

# Junot What?

Drown  
By Junot Díaz  
Riverhead Books, \$21.95

BY ED MORALES

They didn't think he was taking his writing seriously enough. But unlike many self-styled rebels, he was up early in the morning putting in three hours

When Junot Díaz—recently anointed by *The New Yorker* and *The Paris Review* as the Next Big Minority Thing—returns your call, he's likely to leave a joke message about needing to be bailed out of the slammer: "Yo, Ed, they got me, man. You gotta get me outta here!" After all, he did suffer what his book jacket characterizes as a "hardscrabble youth" in the Dominican Republic and the dystopic underbelly of New Jersey. "We lived in the designated low-income community zone on the periphery of the periphery," Díaz says with perceptible irony.

All the bluster Díaz brings with his Raritan River brand of urban Latino streetspeak might set off the cynic alarm, but this kid is no bullshit. The hype ("Talent this big will always make noise . . .") on the back of his first collection, *Drown*, is on the money. In 10 stories—shifting gears from the sultry tropics to the New Jersey hood—he crafts a fluid text of heartfêlt, artful sociology. The reigning bard of the little-known Dominican migratory experience, he's not afraid to drop hip-hop, Spanish, or old-school New York-ese in a riveting, conversational voice:

*When the bar begins to shake back and forth like a rumba, I call it a night and go home, through the fields that surround the apartments. In the distance you can see the Raritan, as shiny as an earthworm, the same river my homeboy goes to school on. The dump has long since been shut down, and grass has spread over it like a sickly fuzz, and from where I stand, my right hand directing a colorless stream of piss downward, the landfill might be the top of a blond head, square and old.*

The Díaz phenomenon (*Newsweek* "New Faces" mention, a national book tour, foreign rights sold throughout Europe) results from two things. He has resisted assimilation enough to concoct a voice that combines Spanglish urban dialect with Caribbean tinsack realism, and he has taken the prescribed route to literary success: the M.F.A. creative writing program. It wasn't easy—being suddenly yanked from a supportive, black-Latino peerage at Rutgers and thrust into ivory-tower Cornell made Díaz terribly homesick. "One time I drank so much," he says, "that I blacked out, and when I woke up I was in Atlantic City, not knowing how I got there."

He was also the classic campus rebel: a political activist, noisily lobbying for expansion of the Latino Studies program. (When I first met him a few months ago at a meeting for an anti-police brutality march, he had already published two stories in *The New Yorker* but didn't mention his writing.) According to Díaz, his intransigence landed him "on the number-one shit list of the creative writing department."



MICHAEL SOFRONSKI

Junot Díaz: the reigning bard of the Dominican migratory experience

of writing, until he had amassed a body of work.

After getting through Cornell, Díaz faced the even grimmer prospect of marketing himself. His exceptional command of language eluded him in business meetings, where he felt all he could rely on was street bravado. "The first time I ever talked to an agent, the guy was like, 'Okay, bye, you sound like an idiot.' I wasn't able to do the whole 'Yo, I'm so fly and I got like 11 books up in this motherfucker.' I was traumatized."

But Díaz persevered. He sold two

pieces to *Story* magazine, and, after reading at the East Village's KGB bar, *The New Yorker* pounced. At Díaz's book auction they bought "How To Date a Brown girl, Black girl, White girl, or Halfie" and "Drown." Both stories suggest enough awkward sex for Bill Buford to include Díaz with several

the visceral, tropical-urban mania of Piri Thomas, but in truth *Drown* lacks clearly identifiable precedents. Its literary influences aren't from European and American literature but from the small world of Latino and black writers that make up the multiculturalist curriculum. The poetry of fellow

Caribbean-American Martin Espada is an important model for its content, if not literary style. "My writing is directly from the Dominican experience, which is an extension of the larger African diaspora. The truth is, there's huge tracts of our experiences which haven't been spoken to."

Díaz went through the typical linguistic shock: "I learned to read English long before I could speak it," he remembers. "I started to lose my Spanish when I went into high school 'cause that's when the first serious waves of adolescent self-hate begin to roll in." Although he lived in a low-income corner of Parlin, New Jersey, he was bused to school at elite Oakhurst, where he found he could play the assimilation game. In retrospect he interprets this as self-hatred, but even now his acculturation bleeds through our conversation. Several languages, accents, and attitudes make up Junot Díaz, and their intertwining is what makes his prose so fascinating.

Stories like "Ysrael," "Aguantando," and "No Face" paint a striking portrait of his native island, immersing the reader in its rhythms and landscape. Take this deadpan description of two brothers on the prowl:

*Back home in the Capital, Rafa had his own friends, a bunch of tigras who liked to*  
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## Friendly Fire

My Favorite War  
By Christopher John Farley  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$20

BY GARY DAUPHIN

Like Christopher John Farley, I have something in common with Thurgood Brinkman, the hero of this first novel. The three of us are black, male, twentyish reporters with Ivy degrees and higher degrees of expectation. Thurgood knows the feeling:

*Man, it's like this—I was at that awkward age when the youthful emerald of my salad days began to transmute into an ugly jealous green whenever I read about the accomplishments of my former Naverton College classmates in the newspaper. . . . And since I was a reporter, I found myself with increasing and alarming frequency writing stories on the very twentysomethings whose successes I secretly coveted.*

The stories he writes for *National Now!*, a *USA Today* clone, are usually along the lines of stars-who-grow-giant-vegetables. It's a pretty soul-killing gig, but it pays the bills, while also affording Farley opportunities for current-culture blitzing and pot shots at the staff, an overwhelmingly white bunch of also-rans. In Thurgood's experience, the news is what happens to or near a boss, nothing more. "If an editor's five-year-old snot-nosed brat just lost a baby tooth, chances are that you, the reporter, can look forward to doing

some shitty story like 'The Tooth Fairy—Fact, Fiction, or Just a Lifestyle Choice?'"

Farley writes almost entirely in such snippets, each anecdote a riff on the bogusness of bogusness: the then imminent war in the Gulf, Republicans black and white, know-nothing journalists, sellers of hip-hop "realness," the comic implications of interracial dating, fried-chicken outlets, whatever happens across his path. Although he's mostly echoing the grousing you'll find from Ishmael Reed to Spike Lee (with a dash of Jill Nelson), the book's belligerence makes for fun, quick reading. Nearly everyone in *My Favorite War*  
CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

# Books

After

By Melvin Jules Bukiet  
St. Martin's, \$24.95

For Isaac, Marcus, and Fishl, the principals in a small-time syndicate of Holocaust survivors, time is divided into Before and After (thereby mincing away the During). It's the After that's most interesting. The novel opens in Aspenfeld at the moment of liberation, and it doesn't take long before Isaac, a born black marketer, is indoctrinated into the new world order. Other survivors give a campmate who has recovered some diamonds preferential treatment, without his having to hand anything over. "Credit," Isaac learns.

In Regensburg, he encounters Marcus, whose specialty is counterfeiting, and, with a few others, they begin dealing in DPIDs (Dead Persons' Identification Cards). Soon, they diversify. Not that things always go smoothly. They acquire a tin of brown crystals, which they figure must be food. (After a few sleepless weeks, they discover it's coffee.) Fishl, a former rabbi and an un-abashed incompetent, accidentally blows up a paper factory and is imprisoned for sabotage. Isaac's older brother, Alter, pops up disguised as a KGB colonel, a monk, and a doctor, always lending a hand when things look dimmest.

After benefits from a dark, cynical bent as well as some sharp one-liners ("Communists are not Facists," Fishl argues. "Only the moustaches are different," rejoins Alter). At first, it appears that the author's purpose is to puncture all the self-serving homilies that have become Holocaust boilerplate. He scores a couple of direct hits when a hidden German soldier is found at a camp and lynched by survivors, for instance, or when American soldiers make a just-liberated Jew prove he isn't a Nazi. But then the targets become more obvious: the Army, the relief organizations, the Regensburg nightclub habitués. To crank up the farcical volume, Bukiet literally borrows the Emcee from *Cabaret*, who provides off-color commentary, and Rocketmann from *Gravity's Rainbow*, who crashes a costume party aboard a yacht on the

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## Dauphin

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gets rough treatment, but Thurgood figures his political heart is in the right place. After all, he's read the right books and his comments are "private," civilly kept between him, his nonblack, male friends, and the reader.

He is in a bit of a slump with the ladies. One sister turns out to be an anti-Semite ("Did she just say *Jew* bastards? Nah, I must have misheard her"). And he begs off from dating another when her brothers and sisters turn out to be her children. "Mom is their nickname for me," Ntozake insists. The women Thurgood likes best are the least available. He fixates on Sojourner Truth Zapader, a high-powered, fire-breathing black writer for the *Washington Post*. After several columns, he's in love.

Unfortunately for the reader though, when Sojourner and the Gulf move to center stage, *My Favorite War* starts to read like two books crammed together, one about the collusion of corporate media with the war machine, the other about annoying roommates, crazy women, etc. The two threads veer off soon after Thurgood beds Eboni, the black, inner-city teenager he's been tutoring in English. He's so taken with discovering and fostering an intellectual bud in bloom that he deflowers the rest of her before he knows what's happened. And once she's pregnant, Thurgood quickly abandons her to cover the Persian Gulf War—as Sojourner's research assistant, of all things.

The wartime set pieces are the book's weakest parts, which makes some sense considering Farley was then writing for *USA Today's* "Life" section. He skewers the press-pool system and tries to describe the devastation of Iraq (including a first-person trip up the Highway of Death between Baghdad and Kuwait City), but the writing ends up sounding more like standard lefty-magazine copy than Thurgood's free-rein rants.



Christopher John Farley: news that will stay news

and me—the perfect, talking android for the New World Order. Neither of them will get out, because "it might be ages before another taxi willing to pick up a black man drove down that street, even if the black man in question was carrying a uniform in his left hand, a wad of twenties in his right, and the Congressional Medal of Honor between his teeth."

For all its winking sarcasm, this scene underscores how Thurgood lives in a world essentially devoid of other young black men. There are a few caricatures like Pinpoint, but no one in whom Thurgood would ever admit seeing himself reflected.

*My Favorite War* is funny and smart because Farley is, seeing clearly through his protagonist's last-sane-black-man-in-America delusions, but I'm not sure he completely sees through Thurgood's isolation. It's tough to really speak for your neglected, in-the-buttermilk generation when your whole conceit is that you're a demographic of one. ♦

## Morales

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knock down our neighbors and who scrawled chocha and toto on walls and curbs. Back in the Capital he rarely said anything to me except Shut up, pendejo.

Even though Díaz insists he keeps a healthy distance from his narrator, it's easy to read his work as largely autobiographical. *Drown's* often interlocking tales are linked by the story of the young, nameless narrator's attempts to recapture his missing father. "Aguantando" ("Holding On") explores his father's absence from the point of view of the family remaining in the Dominican Republic. In "Negocios" ("Business") Díaz makes the father the protagonist, as he tries to establish himself in the U.S. before sending for his family. Only in "Fiesta, 1980," which is both poignant and funny, does the narrator live with his father.

But it's Díaz's suburban-homeboy narratives that will probably draw a larger audience. He captures the bleak peripheral existence of suburban people of color in groundbreaking fashion—his characters never wallow in self-pity even while jumping headfirst into love affairs

with hopeless crackheads, palling around with alienated pool-table delivery boys, and surviving porno-driven adolescent sex encounters. This is the contemporary Díaz; hardheaded, sentimental, yet cynical, as in this description of a first date with a biracial girl:

*Dinner will be tense. You are not good at talking to people you don't know. A halfie will tell you that her parents met in the Movement, will say, Back then people thought it a radical thing to do. It will sound like something her parents made her memorize. Your brother once heard that one and said, Man, that sounds like a whole lot of Uncle Tomming to me. Don't repeat this. Put down your hamburger and say, It must have been hard.*

Díaz wants to stay involved in community politics. And he has a sense of the fragile nature of success that will help him avoid the "great fall" that is as much an essential part of the American ethos as the sudden triumph. "You know what? Publishing has always drawn in marginal voices to spice up their lists," he says. "I'm one of those people who thinks at any moment I'm going to wake up and everything's going to be gone. I'm just going to be prepared for anything. You gotta be that way." ♦

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