

Writer Junot Diaz speaks at Buskirk-Chumley

By Brandon Cook | IDS | April 08, 2014

Critically acclaimed for his work in fiction, and recipient of a MacArthur “Genius” Grant and a Pulitzer Prize, writer Junot Diaz has been compared to literary greats such as Phillip Roth and David Foster Wallace.

He answered questions and read from his novel “The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao” Tuesday night at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater.

The line of fans waiting to enter the theater at 8 p.m. stretched from the theater down to Walnut Street.

“Your mother is rough in all things, but this time she is gentle,” Díaz read from the section of the book entitled “Wild Wood,” a scene that depicts a daughter discovering her mother’s breast cancer.

The reading was a part of a special panel entitled “Science Fiction in the Americas,” which Díaz headlined and was organized by the Department of American Studies and the Latino Studies Program.

“Junot Díaz is one of the most dynamic and compelling fiction writers,” said Deborah Cohn, chair of the Department of American Studies in a press release. “His work challenges us to look closely at constructions of ethnic and national boundaries and identities.”

In addition to the reading by Díaz, the panel included a two-day Latino film festival from April 3-5 and a conference at the IU Cinema.

The purpose of the festival was to bring awareness to transnational perspectives, and raise questions about race, identity and the abuse of power.

Academy Award-nominee Edward James Olmos and professor Chon Noriega were among the festival’s speakers.

Díaz’s writing has been praised for its passionate inventiveness, syntax and its commentaries on the lifestyles of citizens from both America and Díaz’s native Dominican Republic.

His most famous work, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel “The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,” addressed sprawling political issues, from the horrific Trujillato years in the early 20th-century Dominican Republic to the question of white identity in the United States.

The political and ethical boundaries that Díaz crosses and blurs in his fiction are mirrored by his break with stylistic and structural boundaries.

“Oscar Wao” was “neither a novel nor a story collection, but something a little more hybrid, a little more creolized,” Diaz explained in a review for the Guardian.

Reviewer Christopher Tayler summarized Díaz’s nontraditional approach to form writing.

“To his way of thinking,” he wrote, “there’s no reason to draw an uncrossable line between fiction and memoir, down-at-hell realism and stylistic exuberance, the New Jersey experience and pan-American culture.”

Díaz’s reading Tuesday night focused on “Oscar Wao.” The audience questions he addressed included a wide range of topics, from questions of immigration and morality to his favorite writers.

“I want books that give me an opportunity all out of the dehumanizing pressures of society,” he said. “Books that allow me to dwell in a space where there’s pain and loss.”

Audience response to the visiting writer was enthusiastic.

Díaz, with frequent curses and use of the vernacular, delighted his audiences as he spoke about his experience as a Dominican immigrant, as well as his work.

“It’s a little in your face,” said Heather Songer, a student in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. “It’s a very different way of looking at life.”

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