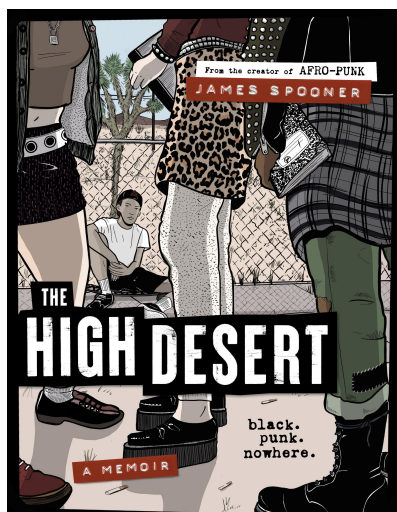


## Review: *The High Desert: Black. Punk. Nowhere.*

by James Spooner. Harper, May 2022. 368 p. ill. ISBN 9780358659112 (h/c), \$26.99.

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Like a great punk song, James Spooner's debut graphic memoir *The High Desert: Black. Punk. Nowhere.* erupts from a void, thirsty, miserable, and seething with social commentary. Focusing primarily on Spooner's formative years as a naive teenager in the early 1990s, this graphic Bildungsroman recounts he and his single mother's return to Apple Valley, California and Spooner's subsequent discovery of punk rock and like-minded outcasts. While Spooner includes the Young Adult genre's greatest hits (rebellion against authority, peer bullying, unrequited love, tragic loss), his signature theme centers around his relationship to punk culture and the racism he endures as a mixed-race American—an outsider to whom even The Ramones could not relate.

Spooner's consistent use of photo-realistic artwork evokes a keen, documentarian eye. Much attention focuses on facial expressions, body language, and a variety of fashion styles, which range from popular late-eighties trends to subcultural looks (punk, goth, skinhead, metalhead, etc.). The use of black, white, and gradients of each signals to readers a wide spectrum of skin tones and perhaps evokes the racial unity as sought in two-tone music—an early offshoot of punk rock. Finally, the poetry of punk proliferates the pages—from enlarged song lyrics stretching across single panels, to the recurrent use of Black Flag songs as chapter titles—Spooner weaves these alluring anthems into a greater tapestry, ultimately proselytizing the DIY-punk ethos.

*The High Desert* is recommended for young adults and older audiences interested in counterculture and issues relating to identity. It suits both public and academic libraries' graphic novel collections, especially in the areas of African American Studies, American Studies, and Musicology.