



Black Wine

Candas Jane Dorsey

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Why is there an old woman, in a hanging cage for punishment, keeping a journal written in blood? Candas Jane Dorsey has written an ambitious, feminist novel about women coming to terms with their identity in a barbarous fantasy world. Dorsey's women travel across the world, from the slave dens to the merchant cities, across seas by ship and by dirigible, to isolated mountain villages and back again. "But there remains provocative ambiguity as the story progresses. There is a woman exiled from her family, a mother who has abandoned her daughter, an old woman in a cage, a young women slave on a lord's estate who does not remember her past. How many of them are the same woman?

Black Wine Details

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Author : Candas Jane Dorsey

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From Reader Review Black Wine for online ebook

Bruce Mackenzie says

I took a while to decide if this was a 2 star or a 4 star read. In one sense, it's a quest novel. Mother seeks daughter, daughter seeks mother. Both women are intelligent, independent, bisexual and very stubborn. Neither finds the ideal they are searching for. In another sense, it's dark fantasy; and it can very dark at times. And there is so much more here. I definitely recommend it.

Althea Ann says

I got this book as a birthday present from my sister.

As soon as I was done reading it (with that shuddering pleasure that only the absolute best books give you), I passed it back to her to read... and I still haven't got it back, because when she was done, she gave it to her boyfriend to read (someone who is not the biggest fantasy fan), and he won't read the very end, because "But once I finish it, it'll be over!"

I'm considering buying another copy, to re-read it and pass it on again to someone else.

It's amazing that 'Black Wine' is a first novel. The characters are complex enough to fully immerse yourself in their lives. The world is not some faux-medieval wish-fulfillment daydream, but a real, gritty and harsh land - that still somehow has the feel of one of your deepest dreams.

Recommended for fans of Ursula LeGuin, Margaret Atwood, and Sheri S. Tepper. (But having said that, I feel I should add that the "feminist" undercurrent of the book is neither distracting, nor does it leave you with that nasty "agenda" taste in your mouth.)

(oh, and they play Scrabble! Yay! (as Scrabble fanatics, both me & my sister got a big kick out of that!)

Karen says

Not your run of the mill speculative fiction, Black Wine is a powerful story about sexuality, politics, and feminism. It reads as true now as when it was first published in 1997.

Joe Susnick says

This is one of the few book from the great anthology of Jo Walters' reviews that I really didn't enjoy at all.

Leah says

Debated about whether to give this two or three stars. The writing is not particularly flawed, I just didn't really care for any of the characters. Narrative seemed disconnected in a way that meant I never got really

involved or engrossed in the world. That's not to say that other readers won't, though. I can easily see why others might really enjoy this book. I just didn't.

Certain aspects of the story got on my nerves. Magic didn't really show up until halfway through the novel, and at that point you learn that a main character has a sort of magical ability--why wait to include this, almost as an afterthought? Why make it seem as if this is a dystopian earth and then suddenly in the last half of the book include fantastic elements?

Also, I didn't mind that it was so graphic but did mind that the relationships between characters flitted about so much. It was just unsatisfying to me. The abusive sex was sufficiently terrifying, but the good sex happened at awkward times and just seemed weird. The characters were constantly like, "I'm really upset and hurt and sick and scared... but look, nipples! Let's do it!" Also, why why WHY why why does no one ever get, like, syphilis in these books? Do these societies have no STDs? And everyone's sleeping around?

Complaints aside, there were some interesting themes, although there are other authors whose feminist sci-fi I enjoy more (which reminds me, I've been meaning to read more Tepper). The book made me think, but I need to be attached to the story as well, and that just never happened for me.

l. says

[https://www.tor.com/2008/09/12/blackwater...](https://www.tor.com/2008/09/12/blackwater)

jo waltons review is good. It's not a book I would normally be interested in reading - the gratuitous descriptions of abuse are not my thing - but the prose and just I guess how the mystery of the girls past and mother is set up makes you want to see it through.

Leif Erik says

What starts out as a fairly bleak fantasy book (major points) devolves into a cross between a Margaret Atwood parody and the naughtier bits of Anne Rice. Still there was some fairly cool passages, just wish Dorsey hadn't got all caught up in how sensitive her characters were.

I pictured all the male characters as having ponytails. Not good.

ka?yap says

This is one of the more fascinating novels I have read in a long time. Very stylized and well structured. The book reminded me a lot of Gene Wolfe's books in the surreal and dark world it creates. The themes dealt with in this are similar to that of Ursula Le Guin. All the major characters here are female and some major themes are female sexuality, freedom and oppression, history and identity, and the epistemological themes of language and perception.

Sarah says

Goodreads ratings, you have let me down again. This was a complex and very well written novel and it made me feel sick to my stomach. It was dark and disturbing and I just didn't like it, despite the fact that it had a lot of pluses on its side. So it gets an "I didn't like it" one star, even though the quality and ideas were 4.

One of the things that this book did very well was to create a wide variety of customs, mores, and sexual orientation acceptance. There were bisexual, homosexual, heterosexual, and polygamous sex scenes, as well as a character that it was hinted that he was transgender. There were a lot more sex scenes in this than I typically like in my books but I give the author major kudos for the sheer variety. There was only one thing that I actually found appalling: (view spoiler)

I ended up classifying this as fantasy-dark but not fantasy. It's not actually a fantasy or sci-fi book. It takes place in a world that is similar to ours in a lot of ways. For the most part it seems to be a fantasy world but then there are references to genetic manipulation and there's a scene with a brain scan of some kind. So this part of the book was actually not clear. I think the author was messing with ideas of what different cultures could be like, as well as sexual orientation and... Actually, I don't know what to call the last. It was like she was playing with ideas of other methods of conceiving a child. And I don't mean things *we* could do. I mean two male partners can conceive a male child but only within one country or region.

While I think that this was actually a really great book in a lot of ways, I simply didn't like the darker aspects. There was incest, rape, and a particularly nauseating scene that was BDSM for *one* of the partners. It was definitely rape and a very violent assault for the other, which made it most definitely *not* BDSM. These were a hefty part of why I couldn't like the book, but it was mostly just that it was so dark that I was sick to my stomach. The southern culture was the only one I struggled with, though.

Actually, I think it's this sex scene that I'm very sarcastically calling a BDSM scene, which it most definitely was not, that killed the book for me. The woman was a vicious, violent psychopath who enjoyed wielding power through cruelty and depravity. The one enjoying the sex so much was the queen and she was flaying (with her nails) and beating *a slave* until blood was pouring off of him. The slave was not allowed to say no or do anything to defend or protect himself. There were a lot of great things about this book but I don't think I ever recovered from that scene.

Lindsay, you don't want to read this.

JP says

This is an old review, but I am glad that I found it, because "Black Wine" is one of the most interesting books I have ever read, from a number of different perspectives. The author is Candas Jane Dorsey.

This book is not for the faint of heart - it is chock full of sex (the good kind and the bad kind), perversion (the bad kind), horrific cruelty, suffering, and uppity women. The structure of the story is very interesting, three separate story lines that add to each other in a very subtle, sophisticated weave. Dorsey is good. At the start it seems a lot like some of Burrough's experimental writing (where he wrote novels and then cut them up and rearranged the pieces). But things become clearer over time, and the interleaving of the various stories is masterful.

Sex is dealt with very frankly here, it is pervasive, not just fitting into the plot from time to time. The bisexuality of the main character (and most of the other characters) just happens, without fanfare or any indication that this might not be normal human behavior, which was refreshing.

This book was in the fantasy section of the library. I am not sure why (there are no swords, goblins, magic or any of that stuff). There are a couple of things that might appear magical, but as far as the "material" world goes, it pretty much seems squarely in the science fiction category (if that - the most high-tech things here appear to be blimps).

That said, the material world is pretty insubstantial in this book, like a minimalist set for a play. I can only remember one (maybe two) instances in which objects were attributed a color (but that may be me). People, relationships, emotional barriers, structures, tensions, chains, and cruelty are the main subject of this book. There is not even the most passing attempt to explain the few fantastic elements that drift through the story. They are just there. She does not present a cosmic view of the powers of the universe (like, say, Wolfe or LeGuin). And it is funny that those two should come up. LeGuin writes a glowing review of the book, and compares Dorsey to Wolfe (and Gibson). Both (well, all three) are among my favorite authors.

I was very impressed. I suspect that there may be echoes of other feminist writers (such as Atwood's Handmaidens Tale, and Sontag's "Summer before the Dark(?)") (??)). I am ashamed to say I have not read much feminist literature recently so maybe this caught me by surprise.

And I was repeatedly surprised as I read this book - at different times it was sociology/anthropology, a fairy tale, a coming of age tale, and a story about a mother and daughter.

So go get it. It is a book worth reading this year.

Tracy says

4.5 stars

This book is as rich, complex, and worth savoring as one imagines the eponymous black wine to be. The characters are delightful and intriguing, and hold up well to the multiple-narrator structure (unlike certain other books The Boleyn Inheritance I've read recently). The plot is intricately structured and well-paced, and the themes are interesting without being overbearing. On top of all that, it is beautifully written, including some brilliant turns of phrase, one of my favorites being "a minuscule tranquility."

I have just three, relatively minor, quibbles that keep it from getting that last half star: First, there is a bit of a narrative lull in the middle of the book after the mystery that carries through the first half has been revealed. Second, there is some inconsistency in the technological state of the world. It bothered me that they had global-range airships and advanced neurosurgery, but apparently no means of long-distance communication faster than people carrying letters, and that this incongruity was not explained. Finally, the geographers among us would really like a map of the world.

AT says

A remarkable book that's perhaps 85% Le Guin and 15% Iain Banks. Difficult and prickly, with some strange details that I'm not sure the purpose of, but I really enjoyed it.

Viki Holmes says

What a tour-de-force. Black Wine is not only a darkly satisfying piece of literary sci -fi, but a blisteringly uncompromising exploration of gender, identity and sexual politics. Gorgeously written, it was no surprise to discover that Candas Jane Dorsey is a poet, and her love of words shines through the story. At times the shifts between narrative voices could be confusing, but as the story unfolds the reason for this blurring of identity becomes clear. There is beauty in bleakness. Wonderful.

Malcolm Logscribe says

Beautiful, warm, tragic, sexy, painful, bitter, sweet.

Mothers and daughters and journeys, escape, return, language, loss, story.

It's difficult to start, and I really loath dream sequences, but everything fits together beautifully by the end. I love the characters, even the ones I didn't like, and I love love love their relationships. There are many distinct cultures and they're rich and delicious. I almost loved this book.

It loses one star for preaching a bit about sexual freedom/promiscuity/nonmonogamy. I hate to criticize here because I also cooed and melted over the main poly-and-also-nonmonogamous marriage. It was presented without judgement or fanfare, and it was lovey and wonderful and just completely yes, but in every instance of sexual... "enlightenment"? It seems to be pushed as the correct, enlightened, non-repressed way to behave. Also the sex was often hot, but also... simple? Everything works perfectly and intent is magic and nobody has quirky or complicated anatomy/needs. Not my experience, so not my preference to read about exclusively, but not necessarily an objective fault. Also, I was convinced enough by the end of the book, but there were a few instances where people went on journeys that were pretty much guaranteed to end badly, and I just wanted to swoop in and yell at them to stay put. Narratively things needed to happen thus, and at the end it worked, but I'll have to reread a few times to decide whether those decisions feel justified on a character level.

It loses another for having a reverse racism land. Ideally, as this is a fantasy land, prejudice can run in ways that have nothing to do with real life prejudice, but... it's like people who get defensive about fictional ladies wearing male-gazey clothes. "Let her be herself! It's her choice!". Um, you created her. That was YOUR choice, and it came from the cultural place where you are. I almost stopped reading because I didn't want to deal with why this author decided to do write about marginalized whiteness, and I will be wary before recommending this book.

Laurie says

I found this book a difficult read. We don't learn the names of some of the characters until late in the game, and the story jumps from plot line to plot line. Some names are very similar to each other. And absolutely

nothing is explained; it's just action and dialogue. The setting seems to be a future earth, where settlements are far flung and have very different languages and social customs from each other; some are horrendously authoritarian, some easy going; some have people who never touch each other if at all possible while in others, sex is casual as breathing.

The story follows several generations of women, all but one of whom live horrible lives; some are the horror, while others are on the receiving end of it. It does seem that with each generation, life gets a bit better and each woman is freer to be herself, even though the oldest woman in the chain is a ruler of a city/country and the youngest works in a warehouse. This is a novel where the characters are very real; no one is 100% likeable- although there are one or two who are 100% loathsome.

This is not fantasy (other than one character), but rather the type of science fiction that isn't fun to read but makes one pay attention and think.

Joseph says

This book is marvelous, very well written, with a complex structure that adds to the effect of the whole. I was reading Lord Valentine's Castle and the first of the New Sun books by Gene Wolfe at the same time, and they have similar tones, science fantasy with darker undercurrents. In some ways a dynastic saga, or a family history, which is not readily apparent at the beginning. One of the best books I have read in science fiction for truthfully handling non-binary relationships, and exploring alternative sexualities in a fashion that feels true. There are many things to savour in this book, and it is one of the few books I know that demand a second read in order to appreciate everything. Also very facile with language, and how we communicate, or fail to.

Ysabet says

The prose and structure in *Black Wine* are beautifully done, and the worldbuilding is intriguing, but I didn't find myself terribly attached to the story or characters. That's because it's not the kind of book I fall for, though, rather than being a flaw in the work.

Elena says

Reading this book felt like a dream. And sometimes a nightmare.

The setup of the book was really unique and intriguing, in the first half. The way the story lines seem disconnected and eventually intertwine is perfect, but I can see where some would find the vagueness annoying. This kind of flowery prose isn't for everyone, and I found myself having to reread a lot of sentences just to understand the clunky wording.

The world building was wonderfully done. It doesn't spell anything out, and a lot is implied or left out entirely. In a normal fantasy or sci-fi story this wouldn't be good, but it works for this kind of disjointed, dreamlike book. It reads as if these cultures are already established for everyone, and don't need to be

explained. The same goes for the nature of all the polyamorous and polysexual relationships, which aren't treated like a big deal.

Some people have mentioned not liking the fact that the time period and technology is so all-over-the-place, seeming to be medieval in some parts and futuristic in others. I don't find that it detracts from anything actually important to the story, and if it got any more specific then it would take away from the central meaning of the story and become more like a standard other-world fantasy novel. Too much lore and it becomes too much Game of Thrones. I thought it was interesting that as the story progressed, the technology and world got steadily more modern and closer to our world. Going from criminals locked in cages or hung from gibbets, to a single girl working as a forklift driver and playing in a band at coffee shops.

I simultaneously did and didn't like all the loose ends - I wanted the stories to be resolved, but that also wouldn't have suited the nature of the book.

I only gave it three stars because despite all this, I wouldn't want to read it again. It was intensely violent and disturbing in some places, and other places were just binging my mind too much to enjoy the read. I prefer less cerebral fantasies. I couldn't get really attached to any of the characters or put much stock in any of their relationships, beyond wanting the mothers and daughters to be reunited.

Becky says

This book is a little hard to get into, but oh my god, am I glad I stuck with it! It is a little confusing in the beginning, with too little information given to the reader. Some of the language choices made the reading, especially at the beginning, awkward. Setting aside the negatives (of which there are few), a couple of chapters in, I was so hooked that I stayed up all night to finish the book. As the world of Black Wine becomes clear and the women's stories are pulled together I found myself enjoying the rich universe that Dorsey created. It is so worth a read, the dark and fascinating plot lines of the individual women are woven together so beautifully and her unique way of telling a story spanning several generations make this book worth a look at.

Kathryn says

Good Points:

Interesting. Weird but interesting.

Very generational, heavy focus on mothers, absent mothers especially.

Political uprisings! And their inherent problems.

Addresses privilege.

You're left wondering about timelines/identity, are these people the same person or different people? How many different women are you reading about? Everything clears up about halfway through but even then you're not ENTIRELY certain.

This is a book about women being women and finding themselves in a dangerous fantasy world.

Mix of science fiction technology and fantasy magic.

Interesting characters.

While the world is entirely fictional and sometimes descriptions of skin color can be lacking there are plenty

of characters of color who are important parts of the storyline.

Mute character.

Essa is potentially mixed-race? Described as being pale but tanning very dark, mother is from the Southern isles where they paint their faces and eat with 'eating sticks'.

I spent most of the book coding Essa as white, however, as she comes from the mountains and has GIANT amounts of privilege. Also, once you get to the southern isles they feel very European.

Polyamorous/pansexual characters.

Sexuality is never truly pinned down but two protagonists engage in sex/romance with both men and women, one of them becomes involved with multiple partners.

Polyamorous couples are called 'forming a hand', in some places meant to literally imply 5 people in a relationship or just 5 people in multiple relationships that overlap.

M/M and F/F couples can conceive/give birth to children which is never really explained.

Ties up all the loose ends without making the last few chapters feel like a Deathly Hallows epilogue.

Characters never settle down. All about the journey!

Abandonment, big theme.

Bad Points:

WEIRD. SUPER WEIRD. WEIRD AND CONFUSING.

Like I said, you're left wondering about identity and that's an important part of the story but at some points it's not enjoyable.

The mix of magic/sci-fi tech is NEVER EVER EXPLAINED.

I felt like the world building was severely lacking. Just like 'how does this all mesh?' Because it's supposed to but there are a number of points where you go 'huh? Wha?'

Racism is addressed from the view of pale people in a primarily dark skinned environment.

Tons of sexual violence.

It didn't feel like 'oh this character hasn't had anything bad happen to them for a while time to abuse them' but oh my god.

Tons of sexual violence. Tons.

Triggers:

TONS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE.

TONS OF IT.

Rape.

Past genital mutilation.

Abandonment.

Slavery.
