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## Interview with Jonathan Lethem

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## Interview with Jonathan Lethem

### Abstract

The work of Jonathan Lethem could fill a bookshelf. His novels include *Fortress of Solitude*, *Motherless Brooklyn* and, most recently, *Chronic City*. Lethem has also penned two collections of nonfiction, three collections of short stories, and the graphic novel *Omega the Unknown*. In 2005 Lethem was awarded the MacArthur Fellowship, and in 2011 he will begin his tenure as the Roy E. Disney Professor of Creative Writing at Pomona College.

Lethem recently spoke at Butler University as part of the Vivian S. Delbrook Visiting Writers series, after which he sat down to speak with *Booth's* Alex Mattingly.

### Keywords

interview, author, writing



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April 15, 2011

## Interview with Jonathan Lethem

The work of Jonathan Lethem could fill a bookshelf. His novels include *Fortress of Solitude*, *Motherless Brooklyn* and, most recently, *Chronic City*. Lethem has also penned two collections of nonfiction, three collections of short-stories, and the graphic novel *Omega the Unknown*. In 2005 Lethem was awarded the MacArthur Fellowship, and in 2011 he will begin his tenure as the Roy E. Disney Professor of Creative Writing at Pomona College.

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AM: *When you were starting out, looking for places to publish, did you have an idea of what kind of writer you wanted to be?*

JL: I did, but that idea changed constantly based on something new I'd learn about myself from writing, or something new I'd glimpse about the world of publishing. So yes, I had what I felt was a strong idea, but it was a very mercurial one at the same time. What I really had was a strong impulse to assume the role of the writer in some way, and I was waiting for the world to say yes to that.

When my first novel was published, it was a bit of a Rorschach test. Some people thought it was a postmodern pastiche, some people thought it was an out-and-out dystopian novel, and some people were sure it was a crime novel, because it introduced a detective and because there were clues in the book and a solution at the end, They were sure I was going to write about that detective over and over again. So I got in this business of gratifying and also disappointing expectations very early on.

It was great fun to try on these different roles. For me, it was exciting to keep messing with expectations. I like being slippery and problematic.

AM: *Amnesia Moon, your second novel, which was sort of a strange collection of dystopian fantasies, was very different from Gun, With Occasional Music. I read somewhere that it actually began from several short stories you'd written.*

JL: It was partly a salvage operation. I had these failed short stories that began to relate themselves in my mind. They all exhibited these same impulses – I felt compelled to destroy the world again and again. I started to wonder, what am I trying to accomplish here? Why do I want to imagine everything in ruins? And I thought that maybe these unfulfilled apocalyptic stories could themselves be put in relation to one another, where the question that was interesting to me was, why do I keep doing this?

It was about characters who are dreaming the world into destruction, and why they feel they have to do that. It's a very homely construction, and I wonder sometimes how it would strike me if I reread it. Some of my earliest published writing ended up engulfed in that book – there's stuff

written by an eighteen year old in there. The fact that it's still in print and sitting among my other books is almost an act of impersonation. It's like a kid in a Halloween costume. On stilts.

*AM: You've described Chronic City as a dystopian novel as well.*

JL: It's the kind of book I was trying to write when I wrote *Amnesia Moon*, but which I didn't have any of the equipment to do. It's the kind of book I once thought I would always be writing, consisting of characters enmeshed in reality meltdowns and paranoid deconstructions of everyday life. I loved that so much when I first encountered writers doing it, I valorized it so totally that my dream was to be that kind of writer exclusively. Of course, I turned out to have all sorts of other agendas that snuck up on me, but in *Chronic City* it's like I got back to the primary job, my initial assignment.

*AM: Do you see any of that with the book you're working on now? You've described it as being set against the collapse of the ideals of Communism, and it seems that the characters must be dealing with their own private dystopias.*

JL: It's there but in a totally different kind of way in my thinking about the real life political nightmare of the American Left in the twentieth-century, which is a kind of paranoid dystopia that was enacted. Half the communist cells in America consisted of three real communists and two FBI agents leading the charge. Half the communist activity that was detectable in America, at a certain point, was probably created by FBI agents. It is its own insane game of masquerade and paranoia, but also with this unbelievably powerful core of human learning and despair of wanting to transform the world and having that spirit crushed so utterly in so many ways.

It's not so different, but it's sourced in personal memory for me and in factual research into the era, the fifties and sixties. But in a certain way, helplessly, it's the same kind of project again.

*AM: Can you talk about your approach for a collaborative piece like Omega the Unknown, or the book with Carter Schultz, Kafka Americana?*

JL: With both those projects, the conditions of their creation were so

specific . . . with Carter, we had been thinking and talking about this joke that became much more than a joke, that there was something about Franz Kafka and Frank Capra, apart from their names, that was in dialogue and needed to be unearthed. So we drew this idea out of the air between us, and if we were going to do it justice it would have to be a piece of genuine collaborative writing. Of course, it also had a reflexivity in it, because it was a collaboration about the idea of collaboration between two sensibilities. We were two writers with different strengths and different leanings, writing about two artists with different strengths and different leanings. The hope was that maybe we could be the antidote to the other's weaknesses rather than cancelling out each other's strengths. But I just can't imagine those exact circumstances coming about around any other thing.

*Omega the Unknown* was collaborative too, but in some ways much more awkward and in slow motion. It was actually an involuntary collaboration, imposed on the other creator, Steve Gerber. It also came at a time when I was thinking a lot about intertextuality and multiple-authored works, and how, while the art form I'd chosen didn't have a particularly strong tradition of collaboration, there were other art forms like pop music or Hollywood film or the superhero comic book that were fundamentally collaborative. So I was excited about that. I wanted to see if I could enter into this position, be the writer of a comic book who could never claim for a minute that everything on the page was my responsibility or origination, and instead celebrate this weird, bastard form.

*AM: Did you approach Marvel with an interest in the character, or did they approach you?*

JL: They invited me to do something with some character of theirs. I think they were expecting me to pick Spider-Man or somebody famous, the idea being that anyone given the keys to the castle of their intellectual property would want to choose one of these mighty pieces of property. But instead it was like I came in and ignored all the treasure and instead noticed this ashtray that someone's twelve-year-old made in school and said, "I want that!" One of the guys I talked to in the initial meeting didn't even remember the character.

*AM: Were you into this character as a kid?*

JL: I loved him as a kid, and I'd always fantasized about what the story might have become if he'd been popular enough to be continued. There's a certain beauty in ruins, and *Omega the Unknown* was a ruined story. It only existed for ten issues, and even those had been compromised – the first writer, Gerber, had been taken off the book for a couple of issues. So it was a fragment, and I began to imagine what the fragment would look like if it were completed.

*AM: Gerber was pretty unusual for his time – he created Howard the Duck, for instance.*

JL: He was a very strange writer, and very much ahead of his time for comic books. He was doing stuff that anticipated the graphic novel boom, things like *Watchmen* or *The Dark Knight Returns*, these literary retellings of superhero myths. He was doing that before anyone had any idea that there was an audience for that, or could even understand what he was up to. He was twenty years ahead of his time, at least.

*AM: With Omega the Unknown, were there issues on the shelf while you were still writing it, or did you have it pretty well scripted out in advance?*

JL: I wanted to understand what I was doing, and get command of it before I let the first issue get out. What I did was a ten-issue sequence, and in fact there were issues published before I'd written the last issue, but I'd gotten a grip on the thing. I wasn't working as much by the seat of my pants as a "real" comic-book writer would have been. I was working so much slower, it was humiliating when I think about it. Those guys were writing seven of those comic books a month in their heyday, and I was taking three or four months over each issue. Marvel must have thought they had the most astonishing prima donna on their hands.

*AM: Did you work from an outline with something like that?*

JL: I never like to work from outlines. Sometimes I resort to it, in certain situations, most often when someone needs evidence of the fact I know what I'm doing, and then I'll sometimes grudgingly scrape out a few pages of plans. But in this case, I did it from my own sense of security. I didn't do heavy outlining, but very scant indications, just so I could trust that I was going somewhere.

AM: With a book like *Motherless Brooklyn* or *Gun, With Occasional Music*, where the mystery element is so strong and there have to be clues along the way, would you use an outline in that case, or do you feel your way along more intuitively?

JL: I was very audacious about working without plans. With the two crime stories, I had to have a solution in mind, and feel my way towards this revelation. There's one part of your brain that's working backwards when you try to write a crime story with any kind of traditional resolution, and each of those does have a version of that. They're trick resolutions, but that's actually traditional in most cases. So I had to consciously plot backwards from a solution, but I didn't do that with a lot of notecards or charts or diagrams. As it happened I did it all in my head.

AM: *Who are you reading now?*

JL: There's a core group of names that I've dropped so often it would probably be humiliating to me if you Googled and revealed it, but they're my constellation of formative influences, so I do think about them all the time, helplessly. They help organize the way I think about storytelling, and even more than storytelling they've laid down track in my brain for how I think about experience, consciousness. Kafka, Orwell, Philip K. Dick, Shirley Jackson, and so on. And then I expanded, and started piling other kinds of influence on top of that.

And some of those layers are very formative too, such as when I discovered Italo Calvino, or Don DeLillo in my early twenties. Anything subsequent to that can be wildly exciting, but I'm not eligible to be reprogrammed. No influence will ever compare quite to some of those.

But in recent years I've been consciously in the thrall of Iris Murdoch, Christina Stead, Philip Roth, James Salter, J. G. Ballard, all at different times and sometimes in different combinations. Those are the writers that are prominent enough in my mind I would never be surprised if someone pointed them out. And then there are others that I'm conscious of, but wouldn't be obvious to other people. Some of them are very foundational writers – I was reading a lot of Henry James in the years up to the writing of *Chronic City*, and I don't think anyone would call it Jamesian. But I was absorbing a lot of his version of social arrangements in fiction, and I can see imprinting itself on the results of the book I was writing. Similarly,



Charles Dickens is in *Fortress of Solitude*, but there'd be no reason for anyone to remark on it. Partly because Dickens is such a fundamental influence on fiction *per se* that to be influenced by him is just to say you're a novelist. Whether you read Dickens or not, he's part of what you do. He's part of the basic language.

*AM: What's your actual process like? When you sit down at the computer, or the writing desk, what happens next?*

JL: Well the answer's pretty much in the question – I sit down at the computer, I sit down at the writing desk. The only rule I keep is to work every day, because I strongly believe in the power of remaining subconsciously immersed in the work. The same thing that makes writers problematic spouses, that they're always a little bit thinking about their project, is to me impossible not to desire. I want to always be half-writing as I fall asleep and as I wake up. Because then I work better – I stay attached to the work. I'm not a very fast writer, but I'm committed to the idea of putting together a shelf of books. I've always believed that the writers I've loved most, it's not that they were prolific or speed-demons, but they kept at it and rewarded their readers' curiosity with a lot to read and explore. I'd always be very frustrated when I found a writer I loved and then found out they'd only written one other book. I've always wanted to be able to delve and consume, and so I want to be able to offer that.

The way to write a lot, if you're not fast, is to write every day, to be the tortoise and not the hare. I've tried to do that faithfully, to trudge every day through some paragraphs. For me, a good day is a page and a half of fiction. Once in a while I'll get on a tear and leave three or four pages behind, but I don't rely on that by any means. I'm happy if I get my page or two.





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## Interview with Jonathan Lethem

*AM: Do you work on multiple projects at once? Like, if you're working on a novel, will you also have short stories going?*

JL: It ends up being that way, but you're not really writing more than one thing at a time, you're just switching back and forth. And it's costly. When you're doing that switching, energy is lost, so I try not to. I'm often backed into it by promises I've made to myself or someone else, or life plans changing slightly. Books get interrupted in favor of this or that short thing, but the best of all is to do one thing until it's done.

*AM: At what point do you decide something is ready to show someone else?*

JL: There's one type of showing that I often do when something is not ready. At some point medium-early in a project I need to throw a lifeline out from my own anxieties, so I get someone to read it to say "You're onto something, now get back to work." So there's one type of reading that has to do with a book not being ready, but with me needing a pat on the back. But after that, I don't really like to show unfinished work. I like to get it to where I think it's going to knock people out of their shoes, and then deliver it, make it a fait accompli.

*AM: How do you develop that internal set of tools to see problems in your*

*own work?*

JL: It's a corner you turn, and it happens usually in the course of workshopping or writer's group or some even less formal version of finding devoted early readers that you begin to see through a potential reader's eyes, and you can be honest with yourself about how much of your original intention was achieved on the page. It's never instantaneous—there are lots of scenes I've written where I was sure I carried it off brilliantly the first time through, and that feeling persists as a kind of obscuring of what's really on the page. And then the time comes when I read it and I see, oh, seventy-five percent of my intention is there. Then I grumble and go back to make it right.

*AM: Do you revise daily?*

JL: I do end up reworking stuff every time I write, as well as writing new stuff every time I write. Nowadays that's mostly how I work. So in a sense, where once upon a time I'd have written a fast first draft and then a full second draft, I now have a slower pace through the first time, but it might be described as a kind of first and second draft combined. Then comes the setting-aside, and reconsideration, and a genuine, full revision. But the computer has changed the way everyone writes.

I'm a living bridge to this other time. I wrote my first three novels on typewriters. So a second draft was a draft—you rolled a fresh sheet of paper into the machine, and made new contact with every word. Every word and every decision had to pass again through your fingers to make it into the second draft. Well that's a very strong learning tool. Sometimes I will ask my writing students to print out a draft and delete the file. Put the draft on your desk and open a new document and make your draft a draft. Rewrite the whole thing. Look at the page and ask, does this sentence deserve to go from this pile of paper back onto my computer? And I'm sure that anyone who's ever followed my advice has had great breakthroughs, but probably no one ever does.

*AM: Would you recommend the same thing with short stories?*

JL: Sure. If you're afraid of doing it for a novel, do it for a short story. You'll learn from totally tearing it down, and building from the ground up.

*AM: I'm kind of reeling a little now, because it makes me wonder what might be lost by computers. It must completely change the way fiction is made.*

JL: I think it changes a lot. I don't mean that the best books, or the most realized writing is in some essential way different than it would have been without computers. The end result is probably fairly similar. But the way people are getting where they're going has fundamentally changed, because of the fact that your text is committed in this endlessly mutable, watery medium, where you can fidget around with it all the time. With typewriters, if you typed a paragraph with a ribbon and ink, then it was typed. You had a few really clumsy options. You could use white out, you could go XXX for a few sentences, or you could pull out a pen and write words above the typewritten font. It was like you were carving in a physical substance.

I revised one of my books with scissors and glue. I would cut paragraphs out of the paper, and sometimes sentences. I would have these ribbons of words I would be pasting onto the page in different places. But now we carve in air. We carve in ether. It makes some things much easier, but it makes other things invisible. There are things that are never confronted or encountered because you're not handling them in a more material way. You can wave your hand and just make them fly through the air.

*AM: When you're writing, do you start with characters in mind?*

JL: I usually have simultaneous and wedded inklings of characters and problems, a situation or milieu. The characters don't just exist the way a costume designer draws a character on the page, in white space. Usually to be interested in the character you're already connecting them to some situation or dynamic involving other characters.

*AM: Fortress of Solitude starts in third person and then goes into first person. The reader gets a different feel for the character that way. Was that the point?*

JL: For better or worse it was always the plan – it was how I saw the book from the outset. The first half would be omniscient and multi-vocal. You'd get to meet a lot of different characters through third person subjective, and you would only know the primary character in those terms, and see him in his world. And then there would be this harshness of the

experiences of having his world fall away, and you and he would be stranded together in adulthood. I wanted to create something structural in the book that was analogous to the giant gulf created between childhood and adulthood, which was one of my subjects in the book. So the shift was a way to create a distressing pothole in the middle that you had to jump over in order to continue with Dylan as a character.

And he's distressing to meet in first person. He's mean, and small-hearted.

*AM: Was that difficult to write?*

JL: That whole book was exhilarating to write, because I was working over my head the whole time. The plan seemed audacious to me, but I felt at the time that I was ready to make this incredible thing come to life, and that I was doing it, even as I wrote the most painful material... whatever else it was, it was also exhilarating. The overwhelming feeling was of empowering myself to give names to things that didn't have names, and to put my imprimatur on all this chaos of experience and longing and shame and confusion that had been out of control until I took command of it.

*AM: When you say 'give names to things,' you're not talking just socially, but also personally?*

JL: All of the above. The whole footing of that project was to be as overt and extensive in naming the unnamable, talking about the shameful or the unspoken stuff of that life that I was a part of in Brooklyn. I wanted it to be a book about embarrassment, and I wanted it to be embarrassing to read. I wanted it to feel, by the end, that something extensively secret had been extensively unveiled.

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## Interview with Jonathan Lethem

*AM: What made you, in a book like that, decide to bring in the element of the ring?*

JL: There was never any question. The structure of your question suggests that there was this ground of realism, and that I brought in this other thing, this disrupting, surprising element, but to me they arrived together. It was always one idea. The lens of the super heroic powers, as ludicrous and second-hand as they might seem to be—that was the focusing element that made the entire thing come to life.

I suppose looking at it in retrospect I would otherwise have been in the realm of nonfiction. I think people underrate that, when they read the book. They don't realize how much the uncanny element in the book is intensifying their experience of what they see as realism, that it's actually all one thing. Because otherwise it's very anecdotal, very sociological, very centrifugal material—it's not emboldened into metaphor. It's not fiction without the magic.

*AM: Chronic City has that feel as well. There are people leading these seemingly normal lives that keep being interrupted by the bizarre. Is it fair to say these two books were dealing the same idea of the unnamable?*



JL: I think it's a very different ration and distribution of the same kind of fundamental urge I have to reveal the presence of the uncanny in everyday experience. It's difficult to persuade anyone that it's safe to talk about, so mostly we don't, but we're still saddled with it.

*AM: Do you think that's something kids are more equipped to deal with?*

JL: I don't think anyone's equipped to deal with it, but kids may be more apt to seek its expression. Part of adult life, at least in non-mystical cultures, is stemming the impulse to express the presence of the dream-life, the irrational.

*AM: This is sort of a half-baked thought, but—*

JL: That's okay, we're in a half-baked area here.

*AM: (laughs) Do you think there's something culturally telling about the popularity of superhero movies and graphic novels?*

JL: Sure, and it doesn't limit itself to superheroes. The world is right now overrun with zombies and vampires. And in another place it's overrun with angels. This stuff can be packaged and sold in extremely banal ways. But it wouldn't have any hold on the subconscious imagination if it wasn't anchored in the anxious apprehension that life has more to it than meets the eye, that consciousness is stranger than prosaic reality. The problem of being and the problem of consciousness overruns its container, which is everyday experience.

*AM: Is that something fiction is especially equipped to deal with?*

JL: I'm tempted to give you the exact same reply – nothing is equipped to deal with it. (laughs) I sound very pontifical and authoritative because I'm trying to answer your questions scrupulously, but I'm not doing anything more than gesturing in the direction of my own peculiar inklings. I don't have access to a secret understanding of anything. I'm just framing questions in storytelling that are exciting to try to get on the page. My friend John Kessel wants his tombstone to read, 'He didn't know, but he had an inkling.' And it's good enough to have an inkling.

*AM: Is that part of the impulse to write for you, to make gestures toward*

*this unknown thing?*

JL: One of the great banal and true clichés about what storytelling does, besides enmesh us in vicarious experience and delight, is also to assuage our existential loneliness. So of course this gesture of making someone else feel as strange as I feel, even for an instant, can be immensely consoling to believe I've managed. And sometimes it's very obvious and simple things that go unnamed, and after they're named you can say, 'Why didn't anyone point to that before?' Other things you gesture toward, give a momentary name, and people feel the relief flood in, but an instant later it's unnamed again. But that doesn't mean the exchange didn't occur. Those things are just more elusive.

I'm very proud when I give something a permanent and simple name, even if it's just in this microscopic area of experience. *Motherless Brooklyn* kind of does that, I think, in that way that we all kind of feel Tourettic. I'm the guy who got to give that its name. That's easy, afterwards, to quantify and remark upon.

My friend Maureen is a philosopher, and she says that she learned at some point that there is an infinity of philosophical space, and the great philosophers have gone into that infinity, that void, and filled in some little area of understanding. And then someone else will go into another quadrant and fill in another little area. Once you arrive, if you're not at the very birth of philosophy, you can point to two spots and pick a zone between them, maybe fill that in yourself. That's all I'm ever hoping to do. That description seems perfectly lovely to me.

Some of the stuff that I'm prone to try to name is distinguished by its unnamability. That's what I'm getting at in *Chronic City*—the power of permanent inexplicability, in our experiences of our social lives, in our political selves, in our assuming of roles in everyday life. There is a permanent gap between what we're asked to do, the script we're handed, and the actor secretly behind the script. That's why it's about an actor who doesn't even know he's been handed a script, because I'm trying to name this unnameable space between our essential, disturbed yearning and the social enactment of adequate personhood.

(laughs) Sorry, now we're way out in philosophical space.

AM: *I know you need to catch a plane, but do you mind if I ask you one last question?*

JL: No, if you get us out of this bleak vacuum we're in here . . .

AM: *What excites you about the future of writing and publishing?*

JL: I don't have any overview, I'm just coping like everyone else. Authors are habitually asked this now, whether it's going to be okay or if the Kindle is going to kill us, but I was thinking about the way new mediums change and how when the dust settles they always wind up funkier and more fallible than they might seem when they're first approaching. Film was going to kill radio and theater, but they changed and adapted and made room for film. And then television was going to kill film, but now they're all here.

One of the things that's going to change is book culture, and by that I mean the culture that connects physically with books, which is going to be reinscribed and damaged by the arrival of electronic reading. Because I think the book has a very deep, resonant place in human culture. Rooms full of books, physical objects made of certain kinds of substance—this resonance is going to be magnified now because of a certain kind of threat. The meaning of the object is heightened, and as a great lover of that object and its traditions, I think that's kind of cool.

*Alex Mattingly is a contributing editor for Booth and a Butler University MFA candidate. He has previously published interviews with Joe R. Lansdale and Matt Fraction, and his fiction has appeared in journals such as Annalemma, Joyland and 3 AM. He lives in Indianapolis with his wife.*

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