

Romance out of reach

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THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO. By Junot Diaz.
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Paterson, New Jersey, is a region in decline. Corrugated steel shacks, huge petrochemical drums and low-grade housing sit under the roar of aeroplanes taking off from nearby Newark Airport to, presumably, happier places. It seems an unlikely setting for anything wondrous, but Junot Diaz in his much anticipated first novel finds wonder to spare. This world - one of dozens of the immigrant communities teeming within present-day Paterson - is Diaz's focus, and it becomes in his hands a place of ineffable possibility.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is funny, lyrical and full of a variety of polyglot discourses and jumbled geographies. Dominican-American argot, hip-hop slang, Spanish patois and high-culture words such as "provenance" and "homo-erotic" swirl around sites as varied as Middle Earth, Gamma World, the cane fields of Hispaniola and a Japanese mega-mall across the Hudson River from New York City. It is in that mall, as an adolescent, that the protagonist comes to declare his love to Ana Obregon, one of several young women he unsuccessfully woos. He is, characteristically, a stranger in a strange land:

It was where he came for his anime tapes and his mecha models. Ordered them both chicken katsu curries and then sat in the large cafeteria with the view of Manhattan, the only gaijin in the whole place.

Seconds later, Oscar ruins everything, telling Ana, "You have beautiful breasts", in a stab at sexual bluntness that both belies and reveals his awkward innocence. Ana's abusive boyfriend, returned from the Army, soon brings her back into line, but Oscar's compulsion to dream of love never stops. It is the urge to seek fresh possibilities that drives the novel's somewhat scattered plots.

The story needs to work this way for its ill-fated hero, otherwise it would be too depressing. Obese, painfully nerdy, dark-skinned and poor, Oscar Cabral ("Wao", which sounds vaguely East Asian, is a mishearing of "Wilde", it turns out) talks "like a Star Trek computer" and fits in nowhere comfortably, neither among his own Dominican people nor with the dominant American teenage culture.

He gorges himself on alternate-universe fantasies and lives for love - girls are his "Alpha and the Omega, the DC and the Marvel". He endears himself to us with his implausible expectancy: he is a Don Quixote in America's armpit, tilting at oil refineries and cheap furniture warehouses with desperate, benighted sincerity: "My favorite", relates the narrator, "was the day on the E bus when he informed some hot morena, If you were in my game I would give you an eighteen in Charisma". An allusion to the Dungeons & Dragons board game, it is a dreadful pick-up line.

But this is no mere tale of a sweet loser. Diaz persuasively develops Oscar's alienation within a sweeping historical and political context. Abandoned by his father and left with his mercurial older sister, Lola, and his fiercely angry mother, Belicia (the three emigrated to Paterson from the Dominican Republic when Oscar was very young), he has one fleeting

golden age as a boy, when, for a few days, he enjoys the favours of two girls, Maritza and Olga. His romantic life goes downhill from there. And because of the fuku americanus, a curse on the western hemisphere and all its inhabitants engendered by Christopher Columbus's "discovery" of the New World, doom is pre-ordained. Oscar's reach for romance always fails - the fuku demands it. As he grows fatter and less attractive, spectacled and more alienated from his peers, he becomes what the book's main narrator, Yunior (Oscar's room-mate at Rutgers University), calls a watcher or pariguayo, someone who looks on from the sidelines at parties while the other guys get the girls. "If you looked in the Dictionary of Dominican Things", a footnote tells us, "the entry for pariguayo would include a wood carving of Oscar." The novel's footnotes are often very funny, mocking rather than self-consciously postmodern.

Although the title suggests a single biography, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is also about Lola and Belicia's explosive lives. Their complications emerge in the novel's rather knotty multi-perspective books, chapters and subsections, which veer widely across time and space. The two women's stories also provide a succinct and memorable account of the tragic twentieth-century history of the Dominican Republic, in particular of the rule of Rafael Trujillo, the "sadistic, pig-eyed" dictator who oversaw one of the Caribbean's most infamous cults of personality and ruled with a manic brutality. Like Oscar, his sister and mother find themselves chronically at odds with their Dominican past. Lola cultivates disaffection, becoming "a Siouxsie and the Banshees-loving punk chick" whom the Puerto Ricans and morenos around Paterson call "Blacula" and "devil bitch". His abusive mother is the novel's most heartbreaking victim, but we see how her hardness (she beats Oscar and Lola at the slightest excuse and drives Lola to run away) has its roots in the Trujillo regime's cruelty.

Junot Diaz's much-acclaimed 1996 story collection, *Drown* (where we first met Yunior), established him as one of the most interesting writers of his time, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* was a critical sensation when it was published in the United States last autumn. One theme in the American reviews was how this book was "worth the wait". The underlying idea seemed to be that the years Diaz spent writing it were linked to an increase in quality, as though writers toiled at a constant rate, ever burnishing their masterpieces.

But Diaz demonstrates here that novels not only need to be built, they must also be carefully grown. The book's great virtue lies in its accretions of poetic coincidence, an organic consonance in imagery, language and narrative.

The notion of "watching", for instance, and the different words for it, plays out on many levels - linguistic, narrative, political, personal - so that we are left as readers admiring the way a work of art can imitate, if not reproduce, the wonder of a single small life in New Jersey.