

The Miami Herald

Posted on Sat, Nov. 10, 2012

Junot Díaz evolves with 'This is How You Lose Her'

By Connie Ogle

cogle@MiamiHerald.com



Pedro Portal / EL Nuevo Herald

Pulitzer Prize winning author Junot Díaz, reads from "This is how you lose her" during a Books and Books presentation at The Coral Gables Congregational Church. September 22, 2012.

"I'm not a bad guy," is the first thing Yunior, Junot Díaz's favorite protagonist, tells us about himself in Díaz's latest book. The statement is precisely the sort of dissembling lie a disreputable man would tell. Is it the truth or merely a hope to which the increasingly desperate Yunior clings?

Díaz, who has lived with Yunior and his idiosyncrasies for so long — three books and many headaches and heartaches now — agrees that the answer is complicated.

"He's so difficult," Díaz says. "He's just so difficult! There's something knotted about him. But he's human in his vulnerability; he's human in his awfulness. He's human in his struggle for something better than his life, even in his stubborn unwillingness to head in the direction of his better self."

Díaz, who will talk about Yunior and *This is How You Lose Her* (Riverhead, \$26.95) Monday at Miami Book Fair International, first introduced Yunior in his acclaimed short story collection *Drown*. Eleven years later, Yunior reappeared to narrate the magnetic novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which blended savage Dominican history with geek culture, earned Díaz a National Book Critics Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize and almost certainly contributed to Díaz's receiving of a MacArthur "genius" grant.

Now Yunior has returned in a second collection of linked stories about love and loss. In them Yunior, whose family has emigrated from the Dominican Republic to New Jersey, faces his father's abandonment, his older brother's death from cancer, his own thoughtless betrayal of women and fear for the future. He breaks hearts. He gets his own broken. He writes: "This is what I know: People's hopes go on forever."

What is it about this guy that draws Díaz back to him?

"I knew immediately after *Drown* I wanted to write this crazy story about a Dominican cheater," Díaz says, adding that he started the new book immediately on the heels of *Drown*. In the meantime, *Oscar Wao* intervened. "It took forever. I didn't think this book

was moving forward. It took years for each story to come together. It was kind of a wild thing. I wasn't expecting it to take this long, honestly."

Yunior is a cheater; in the book's opening story, *The Sun, the Moon, the Stars*, he's scrambling to keep his girlfriend from leaving him after she learns of his infidelity ("I cheated on her with this chick who had tons of eighties freestyle hair. Didn't tell Magda about it, either. You know how it is. A smelly bone like that, better off buried in the backyard of your life. Magda only found out because homegirl wrote her a f----- letter.") He's crushed when Magda leaves him, yet continues to pursue his *sucias*, sabotaging his relationships.

Díaz has taken some heat from critics for what they perceive as misogyny in the stories, but Miami author Edwidge Danticat says Yunior's confessions have the ring of truth.

"You feel as though the character is speaking directly to you," she says. "I think if you grow up in a certain environment in the DR or in immigrant New York or poor in New Jersey, you recognize these characters. They feel familiar to you, even though he brings a different light to them. I know he's been criticized for some of the raw honesty of the characters, especially the male characters. I know him well enough, and I feel like as a reader and a friend I understand the project he's engaged in as a man. ... He couldn't be more feminist-minded in what he does.

"These characters he's dissecting and leaving on the table raw and opened up to each reader. ... and to him, every reader has a right to his response good or bad. It's like you're on a bus. Some people you're going to like and some you're not."

Díaz, who has also taken some heat for Yunior's constant use of the N word, has an explanation for the character's self-destructive behavior: "I can quote a woman friend of mine and tell you to think about the culture we live in. ... the average guys in the neighborhood I grew up in, the only place they are encouraged to be vulnerable is in a woman's bed. There's a way of reading this book where you can read it and say, 'No, this is nonstop misogyny,' but I think the best part of books is their complexity permits a wide range of interpretation. Otherwise it's no longer a book. I've always loved games and reader participation [in books]. As a writer I want to read books with participation in them. Texts that don't challenge you, I think of those as entertainment. A book like this tries to challenge you to come and play."

One of Díaz's best tricks in *This Is How You Lose Her* comes hidden in *Otravida, Otrevez*, the one story in the collection not narrated by Yunior. Yasmin, who works in a New Jersey hospital laundry, tells of her relationship with a man who has a family back in the Dominican Republic. "He claims that he stopped writing to her the year before, but that's not true. Every month I drop by his apartment with his laundry and read the new letters she has sent, the ones he stashes under his bed." The man is Yunior's father, the story written by Yunior trying to make sense of his past.

"It's Yunior the writer, imagining the woman he would be least empathetic to," Díaz explains, adding that only close readers of his books and "maybe grad students" are going to realize this fact. "She kept his father from him, created the first wound in him."

Is such insightful work a sign Yunior is slowly growing into a better man? Díaz calls the book open-ended, but the self-pitying Yunior of *The Sun, the Moon, the Stars* has encountered self-awareness by the final story, *A Cheater's Guide to Love*. He's not the same man: "You are surprised at what a f----- chicken---- coward you are. It kills you to admit it but it's true."

Díaz, meanwhile, is resigned to the "enormous amount of pressure" likely to haunt him until his next book is published. And nobody piles on the pressure like he does to himself.

"I live at the bottom of the sea where the titanic compression of the ocean is upon me," he jokes. "What's a little pressure? But you know, I always tell people: Books are never late to the party. A few years later, you will not remember how long it took a book to come out."

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