





*the heart is*  
**PLEASURE**  
*in* **WRITING**

WHETHER THEY'RE SET IN BROOKLYN, LOS ANGELES, MANHATTAN, OR ON MARS, ALL OF JONATHAN LETHEM'S NOVELS, INCLUDING HIS LATEST, *CHRONIC CITY*, START IN THE SAME PLACE. BY LIZA MONROY • PHOTOGRAPHS BY PIETER VAN HATTEM

**T**HE title of Jonathan Lethem's 2003 best-selling novel, *The Fortress of Solitude*, is an allusion to Superman's private retreat, located far away from his primary residence in Metropolis, the sprawling city that in many ways defines the Man of Steel. Likewise, Lethem, who is known to many readers for writing about his own metropolis, Brooklyn, New York, is often found in another, more secluded home, in Blue Hill, Maine. As if to reinforce this parallel, the driving directions he has sent me (a long list of exits, turns, and merges that comprise the route

out of Brooklyn, where he still has an apartment, to his white farmhouse, located over four hundred miles north of New York City) have a touch of superhero stateliness. "You have now joined forces with Route 15," he writes.

For Lethem, whose eighth novel, *Chronic City*, was published in October by Doubleday, life in Maine is hardly solitary—with him are his wife, Amy Barrett, an ebullient filmmaker, and their two-year-old son, Everett—but his immaculately organized, bookshelf-lined office does indicate a certain peace of mind. A silver MacBook and an iPod resting



**“I’M VERY TOLERANT OF STILLNESS. I DON’T MIND SITTING THERE FOR HALF AN HOUR. I’D RATHER NOT MOVE MY HANDS JUST TO MOVE THEM; I’LL WAIT FOR THE RIGHT THING.”**

on its speaker dock are arranged upon a wooden writing desk, which faces a window onto greenery. An original photograph of William S. Burroughs—taken by Allen Ginsberg—hangs on the wall. In gray corduroy pants, blue long-sleeved T-shirt, and black Chuck Taylor All-Stars, Lethem appears younger than his forty-five years. He looks, as his early mentor, bookstore owner Michael Seidenberg, has described him, like “a normal guy.”

Yet there is something about his stormy-sea blue eyes—a quiet intensity, you could call it—that hints at the mind behind the visionary writing that twelve years ago landed him on *Newsweek*’s list of one hundred people to watch in the new century. Sitting in a striped armchair in a corner between bookshelves as Maisie, the family’s “neurotic” Jack Russell terrier, darts about, Lethem pauses as he searches for precise words, a tendency that mirrors his writing approach. “I’m very tolerant of stillness. I don’t mind sitting there for half an hour,” he says. “I’d rather not move my

hands just to move them; I’ll wait for the right thing.”

Although he is the author of eight novels, a novella, four story collections, an essay collection, and numerous works of journalism and criticism—not to mention being editor of several anthologies, including *The Vintage Book of Amnesia* (Vintage, 2000) and *Philip K. Dick: Four Novels of the 1960s* (Library of America, 2007)—Lethem doesn’t consider himself prolific. Small indications of this modesty are peppered throughout his more recent books. “Recognition creeps up on one,” utters Abraham Ebdus, the father of the protagonist, Dylan, in *The Fortress of Solitude*. In *Chronic City*, about a former child sitcom star living off residuals while navigating a surreal version of the Manhattan social scene, Lethem writes: “Legitimacy settles on us in various ways.”

Such lines encapsulate the arc of Lethem’s career, which has been a mostly steady climb since his debut novel, *Gun, With Occasional Music*, was published by Harcourt in 1994. For the next five years, until his fifth novel, the National Book Critics Circle Award-winning *Motherless Brooklyn*, was published by Doubleday, Lethem was respectably reviewed, but also, he suggests, comfortably midlist. “When *The Fortress of Solitude* came out, people said, ‘Great second novel!’ and I said, ‘Sixth, but thanks!’” he recalls with a good-natured laugh. When most readers

think of Jonathan Lethem, they don’t often think of novels such as *Amnesia Moon* (Harcourt, 1995); *As She Climbed Across the Table* (Doubleday, 1997); and *Girl in Landscape* (Doubleday, 1998), all of which blend the influence of science fiction, mystery, and even, in the case of *Girl in Landscape*, westerns, with elements of literary fiction.

In 2005, two years after the publication of *The Fortress of Solitude*, Lethem was under the brushes of a car wash with Barrett, in Maine, when the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation called to award him a five-hundred-thousand-dollar “genius” fellowship. “I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but I suspected I was happy to be hearing it,” he says. “It solved a lot of problems on the spot.” The foundation’s citation read, in part: “By orchestrating...allusions to popular genres within his fiction, Lethem heightens emotional engagement with his characters, blurs boundaries across a broad spectrum of cultural creations, and expands the frontier of American fiction.”

Lethem’s new book, *Chronic City*, which he started writing in 2004, pushes his boundaries even further. “It’s associated with reelecting George Bush and accepting the nightmares of the previous four years—where 9/11 happens and becomes horribly appropriated for this crusade,” he says. “It’s an angry and sorrowful book on that level, trying to accept things about what reality had become, or how deeply unreality had infiltrated. I was trying to get at some

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**LIZA MONROY** is the author of the novel *Mexican High* (Spiegel & Grau, 2008). Her writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Psychology Today*, and other publications. She teaches writing at Columbia University and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she is working on another novel.

essence of how I feel about the texture of everyday life and the degree to which it's riddled with complicities, illusions, and displacements."

The terrorist attacks of September 11, though, aren't mentioned explicitly in the novel. Instead, lower Manhattan is covered in ominous gray fog. "It's not my way of thinking," Lethem says of handling events head-on. "I started to feel if the anger in this book and the energy driving it was going to be coherent, it had to confess at some level that there was trauma. The way 9/11 was a real event but also an event behind which other things conceal themselves—that became my subject."

Ultimately though, in *Chronic City*, as in all of Lethem's books, the characters take center stage. The novel traces the intersecting trajectories of former child star Chase Insteadman, whose fiancée, Janice Trumbull, is an astronaut trapped in orbit; misanthropic retired rock critic Perkus Tooth, who moves into a fancy Upper East Side apartment building whose only tenants are dogs; Oona Laszlo, a ghostwriter with

a riotous sense of humor ("a character funnier than I am," Lethem says); and Richard Abneg, once a Lower East Side anarchist, who works for the mayor undoing rent stabilization.

Lethem's new novel also represents a return to New York City—just not the borough that readers have come to expect—as a setting for his fiction. With a "huge chapter" of his life now spent in Maine, and *Chronic City* set in Manhattan, his days of being known as the Bard of Brooklyn have likely come to an end. Not that he was comfortable with this or other such labels in the first place. In fact, his previous novel, *You Don't Love Me Yet* (Doubleday, 2007), was a purposeful attempt at shrugging them off. "I was slightly at risk of becoming a civic monument," he told science fiction magazine *Locus* earlier this year. "People wanted me to write about childhood and Brooklyn in these big novels full of Dickensian richness, so I wrote an angular romantic comedy basically derived from the tradition of Muriel Spark." The *New York Times Book Review* called the novel "parenthetical," but Le-

them says it refreshed him and taught him a few things he needed to know in order to write *Chronic City*, such as how to handle intricate social arrangements and bantering, jaded circles of friends.

"I loved *Fortress* and the sequence of essays that came along with it, *The Disappointment Artist*, but by handling so much intimate material and taking on so much sorrowful stuff about family, gentrification, and time, I came out of those years thinking, 'I've become a very ponderous dude; I should remember that part of my assignment, in my mind, is to make wonderfully useless artifacts for people to enjoy.'"

**L**ETHEM has drawn much of his fictional material from childhood. The eldest of three siblings, he was born in 1964, when his parents—avant-garde painter Richard and political activist Judith—were living in an illegal sublet loft in SoHo. His father, a Fulbright scholar, studied and later taught painting at Columbia University. A year after Jonathan was born, the family moved to Kansas City, Missouri, where his father taught at the art institute, then returned to New York City, to a brownstone on Dean Street in Brooklyn, in 1968.

In those early years, the Lethem home had "a quasi-commune aspect to it," the author says. "My father's students and my mother's radical friends were always crashing there." Living with a working artist in the house demystified the process of creating art; as his old high school friend, novelist Christopher Sorrentino, says, such a situation "tends to bleed the romance out of what making art entails." His mother gave him a typewriter when he was fourteen, shortly before he lost her to brain cancer. The summer following her death, he put it to good use, diving into the writing of a 125-page manuscript titled "Heroes." Around the same time he wandered into Brazen Head, a used-book store in Brooklyn run by Seidenberg, who would become a lifelong friend and mentor.

Now gray-bearded, the charismatic Seidenberg owned three businesses

## EXCERPT

**Chronic City**

Perkus Tooth was my neighbor, it turned out. His apartment was on East Eighty-fourth Street, six blocks from mine, in one of those anonymous warrens tucked behind innocuous storefronts, buildings without lobbies, let alone doormen. The shop downstairs, Brandy's Piano Bar, was a corny-looking nightspot I could have passed a thousand times without once noticing. BRANDY'S CUSTOMERS, PLEASE RESPECT OUR NEIGHBORS! pleaded a small sign at the doorway, suggesting a whole tale of complaint calls to the police about noise and fumes. To live in Manhattan is to be persistently amazed at the worlds squirreled inside one another, the chaotic intricacy with which realms interleave, like those lines of television cable and fresh water and steam heat and outgoing sewage and telephone wire and whatever else which cohabit in the same intestinal holes that pavement-demolishing workmen periodically wrench open to the daylight and to our passing, disturbed glances. We only pretend to live on something as orderly as a grid. Waiting for Perkus Tooth's door buzzer to sound and finding my way inside, I felt my interior map expand to allow for the reality of this place, the corridor floor's lumpy checkerboard mosaic, the cloying citrus of the superintendent's disinfectant oil, the bank of dented brass mailboxes, and the keening of a dog from behind an upstairs door, alerted to the buzzer and my scuffling bootheels. I have trouble believing anything exists until I know it bodily.

From *Chronic City* by Jonathan Lethem. Copyright © 2009 by Jonathan Lethem. Published by Doubleday, an imprint of the Knopf/Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc.

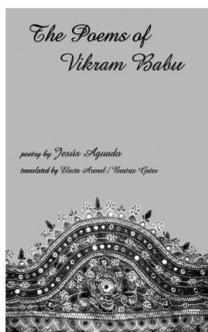
operated out of one space on Atlantic Avenue in the late 1970s—front to back: a used-book store, a puppet theater, and a moving company. “Jonathan said, ‘Hi, can I work here?’” Seidenberg recalls. “He was like a little adult, precocious and well read.” Seidenberg wanted to hire Lethem, but the store wasn’t profitable. “He said the magic words: ‘I’ll work for books.’” They did not discuss the then-recent death of Lethem’s mother, Seidenberg says. “He came to escape. He came to be in my world. I knew he needed something, but I didn’t know the extent of it.” The two men have remained close, with Seidenberg serving as the basis for mobster Frank Minna in *Motherless Brooklyn*, his moving company having morphed into the novel’s detective agency, and the bookstore owner’s Eighty-fourth Street home standing in as Perkus Tooth’s garret in *Chronic City*. (Even Seidenberg’s three-legged white pit bull, Ava, makes an appearance in the new novel.)

After graduating from Manhattan’s

High School of Music & Art, Lethem studied studio art at Bennington College in Vermont, during the same period Bret Easton Ellis, Donna Tartt, and Jill Eisenstadt attended for writing. Citing “money and cultural awkwardness,” Lethem took a semester off and returned to New York City. He almost moved in with his and Seidenberg’s friend, rock journalist Paul Nelson, who later died tragically; Nelson was one of the primary inspirations for Perkus Tooth. “The only thing that kept me from living with Paul was that he smoked these horrible-smelling little cigarillos,” Lethem says. “Paul was the ambassador of a number of things I’m still obsessed with.” Though Perkus is not based entirely on any individual, he is, as Lethem says of all his characters, a “container” for various people, ideas, and influences. “I was mourning Paul by writing Perkus in some way.”

Lethem never returned to college and still jokes he’s a sophomore on leave. Instead, in 1984 he moved to Berkeley,

California, and found “a place where my parents’ version of the counterculture was still alive,” he says. “Reagan’s America hadn’t taken the hippie dream away from Berkeley.” He worked in used-book stores; met his first wife, novelist Shelley Jackson (their marriage lasted ten years); and reconnected with Sorrentino, author of the novel *Trance* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005). “We admire—and disdain—the same things, in an uncanny way. Not just movies, say, but scenes in movies,” Sorrentino says. “The other day I wrote him recommending this relatively obscure book I’d just finished, Cyril Connolly’s *Enemies of Promise*, and Jonathan wrote back, ‘I just finished that last month.’ We’re permanent residents of the same page. I think that has a lot to do with our being autodidacts, college dropouts who acquired knowledge through the habit of randomly pulling books off the shelves, following our interests back to their sources, tracing different branches from those sources, then returning to the initial interests.”



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In Berkeley, Lethem wrote his early novels: *Gun, With Occasional Music*, a science fiction–mystery hybrid; the post-apocalyptic *Amnesia Moon*; and *As She Climbed Across the Table*, a campus farce set against a relationship’s disintegration. “A lot of Jonathan’s earlier books are all about executing a high concept, while now I don’t think he’s having ‘ideas’ so much as seeing narrative possibilities,” says Sorrentino. Seidenberg agrees: “The early novels are clever ideas that are executed. They come from a different place than the later work.”

An agent submitted the trio Lethem called “Moon, Table, Gun” to publishers, and *As She Climbed Across the Table* narrowly missed becoming Lethem’s official debut from Bantam. Instead, Harcourt picked up *Gun, With Occasional Music*, which was published in 1994, followed by *Amnesia Moon*, the story collection *The Wall of the Sky, the Wall of the Eye*, and *As She Climbed Across the Table*.

At Harcourt Lethem had been edited

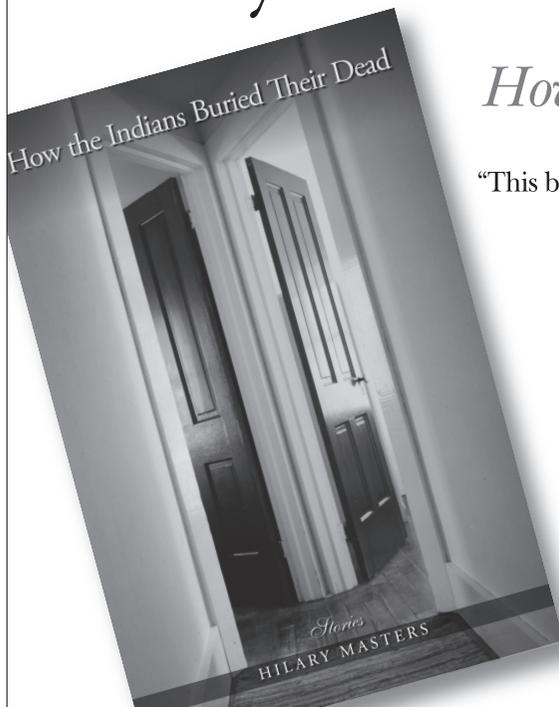
by Michael Kandel, whose background is in science fiction, having written four of his own novels in the genre. Shortly after the publication of *As She Climbed Across the Table*, however, Lethem moved to Doubleday, where he began working with Bill Thomas, who saw in him a more literary writer, and he strived to get him reviewed as such. *Girl in Landscape*, Lethem’s fourth novel, was the first to be published after the switch, in 1998. While the first part had been written while he still lived in Berkeley, Lethem told *Publishers Weekly* at the time that he was putting his toes in the water for coming back to Brooklyn.

Speaking at the Writers Center Stage series in Cleveland this past March, Lethem told the audience: “*Girl in Landscape* is truly my most autobiographical book, but nobody would ever know this because it’s about a girl and it’s set on Mars.” The personal nature of the novel is evident in the following passage: “‘I want to be perfectly truthful,’ said the doctor. ‘Many people with your

mother’s illness fight it again and again and throughout their lives. No drug or radiation can ever completely eliminate the cancer. But people live years...’ Or they don’t, Pella understood.”

“The books get serious when they go to Brooklyn,” says Seidenberg. “Jonathan comes to times in his life when he decides to deal with things, and he made the decision to deal with life in Brooklyn.” Lethem himself moved back in 1996—around the time he and Jackson were divorced, though they had separated four years earlier—and started to write *Motherless Brooklyn*, which borrows more from detective novels than science fiction (though in a typical Lethem flourish, his detective has Tourette’s syndrome). With its publication in 1999, Lethem’s big move—not only to the borough of his childhood but also to a larger readership and more widespread critical recognition—was complete. “Jonathan’s ditching sci-fi was his Dylan-at-Newport moment,” says Sorrentino.

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Lethem, however, is quick to point out that this “Newport moment” is more complex than it appears, and consists mainly of the public perception of a radical shift rather than a significant change in the artist who was, as Lethem says of Dylan’s switch from acoustic to electric guitar in that famous set in 1965, just “continuing his practice, moving through forms and elements that mattered to him. And, in fact, as Dylan buffs know, his first music using electric guitars came several years before, in a song called ‘Mixed-Up Confusion.’”

Similarly, *Motherless Brooklyn*, like *Gun, With Occasional Music*, features a detective and a mystery storyline, while *The Fortress of Solitude* incorporates fantasy elements, notably a Tolkien-esque magical ring. Lethem even calls *Chronic City* a “monolithic reworking of *Amnesia Moon*.” While his interests, influences, and approach remained consistent, what does figure more heavily into his more recent work is setting. “My early books

are the books of a transplanted person,” he says. “I wrote about the Bay Area twice after just arriving there and being wrenched out of the deep immediacy and knowledge of my New York life into this relatively opaque California reality. Obviously, [California] has its own deep and intricate textures, but I wasn’t able to contact those, so I wrote about displacement.”

OVER lobster and crab rolls on his porch in Blue Hill, Lethem seems anything but displaced as he discusses his plan for his New York *Chronic City* appearances (reading the novel aloud in its entirety on a series of sequential nights in different venues) and the challenges of having a two-year-old: “It’s hard to sit with a book and think, ‘I’ll read these pages rather than play with that marvelous child.’ I don’t have the same slack time I used to have.” The shortage of time hasn’t limited the magnitude of his focus, how-

ever. Lethem is currently working on a book about the 1979 Talking Heads album *Fear of Music* for Continuum Books’ 33 1/3 series of authors writing about music albums. He’s begun a new novel as well, this one set in Queens—his mother’s borough—in the 1950s and 1960s. He also recently finished a short story that took him six months to write.

“I don’t give up on a lot of work,” he says. “I usually think, ‘I must have been driving at something, even if it looks a little stupid or I’m rather stuck.’ The heart is pleasure in writing.” Which translates to pleasure in reading. Lethem advises readers to seek out “minor authors, forgotten authors, books where you haven’t already listened to Terry Gross interview the writer. I think it’s so important to meet narrative at its dreamlike, immersive best,” he says. “Just experience what it is to love narrative—not for its significance or as an X ray of the artist in question—not for anything but itself.” ∞



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