



Once You Break a Knuckle

D.W. Wilson

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Set in the remote Kootenay Valley in western Canada, *Once You Break a Knuckle* tells stories of good people doing bad things: two bullied adolescents sabotage a rope swing, resulting in another boy's death; a heartbroken young man refuses to warn his best friend about an approaching car; sons challenge fathers and break taboos. Crackling with tension and propelled by jagged, cutting dialogue, the stories interconnect and reveal to us how our best intentions are doomed to fail or injure, how our loves can fall short or mislead us, how even friendship—especially friendship—can be something dangerously temporary.

Wilson's world is always dangerous, barbed with violence and the possibility of betrayal. And yet, in this small, finely-wrought universe, a dogged, wry dignity is usually enough to see us through.

An intoxicating alloy of adrenaline and the kind of vulnerability we would all admit to if we were honest, *Once You Break a Knuckle* is about the courage it takes just to make it through the day.

Once You Break a Knuckle Details

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From Reader Review Once You Break a Knuckle for online ebook

Alan says

heard great things about this. People comparing him to Breece D'J Pancake - that's how good. Plus he's Canadian so he has a head start on all other mortals when it comes to fiction in general and short stories in particular.

finally come in at the library..

review coming (getting behind...)

Great gritty stories of (mainly) macho fathers and sons struggling to articulate their feelings, instead mock-fighting and/or actual fighting. (Some dads and sons hate each other and fight for real). Also of teenage gangs, crushes on teachers, and of usually unsuccessful attempts at finding girlfriends or maintain relationships generally. Of course it's been done before, but Wilson does it very well. He's particularly good on the smells of the small towns his protagonists inhabit in B.C., Canada.

He liked the smell of the bleeding hours, the frost or dew and, at home, the scent of a cold house and the cheap, cheap stovetop coffee he'd strain into a cheap steel thermos and drink in the shower, and while pissing..

And there it was: the smell of carbide and tar and dirty steel.

And descriptions of its inhabitants:

His hair gummied to his cheeks and his head tilted at an angle. This gruesome, spider-like scar spanned his chest and the whole left nipple was sliced off, snubbed like a button nose.

Her hair smelled like tea leaves and her lips had the cabbage taste of marijuana.

At first I started reading these in random order, but discovered that many are linked with the same protagonists appearing at a further point in their stories, so prior knowledge was needed (or a minor character would show up as the main one in another), so I read them in order. I have to say that the stories did become a mite repetitive towards the end, covering similar ground, albeit near-perfect in execution.

Larry Bassett says

Some months ago I bought three used books of short stories online. I must try to recreate that moment since these books are proving to be a most strange, kooky and weird combination of books. What was I thinking? It turned out that they were all, unbeknownst to me, ex-library books, something I generally avoid. It is feeling like a meant-to-be serendipity.

You will not be surprised when I tell you that *Once You Break a Knuckle* is a bit of a macho book. It is about guys who are, or who imagine themselves to be, rough and ready. Guys who drink beer and drive trucks. The stories are set in the environs of Invermere.

Invermere is a community in eastern British Columbia, Canada, near the border of Alberta. With its growing permanent population of almost 4,000 (including Athalmer and Wilmer), swelling to near 40,000 on summer weekends, it is the hub of the Columbia Valley between Golden in the north, and Cranbrook to the south. Invermere sits on the northwest shore of Lake Windermere and is a popular summer destination for visitors and second home owners from Calgary.

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Invermer...>

You might think, like I often do, that Canada is simply a northern extension of the U.S. You and I would be wrong. Canada is someplace else. D.W. Wilson is from Canada and writes in the Canadian language. It takes some adjusting for us southerners – and we are all southerners to Canadians. For example, befitting my view of the book as macho, I was still impressed when cars traveled at one hundred. It took me a while to figure out it is *kilometers* per hour in Canada. It is good to know a little bit about hockey as well.

This was a fun book to read in moderation. I do not need to read another one like it anytime soon. The author has a way with words, a sometimes clever way. He can be humorous to the point of being occasionally ribald or self-deprecating. Based on the reviews in Goodreads I would say that many of the readers are from the Invermere part of the world. In fact, my ex-library book came from the Vancouver Island Regional Library. And, for a somewhat macho book, it surprised me how many of the GR reviewers were women. In fact, I'd say I was stunned by the femaleness of the readership. Must say something about being a Canadian woman.

An example of what passes for father-son conversation in this book:

I threatened to tell the other cops that he had been out-drunk by a nun and he threatened to acquaint my skull with his fist. I said I had nothing to fear from a man who was floored by a nun and he said if it wasn't for the goddamned cat, who would take his spot as soon as he stood up, he'd show me why they called him the Kid of Granite.

You can see how this book could make you smile at least occasionally the first time you read it. But be glad you could see you were getting to the end of it at the same time.

Guys in this book wear t-shirts with slogans on them like: Cops Only Have One Hand – the Upper Hand. Although they would never admit it, the guys do change their t-shirts. You can tell since the slogans change.

There is some nostalgia about growing up in a small community. It is interesting that the author, who is writing about the very small community where he grew up in western Canada, has evidently relocated to London. And how much of this book is autobiographical?

I finish the book and ask myself, "Why do people live that way?" Then I think, "This could be a great book if it answered that very question." But it doesn't answer the question, choosing to just draw a stark picture and letting me try to figure it out. But the life portrayed in this book is too far outside my world and I just don't seem to be able to get it. The macho guys in the book don't seem to get it either but mostly they don't even want to talk about it – except maybe occasionally in the secrecy of their own minds – and a little bit at the end of the book. So I end up feeling sorry for them as well as for myself for not being able to do anything to help them out of their dilemma. Maybe it's really OUR dilemma – that of the big world. We just can't figure out how to live together.

I give *Once You Break a Knuckle* four stars for shining a light on the question but, since it leaves me without

either an answer or hope that there is one, I can't give it that fifth star. The Friend's Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) has a slogan that these macho guys might want to consider putting on their t-shirts: War Is Not the Answer!

Jeffrey Keeten says

"It always seems like everything's the same until the moment when you need everything to be the same. Then you find out it's been different the whole time." From the story The Persistence.

I'm really surprised to discover that someone growing up in Invermere, BC could have a similar experience to a kid growing up in Glade, Kansas. Small towns, it seems are similar everywhere. I can't tell you how irritated I was when Sarah Palin was going around the country talking about **Small Town Values**. It made me want to upchuck. I had lived in some major cities by then, Tucson, Phoenix, San Francisco, and had spent time in most of the major cities in the United States. One thing I've discovered is that people are people and what good people value are pretty much the same things good people value everywhere. Big city people can be just as friendly if not more so than small town people who generally, frankly, are hindered by inbred discriminations against anyone they didn't grow up with. Nothing personal, you're just not from around here. If you listen to Sarah Palin small towns are the paragons of virtue, but what I've discovered is that adultery, fornication of all kinds(yes what you are thinking), too much drinking, drugs, and true evil are as prevalent in small towns as in big cities.

Now D. W. Wilson embraces all of that, but what is endearing about his characters are they are fundamentally good people struggling with life. I grew up with a bunch of guys that hung together because of bisecting interests. I'd say that we were a little more intelligent than the average teenager. We dated the same pack of girls and took similar classes. We went out for sports. We became officers in FFA, muscling out the upperclassmen our sophomore year to take control of the direction of chapter. We supported one of our members to be class president our senior year. Ultimately we were held up by one thing:

"We were never the kids who ran the town--it never felt like ours, probably because none of us ever intended to stay." From the story Once You Break a Knuckle.

Every relationship we had was temporary because we weren't staying. It was like a mantra we would keep reminded each other of.

"Small town girls, Twigg might mumble into his pint. They come into your life and then they're gone and you've forgotten them just as quick. You know how it is. You know how it is." From the story Accelerant.

But there is always that one girl that for a moment you think about throwing all your dreams and your expectations for yourself out the window of a fast moving Chevy.

"She sucked the rest of the whiskey and pointed at the sky where a trail of turquoise streaked across the horizon--the northern lights, earlier than I'd ever known them. She just stood there for a second with her back to me and those light around her. Christ, she was so pretty. Then she whipped the empty bottle off the summit, and I stared at her and thought about her and waited for the sound of the bottle breaking way, way below us." From the story The Dead Roads.

Then you wake up and realize you might as well just drown yourself in the nearest rusty cattle tank.

There are a lot about fathers and sons in this collection. There is conflict and love and fear.

"He wanted to grab his dad's hair and smash that face into a tabletop, until the wood was dented with his dad's front teeth and all that remained in his fist was a bloody husk of hair and sinew." From the story Valley Echo.

I never felt that much anger at my Dad. I only made him really mad one time. I was disking a field and these two young ladies I knew tracked me down and asked me if I could go to the lake with them. An hour no more... which ended up being closer to three. When they dropped me back at the field my Dad was driving the tractor. I waited at the edge of the field until he made a circle and pulled up in a cloud of dust or it could have been a cloud of my shame. He stepped out of the tractor and pushed me. I hit him in the chest, which turned out to be one of his least vulnerable spots. I nearly broke my thumb. It was black and blue for several days and sore for weeks. He pushed me again towards the road and got back in the tractor and drove off. I walked about five miles home. We never spoke about it again.

"I imagined my old man behind me, on the slope with arms crossed, dwindling to an outline, a silhouette, a shadow." From the story Reception.

My grandfather died from a massive heart attack at 45. My father found him, black tongue extended. He'd been throwing some feed into the horse bunks when his heart seized. My father was 14. It just so happened that when I turned 14 my father was 45. He didn't talk about it with me, but the house was small and I heard his conversations with life insurance agents. That same year I remember my mom waking me up at 2AM and asking me to go look for my father. My heart was in my throat as I started the pickup letting the engine warm up. It was hard for me to conceive that anything could happen to my Dad that he didn't want to have happen. I drove around through all the pastures thinking he had been restless and had decided to check cattle. It was spooky being out that time of the night, black as pitch. The cattle's eyes glowed from the light of my high beams. Shadows looked menacing. My mind began to imagine the absolute worst possibilities. I finally came home without finding him. I was worried about what my mom would say regarding my failure. Luckily he was back, healthy, angry at mom, but he chucked my chin and ruffled my hair and told me to get back to bed.

Wilson talks about sons. The struggles they have to find themselves, respect their fathers, and at the same time make them proud of them. Yes, I was one of those guys with tears welling when Kevin Costner asked his Dad if he wanted to have a catch.

"Together we've raised our sons to be someone into whose care you could entrust a belonging." From the story The Mathematics of Friedrich Gauss.

This line made me gasp because it encapsulated the way I feel about my son. He is loyal, warm, considerate, and strong. He will be a rock for the woman lucky enough to win his love.

My London Bookseller recommended this to me along with D. W. Wilson's first novel Ballistics. I got to say Nick came through for me again. I loved the way these stories weave around each other with characters starring in one story and appearing as a sidekick in the next. Wilson explores all facets of this community of people. He shows how hard life is and how difficult it is to be happy. He shows how destructive people are, not intentionally, but breaking dreams of other people in the process of trying to figure out their own lives.

Obviously this book clicked over a lot of memories for me. It made me think about things I haven't thought about for years. His short story *The Dead Roads* won the 2011 BBC Short Story Award and it was certainly one of my favorites, but the rest of the collection had the same muscular confidence as the one that won the award. I'm definitely going to read his novel and see what he can do with a longer arc of plotting.

"Promotions, he told me, are a lot like blowjobs: easy to get if you're willing to go somewhere dirty." From the story *The Elasticity of Bone*. So get a little dirty with D. W. Wilson. You might get beer spilled on your lap or grease on your clothes or dirt on your skin, but in the process you might appreciate **who you have and what you have** just a little bit more.

Joseph says

Once You Break a Knuckle: Stories by D.W. Wilson is a collection of short stories based out of British Columbia. Wilson was born and raised in small towns in British Columbia. He has earned his PhD in creative writing from the University of East Anglia in Norwich. He has the novel *Ballistics* to his credit as well as being shortlisted for several awards as well as winning the BBC National Short Story Award for "The Dead Roads," a short story that appears in this collection.

Short stories tend to be difficult for me. When I read a story I like it to go on for a while and have the fundamentals of a story: Setting, characters, plot, climax, conclusion. Most collections of short story collections I have read seem to lack this and are a collection of disjointed stories that seem to have the same appeal of asking some on how was work today? There might be an interesting bit here or there but most of the time its pretty slow.

As I got a story or two into *Once You Break a Knuckle*, I found a theme. Intended or not, I thought if Bruce Springsteen wrote short stories, it would be like this. There's a car (cobalt colored Camaro), several women, some regrets, the guy thing, and a story of a mathematician that really reminded me of parallel universe version of "Racing in the Street." It is otherwise very blue collar and even includes a "State Trooper" (RCMP) and a wounded veteran coming home. Intermixed are some requiring themes of Kokanee beer, t-shirts and coffee mugs with corny but applicable sayings printed on them. It's almost like Asbury Beach, NJ and Invermere, BC are sister cities.

This is a great collection of stories. The most of the stories interconnect and the standalones do not leave you hanging or feeling like you walked in to a middle of a conversation and left before it was over. The characters are well developed and at times it seems like you are reading a memoir rather than stories. Collections like this one restore my faith in short story collections. An excellent read for all.

Josh says

Reads like a Johnny Cash song but with more beer and heartache.

Caroline Woodward says

A simply wonderful collection of short stories, set in the East Kootenay region of British Columbia and happily, recognized and published by a biggie, Hamish Hamilton and not consigned to the 'regional voice' ghetto in parochial Canadian literary terms. Most of these stories are written from the p.o.v. of young, yearning males: what to do about the hicks waiting to beat them up, weekend in, weekend out? Should they leave town and get an education? Should they follow in their fathers' footsteps and do the same job, and somehow earn the old man's respect? Should they let the local tough girls know they are crazy for them? It is the bare-bones, muscular style of the writing that sets this book head and shoulders above the cliched tropes of small town settings and Wilson is a brilliant stylist. His ear for the vernacular of working class tradesmen is wonderfully honed, pitch perfect, for those of us who've spent any time working alongside these jokers, some of the funniest people around. His nuts and bolts descriptions of the daily tasks of carpentry and electrical/plumbing work evoke such authenticity and made me realize: we just don't read about this stuff in fiction, do we? Thanks to Wilson, a world is revealed. His comprehension and articulation of the muddled mysteries of male desires is nothing less than a tour de force. Look for this young man to become a major writer, period.

George Ilsley says

This is one of those collections where more becomes less. If you read one story, you think brilliant. But after several, somehow one becomes less impressed. One drawback for me is that some of the characters reappear in other stories; yet the linkage is confusing more than enlightening. I was left trying to match up the other story with the current one, and was inevitably unsuccessful. Another drawback is the author's spare prose, which invited confusion at times. If one is talking about Bill and Bob, and says "Bill met Bob when he worked at the restaurant", who worked at the restaurant? Some sentences I had to read several times, and I still don't know who worked at the restaurant. However if you're a big fan of nouns as verbs, where pick-up trucks don't just drive down the road, but are "missiled", then you will love this collection. You can expect calamity, death and violence at every turn of the road.

Carolyn Gerk says

Once You Break a Knuckle was my first Goodreads Giveaway win. I was drawn to the novel because it is set in Western Canada (I live in Northern Alberta). The description on the back of the novel describes it as a collection of stories of 'good people doing bad things'. I think Once You Break a Knuckle could more accurately be described as a collection of snapshots telling the story of small town Canada (specifically Invermere for the most part). The stories are an interconnected web of moments in the lives of the residents of the Kootenay Valley region. After a few stories I realized Wilson had strung each tale together with a chain of recurring characters; I would find myself trying to remember who was who and eventually gave this up, realizing that even though the same characters may pop up again, the stories stand alone, not requiring the support of the previous ones. Often harsh and violent, Wilson has written a novel chock full of blood, sweat and testosterone. Relationships between men/boys and their fathers is an ever prominent theme, as is the breaking point that sets one man to challenge another. The women in Wilson's stories are secondary characters, sought after by narrators, or legends who have scorned the tellers of the tales. Wilson has skill and promise and a distinctive edge. He writes in a blunt, realistic tone that, despite its

roughness feels intimate and honest. A unique, gritty voice, full of truth and tension. I look forward to checking out Wilson's future writing.

The copy I won was an 'unedited and uncorrected' copy. The only tweaks I can suggest would be to lay off on 'wrapping up' the stories by telling the reader what will happen in the future. its not the technique so much that irked me from time to time, but the frequency of use.

Penguin Random House Canada says

I'm the social media person at Penguin, but I can't help be the champion of this book. Gritty, dark, spare, unflinching, this book takes Light Lifting's eloquent prose and deft handling of the subtlety of human relationships, and merges it with the hard-nosed rural stories of Annie Proulx. I wasn't prepared for these masculine tales of violence and betrayal to move me, but Wilson's writing is so keen and courageous, I couldn't help being intoxicated by the worlds he created.

Ayelet says

D.W. Wilson, who I saw recently in the IFOA, has been receiving great reviews for his first book and for a good reason (he's also won the BBC National Short Story in 2011 - the youngest person to have ever won it. He's like, twelve). I didn't expect to like his book as much as I had. His loosely linked stories, set in the Kootenay valley, centre on men—tradesmen, fathers and sons—and his language and imagery, his detailed descriptions of physical activities, reflect that. But despite it being a physical, masculine, sometimes violent book, the writing is so fluid and gorgeous and fine (I sometimes had to pause, go back and reread whole paragraphs) that there was something almost feminine about it. (Similar, I guess, to how physical fights can sometimes look like dancing...)

Elinor says

Living in Invermere, I couldn't wait to read this book and do the commonplace thing of trying to recognize local characters. The author made this very easy, in some cases changing just a syllable in the person's name. I couldn't help wondering what some local people thought when they read a very thinly-disguised version of themselves.

D. W. Wilson is a real talent with a keen eye for observations, some of which were bang-on. I wish he had explored more fully the real advantages of growing up in a small community, but perhaps that will come later as he comes to terms with his past.

One thing that annoys me in all descriptions and media articles about this book . . . there is no such place as the Kootenay Valley. Invermere lies in the Columbia River valley. I think this was an example of Wilson slightly fictionalizing the setting for the book, and then the term being picked up by everyone else who doesn't know the difference. However, that's just the editor in me.

All in all, a wonderful book by a rising literary star.

Jay Hinman says

I found my way through about three quarters of the stories in D.W. Wilson's new collection "ONCE YOU BREAK A KNUCKLE" before concluding that I pretty much had the rough, blue-collar feel of working-class Western Canada nailed, and called it a rueful day. I'd been on a pretty good hot streak reading and enjoying unfamiliar authors who tackled similar terrain of the lost, the confused and the foregone, all living in misbegotten places far from our urban centers. Daniel Woodrell's "The Outlaw Album" was a good one mining this field for psychological pathos; even better was Jodi Angel's amazing "You Only Get Letters From Jail". Wilson's characters, all male and generally of good heart if not sound mind, work the construction sites and police forces of the Kootenay Valley in British Columbia, rubbing up often against the darker side of humanity: meth addicts, hockey-crazed dolts and troublesome and feisty women in many flavors. It had a lot to speak for it, including the NY Times review that made me buy it in the first place.

That said, I found it to be overwritten, with too many flourishes crammed into paragraphs, and a certain grating conversational rhythm that didn't strike me as particularly "real" - a cardinal sin when trying to convey the desperate humanity lurking below the surface in our fellow citizens. At times Wilson descends into "hick" dialect and story-telling mannerisms, which is all well and good, considering his subject matter, but it sometimes seems so ham-handed it makes me want to fly up to Invermere and see if the "puck sluts" and working stiff of the town could truly actually converse in this manner.

No question that Wilson's got some fine chops - I certainly didn't make it as far as I did in the book just to prove a point. He unwraps these seemingly tough men quite well at times, without having to take them through a crucible of pain or through major life events in order for us to get to some deeper sense of their missed opportunities and regrets. There are also some well-scripted portraits of dead-end towns, where everything fun more or less ends on high school graduation day, and adulthood comes crashing into full force as inelegantly as you can imagine, with quick divorces, unloved children and abandoned jobs in its wake. I see a few things to recommend in bits and spurts - just not in book length, I'm afraid.

Jen Squire says

The best thing about waking up too early this morning, is that I could make a strong cup of coffee, go back to bed, and read the final (title) story in this collection in the very quiet hours.

I've made this book last a long time and I think it's worth that. I'm on a run of quite amazing books, and have gone to a D.W. Wilson story in between them. It's been like going to a new and entire novel each time.

I'm so pleased to have read this, and am really looking forward to reading his debut novel.

But I'm going to wait a little while before I do that.

Sojourner says

Once You Break a Knuckle: Stories by D.W. Wilson is a wonderful collection of short stories, set in the East

Kootenay region of British Columbia. A collection of loosely connected vignettes means different opinions and reactions. Some will be sad and depressed, and some will read meaning into the stories, and that is how life actually is. On the whole, the book is about how people respond to things that happens in their lives.

Featuring 12 stories filled with likeable characters, memorable stories and the beautiful setting of Invermere which played a significant role in these stories, *Once You Break a Knuckle* is the story of people who are smashed and stoned. They are electricians, plumbers and cops. The stories are full of people bursting and crackling with life, however difficult that life may be. It is a collection of stories that depicts both the harsh reality of life, and its beauty in a small town in British Columbia. More than anything, Wilson's fascination with relationships comes to the fore through his portrayal of the love-hate between father and sons.

In fine, *Once You Break a Knuckle: Stories* by D.W. Wilson is a very fine collection of short stories. Readers will truly appreciate the writing style of Wilson. Written mainly from the male perspective but nonetheless penetrating and perceptive, it makes for a delightful reading.

Andrew says

—No-good whore, he said, and Winch felt a lump in his throat he couldn't swallow, and he watched his own fist smack his dad in the jaw, an earthy sound, like someone tapping a piece of chalk to slate.

For a moment his dad didn't react. He touched his chin. He glanced from car to woman to boy and then back at the house, his head tilted to the ground and his left eye squinting as though puzzled. Then he shot forward and those two massive pink hands hoisted Winch from the ground.

He landed hip-first, sideways. The impact spiked down his leg. His dad fell upon him, limbs methodical. Winch battered an arm aside, absorbed a half blow with his ribs, snugged his elbow over it. He smelled beer and deodorant and cigarettes, and Winch had never known his dad to smoke.

Once You Break a Knuckle is a collection of semi-linear linked short stories that take place in and around the Kootenay Valley in the British Columbia interior—specifically focussing on the town of Invermere. Focussing on a small group of families, the stories trace a line partially unstuck in time—while there is a certain sense of narrative progression to the stories, much like Jennifer Egan wrote in *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, the tales often break from their present tense and look deep into the past or far into the future, charting the mistakes and fights and transgressions of the many protagonists from several different perspectives. The result is a collection that feels claustrophobic in its setting—intended, I'm sure, to mark the limited personalities and opportunities provided by the very blue collar way of life—but expansive in its scope, offering a wide breadth of point-of-life experiences while allowing the reader to fill in certain chronological gaps on their own by interpreting events only partially alluded to.

A central conceit of oppressive masculinity gives a sharp edge to each story in the collection. Even when written from the third person, Wilson writes in the minds and dialects of the townsmen and women. His descriptions are minimalistic, often preferring to sharpen a tooth rather than coddle the reader with his metaphors. As such, the tone of the book rarely deviates, giving it a voice of unity that most linked collections lack, preferring instead to link specifically through plot or character arcs. A recurring bit of imagery that does play through most of the stories, to varying degrees of effectiveness, is the use of

knuckles—as descriptors for facial features, as evidence of pain or failure, and as a creeping disturbance to the broken nature of one’s dreams or love lost.

The back-and-forth-through-time placement of the stories in the collection works most effectively when offering us glimpses into the lives of Will and Mitch, two young boys whom we see grow into adulthood and push apart from one another throughout the course of the book. However, the strongest, most abusive of the stories—the multi-part “Valley Echo”—also feels the most out of place within the overarching narrative, if it can be called such a thing. Though it’s tone and style remain in tight alignment with the rest of the book, the years as seen through its protagonist Winch’s eyes, and the confusion and abuse he suffers through his drug addled absentee mother and violent disaster of a father are engrossing enough as to separate this tale from the others as something that stands strong and on its own.

Wilson writes a string of effortlessly broken men, women, boys, and girls like a child pulling apart his G.I. Joes and toying with the elastics inside. People flit in and out of each other’s lives in perfunctory, sometimes shocking ways. Women are eyed as prizes to be won from the weaker men. And strength of will—or the perception thereof—rules all. *Once You Break a Knuckle* is a travelogue through personal tragedy, misery, and the often-crippling inability to see one’s possibilities beyond such a tiny corner of the world.
