



Thought, with Occasional Poetry

First of Two Parts

Motherless Brooklyn

by Jonathan Lethem

Doubleday, 1999

Hardback, 312 pp, \$35

Gun, with Occasional Music

by Jonathan Lethem

Tor/Tom Doherty, 1995

Paper, 262 pp, \$10.95

The Wall of the Sky, the Wall of the Eye

by Jonathan Lethem

Tor/Tom Doherty, 1997

Paper, 294 pp, \$13.95

[Gay Partington Terry](#)

I was pleased to discover others who are not put off by a narrator suffering from Tourette's syndrome, as in Jonathan Lethem's most recent book, *Motherless Brooklyn*. I was afraid I was alone in my obsessive relationship with language that moved me, but whoever gives out the National Book Critics Circle Award apparently shares my obsession. Good for them!

The idea of a detective afflicted with uncontrollable outbursts is an inspired transgression. Lionel Essrog as Tourettic narrator of *Motherless Brooklyn* brings chaotic energy and manic poetry (which Lethem calls "echolalia") to the story of four Brooklyn orphans working as operatives for a car-service/detective agency/monkey-business run by Frank Minna. When Frank is killed, Lionel goes on a wild, compulsive tic-laden journey to find the murderer. As Lionel puts it, "Reality needs a prick here and there..." Lethem is certainly up to the job as words rush through Lionel's brain "tickling reality like fingers on piano keys."



Motherless Brooklyn
by Jonathan Lethem

One of the things I dislike about detective stories is their emphasis on plot and the relentless pressure to "figure it out." Although Lethem's stories do have plots, complete with clues and endings, it's the narrative journey that is prominent, the play of language, character and setting. In his short story, "Five Fucks," Lethem contends that "Human lives exist to be experienced, or possibly endured, but not solved." Lethem delivers his tales to be experienced, and they are wild encounters.

Lethem is not the first writer to offer disturbing commentary on the nature of humanness, but his is notably without superficial prejudice about what is possible. In the short story "Forever, Said the Duck," only the hosts are "real". The guests, who are simulated personalities, ultimately change into cartoon characters. In "Five Fucks" an all-consuming erotic love devours the characters' time and, ultimately, their lives.

These stories, and, indeed, all of Lethem's novels, up to and including *Motherless Brooklyn* contain ideas — unique, original, and joyously unconfined ideas. There's postmodern basketball in the story "Vanilla Dunk"; a prison wall composed of live people in "Hardened Criminals"; and in "Sleepy People", individuals whose very presence in your home causes house plants to grow and sharpens razor blades.

Brooklyn's chaotic rhythms match the world of Tourette's that Lionel lives in and makes a much more agreeable character/setting than the bleak worlds in many of Lethem's earlier science fiction stories and his first novel, *Gun, with Occasional Music*.

Gun's bleak world includes government-controlled karma points, drugs like "Forgettol" and "Avoidal," and babies and animals that talk and carry guns thanks to "evolution therapy." The job of the private investigator ("private inquisitor," as they're called in this world) is complicated because it has become socially unacceptable to ask personal questions. All of this is described in the vernacular of the 30s/40s noir crime novel driven so frenetically beyond its own boundary that you come to buy the idea of a gun-toting kangaroo in canvas jacket and plastic pants saying, "You're in too deep, flathead." You begin to wonder just how far we really are from talking into a black box in order to consult our own (rigorously edited) memory.

Like *Motherless Brooklyn*, *Gun* has its own rhythm, a musical rhythm. Musak comes from inanimate objects when they're employed. There is musical interpretation of the news in which you can hear the sound of trouble, even specifically private and tragic trouble, in the arrangements. And, like Lionel Essrog, Conrad Metcalf (*Gun*'s private inquisitor) is oddly flawed. Metcalf has undergone an operation to switch nerve endings with a girlfriend; now his erotic sensations are feminine in nature and his relationships with women precarious.

Jonathan Lethem takes the genres of noir crime and post-cyberpunk and distends them to the point that they are no longer kitsch, but eloquently fluent and pithy. His writing is intelligently rabid, deliciously unruly, and poetic in a totally unique way. Perhaps it should be called Thought, with Occasional Poetry.

In the next issue of Frigate, Gay Partington Terry will write on Jonathan Lethem's *Amnesia Moon*, *Girl in Landscape*, and *As She Climbed Across the Table*.

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