

THEN LIKE THE BLIND MAN: ORBIE'S STORY (Starred Review)

by [Freddie Owens](#)

Link: <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/freddie-owens/then-blind-man-orbies-story/>



★KIRKUS REVIEW

A Detroit boy is sent to stay with his grandparents in rural 1950s Appalachia in this debut literary novel with touches of magical realism.

Nine-year-old Orbie Ray is “a handful” according to his stepfather, Victor. That’s why he has to stay with his grandparents in Kentucky while the rest of the family drives down to Florida, where Victor has a job opportunity. Everything in Harlan’s Crossroads is so different from Detroit—not just the bluegrass and tobacco farms, but also the race relations. Orbie grew up believing that “colored” kids jumped you in the schoolyard and that a black man caused the accident that killed his father. However, in Kentucky, he notices that white folks are often scarier—such as Old Man Harlan, who charges too much at his store, or Bird Pruitt, Harlan’s disturbing hunchback cousin. He also meets Moses Mashbone, a half Choctaw, half black snake handler and medicine man who saved Granpaw’s life; as a result, Granny won’t allow Orbie to say the N-word. Orbie can’t find anyone to play with, so he overcomes his fears and makes friends with Willis, a “little colored boy Moses takes care of.” Willis has a stutter and clubfoot, but he also sings and draws pictures. The story of how Victor courted Orbie’s mother unfolds in flashback, alternating with scenes of Orbie’s story, as he finds himself confronting powerful forces—race, family, nature and even something supernatural. In his debut novel, Owens captures his characters’ folksy Appalachian diction without overdoing it and subtly reveals character through dialogue and description. He also renders a child’s viewpoint with great psychological sensitivity: “I didn’t like the way [Victor] was all the time trying to be on my mind. It was too close together somehow—like when Momma started talking about Jesus and wouldn’t shut up.” Moses and Willis are sometimes overly idealized, and readers may wish that the novel better explored the downsides of snake-handling churches. Overall, however, readers will find this an impressive debut.

A psychologically astute, skillful, engrossing and satisfying novel.

THEN LIKE THE BLIND MAN: Orbie's Story

Publishers Weekly Review

In an American coming-of-age novel, the author presents a stunning story with clarity and historical accuracy, rich in illuminating the Appalachian culture of the time period. It is 1959 and Orbie, aged 9, is forced to spend the summer with his grandparents in Harlan, Kentucky, rather than travel to St. Petersburg, Florida, with his mother, sister, and step-father Victor. Instead he will live in a two-room cabin with his share-cropping grandparents, no friends, and nothing to do. Such is the set-up of the story of a young boy from Detroit who learns about racial tolerance, religion, and the meaning of betrayal and love. As the summer progresses there are flashbacks to Orbie's tragedy, pain, and misunderstanding that help to illuminate the reasons for his fears and uncertainties. The reader learns these lessons with Orbie, gaining knowledge and understanding of the segregated South. This story educates and brings history alive, depicting American union labor practices and the racial prejudices that were so prevalent in the 1950's.

ABNA Publisher's Weekly Reviewer

Link: <http://www.pinterest.com/pin/365776800956061336/>

24TH ANNUAL WRITER'S DIGEST SELF-PUBLISHED BOOK AWARDS

JUDGE # 64 | Commentary:

I prefer the subtitle “Orbie’s Story,” for this novel is a coming of age story about a little boy who saves his mother. The boy is named Orbie. I loved reading this novel, set on a Kentucky farm and narrated in the Appalachian dialect of the 50s. I liked that “Orbie’s Story” stays firmly in the perspective of the young protagonist, who at the outset is steeped in the racial attitudes besetting Detroit, where he was raised. The same attitudes poison much of the Kentucky culture—but not, by a miracle, the home of Orbie’s wonderful Granpaw and Granny. There Orbie learns that good feels good and bad feels bad, but it certainly takes him awhile! Owens could not have created stronger characters or a more convincing story arc. The love Orbie feels for his mother is strong and genuine. The self-serving interests of Victor are clear, and the reader will recognize the strength of human desire seeking a course that suits the soul. The development of all these characters is superb, and the emotional bonds Orbie grows with Willis, Miss Alma and the rest of the cast including a couple of chickens named Elvis and Johnny are pivotal. Owens allows spiritual, even paranormal, visions to take place and I must say I am in great admiration of the seeming natural ease with which Owens writes these scenes. Nothing is overwritten; the story is exactly as it should be, building to a wondrous climax of physical-psychic-emotional depths and rooted in the certainty of what is correct and protective of the human soul. The Appalachian dialect was present but not so much that I could not understand the story. The cover art is lovely and the blurbs give credibility to the fact that the novel truly is wonderful.

THEN LIKE THE BLIND MAN: Orbie's Story

The San Francisco Book Review

Every once in awhile, you read a book in which every element fits together so perfectly that you just sit back in awe at the skill of the storyteller. *Then Like the Blind Man* is one of these books.

When nine-year-old Orbie is dropped off at his grandparents' farm, he feels abandoned, lonely, and superior to the country folk around him. As the story unfolds, we learn of his father's death and of his mother's subsequent marriage to a violent, drunken man. We see his acceptance of his surroundings and their people. We discover his ongoing internal and external conflicts concerning his stepfather. We recognize his thorough and significant growth.

Throughout the course of the story, Orbie deals with discrimination, domestic and sexual abuse, violence, religion, murder, death, love, forgiveness, the complexities of human nature, and so much more. Even with these deep themes, the book never loses the sense of wonder, passion, and fragmented understanding that comes with a child narrator.

Set primarily in rural Kentucky in the late 1950s, the story is filled with a sense of place. The entire narrative, not just the dialogue, is written in such a way that you cannot help but pronounce it in a particular accent. Despite its prevalence, this dialect never seems overwhelming or false. Important plot points are also tied to the setting, including the fate of a pair of chickens, access to medical care, and even the weather. Within this story, you never lose track of where or with whom you are.

The isolated, segregated environment echoes the constant, building tension between people. The entire story has a very specific and oppressive atmosphere that reminds me of standing in a dusty field seconds before a storm breaks.

The back of the book jacket says the story is "equal parts Hamlet and Huckleberry Finn." That is not exaggeration or unwarranted praise. *Then Like the Blind Man: Orbie's Story* grabs you from the very first page and carries you along, breathless and tense, until the very last, very satisfying sentence. Freddie Owens has created something special.

Link: <http://sanfranciscobookreview.com/product/then-like-the-blind-man-orbies-story/>

Then Like the Blind Man

Orbie's Story

FOREWORD REVIEWS

Reviewed by [Michelle Anne Schingler](#)
November 7, 2012

At nine, Orbie seems to live his life along a precipice. He is burdened with an overabundance of difficult choices which would be beyond the capacities of most boys his age—but Orbie is about to discover that he's no ordinary boy. In the debut novel from artist and poet Freddie Owens, nothing is ever precisely what it seems: prejudice is not innate, the dead aren't really dead, and those in positions of power cannot be trusted.

Orbie finds himself deposited at his grandparent's home in Kentucky one summer, his stepfather, Victor, having had a change of heart about including him on a family prospecting trip to Florida. Except "heart" doesn't seem, to Orbie, quite the right word to apply to his stepfather, whose tempestuous temper took him from the widowed family's salvation to its most dangerous element in one outburst flat.

With no end to his stay in sight, Orbie finds himself settling into routines all but unthinkable weeks before. He becomes fast friends with the Kingdom Boys, who he'd have happily kept himself segregated from back home in Detroit, though he now finds that skin color is not the best indicator of trustworthiness. He forms a strong bond with Willis, the stunningly talented, physically disabled black boy connected to his grandparents via their mysterious friend Moses, who may call down the rain.

Orbie's story is driven by elements of magical realism. Dreams melt into prophecy; Orbie learns to part the clouds and peer into the past, with charismatic Moses as an occasional guide. He'll need these newfound abilities, and the curious new maturity they bestow, when Victor and his mother unexpectedly return, tumult behind them and an incredible storm at their front. Orbie watches as his world is rent and, as his family slips closer to the maelstrom, finds himself wondering this: at the last, why do we wish to save that which we once needed to destroy?

Then Like the Blind Man is an electrifying porthole to the South of the '50s, where, though inane prejudice may have dominated, kindness and justice also had a place. Orbie's sharecropping grandparents, by defying convention with unnerving grace, become founts of colloquial wisdom whose appeal is impossible to resist, and the Orbie they nurture—the best version of a boy who may otherwise have been lost—is someone the reader comes to love. These are characters with incredible heart and appeal, and the turbulent world they inhabit is magnetically drawn. Ethical and spiritual challenges abound in this intelligent and unusual tale, and readers will be enlivened and edified by its climactic moments.

Link: <https://www.forewordreviews.com/reviews/then-like-the-blind-man/>

THEN LIKE THE BLIND MAN: Orbie's Story

Midwest Book Review

The weight of the world was never meant for the young. "Then Like the Blind Man: Orbie's Story" tells the story of nine year old Orbie as the death of his father pushes him off from his mother as she marries a man he can't get along with. Living with his grandparents, Orbie learns much of the world, his parents, and faith. With much of faith and learning, "Then Like the Blind Man" is a strong addition to general fiction collections with a focus on coming of age tales.

John Taylor
Reviewer

Link: http://www.midwestbookreview.com/mbw/jan_13.htm#taylor