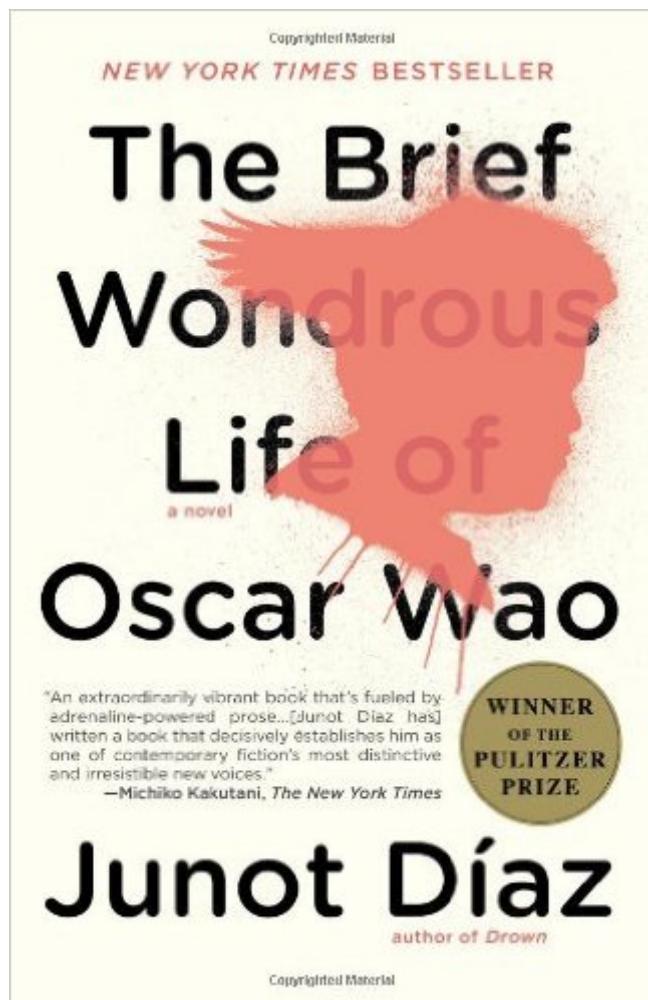


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# The Brief Wondrous Life Of Oscar Wao



## Synopsis

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 fuk" "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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest."Meet Oscar de León. Once upon a time, in elementary school, Oscar was a slick Dominican kid who seemed to have a typical life ahead of him. Then, around the time he hit puberty, Oscar gained a whole lot of weight, became awkward both physically and socially, and got deeply interested in things that made him an outcast among his peers (sci-fi novels, comics, Dungeons & Dragons, writing novels, etc.). A particularly unfortunate Dr. Who Halloween costume earns him the nickname Oscar Wao for the costume's resemblance to another Oscar: playwright Oscar Wilde (Wao being a Dominican spin on the surname). His few friends are embarrassed by him, girls want nothing to do with him, and everywhere he goes Oscar finds nothing but derision and hostility. And he's not the only person in his family suffering through life: his mother, a former beauty, has been

ravaged by illness, bad love affairs, and worry regarding her two children; and his sister Lola, another intense beauty, has been cursed with a nomadic soul and her mother's poor taste in men. The kicker about the de León family?

Before writing this review, I read many of the fine reviews that other readers had previously submitted, and now I want to throw in on some of the oft repeated comments: 1. Many readers objected to the heavy use of slang. Rather than offend me, I found the use of slang lyrical and realistic. 2. Like the prior comment, I enjoyed the use of spanglish. My Spanish is pretty good, and the spanglish added color and depth to the novel for me. However, the spanglish was hardly essential, and I was able to skip over those words I didn't know without any loss of enjoyment. 3. I really enjoyed the footnotes, and thought they added depth and uniqueness to the novel. One of the themes of the novel was the interaction of larger historical events (the demonic Trujillo regime) and the life of this family. In this regard, the footnotes were essential. Moreover, I appreciated the unique mixture of this "street" novel and these very detailed historical references. At the same time, I was surprised to see that there weren't more reviewers that shared my lack of interest in the thoughts and fate of Oscar, the main character. As hard as I tried, I had a hard time empathizing with this character. For me, the best part of a well-written, well developed novel is the opportunity to inhabit the mind, spirit and experiences of another human being, to feel for them, to feel what they feel. For several reasons, I just couldn't get there in this book. 1. Here, the narrator was neither an omniscient voice, nor the main character, but instead, Yunior, another character who related the facts. To me, Yunior's narration was without much insight or understanding. While it was stylistically interesting, it did little to bring Oscar to life. 2.

I loved Diaz's short story collection *Drown*, and like almost everyone else who read it, have been eagerly waiting years for his next book. Now, something like a decade later, Diaz brings a character from that collection (Yunior) back to narrate the family history of his Rutgers roommate Oscar (who is also the brother of Yunior's sometime girlfriend). This tale begins with Oscar's grandfather and ends up encompassing quite a bit of the modern history of the Dominican Republic. And although the story hopscotches back and forth in time and location quite a bit, Diaz has complete command of his narrative. To be fair, sometimes the story feels more like "A People's History of the Dominican Republic." than a novel about a geeky kid from New Jersey. Not that this is a bad thing -- Diaz manages to get at the political, economic, and psychological forces that brought so many Dominican immigrants to the U.S. over the last fifty years via captivating and dexterous prose. The

dominant theme of this multigenerational story is the "fuku" (curse) Oscar's family lives under. (Of course, as Yunior points out, every Dominican family believes itself to be cursed by the fuku americanus, a curse brought by European colonialists which has turned the Caribbean Eden into a despotic prison to be escaped.)s The fuku first hits Oscar's grandfather, an upper-class doctor undone by the rise of the Trujillo thugocracy (equal to that of Saddam Hussein in horror inflicted on its subjects). His daughter (Oscar's mother) faces her own tragedy due to the fuku, and is the bridge between life in the D.R. and life in America, as she escapes to New York. Her children, Oscar and Lola, represent the generation born and bred in the U.S. -- both connected to, and apart from their Dominican heritage.

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