Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction

Junot Díaz

The BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE of OSCAR WAO

'Exotic, original and spirited, it's written with huge energy and heart.'

GUARDIAN
They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. Fului americanus, or more colloquially, fukú—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. Also called the fukú of the Admiral because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its great European victims; despite “discovering” the New World the Admiral died miserable and syphilitic, hearing (dique) divine voices. In Santo Domingo, the Land He Loved Best (what Oscar, at the end, would call the Ground Zero of the New World), the Admiral’s very name has become synonymous with both kinds of fukú, little and large; to say his name aloud or even to hear it is to invite calamity on the heads of you and yours.

No matter what its name or provenance, it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world, and we’ve all been in the shit ever since. Santo Domingo might be fukú’s Kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not.

But the fukú ain’t just ancient history, a ghost story from the past with no power to scare. In my parents’ day the fukú was real as shit, something your everyday person could believe in. Everybody knew someone who’d been eaten by a fukú, just like everybody knew somebody who worked up in the Palacio. It was in the air, you could say, though, like all the most important things on the Island, not something folks really talked about. But in those elder days, fukú had it good; it even had a hypeman of sorts, a high priest, you could say. Our then dictator-for-life Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina. No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse’s servant or its master, its agent or its principal, but it was clear he and it had an understanding, that them two was tight. It was believed, even in educated circles, that anyone who plotted against Trujillo would incur a fukú most powerful, down to the seventh generation and beyond. If you even thought a bad thing about Trujillo, fuiá, a hurricane would sweep your family out to sea, fuiá, a boulder would fall out of a clear sky and squash you, fuiá, the shrimp you ate today was the cramp that killed you tomorrow. Which explains why everyone who tried to assassinate him always got done, why those dudes who finally did buck him down all died so horrifically. And what about fucking Kennedy? He was the one who green-lighted the assassination of Trujillo in 1961, who ordered the CIA to deliver arms to the Island. Bad move, cap’n. For what Kennedy’s intelligence experts failed to tell him was what every single Dominican, from the richest jabao in Mao to the poorest güey in El Buey, from the oldest anciano sanmecorisco to the littlest carajito in San Francisco, knew: that whoever killed Trujillo, their family would suffer a fukú so dreadful it would make the one that attached itself to the Admiral jojote in comparison. You want a final conclusive answer to the Warren Commission’s question, Who killed JFK? Let me, your humble Watcher, reveal once and for all the God’s Honest Truth: It wasn’t the mob or LBJ or the ghost of Marilyn Fucking Monroe. It wasn’t aliens or the KGB or a lone gunman. It wasn’t the Hunt Brothers of Texas or Lee Harvey or the Trilateral Commission. It was Trujillo; it was the fukú. Where in coñazo do you think the so-called Curse of the Kennedys comes from? How about
Vietnam? Why do you think the greatest power in the world lost its first war to a Third World country like Vietnam? I mean, Negro, please. It might interest you that just as the U.S. was ramping up its involvement in Vietnam, LBJ launched an illegal invasion of the Dominican Republic (April 28, 1965). (Santo Domingo was Iraq before Iraq was Iraq.) A smashing military success for the U.S., and many of the same units and intelligence teams that took part in the “democratization” of Santo Domingo were immediately shipped off to Saigon. What do you think these soldiers, technicians, and spooks carried with them, in their rucks, in their suitcases, in their shirt pockets, on the hair inside their nostrils, caked up around their shoes? Just a little gift from my people to America, a small repayment for an unjust war. That’s right, folks. Fukú.

Which is why it’s important to remember fukú doesn’t always strike like lightning. Sometimes it works patiently, drowning a nigger by degrees, like with the Admiral or the U.S. in paddies outside of Saigon. Sometimes it’s slow and sometimes it’s fast. It’s dooms- ish in that way, makes it harder to put a finger on, to brace yourself against. But be assured: like Darkseid’s Omega Effect, like Mordor’s bane, no matter how many turns and digressions this shit might take, it always—and I mean always—gets its man.

Whether I believe in what many have described as the Great American Doom is not really the point. You live as long as I did in the heart of fukú country, you hear these kinds of tales all the time. Everybody in Santo Domingo has a fukú story knocking around in their family. I have a twelve-daughter uncle in the Cibao who believed that he’d been cursed by an old lover never to have male children. Fukú. I have a tía who believed she’d been denied happiness because she’d laughed at a rival’s funeral. Fukú. My paternal abuelo believes that diaspora was Trujillo’s payback to the pueblo that betrayed him. Fukú.

It’s perfectly fine if you don’t believe in these “superstitions.” In fact, it’s better than fine—it’s perfect. Because no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you.

A couple weeks ago, while I was finishing this book, I posted the thread fukú on the DRI forum, just out of curiosity. These days I’m nerdy like that. The talkback blew the fuck up. You should see how many responses I’ve gotten. They just keep coming in. And not just from Domos. The PuertoRocks want to talk about fufus, and the Haitians have some shit just like it. There are a zillion of these fukú stories. Even my mother, who almost never talks about Santo Domingo, has started sharing hers with me.

As I’m sure you’ve guessed by now, I have a fukú story too. I wish I could say it was the best of the lot—fukú number one—but I can’t. Mine ain’t the scariest, the clearest, the most painful, or the most beautiful.

It just happens to be the one that’s got its fingers around my throat.

I’m not entirely sure Oscar would have liked this designation. Fukú story. He was a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, believed that that was the kind of story we were all living in. He’d ask: What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?

But now that I know how it all turns out, I have to ask, in turn: What more fukú?

One final final note, Toto, before Kansas goes bye-bye: traditionally in Santo Domingo
anytime you mentioned or overheard the Admiral’s name or anytime a fúkú reared its many heads there was only one way to prevent disaster from coiling around you, only one surefire counterspell that would keep you and your family safe. Not surprisingly, it was a word. A simple word (followed usually by a vigorous crossing of index fingers).

Zafa.

It used to be more popular in the old days, bigger, so to speak, in Macondo than in McOndo. There are people, though, like my tio Miguel in the Bronx who still zafa everything. He’s old-school like that. If the Yanks commit an error in the late innings it’s zafa; if somebody brings shells in from the beach it’s zafa; if you serve a man parcha it’s zafa. Twenty-four-hour zafa in the hope that the bad luck will not have had time to cohere. Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain’t a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell.

1. For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history: Trujillo, one of the twentieth century’s most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality. A portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era haberdashery, Trujillo (also known as El Jefe, the Failed Castle Thief, and Fuente) came to control nearly every aspect of the DR’s political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror; treated the country like it was a plantation and he was the master.

   At first glance, he was just your prototypical Latin American caudillo, but his power was terminal in ways that few historians or writers have ever truly captured or, I would argue, imagined. He was our Saaron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator, a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up. Famous for changing ALL THE NAMES OF ALL THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican Republic to honor himself (Pico Duarte became Pico Trujillo, and Santo Domingo de Guzmán, the first and oldest city in the New World, became Ciudad Trujillo); for making ill monopolies out of every slice of the rational patrimony (which quickly made him one of the wealthiest men on the planet); for building one of the largest military bases in the hemisphere (dude had bomber wings, for fuck’s sake); for fucking every hot girl in sight, even the wives of his subordinates, thousands upon thousands upon thousands of women; for expecting, no, insisting on absolute veneration from his pueblo (tellingly, the national slogan was

   “Dios y Trujillo”; for running the country like it was a Marine boot camp; for stripping friends and allies of their positions and properties for no reason at all; and for his almost supernatural abilities.

   Outstanding accomplishments include: the 1937 genocide against the Haitian and Haitian-Dominican community; one of the longest, most damaging U.S. backed dictatorships in the Western Hemisphere (and if we Latin types are skillful at anything it’s tolerating U.S.-backed dictators, so you know this was a hard-earned victory, the chilenos and the argentinos are still appealing); the creation of the first modern kleptocracy (Trujillo was Mobutu before Mobutu was Mobutu); the systematic bribing of American senators; and, last but not least, the forging of the Dominican peoples into a modern state (did what his Marine trainers, during the Occupation, were unable to do).

2. Here’s one for you conspiracy-minded fools: on the night that John Kennedy, Jr., and Carolyn Bessette and her sister Lauren went down in their Piper Saratoga, John-John’s father’s favorite domestic, Providencia Parédez, dominicana, was in Martha’s Vineyard cooking up for John-John his favorite dish: chicarrón de pollo. But fúkú always eats first and it eats alone.

3. “I am the Elder King: Mellkor, first and mightiest of all the Valar, who was before the world and made it. The shadow of my purpose lies upon Arda, and all that is in it bends slowly and surely to my will. But upon all whom you love my thought shall weigh as a cloud of Doom, and it shall bring them down into darkness and despair. Wherever they go, evil shall arise. Whenever they speak, their words shall bring ill counsel. Whatsoever they do shall turn against them. They shall die without hope, cursing both life and death.”