

EDUCATING THE IMAGINATION

Jonathan Lethem

Interviewed by Matthew Sharpe

Photograph by Rufus Burckhardt, View of Brooklyn Harbor, Courtesy of Thor de Nagy Gallery

Matthew Sharpe: How about starting with a story about your background as a writer?

Jonathan Lethem: My father was a painter, a working artist with a studio in the house. The sense that art was something you did and it was normal and admirable was a given. I could never have understood then how much of an advantage this would be to making myself a writer. So many people have to fight to carve out that identity.

I wanted to be an artist like my father. I'd inherited some of his facility. I could impress grown-ups really easily by drawing stuff. So I did that for a long time without ever completely noticing that I had a lot more real engagement with the books I was reading. Under a very public mask of the young art prodigy, I was cultivating the kind of secret wish to be a writer that's actually very typical of a lot of young writers. They imagine they're going to become writers, but they're not sure they want to tell people yet.

MS: What do you make of this secretiveness that seems to be part of the mythology of writing?

JL: I've been thinking a lot about the secrecy gene in my personality, and how essential it is to the work. I'm working on a big novel right now, and I've been working on it for a long time, which means that the pressure—both from inside and from outside—to begin to describe this place I've been living, and this thing I've been doing, grows. My friends have been waiting to hear what I'm doing for a long, long time, and I'm beginning to want to have something to tell them. But I've

noticed that I create a deliberate blind-man-and-the-elephant structure, where I'll vent that need to share by describing the ear to one person. And you know, I'll talk quite a bit about the ear. And they'll think I'm writing a novel about an elephant's ear. And then I'll pick someone else to describe the elephant's toenail to, and I'll really go on a bit, and they'll be sure that it's a big toenail that the novel's about. And I keep the elephant invisible that way.

MS: What's good about not telling?

JL: Literary writing is about things that are endlessly specific. Generalizations are fatal. There's this constant honoring of complexity. My new book may be essentially an elephant, but there are vast stretches of it that are an exploration of a toenail. The complexity and the digressiveness and the specificity and the resistance to abstraction or generalization, that's the art itself. But anyway, we writers are squirmy, contemptible creatures.

MS: Any thoughts about how it is that you've become a fantasist as opposed to a realist?

JL: Well, thoughts. But I can never get outside my own sensibility. I can make observations from inside that sensibility. Growing up in the late 1960s and early 1970s in a bohemian family, and that bohemian family being embedded in a bohemian demi-monde in Brooklyn in this neighborhood that was bohemian enough that a lot of hippie communes moved in. That and my father's painting. A lot of my aesthetics come right out of my father's work and the kind of art that he loved and showed to me. Surrealist painting, figurative Expressionist painting—in which observed reality is always being combined with fantastic or imagined reality—I took that as a given.

And some of my sensibility is political. I grew up during Watergate and Vietnam, and my parents were radicals.... I sensed that I lived in both a surreal world and a dystopian world in many ways. So the writing that felt meaningful to me, that reflected the reality that I sensed, was Kafka and Orwell and Philip K. Dick, writers who never restrict themselves from colliding observed and imagined reality together.

MS: One of the epigraphs for your novel *Girl in Landscape* is from John Wayne, the Duke: "Screw ambiguity. Perversion and corruption masquerade as ambiguity. I don't trust ambiguity." What is the value of ambiguity?

JL: I do think that a lot of evil in so many realms is done in the name of an answer rather than questions. It's hard to expand on that without getting metaphysical in a way that I'm very, very bad at, or getting all weepy about the world right now.

But, to be very specific about the John Wayne quote: that book, *Girl in Landscape*, stands on the enormous underground foundation of the John Ford film *The Searchers*. I actually don't think that John Wayne-like character in my book or John Wayne in *The Searchers* are unambiguous characters, or fail to grasp the power of ambiguity. I think they're tremendously ambiguous and enormous manipulators of ambiguity. Wayne as an actor knows a lot more than the man giving that interview. As an actor, he's in command of a tremendous, sophisticated doubleness in *The Searchers*. His conscious intentions notwithstanding, Wayne and Ford were able to illuminate through that character the ambiguity of the isolated, masculine hero. Wayne teaches us to know things that the guy who said that about ambiguity doesn't understand.

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I think that there are plenty of writers—and I may be one of them right at this moment—who know a lot more on the pages of their novels than they do in the interviews they give. I like ambiguity, and I'm very frightened of trying to explain what I mean by that.

MS: Sometimes fantasy seems not-so-nice in your books. People are tempted into it, and away from reality.

JL: I think I'm always playing both ends against the middle on this issue. Fantasy is liberation and self-discovery, except when it becomes denial and escape. Or it's freedom, except when it becomes oppression. The drugs in *Gun*, or the virtual realities in some of the stories, or the Tourette's in *Motherless Brooklyn*, or the speaking in tongues of the Archbuilders in *Girl*, or the transubstantiation that occurs through the other creatures on that planet; all of those drug-like languages or language-like drugs in my books generate possibilities of fantasy. I suspect I'm working really hard—and, I hope, mostly succeeding—in keeping them enormously freighted but unresolved, as equally potent tools of freedom and repression, and of reality-encountering and of reality-avoidance.

MS: Another thing I see in a lot of your novels is a merger between the self and the world.

JL: A lot of the writing I was first drawn to had a paranoiac, or solipsistic, element: the Borges and the Kafka and the Dick. Calvino, who's particularly sunny, writes about solipsism without paranoia. But the constant recurrence of the world being mistaken for the self and the self for the world, is something I'm very, very drawn to.

Because of my enormous difficulty thinking abstractly or philosophically, I work this out through imagery and metaphor, sometimes very cartoonishly literal imagery and metaphor. My book of short stories, *The Wall of the Sky, the Wall of the Eye*, consists again and again of microcosmic worlds that recapitulate the real world. The Hell of the character's fantasizing brain in "The Happy Man"; the basketball game which reproduces the skills of former basketball players in "Vanilla Dunk"; the babbling, disembodied brains floating in a computer in "Forever, Said the Duck"; the prison made of criminal heads talking amongst themselves in "hardened Criminals"—again and again, there's this image of the world distilled into a model of itself and apt to go on behaving as if it's a world, when, in fact, we can see that it's only a toy.

I'm just constantly seeking a better description of how brains feel moving through a family, and how brains feel moving through an intimate relationship and how brains feel constituting a nation.

MS: The other kind of merger that recurs in your work is the merger of people in a single person. In "Vanilla Dunk," set in an imaginary future where basketball players wear what you call an "exo-suit"—in which, say, the skills of Michael Jordan are transferred into their bodies through this suit—or in *Motherless Brooklyn*, the way that you hear things that Frank Minna would say, coming....

JL: ...Out of Essrog's mouth. Yes. Well, they start to sound like really dopey 1960s Zen koans when you distill them. You know, where do I end and where do you begin? That somehow is a witticism that has never finished interesting me, and when I repeat it as a witticism, I can't believe I was ever interested in the first place. At some level, I'm irri-

tated by images that produces that glib distillation. But I want to find out why I'm irritated, and I'm on a hunt. If I were a philosopher, probably the problems I'm obsessing over would have been solved or abandoned a long, long time ago.

MS: Moments of violent discontinuity are crucial to your books.

JL: Everything I write begins, at some level of obviousness or concealment, with a fundamental rupture. There's going to be a howling loss or void or breach or breach birth for the world. And this is something that I can only account for to a degree by conventional psychobiographical detail: my mother died when I was a kid.

I also have—and had before my mother died—an innate responsiveness to what I much later learned to call a gnostic vision of the world, one where God was hurt, or abandoned the world, or where there were two gods and one left and the other is bereft of the second god. Gnosticism feels consoling to me. I feel we live in a broken world, and this may also have to do with growing up in the Nixon-Vietnam era in a radical hippie household in an impoverished, crumbling, rather dystopian part of New York. In the early 1970s this was a dystopian city. The bankrupt, infrastructure-crumbling Brooklyn that I knew was a world that had suffered a breach. I have enormous sympathy for this kind of story or feeling about the world. I can't, obviously, completely account for it, and maybe if I ever did I would evaporate in a puff of smoke.

I think that one of the most simple changes in my work over the long arc of it is that I began by tending to put the rupture before the start of the book, and later put the rupture inside the book itself. And that felt like a profound change to me. In *Gun, with Occasional Music*, my first book, the world was ruined before Conrad Metcalf can remember. He remembers things that

he preferred slightly, but basically the world was ruined, and he's dealing with it, and that's the classic hardboiled version of gnosticism. Like Humphrey Bogart: "Yeah, I'm in Casablanca. Yeah, everything's corrupt, and my heart is broken. I can live with it." At first I was very drawn to that, perhaps because it's a safer way of dealing with the feeling that the world is broken: it was always already broken, and we're just the people mopping up the pieces.

And then, a really signal experience for me was watching *The Searchers* for the first time, which is a story that contains an unbelievable breach, a rupture, a loss in the first reel. And the emotional stakes are so cataclysmic because you've seen the before and after of the loss. And that was when *Girl in Landscape* had to start with a loss and that's the beginning of this change in my work. I think it's very easy to see that *Motherless Brooklyn* goes there again. And the new book that I'm writing goes there again.

MS: I would like to read a list of names of your characters: Chaos, Moon, Edie Bitter, Pella Marsh, Vanilla Dunk, Light, Professor Soft, Mr. Foible, Hiding Kneel, Truth Renowned, Lonely Dumptruck, Gelatinous Stand, Notable Johnson, Cambert Moid, O. K. Tinkers, Wendy Airhole, Lionel Essrog, Matricardi and Rockaforte, Fujisake, Detective Pupkiss.

JL: The names are the most Tourettic part of my own writing process. I make lists of names to distract myself. It's kind of like mental chewing gum that I really love. I've got thousands of character names that I could never write enough fiction to use up. Almost all the names that you read were on the list at one point, meaning nothing particular until I attached them to some situation. Some others are homages or make some kind of crucial personal reference, probably not interesting to the reader to know. Professor Soft is a nod to

Professor Softly in Don DeLillo's *Ratner's Star*, and Matricardi and Rockaforte are two friends of mine with great last names.

But names do something more for me. They're like a thermostat. The level of cartoon in a given story—the level of rubber in the DNA of the characters—is often signaled by how ridiculous their names are. I'm always secretly a little bored when characters are named Bill Smith, because at the simplest level, the words that will name the characters themselves seem to me to represent a level of commitment to invention. Particularly in things I write that present a realist exterior, I'm energized if the names are unusual, because it suggests, okay, I know that all this guy is doing right now is answering the phone and then going to the corner store for a quart of milk. But I'm thinking. I'm inventing. And the fact that his name contains an embedded quality of invention is a promise to the reader that there will be invention at other levels, no matter how banal the surface may seem in some ways. I feel I've begun to strike a different opening bargain with the reader. The names are a way to continue to promise invention to myself as well, because they provoke me.

MS: If you were to teach the following passage from your novel-in-progress (see page 28) to writing students, what background would you give and what might you have them write from it?

JL: The piece is a snapshot from my novel-in-progress, which concerns (partly) a kid my age making his way through public school in 1970s Brooklyn. The excerpt is a perfect case of the part representing the whole, since I've just realized—as I approach the finish line on this project—that one of the main themes of the book is “people defining themselves according to culture”—in other words, to artifacts, like paintings, films, and songs. It's a book about being a fan, even if, at times, an involuntary one. I think it would make a wonderful writing exercise to try building a character sketch around a person's relationship to a hit song, as I have here with “Play That Funky Music.”