

# Black Gum: A Conversational Review

written by Entropy | August 7, 2015



Black Gum by J David Osborne  
Broken River Books, March 2015  
120 pages – [Amazon](#)

*With Alex Kalamaroff and Gabino Iglesias–*

**Alex K.:** How you been, G.? Lemme kick this thing off with a quick summary and we'll rover from there.

*Black Gum* is a tersely-written tale narrated by a guy who, in the first chapter, splits ways with his wife and then, glum and in search of any kind of anodyne, hangs with Charlie, does drugs, checks Facebook, kinda tries to find a job, and occasionally encounters Shane Tilden, aka "The Heathen." Shit hits the fan regularly and nobody is surprised by that fact. Osborne's chapters have jabby titles, like "Hippy Crack" and "If I'd Met You When I Was Young I Would Have Killed You," and average about three pages in length. The prose style tends toward coiled sentences that spring back-and-forth between pained precision and a certain kind of emblematic vagueness. Overall, the book's outlook is pretty grim, yet the unnamed narrator keeps on claw-climbing up the well of life.

That sound about half-righto to you?

**Gabino:** That's one of the best descriptions I've heard/read of this book. Since I can't offer more on that, I'll cling to "nobody is surprised." That first chapter surprised me. After you read a few hundred books, you more or

less learn to expect certain things. Subconsciously, I was expecting violence early on. It didn't happen. One of the reasons I keep recommending Osborne's work is that he changes thing up with every book he releases, and while *Black Gum* is the spiritual successor to *Low Down Death Right Easy*, it's also a unique animal that resembles nothing the author has done before.

**Alex K.:** I haven't read *Low Down Death Right Easy* yet, so I'll have to check that out. Does it also involve the down-and-out life in Oklahoma and delicious niacin capsules filled with speed? Mmmm ... delicious niacin.

Violence intrudes occasionally in *Black Gum*—there's the scuffle at the Juggalo party, for instance—but primarily it exists at the periphery. "I've always felt a certain inclination to hurt others," the narrator tells us at the end of the first chapter. "But I didn't do a thing. I just left." Violence, it seems, is more interesting as a possibility than as an outcome or resolution, mostly because of how little it can actually accomplish.

The narrator desires some kind of striking change but so many avenues feel exhausted or useless. I'm wondering what stood out to you most about the narrator's experiences, as the chapters progressed and we got a better understanding of how he's trying to cobble together a life?

**Gabino:** *LDDRE* does take place in the gutters of life down in Oklahoma. Knowing that Osborne spent some time there, talking to people and watching the city breathe and drinking cheap beer in dilapidated joints, I can see how Oklahoma left a print on his work for a while. As for the promise of violence, I think your reading hits the nail on the head. Specially in literature, tension can sometimes trump a bloody outcome. That being said, I think the fact that the author decided to leave fists and kicks in the realm of possibility instead of letting them play out obeys the fact that, as a storyteller, he enjoys playing with expectations. Or maybe I'm very, very wrong and none of that is true. Are the curtains blue here? I don't know.

As for the narrator looking to put his existence together, I feel like *Black Gum* falls in line with other superb contemporary titles like Andrea Kneeland's *How to Pose for Hustler* in that they show us that human nature is more about hovering above the moment and thinking about the right move to make more than actually doing the moving.

**Alex K.:** The narrator is searching in his own wounded way for what's next, even though it's hard for him to imagine anything behind the inconsiderate present for sure.

One of wonders of literature, it seems to me, is the ability to explore the ambiguities of everyday life; while so much other writing, non-fiction writing I mean, is about certainty, about facts and claims and conclusions, where the goal is increasing assuredness, where the point is *to know*, fiction

is often about *not-knowing*, about uncertainty, confusion, the miasma of the moment-to-moment, where our goal is simply to try and be. In *Black Gum*, we see this in the narrator's struggle to make sense of his life, a life, like you say, he almost hovers above, wondering what to do with. What is this strange thing, his life?

At one point, toward the end of the novel, the narrator thinks, "Netflix and Chihuahas till I passed out. / Then I woke up and did it again. For a time, it was exactly what I needed." There's something relatable here, that Netflix and Chihuahas can be a brief salve—surely not a solution, but a way to postpone the looming questions.

On a sentence level, G., what stuck out to / struck you? What excited your mind and tingled your spine? How's the clipped prose style relate to Osborne's other books?

**Gabino:** One of the things that has blown my mind as I've followed Osborne's career is the way he's morphed into a master of economy of language. His work now makes me feel the way I felt the first few times I read James Ellory. Too many authors are obsessed with letting you know everything that's happening in and out of their characters' heads. In that regard, JDO is the antithesis of the classic Russians: he delivers things like setting with the speed and accuracy of William Tell's arrow. "Cups stacked/table folded/us on the couch. Shane held up a finger and spit blood into an empty bottle and smiled. Charlie peered at his cousin's gums and clapped his hands. 'Evil, man. Ugly shit.'" Boom. Two characters, action/movement/atmosphere, dialogue, and setting in five short lines. That's something he does time and again in *Black Gum* and something I hope newbies who are reading his work now will try to emulate in their own way.

**Alex K.:** Going off Osborne's economy of language, to me what makes brevity most interesting is that it leaves it more up to you, as a reader, to make meaning out of. The more an author explains, I often find, the less contemplating I have to do.

Now particularly with Osborne, with his choppy-short sentences and quick-flip chapters, we've got to read into the narrator's interiority, into his crozzled heart. The bleakness of the narrator's life is on full display here. But his desire, his urge for more, is usually concealed and most keenly felt when he's eyeing The Heathen's primal fury. For the Heathen offers a rival account of how to live a life.

Anyway, there was one descriptive sentence early on that twinkled me: "The room turned blue with the dawn."

What else you thinking about, G.?

**Gabino:** At this point, I'm thinking "This is a hell of an idea and I'm glad Alex asked me along for the ride." Books are strange creatures because, like all cultural objects, they can be interpreted in an endless variety of ways. What Osborne brings to the table is a bizarre mix; I tell you what's happening, but you also have to fill in the blanks. When I was younger, I thought that authors who overused that technique were lazy. Now that I've encountered it in its best incarnations, I realize that inviting the reader to partake in the action is a surefire way of forcing engagement, and this book pulls that off with flying colors. The quick/short descriptions put the reader in a place/state of mind, but the way Osborne writes, it's almost impossible, at least for me, to not want to stay there (and there!) a little longer.

This is weird, but now I'm thinking the way he writes is like a somewhat clear photo of an unknown animal. You know it's there, but you keep looking because it's intriguing and interesting and new. You can almost make out what it is, but your imagination runs wild with theories. You know it's fake, but you kinda want it to be true. Or maybe that's just me.

**Alex K.:** Now then, let's go find ourselves some more unknown animals in the library or in that used bookstore on South Congress Street.