

[Narcisa by Jonathan Shaw](#)

written by John Yohe | August 12, 2015



Narcisa: Our Lady of Ashes by Jonathan Shaw
Infinitum Nihil (HarperCollins), 2015
624 pages – [HarperCollins](#) / [Amazon](#)

Normally I don't like to discuss the externals of a book, the text should stand for itself, and *Narcisa* does, but in this case I can't resist, and if it helps you decide to buy the book, then so be it. Jonathan Shaw is a (now ex-) famous tattoo artist, and general world vagabond somewhat like his narrator, Cigano. Shaw's original *Narcisa* novel was published in 2007 by the independent Heartworm Press. It sold out immediately, and has been picked up by one of the 'biggs,' HarperCollins. Or rather, through its imprint, Infinitum Nihil, run by Johnny Depp. So, yay, Johnny Depp.

Even more fascinating is that, like Kerouac's *On The Road* (to which *Narcisa* has been compared)(and yes, they're both about the narrator becoming involved with a charismatic lower-class fucked-up person), there is an original text and a more mainstream text. Shaw went back and performed "almost a decade of constant editing and reflecting, polishing and rewriting" for the new edition. Because this text is so in-your-face full of energy, I wonder what the original, pre-mega-revised, text might be like. More energetic? More in your face? Better? Worse? Completely different?

Shaw's writing style is anti-MFA: raw and not de-clawed by 'craft.' A MFA workshop would have suggested avoiding repetitions in descriptions like, for just one example, when the character Doc is introduced and he's described as pear-shaped twice within two pages. We get it the first time, and seems like an easy fix? To which I think Shaw would reply (à la his character Narcisa), *Fock you*. And we'd both be right.

Or, say, when Cigano tells us how he's feeling after a run-in/encounter/conversation with Narcisa. When the dialogue and actions do a pretty good job of 'showing' everything we need to know, or feel, he, or Cigano, tells us. Again, we get it, and again, a MFA workshop might have recommended cutting these obvious reactions. This is also where a comparison to Charles Bukowski's work doesn't seem fair, since Bukowski's style was the opposite of that: he'd present the Hemingway tip of the iceberg, the actions and dialogue and hardly ever tell us what anyone was feeling. (Though too, I think Bukowski continues to be misunderstood for that.) But I feel like Shaw isn't quite sure whether readers will feel what he wants us to feel, or to know what Cigano is feeling. Still, does it matter? Does Shaw (or Narcisa) care? Nah. *Fock you! Go go go!*

Cigano is the huge question mark. 'Cigano' means 'gypsy' in Portuguese, and he's a gypsy times two, since he's literally from a gypsy community that

settled in Rio de Janeiro—his mother and aunt were even fortune tellers—but also a gypsy in that he left Rio at an early age and traveled the world or, the underworld of our world, selling drugs and also getting jailed for selling drugs, in Mexico of all places, so if he survived *that* he's gotta be a tough hombre.

He describes himself as “a six-foot-three, 240-pound tattooed gypsy thug, who looked like he was late to a knife fight, but would be glad to take a minute to slice off your face.” But by the time the story starts, he's gone clean, and fortuitously inherits an apartment in Rio from his dead aunt, his last relation of any closeness (which, perhaps conveniently, saves Cigano, and us, from having to think about any kind of personal history and instead enjoy the absolute NOW of this story).

But Cigano is hard to figure out, I *think*, because of Shaw's writing style is hard to figure out. Sometimes Cigano waxes poetic all over the place, and other times he's terse and a little cruel. One could argue that we can all be that way at times, depending, and this changing voice is part of the rawness of style, and part of the appeal. It hasn't been 'ironed out' and de-wrinkled, like a *New Yorker* article. For example, here's a longer excerpt of Shaw/Cigano at his best (Lobos is Cigano's real last name—italics Shaw's):

*My weathered little Mexican lather traveling bag weighs heavy across my shoulder as I pass a short, stout paraíba sweeping at the sidewalk **sssskkk ssssskkkk** outside a shadowy little hole-in-the-wall boteco.*

*Skinny, barefooted mulatto kids kick a dull, deflated rubber ball around a weedy, abandoned dirt lot. A sudden staccato popcorn **pow pow pow** of gunfire. Two bulky gray-uniformed thugs pushing, shoving, dashing, flashing around a corner behind a darting brown shadow; a bare-chested Negro teenager running ahead, two guns held aloft **pow pow pow**, just like in a movie.*

Nothing's changed.

This isn't a movie. It's just Rio de Janeiro, City of God, in the Year of Our Lord, 2006, and Ignácio Valencia Lobos is finally returning home.

I love the inclusion of portuguese words right in with the american slang with no italics (or in this case un-italics) to show how Cigano thinks: in a mix of american and portuguese, of slang and poetry, of cultures. A MFA workshop might have suggested getting rid of the '**pow pow pow**' sound effects. I'm unsure. It does feel a little old-school Batman tv show-ish, though I think Shaw's point is to show that a real gunfight *does* have some element up cartoonish ir-reality.

More problematic, and to my ear less well-written, is this section a few pages earlier in the same chapter, also narrated by Cigano:

Back in Rio de Janeiro after all these years, I pass a decaying Portuguese building, its ornate colonial façade fallen into poverty and weathered decay. Row upon tangled row of clotheslines, crisscross a once-

stately courtyard, home now to hordes of naked shit-brown children. Weeds growing into small trees just out of a crumbling brick wall. A marble statue of a pigeon-shit-encrusted angle looks down from its rooftop perch with lifeless yellowed eyes of timeless stone apathy.

Just maybe a little over the top with the adjectives in the last sentence, not to mention that Cigano tells us here, and in the previous quote, and lots of other places, that he's in Rio de Janeiro. But, the big problem in this paragraph is the 'shit-brown children.' Is Cigano racist? Appears so, though later Shaw makes of point of showing how racist Cigano thinks Doc, is. So is Shaw just going for an artistic, but not necessarily original, description here? This is where some careful reading in a MFA workshop might have at least pointed out the (unintended?) effect he's having. Or, do we just roll with the fact that Cigano is racist? That *might* be interesting, in a flawed hero kind of way, if we knew for sure, if it came up again, if it mattered to the story.

Yes, and what do we make of Cigano mid-way through the book when he fucks Narcisa, multiple times, while she's passed out for 24 hours after a long crack binge? Is that not rape? Cigano doesn't seem to think so. I'm not sure about Shaw. But it is an example of how Cigano too is on a path-to-hell addiction, just like Narcisa, despite his claims of being clean. He's just addicted to Narcisa, and will destroy his own tenuous existence in Rio in order to keep her around. Which she's very much aware of. Which can then lead to the story becoming us watching a bucket full of scorpions sting each other to death. Which can be difficult to read.

All that is why I almost didn't buy the book. If I had to just read about Cigano's *flaneur*-ing around Rio, at least in the writing style here, and his maybe-maybe-not lying about what a decent guy he is now, I'd pass. But this is really Narcisa's story:

"What fucking friend, Cigano? What is doormat, hein? Porra! You wan' throw me out on de e'street like de garbage, just cuz I don' wan' make de puteria with you all de time! Fock you! I never gonna do what you wan'! I prefer go e'stay with de fucking Doc. At least he don' wan' only using me for de sexo! I prefer go e'sleep in de fucking bushes or on de park bench or de beach then e'stay with you any-more! So fock you! you can fock you own self now, cuz these is de only fock you ever gonna get, e'stupid e'sheet!"

Normally I talk about a person dominating a story in the context of a film, when a certain actor just dominates the screen over all the other characters (like, say, Robert Downey, Jr. as Iron Man in the *Avengers* franchise). In this case, weirdly, it's the *character* Narcisa who dominates this book. It's not, really, Shaw's writing, since if the story were just about Cigano narrating some other kind of 'return home' to Rio, I don't think I'd be as engaged. No, it's when Narcisa appears, and especially when she *talks*: her dialogue, her ranting and philosophizing and cursing, is the core pleasure here.

"...Is alway e'same e'sheet with all de mans! When I do bad thing an' I

treat you bad, then you love me an' wanna eat de e'sheet from my asshole like candy! An' then I feel e'sorry an' I try make it better, an' I dance for you to make you happy, but then you hate me an' e'say to me all these insulto! An' you think is me who insane? Hah! Is you! All you mean, jealous peoples de one who insane!"

The one other thing I would have, at first, suggested changing (I swear I'll stop nitpicking after this) is Shaw's use of bold text as the way to show Narcisa yelling. It's not standard—ALL CAPS in a slightly smaller font is how Bukowski's editor handled it—and to my reading a little distracting, and little pulling me out of the story, until I got used to it, and that's one of the gifts that this underground text might teach our corporate overlord publishers—that different effects can be utilized, our books don't all have to look the exact same way, and that that might be exciting.

The book and character Narcisa remind me most of, but which may mean nothing to most readers, is *Rosario Tijeras*, by Jorge Franco. It *should* mean something, since that too is a great book with a female protagonist in a drug-filled underworld of a South American country (Columbia) who also doesn't (want to) take any shit from machista culture and wants to live her own life by her own rules, which of course isn't easy. In each novel, the women, Rosario and Narcisa, seem to embody their countries—they are Columbia and Brazil. So if I were still interested in getting a PhD, that might be my thesis: Fucked-Up Chicks of South America: A Marxist-Feminist Study.

But no matter how fucked up Cigano, or we, think Narcisa is, part of what makes her kinda irresistible is that *she* doesn't think so. Nor does she give a fuck what we think. We may ultimately tend to feel some pity for her, and could analyze how and why she's a victim of patriarchal capitalist society (*and all that e-sheet*) but Narcisa doesn't for a second think of herself that way. Perhaps a *survivor*, but even then I think she'd reject any definition that didn't include her own responsibility for her own choices, and in this I see her like the female characters in another recent book I reviewed, *The Palace of Illusions* by Kim Addonizio. *These*, these are the anti-Oprah female characters whose stories I want to keep reading. Strong and independent and real, and decidedly *not* privileged—they can't fly to Italy when a relationship goes bad and eat good food.

And this is where Shaw *is* like Bukowski (or Kathy Acker, or early Denis Johnson) in that he's writing about lower-class life, both the horror and beauty of it. And that's not something I think middle-class Americans want to read about. Or so I think corporate book publishers think. So kudos to HarperCollins taking a chance on *Narcisa*, and kudos to Johnny Depp for helping make it happen. Yes, and if I contradict myself, well then I contradict myself, because I even as I love the rawness I still find myself wishing that the text were just a little tightened up. Forget the MFA workshop, seems like the editor at HarperCollins (or Infinitum Nihil) might have excised some of the obvious clunkers.

Still, though my interest in contemporary fiction has been waning. *Narcisa*, and Jonathan Shaw (and a few other 'underground' writers like Addonizio) revive it. I'd rather read books like this, warts and all, than eat, pray,

and love with mainstream slick stuff. Corporate publishers, for what it's worth, take note.

Further reading:

An interview with Jonathan Shaw at *CVLT NATION*:

[CVLT Nation Interviews Jonathan Shaw](#)

My review of *The Palace of Illusions* by Kim Addonizio at *WORD RIOT*:

[The Palace of Illusions by Kim Addonizio](#)