

## Oscar Wao Breaks the Silence

August 24, 2009 1:15 AM Mary Ann Travis  
mtravis@tulane.edu

English faculty member Felipe Smith has started the conversation, and in the next few weeks the dialogue continues. Smith's talk on Sunday (Aug. 23) in McAlister Auditorium about *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz was the first formal event of this year's Reading Project.



First-year students fill McAlister Auditorium to hear Felipe Smith, associate professor of English, start the discussion about this year's Reading Project book. (Photo by Tricia Travis)

First-year students, who received the book over the summer, filled the auditorium to hear Smith, associate professor of English, discuss the novel's literary and historic aspects.

Smith's presentation, designed to help students frame their thoughts about the book, more than likely will spark lively discussions in TIDES (Tulane InterDisciplinary Experience Seminars) next week and when author Diaz appears on the uptown campus to discuss the [book](#) himself on Monday (Aug. 31).

The novel is "sprawling and difficult," said Smith. "It forces you to rethink what a novel is."

From a family curse to the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo and the harsh and lingering effects of slavery, Diaz "toggles back and forth" between an intergenerational story and a history of the Dominican Republic.

Oscar Wao, a "bookish" boy growing up in 1990s' New Jersey in a family from the Dominican Republic, attempts to find his place in the world. The book has multiple frames of references, said Smith, from the characters' "self-hatred with an acute racial dimension" to references to Shakespeare's character Caliban from *The Tempest*.

"This is a family of extreme mood swings," said Smith.

In the end, like many family stories, the book is about silence and denial and how to put an end to suffocation and hatred and let love prevail.

Other Reading Project activities include a screening of the film *Sugar* on Oct. 1 about a Dominican baseball player pursuing the American dream, and an evening of comedy about growing up Dominican American by comedian Ruperto Vanderpool on Oct. 6.

Students can enter the Reading Project [essay contest](#), which offers cash prizes.