

Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (Diaz)

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Discussion Questions

1. Throughout the novel, Spanish words and phrases appear unaccompanied by their English translations. What is the effect of this seamless blending of Spanish and English? 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)?

2. 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?

3. 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?

4. 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?

5. 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?

6. 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?

7. 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?

8. 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?

10. In one of the footnotes the narrator posits that writers and dictators are not simply natural antagonists, as Salman Rushdie has said, but are actually in competition with one another because they are essentially in the same business (p. 97). What does he mean by that? How can a writer be a kind of dictator? Is the telling of a story somehow inherently tyrannical? Do you think Díaz actually believes that he is in some way comparable to Trujillo? If so, does Díaz try to avoid or subvert that in any way?

11. 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, Belicia, 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?

12. 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?

13. 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?

14. The image of a mongoose with golden eyes and the a 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?

15. 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? Yuniór? Belicia? The entire de Leon and Cabral family? The fukú?

16. 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?

17. During the course of the book, many of the characters try to teach Oscar many things—especially Yuniór, 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 Yuniór, and the other characters if anything?

(Questions issued by publisher.)

Also read the [interview with Diaz](http://us.penguin.com/static/html/features/diaz.html) (<http://us.penguin.com/static/html/features/diaz.html>), in which he talks about *Brief Wondrous Life*, on the Penguin Publishing Group website.

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