

# Called to Write

## INTERVIEW WITH JUNOT DÍAZ

by Amy Entwisle

When Junot Díaz arrived in the U.S. from the Dominican Republic at age six, he had to learn to speak, read, and write English. Today he is an influential writer whose work explores issues of identity, prejudice, and the immigrant experience in America. He has garnered numerous awards for his critically acclaimed books, including the National Book Critics Circle Award, a MacArthur “Genius Grant,” and the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Díaz is the Rudge and Nancy Allen Professor of Writing at MIT, the fiction editor for *Boston Review*, and a co-founder of the Voices of Our Nation workshops for writers of color.



### **What was your favorite book as a child?**

Like most inveterate readers, I had a clutch of favorites, including *Watership Down*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the *Escape to Witch Mountain* books. A book that had a huge impact on me was *Flight to the Lonesome Place*, about a very gifted young person with an almost perfect memory who has a crazy adventure in the Caribbean.

It was about getting as far away as I could from family, school, and the quotidian burdens of being a young person. I was also an immigrant kid, and these were stories about people who had to leave their safe, known world and enter a completely different world that they had to master. *Watership Down* and *The Lord of the Rings* had a high learning curve. You had to learn the world inherent in them to enjoy them, and as an immigrant, I was sympathetic to that.

### **How did you become interested in writing?**

The only thing I wanted to do as a young person was read. I was trying to figure out where I could get a job that would just allow me to read. Eventually I realized that writing was a wonderful excuse to be a permanent reader.

### **What was your school experience like?**

I lived in a neighborhood where nobody was supposed to like school. Nobody would claim to enjoy reading, but I loved school and loved to read. Immigrating and discovering this new world was so hard, but reading was stabilizing and reaffirming for me. School was a place where I felt some mastery and connection. In seventh grade, I was accepted into a gifted and talented program.

I had an expansive social life for a nerd. On one hand, I had this intellectual life that was really important to me, but I was also part of a large black and Latino community. I was very bookish and very out in the world at the same time.

**What did the gifted and talented program do for you?**

We were exposed to works that we never would have been exposed to in the regular curriculum. I remember that our teacher showed us a documentary called *Koyaanisqatsi*. It was this sort of visual poem with an incredible Philip Glass soundtrack, and it had no words. It was just cities and landscapes and music and art. It made an indelible impact on me.

I had a great fondness for school then. But adolescence brings its own challenges, and my brother was diagnosed with leukemia right when I was entering high school. That was a tremendous hardship for our family. Anyone who has a family member with a serious illness when they're young knows that it takes them out of their normal world in important ways, and that was me in high school. I was worried about my brother and my family, so I wasn't really focused. By the time I was a senior, I got kicked out of the gifted and talented program.

**What books or writers influenced your writing?**

In college, I was completely in love with writers like Leslie Marmon Silko, and Sandra Cisneros, who at that time wasn't as well known as she is now, had a huge impact on me. Writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison were publishing their best books while I was in college. It was an extraordinary time to love books.

**What does writing do for you?**

It sounds absurd and pretentious, but I think I was called to write. It's something I find very difficult, whether it's the sentence-by-sentence composition or coming up with a project or plot. It troubles me to no end, yet I'm called to do it. Young people want to hear, "I love this more than I love chocolate cake," but I always tell them that it's possible to be very good at something you find very difficult.

Art is a profound mystery. We come up with interesting little myths about what art is and why we do it, but we really don't have the answers. My little myth that I tell myself is that there are things that have to be told. There are lives that have to be witnessed, and I seem to be in a unique place to be able to do some of that work.

**You had a not-great experience in the MFA program at Cornell. What happened?**

Many of these institutions are generally unresponsive to people of color, women, the poor—those who fall outside of main-

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stream America. I came from a different world, so I was able to see the shortcomings in the program, and I was vocal about them.

When you're young, you're much more inclined to go along with it. If they're like, "Don't bring up race," you're like, "Cool, I'm not going to bring up race." Don't bring up the fact that in this society, there's a bias against poor people. When you're young, you tend to follow instructions because you want to fit in, but as you get older, you start to think that it isn't right. And it's not just because it's about you as an immigrant or whatever. It's just not right, period. As a writer who has gotten a certain amount of recognition, I have the privilege to try to start conversations about topics that might otherwise be ignored. I think that privilege is only interesting in terms of how you use it to help others.

**Now you're teaching creative writing at MIT. What are you doing differently?**

I teach very diverse material that explicitly deals with issues like class and gender. These are the kinds of classes I wish I had had a chance to take when I was in grad school.

**Do you have any advice for young writers?**

My advice is for young people, period, because writers are not the only people I'm interested in. That would too narrowly define who I am. What I do tell young people who are perhaps overwhelmed with advice from adults is to travel if they have the chance, because the world is not meant for just a few. The world is meant for everyone, and when you travel, you actually meet yourself most fully.

I also believe that no one can live a completely fulfilled life without some connection to the arts. Whatever kind of art speaks to you—whether it's writing, visual art, music, or whatever—you should try to build a relationship with that. Having a relationship to art doesn't cost anything. Often, there's not much prestige involved in it, and it takes up time. It won't help your résumé, but it will nurture and strengthen your soul. ■