



# BOOK OF LOVE

**GOODBYE BROOKLYN. WRITER JONATHAN LETHEM TAKES ON NEW TERRITORY IN HIS LATEST NOVEL—THE LOVE AND STUMBLER OF A YOUNG CALIFORNIA ROCK BAND**

Jonathan Lethem is a New York treasure, one of Brooklyn's seven wonders, and, no doubt, will one day have a rose garden named after him in Prospect Park, a street in Greenpoint, a bench in the botanical gardens. So goes the mythic treatment of the 43-year-old writer on his home turf nowadays. His two most popular books, 1999's *Motherless Brooklyn* and 2003's *Fortress of Solitude* quickly established him as the official scribe of Brooklyn, the herald of the mean city streets. And since Lethem was originally born in Brooklyn and wrote so beautifully and sharply about its residents, he rightly deserved the honor. So what happens when Lethem's imagination takes a fast plane to Los Angeles, recording not Tourettic private detectives or motherless young punks, but a lost collective of messed-up bohemians trying to survive their sex lives and form a decent rock band? Lethem's

latest novel, *You Don't Love Me Yet*, covers just such terrain. In what might be the most unexpected release lately in literature, the novel follows a hapless/hopeless bass player named Lucinda and her comical, bizarre entourage of misfits who rock out in a band called Monster Eyes. Kidnapped kangaroos, sniffed armpits, the state of contemporary conceptual art, and radio gigs all ensue, but along the way Lethem seems to be taking the pulse of what it means for young people to try and fail to take themselves seriously as artists. In one memorable scene, the members of the band give a toast that could easily sum up the generation of which he writes: "To the shark's tooth, the mouse's skull, the sour note, the sour mash, the mash note, the sour grapes, the souring of an old friendship...to the resentment that hides inside love, to the loneliness that hides among companions, to bad sex...to forgetting it was bad...to telephoning an old lover and pretending to forget it was bad, to falling back into bed when you know you shouldn't, to sucking the dregs." Jesus, that's as true in Brooklyn as it is in Silverlake. **Christopher Bollen**

**CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN** What prompted you to write about young, confused rock-and-roll Los Angelenos? It's a change of mode. You're supposed to write about Brooklyn.

**JONATHAN LETHEM** It's a departure but I see it as a return, because I used to live in the Bay area and I wrote about the West Coast before the Brooklyn books became such a signature for me. One thing that came out of *Fortress of Solitude* was that I knew I couldn't write about Brooklyn and childhood and growing up in the '70s again for a long time. I wanted to do the opposite kind of work. *You Don't Love Me Yet* is partly defined by what I dropped—for example, it doesn't have fathers and sons, which

has been a huge obsession in my writing. But what is most different about it is that there are no mortal stakes. No one is ever held at gunpoint. The stakes are the ones from everyday life—like embarrassment or ennui. I also wanted to write a comedy. And I wanted to write about a woman. The Brooklyn books are very male. One of their signatures is alienation of women.

**CB** It's easy to want to shift your style, but it's a hard thing to achieve. Did you struggle getting the voice of a woman down?

**JL** This was longer between novels than I've ever gone. When I finished *Fortress of Solitude* I was really depleted. So when I came back to novel writing I was rustier than I've ever let myself get. I had to reinvent some things. To me, this book is a playful piece of writing. And I don't just mean it has sex and comedy and the characters are slackers. It's playful at the level of composition. I was letting myself fool around. The plot was extremely open to chance, to serendipity. Someone would suggest one thing and the next day it would appear on the page. The book took several odd u-turns. The zoo, for example, was not part of the master plan. I was in L.A. doing half-assed research, which involved hanging out in Silverlake and asking people what it was like to live there. I'm totally bluffing. I've never been an L.A. bohemian. The equivalent years were spent in the Bay area. So I was asking people to give me stuff. I was introduced to someone who people called the "mayor of Silverlake"—he knows everybody. And I met this skittish character who wanted to go to the zoo. Suddenly the zoo was really important and became a lens for looking at L.A. It becomes a huge plot mechanism. For this project, I was rediscovering the whimsical part of writing. I'm trying to write about that part of life when you're groping to figure out how real your ambition is, whether you are a fake or a wannabe. And whether it's all going to gel into something. I was thinking about the fakery that artists have to go through before they become real—bluffing and posturing. In a way, the book itself has that same amateurishness to it.

**CB** Were you ever in a band?

**JL** Barely. Just barely. I have no talent for music. It's always really impossible. But there was a very short time that I stood in front of a microphone. I can't really sing so it was more like Lou Reed mumbling, rapping. The only thing I can really do is write lyrics. I can't make up a melody if my life depended upon it. But I've written lyrics for a few bands. The book draws on part of my life in California when I was trying to become a writer and everyone around me was trying to become whatever they wanted to be. Some people were panicking and running back to graduate school. Other people were flaming out and going to live with their parents. It was that feeling of, who is going to make something real happen?

**CB** Do you think you wrote differently in the West Coast versus the East? When you moved back to Brooklyn, your style shifted a lot.

**JL** Yeah, it did. And I wouldn't want to imagine that I could change it back. When I read my first couple of novels they seem to be written by someone totally different. I'm interested in them but I could never reproduce that. My work was very conceptual and clever and the emotions were very deflected. With *Motherless Brooklyn*, which is an emotional Valentine to the streets of New York, I started putting my heart into the work in a different way. That's the difference between the first few books and the later ones.

**CB** Your early work also seems fascinated with comic books, fantasy, sci-fi. Was that something you loved as a kid?

**JL** As a kid I was a voracious consumer of almost every kind of vernacular American culture. I loved rock and roll, pop music. I was an unembarrassed lover of Top 40, comic books, westerns—even though I was from New York City and that appreciation came late. I like that voice that comes out and I've reached for it in so many ways in the work. In some ways this book is an attempt to write something like a pop song—if a novel could be anything like a pop song. I'm thinking of what that voice would be, what the characters would be like if they came out of a Velvet Underground song.

**CB** You write a song or two in this book. Do you think they could ever stand on their own as lyrics?

**JL** I'm encouraging people to try to make songs out of them. On my website, I'm saying, here are some lyrics, use them. Some people have done that and you can listen to them on the site.

**CB** Why did you pick Los Angeles? Was it because of its punk-rock history? I'm surprised you didn't set this book in San Francisco.

**JL** I think after seven or eight years of being immersed in Brooklyn, writing out of this totally consuming memory-relationship place, I started brandishing this authenticity: I'm from Brooklyn, I'm more from Brooklyn than anyone could ever be, and I'm going to tell you about it. I didn't want to write about a place I had deep personal associations with. I wanted to do the opposite. I wanted to write about a place I was merely curious about but didn't have expertise in or couldn't claim any authority over. I could use L.A. as a laboratory for these characters where I could set them loose—a place I was fascinated by but stupid about. The one thing I'm proud of is that I wrote a whole book about L.A. without ever once writing about the movie industry. Ever!

Jonathan Lethem in Berkeley, California, 1988  
**Photography Shelley Jackson**

*You Don't Love Me Yet* is out in March 2007 from Doubleday