

Lethem's Latest

A bit of literary tourism

YOU DON'T LOVE ME YET, fiction by Jonathan Lethem. Doubleday, 2007. Hardcover, \$24.95.

Recently, Jonathan Lethem's appearances in the press have had less to do with his seventh novel, *You Don't Love Me Yet*, than they have with his interest in copyright issues. A March 25 interview on Salon.com covered the key bases: One, Lethem's recent *Harper's* piece, "The Ecstasy of Influence," cribbed artfully from numerous sources; and two, his decision to give away a free option (with conditions, including 2 percent of the film's budget should it ever get made) on the film rights to the new novel. At www.jonathanlethem.com the author explains why: "Lately I've become fitful about some of the typical ways art is commodified." Lethem's also put up a handful of his short stories for adaptation

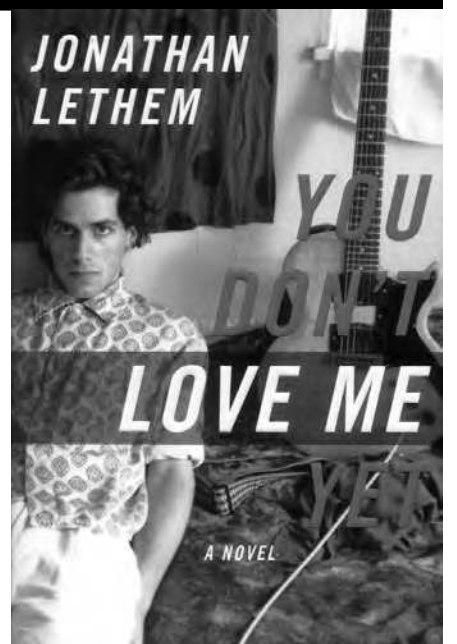
under the banner "The Promiscuous Materials Project."

But to bring it all back to that new novel — well, it's not even an effort. *You Don't Love Me Yet* is another step for Lethem, another genre, another style. The book almost feels as if it ought to have been written by an upstart 27-year-old rather than an established, MacArthur Award-winner whose last novel was a love letter to his childhood neighborhood (among numerous other things). *You Don't Love Me Yet* concerns an utterly unknown, utterly unremarkable band in Los Angeles. The story's focus is mainly Lucinda, the bassist, who recently quit her job at a coffee shop to work in the gallery of a friend (the richly named Falmouth Strand). The gallery is a real piece of work: Cubicles and desks and

phone lines, like an office, are home to interns (and Lucinda) who answer calls. The calls are complaints; the phone number is on stickers all over town. The callers don't seem to know or care that this is Art.

Except, perhaps, the complainer. The complainer only calls for Lucinda. He tells stories about lonesome sex and ugly relationships, stories she, inspired, spills over onto her bandmates, mainly the shy writer-guitarist, Bedwin. Snippets of life become stories, stories become lyrics, lyrics become songs — one of which, when played at another of Falmouth's arty events, becomes a buzzword. A buzz song. An opportunity. Except for its source: The complainer doesn't want to let go of his complaints.

Writing about bands is usually a terrible idea; the details get screwy, the references lose their cool, the music, as described, doesn't appeal. Lethem is too smart for that trap, though, and in that Salon.com interview, he explained, "I made up art that no one cares about. That's much easier to persuade people of, because there is so much of that." For this accomplishment alone — writing believably and entertainingly about a band whose worst enemy is itself — *You Don't Love Me Yet* succeeds. Of course, there's more reason to read the novel than just the fake band, and chief among the other reasons is Lucinda, the embodiment of the culture of appropriation that holds the author's interest. Lucinda, more than most, borrows from those around her to create her own story; she borrows band members for affection, the complainer for desire and creativity, Falmouth for inspiration. It is her



borrowing that is her glory and her downfall. She is what anyone makes of her, what they give her, what they leave behind. She is sympathetic, frustrating and lovely, much like *You Don't Love Me* as a whole.

Lethem's latest feels like a piece of musical and literary tourism, a trip though a dingy yet glittery side of Los Angeles and an exploration of a notion still crystalizing in the author's head. It's a diversion on a path to something greater, a sweet dessert after the lush, sprawling meal that was *The Fortress of Solitude*. If a great novel is the equivalent of a catchy pop hit, this is a b-side. At least that's what the *Booklist* reviewer said.

Jonathan Lethem speaks at 7:30 pm April 12 at Portland's Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall.

BOOK NOTES: Novelist **Leslie Marmon Silko** speaks as part of the Native American Philosophies series, 6:30 pm 4/4, Giffill Auditorium, OSU. **Cara Black** (*Murder in Montmartre*) speaks on "Foreign Intrigue — Research and Setting in Mysteries," 6:30 pm 4/5, Baker Downtown Center. \$10; Willamette Writers members free. UO Creative Writing Department's Works in Progress series reading, 8 pm 4/6, Tsunami Books. **Alissa Lukara** discusses *Riding Grace*, 2 pm 4/7, Barnes & Noble. **Tess Gallagher** reads, 8 pm 4/12, and lectures 11 am 4/13, 302 Gerlinger, UO. **Jonathan Lethem** speaks at 7:30 pm 4/12, Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, Portland. \$26, \$20 stu., sr., \$5 youth. Author **Valerie Brooks** of Leaburg was recently awarded a month-long residency and grant to Vermont Studio Center and an Elizabeth George Foundation grant to work on her novel, *Finding Vincible*. Congratulations!

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