

>> This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. Each year thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. For the first time in the festival's nine year history, President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama will serve as honorary chairs of this free event. Held on the National Mall, Saturday, September 26th, the 2009 festival will spark reader's passion for learning as they interact with the nation's bestselling authors, illustrators and poets. Even if you can't attend in person you can still participate online. These podcasts with well-known authors and other materials are available through the national book festival website at www.loc.gov/bookfest. It's now my pleasure to speak with Junot Diaz, who is one of the uniquely innovative writers in America today. He's a short story author turned novelist. Mr. Diaz is widely known for his critically acclaimed, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Oscar Wao won Mr. Diaz a Pulitzer Prize in 2008 and since then he has become a cultural phenomenon. In addition to winning the Pulitzer, *Time* and *New York Magazine*, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, *Los Angeles Times Village Voice*, *Washington Post* and *Publishers Weekly* were among the 35 publications that placed the novel on their best of 2007 lists. Mr. Diaz is currently a creative writing professor at MIT. Mr. Diaz, welcome. Thanks for talking with us today.

>> Well thank you for having me.

>> Appreciate it. I have to say, I saw you on the Colbert program on Comedy Central and you talked a little bit about the term nerd and you seemed to have embraced Nerdom. But what I'm wondering is how would you define nerd?

>> Well that's like a tough question because it's one of those things where you know it's a definition that sort of has a billion subcategories beneath it. It's really something where people say well I know one when I see one.

>> Ok.

>> You know in my mind I always thought of, at least the way I was using nerd, was from the context that I grew up in, where I grew up in, the time I grew up in and in that context, especially in my neighborhood, anyone who liked to read was a nerd. So I'm sure there's a billion other nerds but the one I think about the most is the fact that you know the reader.

>> Well that's wonderful obviously at the Library of Congress we would like nerds, by that definition. Having seen that I guess it sort of inspired me to maybe mix up the questions a little bit. We'll talk about your writing and your background a little bit but I think we wanted to ask you some, perhaps nerdy, or a little bit more unique questions. First of all, I think just basically, if you weren't a writer, what would you like to be?

>> Matt, if I wasn't a writer I think I would, in my dream of dreams I'd probably want to do something that allowed me to travel an enormous

amount. I'd probably be one of those, in the dream fantasy I'd be one of those airline people. But probably in the end if I wasn't a writer I'd probably end up just being a teacher full time, teaching history at some high school somewhere because I kind of am drawn to that.

>> Now I know that you're a former boxer so I wanted to just set up a couple of hypotheticals here. Who would win in a fight between you and Sandra Cisneros?

>> Oh well no, I'm no former boxer. My father used to box. But if we're talking about a throw down fight between me and Sandra, that's Sandra in two rounds easily. [laughter] Easily. Sandra is no joke.

>> And I guess you're a product of the 1980's so is it Sugar Ray Leonard or Roberto Duran?

>> Oh no, my family was a Sugar Ray fanatic. I think we saw every single fight of him. I think my mother even had a crush on the guy.

>> And are there, talking about writers again, are there any others that you think would be pretty good in the ring?

>> You know there some pretty tough characters out there. I mean there's no question about that. I think about, like I mean who in the world would ever really want to mix it up with Tony Morrison? [laughter] [inaudible] you know. Then I think of people who, I think about people who just you know you meet and you think are going to be absolutely ferocious like Samuel R. Delaney who is this big bear of a guy who turns out to be really sweet. You know it's hard to know until people throw out the first punch. But I think Jayne Ann Phillips would kick a lot of major ass. [laughter] Without question I would be definitely a little scared of her, you know.

>> Do you see any commonalities between boxing and writing?

>> Well again like I said that was more my dad's thing but I got to say they appear real counter intuitive. I mean boxing is this sport where you know to be any good at it you've got to endure a tremendous amount of pain. You know you go in there and someone tries to punch your damn lights out. And writing is a little counter intuitive too. You cut yourself off from what we would call the social. You cut yourself off from life in some ways to try to produce art. And I think with that they definitely have a lot in common. Like you cut yourself off from what would be considered the normal.

>> Now this next question I got from one of your fans and I honestly don't know the answer so I'm just going to ask you. It's a nerd test and it says what is a Triffid?

>> Oh come on, Matt. [laughter] That's an easy one.

>> I don't know.

>> That's from John Wyndham's classic novel, The Day of the Triffids.

>> Oh ok, ok.

>> A British apocalyptic novel and a triffid is like this made up, this fictional plant that ends up taking over the earth by the end of his novel.

>> Ok well that was only a stumper for one of us, I guess. Now next one, if you could be a Star Trek character, who would you want to be? And the list I was given says Kirk, Spock or Jean-Luc Picard? But I think if you want to pick another one you're welcome.

>> Yeah Matt well like if I'm only limited to Star Trek characters, ok, myself if I had to be any kind of Starship captain I would be Edward James Olmos's character, Adama, in the new Battlestar Galactica. I mean he's just amazing. But if I had to pick a regular Star Trek character I would have to be Spock. And believe me in a real world I think Spock would be the damn captain and Kirk would be like a cook or something.

>> Yeah in the new iteration of Star Trek, Spock is a little bit more intense, isn't he?

>> Yeah, yeah but they also had to bend over three ways to figure out how to make somewhat a cool Spock subordinate to someone as doofus as Kirk.

>> Now did you enjoy Science Fiction growing up? I guess that's a classic barometer of nerdism.

>> Oh yeah, oh yeah definitely. I enjoyed everything that took me out of my time and place so I read a lot of horror. I read a lot of Science Fiction. I read fantasy. I mean there wasn't a genre I didn't like. I loved westerns.

>> Well I certainly have to agree with you about Battlestar Galactica. I don't think I missed an episode of that. Next question, what word would you most like to see retired from the English language?

>> Capitalism.

>> Really, why is that?

>> Well hopefully it would put an end to the entire apparatus. But you know, I mean it's just what a beast we've created, what a beast.

>> Do you say that mainly because of the state of the economy or is that sort of a long held thing with you?

>> I mean it's just long held as someone of 40 can hold something. It's just, I mean you know the word itself connects to a larger narrative that itself connects to a larger paradigm of like pain and subordination so that's a word I wouldn't mind seeing go.

>> Now you talked a little bit about I guess the connection between nerdism and books and this I guess we'll say is a hypothetical, now if I'm a

15 year old boy, chances are I'm texting. I'm tweeting. I'm on Facebook. I'm playing Guitar Hero, sitting in an air conditioned room, you know, who knows what else. So what are these books that you speak of and why should I care about them?

>> Well you know I mean what can you do? I mean there's no way that I can convince anyone to be a reader, to become a reader, you know in the span of a few seconds. I think for me what is important is you know if I had within you know within my proximity, in my circle, a young teenager who I didn't see reading too much, I guess I would assume I know a little bit about his personality or her personality, I would try to find books that you know would be the kind of things that would not only grip them, that would speak to them. I mean if you're going to go up against Facebook, try to give a kid a book like Moby Dick if they're not a reader, that ain't going to work, Matt. That's just not going to work. I think to cultivate readers I think is something that's important but also really difficult, Matt.

>> Yeah.

>> I would, you know again it's all about forming relationships. If this was someone in my life, in my circle, you know I would find out what their interests are and get them reading. I mean I have a young person I know who themselves, they don't always read but I knew them for a while, I talked to them for a while and I said you know what? A perfect novel for you is Alice Sebold's, *Lovely Bones*. Gave it to her and she absolutely adored it. Now did that turn her into a reader? Does that always work? No. But man, you've got to try. You've got to try.

>> What do reading and books offer a young person that all those gadgets and websites don't?

>> Hard to say. I mean we've only had these gadgets and websites for a short period so it's not like we have a longitudinal view of what you know the benefits and some of the drawbacks are. I know from my experience as a reader that one of the extraordinary things about reading is that reading is one of the few places, it's one of the few experiences where we directly and intimately encounter another human subjectivity, where we really see and have shown to us how another person thinks. I think there's very few places where you can dwell under the wing of another person's thoughts, six, eight, 10, 12, 20 hours. And I think that's deeply humanizing and also I think incredibly important for our own selves. We're often so cut off from you know other people's interiorities that novels give a glimpse of it the way I think very few other pieces of art do.

>> Now I mentioned earlier that you teach at MIT. How are the nerds there different from the ones in say central Jersey?

>> Well since I got plenty of Central Jersey nerds up at MIT. Well I can tell you it's like look, MIT, it's like any other select college in the United States except, so what I'm saying is these are the smart, bright students who've got a ton of extracurricular activities. They wouldn't be

out of place at most select colleges. But MIT of course is just that extra level of intense, you know?

>> Yeah.

>> A place where, it's sort of like a marathon. Most of us go to college and college has hard periods and its lulls. But at MIT I think it's just intense all the way through. And I think that ends up leaking into the students. So while my students themselves might be coming from the same backgrounds, same places as kids who end up going to Princeton and kids who end up going to University Michigan, kids who go to Cornell, the Institution makes them incredibly intense, Matt, makes them incredibly intense.

>> I do want to talk a little bit about your background and your writing. Early on you were writing mostly short stories, as I mentioned. Was it a challenge to transition to novels or was it more liberating?

>> Well I mean it was both. I think it was both. I think it was, you know, I think there's a remarkable sense of freedom when you're working with a large canvas. There's just a joy to that, you know? Being a miniaturist gets exhausting after a while. The other thing though is that you know novels aren't easy. Novels are difficult and they require a whole new set of muscle that you've got to develop as a writer, you know? One thing in the short story form to always be taking things out to try to make the story lean. In a novel you've got to be far more inclusive. You've got to sort of put more in than you've ever had to do before. So I thought it looked like that, as you're saying, at once liberating but also very challenging.

>> Now your work draws pretty equally from your Dominican cultural roots and from popular culture today. Do you think there's a tension between the two? Can they coexist really?

>> Oh why not? I mean shoot, I always felt that my book was proof positive, not only that they can coexist but they're a natural fit. You know I think in the end you've got to remember that everything seems to exist quite tidily in the real world. I think the only problem is figuring out an aesthetic way to metaphorize it at the level of art. Because you've got Dominican kids who are into all sorts of you know pop culture and that's what they're into. You've got a Dominican kid who just wants to play Guitar Hero all day next to a Dominican who themselves are just deeply involved with the politics back home on the island. And these people sit down to eat together without any problems. And I think that if you everything's out there, Matt. And I think it's only in our mind that things don't seem to fit or things can clash. So I think that getting past our myths of what belongs in the soup is important. But finding out a way to put all these various different things in the soup and make someone want to eat it is an even greater challenge. I think people have no problem living in life's stupendous diversity but they do have to be convinced of that stupendous diversity on the page.

>> Now you've got a story called How to Date a Brown Girl (Black Girl, White Girl or Halfie), which provides I think some blunt advice. But you

wrote this 10 years ago. Would your advice differ today, particularly now that we're in the age of Obama, as some call it?

>> Well I mean, this again, this was a story that wasn't really about dating advice at all. It was a story about you know how self-hatred impacts desire, how race helps to organize who people think is cute and who people think are not cute, including their own selves. So I mean in some ways there's plenty of things that have changed in the last 10, 15 years but in other ways I think that the general, general calculus, the general racial calculus in this country, remains unchanged. And you know I would hope that the story unfortunately still holds up.

>> Yeah. And finally I guess before I let you go I want to ask if there is any other projects you have in the works or anything on the horizon for you?

>> You know I'm just trying to keep my head, you know it's that moment where you finally start rolling, where all that thinking coalesces into action. You finally got what you need to do and you put the pen to paper. Right now I'm still in the contemplative state. I'm still sort of just dreaming about what comes next. But I haven't been able to get anything rolling.

>> Ok well Junot Diaz, I very much appreciate your time with us today.

>> Oh no problem. Thanks so much.

>> And we will be excited to hear more from you at the National Book Festival on Saturday, September 26th on the National Mall from 10:00 am to 5:30 pm. It's free and open to the public. If you want more details and a complete list of participating authors, go to www.loc.gov/bookfest. From the Library of Congress this is Matt Raymond. Thank you for listening.