A few months ago, I got a chance to interview Junot Díaz, author of Drown and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. The place was Glide Memorial Church in the Tenderloin. This is a slightly cleaned-up version of that public conversation.

— Dave Eggers

DE: You live in Boston, and we have a non-profit up there, 826 Boston, modeled after our program here in the Mission. And a former student of mine went to school out there and took one of your classes at MIT. He later convinced you to work with what was then not even a non-profit yet—we were starting to form it—but he got you to come and speak at a high school called English High School. It’s a big public high school that keeps getting knocked down, threatening to be closed for lack of funding, and they get some really bad press, and the students were feeling really kind of beat down, and you came in and spoke. Do you remember that?

JD: Yeah, of course.

DE: I talked to one of the students afterward, a few weeks after your visit, and you sort of electrified him, and all the students. There was this one kid, Edwin Gonzalez, who after your visit decided he wanted to be a writer. And he wrote a piece in this book of student essays called I Wish They Would Have Asked Me that 826 Boston published, from the point of view of this girl thinking of committing suicide. Edwin’s ROTC, a big, popular guy, and yet he wrote this very delicate and beautiful piece of prose. Edwin went on to continue writing, he’s working on all kinds of things, and he’s now at Brandeis on a scholarship. I think you made a big difference in this guy’s life, and every time we have a fundraiser in Boston, Edwin speaks, and the first question he asks us is, “Is Junot going to be here?” Do you remember what you talked about during that visit, or what you talk about when you talk to high-schoolers?

JD: I’m sure, look, this is the kind of crowd that’s self-selected; in other words, if you’re here, chances are you’re in the arts or you work with young people—how many of you work with young people, raise your hand? All of you. See, that’s crazy. This audience knows the deal. It’s no mystery, and we know this, either we know it directly or indirectly: things have really shifted, not only in the culture of education but in the larger society. Young people are more isolated from adults than they’ve ever been. Unless you’re an adult who is getting paid to somehow be involved with young people, chances are most adults have no contact with young people that they’re not related to. And the isolation is kind of structural and it’s very deep and it’s very visible. It’s basically divided the country into people who have daily contact with youth who are not related to them, and people who don’t. And what’s sort of extraordinary about this is that it’s not fucking rocket science—young people need a tremendous amount of support and they need a tremendous amount of conversation and people to listen to them. And all you’ve got to do is just show the fuck up [laughter] and actually give a shit [more laughter]. I mean it—the severe lack that so many young people encounter means that very little seems like quite a lot. And that’s more of a side statement than anything about what I do when I meet young people—it’s just that they’re desperate for us, man. It’s that artificial isolation that people pay for the most, you know, and we pay a price, too, being removed from young people the way most people are. That young people are some sort of numerical abstraction has robbed the society of much of its strength. When I came to the U.S., they hadn’t gotten this whole thing that, you know, strange adults were gonna rape and kidnap you, they
hadn’t convinced us of that yet. Strange adults were someone you could possibly talk to—we hadn’t yet been divided by fear. The reality is that most of the raping, abuse, and attacking of young people was happening inside their families, but hey, no matter, it was easier to convince people to be scared of strangers. What I remember most from English High School was just sitting there and being like “Okay, I’m here. Let’s just chat. I’ll listen to you.”

DE: Now, after *Oscar Wao*, you must get so many requests for your presence. Everything from festivals to going to Europe for a new translation of your book to appearances like the one at English High School. How do you sort all of this out, how do you find time to write?

JD: First, I *don’t* have time to write. Second, I have a job, so it helps me cut shit out, and I teach, so that means, you know, there’s a real reason I can’t do all the cool stuff I would do if I was not working. And I spent ten years writing *Oscar Wao*, and I definitely didn’t spend the ten years being like, “I’m amazing! This has taken ten years, because this much genius requires a decade!” [laughter]

I spent the whole time, you know, fucked up, unhappy, really miserable and convinced that I’d ruined the whole thing, and all the stuff you get when you spend a really long time lost in the desert. I think more than anything, my basic lesson as an artist has been humility. So when I get a bunch of stuff, like “Do you want to come to this thing, do you want to come to that thing?” I say to myself “Do I want to go to this because I want applause? Do I want applause to make up for the fact that my mommy never held me enough? Or is this something where I feel I can be of service, is this an event where I can be of service?” That’s the way I choose.

DE: When you were here in 2006 for Intersection for the Arts’ adaptation of *Drown*, there was an interview that you did here with the *Chronicle*, where you talked about the pressure you felt when you were still finishing *Oscar Wao*. You used the word “deranged” to describe your state of mind after all those years working on it. I wondered if when you finished it, if you figured out a solution. That is, did you reach some new level of mastery, for lack of a better word?

JD: The crazy thing about the arts is it’s not like other stuff where you can build up muscle to help you with the next project. A friend of mine, he’s a surgeon, he’s like a combat surgeon in Iraq, and we grew up together and immigrated together, and he tells me every surgery makes you even more awesome for the next surgery. I’ve never felt that anything I’ve written has made me more awesome. So I think for me it’s going to be a struggle for whatever the next project is, and if you’re an artist and you work long enough at this, you begin to understand your rhythm, and what I’m beginning to understand is my rhythm is very slow. I felt like my first book was just an accident, but what I’m discovering now is that this is my rhythm. I take forever. Friends of mine hear this and they want to fucking throw themselves off a bridge, because the first ten years drove them crazy. Again I wish I could come up with something... Melville wrote *Moby-Dick*—does anyone remember how many months it took him? Like fourteen months! Fuck you, Melville!

DE: There’s that story about Edward P. Jones that says he spent ten years walking around with *The Known World* in his head. He didn’t put a word down that whole time, but when he finally figured it all out, he wrote the book in three or four months. I tell everybody that. You never know how long it’s going to take or how you’re going to do it, but once you realize your pace, I think that’s it. My last book [*What Is the What*] took four years, and this new one [*Zeitoun*] took three. It only drives you crazy if you think you should be faster for whatever reason.

JD: And we’re in a good field. Cause one of the best things about what we do is literally that the people who are into our shit are readers, and we’re not the only books they have on the shelf. So no matter how long and how much of a struggle it takes for us, there’s always young writers coming out with really good shit, and there’s always people like us who’ve published coming out with shit. Readers always have room and time for us. If you really believe in the readers as much as I do, there’s always going to be someone waiting for us. Maybe not the same crowd that read it the first time around, but a good group nevertheless. Readers can be really, really loyal—not all of them, but enough that it makes what we do wonderful.

DE: What was the difference in audience between *Drown* and *Oscar Wao*? *Oscar Wao* is one of those books that’s just caught fire in so many different directions. *Drown* was probably a smaller, more short story or grad student audience, whereas *Oscar Wao* was read so widely. Book clubs, high schools, everything. Was it a shock to see this new audience emerge?

JD: Definitely. The novel had two different lives. The novel was first published in September 2007, and the Pulitzer wasn’t announced until seven months later. What was fascinating was when the book first came out, there were AP articles written about how
the book had bombed, because they were like, "The book only sold this many copies. This is disastrous." So I remember that in the first life of the book, the audience was hardcore readers. I'll never forget that for the first seven months, you guys, and this is why my heart is in such a strong place for the Bay Area, for the first seven months of Oscar Wao, the only bestseller list where this book showed up for more than one week was in San Francisco. It was only after the prize, after the Pulitzer, that the rest of the country began reading the book the way that San Francisco was reading it. I felt like there were these two periods, and I remember very clearly the first period, and that's the one that has helped me be more clearheaded about what happened after. It's always great when a book finds a brand-new audience. In some ways you're seeing, when you get a prize like the Pulitzer, you're seeing your book in fast-forward. It's picking up the audience it would pick up in a twenty-year period in just six months. So you get all sorts of weird stuff. I can never get it out of my head that for the first seven months, it was really only hardcore book nerds who were like, "This fucking book is good." And those were the people in some ways who kept it alive long enough for someone to nominate it for a prize.

DE: And were you writing it with that in mind at all? That is, Oscar Wao is so pure that it reads like it's not aware of a potential audience.

JD: When I was writing this book, I was very aware in my head that I was writing about Dominicans in New Jersey—and that while I considered this experience universal that's not the way it's usually viewed by the larger world. But it's not like I could dumb anything down, because if I tried to write for some sort of vague mainstream audience, I would just lose everything that mattered in the book, I would lose all the awesome specificity and have nothing in the end to show for it. This is a long way of saying, if you're going to write a novel about New Jersey Dominican immigrants, you might as well go for it. It's not like if you reduce the amount of cursing, you're going to find yourself more popular. If you're a writer like me, writing about people of color who are not always viewed as the center of the universe, you have to rely on your core readers, and on people who are nuanced readers, to keep your book alive long enough for the mainstream to catch up. And I really feel that way—as a writer, it had it not been for readers of color who kept it around for so long, and for teachers and writing nerds, I would have been finished. And the only reason I had these readers in the first place was because I was everything but mainstream. I think you should always write—I see this in both our works—you should always write to the most specific audience imaginable, and from there springs the universal. It's not the opposite way—you don't write to a very big audience, and assume that that's going to make your work universal. Every book that we continue to read a hundred years later, the thing that really joins it to other books that we're still reading a hundred years later is the extraordinary specificity.

DE: One of the things you're doing in San Francisco is working with the Voices of Our Nation Arts Foundation, and this might be a good segue to talk about what you're doing and what the goals of the organization are.

JD: I don't remember, did you ever do an MFA program?

DE: I took one creative-writing class in college, and I failed miserably. I was run out of there; I was terrible. No MFA program would have admitted me.

JD: Well, I do this workshop here in San Francisco called the Voices workshop, which is a programmatic alternative to MFA programs. There's like a billion MFA programs in writing. Every fucking school's got one. This is specifically for writers of color and it's been a really remarkable experience. I've been doing it for about twelve years—

DE: And it's students of any age, it's not just—

JD: Of any age. And before this year the majority of writers we were getting would be considered nontraditional writers, so they weren't coming out of MFA programs or getting ready to go to MFA programs. We got a lot of folks who already had families, already had careers, and really wanted to be writers. It's been an amazing program. It's something that, for us, those of us who've been involved, it's really been an opportunity to give nontraditional writers the kind of exposure you could only get by going to a select university. Just having that door available so that somebody who's got a family of five and has always dreamed about writing, who's like a single mom, can get exposure to Cristina Garcia, to Suheir Hammad, to David Mura, to Saul Williams, to Chris Abani, and all these types of great writers, and that's a wonderful thing. It's just a cool way to give back to your community that doesn't always have access.

DE: I wonder what you think about whether the MFA programs in general are doing enough. Because I've had some frustrating experiences where I've written recommendations for former students of mine and young writers of color I've met along the way, and the results haven't always been so good. A lot of MFA programs, they're not interested in a nontraditional learner, or someone from abroad, or someone not from a polished academic background. It makes me furious sometimes.

JD: No, I think you've hit it on the head. You've gotta understand, what's scary about MFA programs is that there's a huge amount of privilege these universities hoard. They basically have years and years of free writing time they can dole out. And what's fascinating is that if you actually look at the profile of writers doing an MFA program, they look nothing like the rest of our society. They're almost always between the ages of twenty-three and twenty-seven, so it's almost never people with families. That eliminates a ton of folks who should be qualified for this. But because they
don’t give the students enough money, if you’ve got two kids there’s no way you can get this two years of writing. I think for me the biggest problem is that, again, if it doesn’t look anything like the rest of our country, what the fuck is going on? I don’t only want to read writing from twenty-six-year-old hipsters. I include myself in that category, for real. It’s like, sixty-something percent of the adults in this country have got kids. I would love to see that kind of age range represented, because I feel like it would deepen our literary tradition. And it’s not like MFAs control the bulk of everything that gets written. But it’s a lot of money and a lot of privilege that they do control. So I’m like you, I think that at least a third to half of all MFA seats should be reserved for people with families. And the schools should figure out ways to get the kind of money so that people with families can get two or three years to write, you know, see the way our literature would change. Our literature would change in ways that would challenge all of us.

DE: Good. Let’s write up a manifesto. Let’s do that tomorrow. But you’d have to lead the charge. You’re the one with the MFA.

JD: But we need to be there together. The thing is, I’m not saying, “Let’s take all the twenty-six-year-old hipster MFA students and shoot them.” It’s that I feel like if these kids are not in a classroom with a couple of forty and fifty- and sixty-year-old people who have children, I feel like everyone loses. And the literature itself loses that as well.

DE: Okay, now we should talk about science fiction and Obama. Is it weird to have a president who knows science fiction? I just saw a speech John Hodgman gave in front of Obama, and there were all these *Dune* references, and seeing that Obama knew what he was talking about was just crazy.

JD: I think that’s hot, it’s a kind of crazy power balance. For those of us who are old enough to have grown up with Reagan as our diabolical Voldemort, what we forget is that Reagan was all into that shit, too, the science fiction. But because he’s evil, we don’t want to mention it. Reagan was really into all those sci-fi movies, hardcore. And so we’ve had a bad evil nerd president, but it’s like the first time we’ve had one that we like, that isn’t a demon and has a fuller range of nerdiness. Reagan was just into the films, he wasn’t into

### OH BROTHERS, LET’S GO DOWN

I want her mouth to taste like the ladies of Saint Luke’s after their annual Spirit Drive, when they all get to take their heavy black shoes off and sit in the shade of Christ our Father— their wide summer hats flung around them like flattened moons.

—Matthew Dickman

“If you actually look at the profile of writers doing an MFA program, they look nothing like the rest of our society. They’re almost always between the age of twenty-three and twenty-seven.”

reading too much. But when you read biographies of Reagan, you see how much these terrible sci-fi movies he loved shaped a lot of what he did [laughter].

[AUDIENCE QUESTIONS]

Audience Member 1: This is a question about teaching; I’m a teacher. I assume writing’s your first passion and that teaching’s a little lower down for you, and I assume you don’t just teach graduate students, you get some freshmen, is that correct? Well, my son wants to apply to MIT next year; he told me that his goal in college is to not take a single English class. How do you approach students like that?

JD: Well, you know, I think that at this moment we belong to a country that marginalizes and trivializes the arts. For all the lip service this country gives to the arts, I feel like your child is in some ways voicing the real code of this country, which is, like, “Can I avoid this totally irrelevant, superfluous practice?” If you live in this country as long as I have, you become really prepared to deal with that. In other words, America can be great training for teaching at MIT, for kids who don’t want any exposure to the arts, who are hostile to it, who think it’s stupid… I guess my faith is always the same: exposure to the arts, especially that passionate, compassionate exposure to the arts, always seems to melt the pharaoh’s heart. The only argument one can make to a country that again and again refuses to acknowledge the centrality of the arts is simply through our fight to increase exposure. Give me the youth, and I’ll show as much as I can. And that doesn’t mean that you’ll win every person, but out of every ten, if you win one, you’re doing more than some of our highly funded arts organizations do.

Audience Member 2: What are you reading right now and what did you read that made you want to be a writer in the first place?