

HOPE IN THE TIME OF Dystopia

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For Dominican-American writer and Pulitzer Prize-winner Junot Díaz, stubborn optimism is the way forward during trying times, writes ZARA ZHUANG

AFTER NOVEMBER 8, 2016, came and went, and as half the US reacted to the presidential election results with marches in support of the Resistance, women's rights, civil liberties, and even making Margaret Atwood's dystopian worlds fiction again, Pulitzer-winning Dominican-American writer Junot Díaz responded

the best way he knew how — with words. Powerful words.

"We need to bear witness to what we have lost: Our safety, our sense of belonging, our vision of our country," he wrote in an article titled "Radical Hope" in the November 21, 2016, issue of *The New Yorker*.

"And while we're doing the hard, necessary work of mourning, we should avail ourselves of the old formations that have seen us through



darkness. We organise. We form solidarities. And, yes: We fight. To be heard. To be safe. To be free."

A fiction editor at *Boston Review* and the Rudge and Nancy Allen Professor of Writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), he reiterated these sentiments at the 20th Singapore Writers Festival in November at Victoria Theatre and The Arts House Chambers during his "Hope and Resistance in the Age of Dystopia" lecture and "Taking a Break in an Age of Uncertainty" panel. Díaz was as generous with raw honesty as he was with a few well-placed f-bombs.

"One thing that our political elites have been encouraging is a sense of demoralisation, a sense that nothing can be done about the world," he says when we chat over email. "And I reject that completely."

The 48-year-old is pushing back against the dark cloud of despondency that's cast its shadow over politics and society, and he remains a fierce fighter for the under-represented and an outspoken critic of apathy and oppression. Besides signing an open letter by the MIT faculty denouncing the then President-Elect's Cabinet choices, he also delivered a stirring speech in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on the impetus for unity during a fundraiser for Puerto Rico residents affected by (and then left to fend for themselves) the Category 5 Hurricane Maria in September.

In 2015 his campaigning in

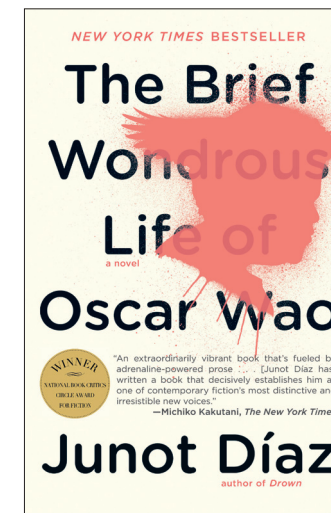
Washington DC for the rights of undocumented Haitian immigrants being persecuted in his native Dominican Republic caused him to lose the Order of Merit Citizen medal bestowed by the nation in 2009.

To Díaz, hope remains the answer to pessimistic cataclysm. "Most of us are living in dystopian times, and when you are in dystopian times there are a number of strategies for dealing with the political structures," he says. "And hope certainly ain't going to hurt you."

The deep compassion Díaz feels for human suffering is the same one he extends to the characters in his work — short story collections *Drown* (2006) and *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012), and novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) — which feature as the protagonist or narrator his alter ego, Yunior, a Dominican immigrant struggling to adjust to life in the US.

The fragility of relationships, the struggles of working-class communities, identities in flux, displacement and belonging, the American Dream immigrants worship versus the American reality they encounter — these heartfelt vulnerabilities are laid bare in his stories.

"If my books have pull, it's because I rely on the oldest formula in the world — characters in perfect conflict with themselves and the world," Díaz says. "And no conflict pierces the veil of the self and of the world quite like our desperate longing for connection, for love."



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The immigrant experience, especially one that's more disconcerting than rosy, is a strong element in his work. "We all leave worlds and find ourselves in others, and nothing makes these transitions so dramatic as the immigrant experience," he says. "And immigration is about the most modern thing about human beings — there's so much to be said about immigration that this silence draws artists."

Díaz is extending this theme to his first book for children, *Islandborn*, due out in March 2018, an illustrated volume that follows the lives of two

Dominican girls growing up in the Bronx. He describes young readers as a tougher crowd to please. "What fiercer critic [is there] than a child? When they don't like something they more or less spit it out," he says.

"But when a child loves a book it stays with her for her whole life. I realised as I was writing *Islandborn* that my child-self has a lot better taste than my adult-self, and if I wanted to write anything worth reading I was going to have to satisfy that younger me."

The younger Díaz might have appreciated access to a book such as *Islandborn*. The third of five children, he moved, at six years old, from Santo Domingo to New Jersey, and came of age during the Reagan years, when the threat of nuclear war was part of the collective memory. He found solace — from an abusive father and from feeling perpetually wedged between worlds — in dystopian, apocalyptic realms such as *Planet of the Apes* movies, and science fiction novels by John Christopher.

So while the current bleak Orwellian outlook might be déjà vu, Díaz isn't about to give up or give in.

"Of course there are times when one gets tired and demoralised," he says. "These are precisely the moments when one should focus on recuperating oneself and not on drawing global conclusions about the future. My childhood was pretty hopeless. I've had enough of hopelessness. I'd rather spend my energies fighting." ■