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**Review: Joseph Brooker, *Jonathan Lethem and the Galaxy of Writing* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), ISBN: 9781350003767, 224 pages, £85.00**

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How should a literary scholar write about Jonathan Lethem? What should a book on Lethem do? To ask these questions about Lethem is not just to rehearse the important debates about the fate of the single-author monograph in English studies. Instead, it is to note the particularity of Lethem's work—not just his fiction, but also his voluminous nonfiction and editorial output—and the challenges it generates for critics. In the introduction to *Jonathan Lethem and the Galaxy of Writing* (Bloomsbury 2020), Joseph Brooker confesses his anxieties about one of these challenges, noting that Lethem has already spoken and written so perceptively and prolifically about his own work 'that the critic might feel redundant' (9). Even early in his career, Lethem was helpfully pointing out to interviewers how his work might be framed among other key figures in postmodern and contemporary literature; Brooker points to a 1997 interview in which Lethem explicates an unnoticed homage to John Barth in *As She Climbed Across the Table* (1997) as one of many examples in which 'it is as though Lethem is priming a putative future editor of a scholarly edition of his work' (27). What, then, is there left for a critic to write—what connections are left to be made that are not already explicitly marked, either in Lethem's work or in his own commentary upon it?

Fortunately, Brooker's excellent study of Lethem offers numerous possibilities for further interpretation, articulating several paths through the author's work and mapping out possibilities for several more. Brooker intends the 'galaxy' of the book's title to connote both the many connections among Lethem's works and its lack of a clear centre. This interpretive challenge is especially notable in Chapter One, 'Sources,' in which Brooker grounds a discussion of Lethem's authorial genealogy through his best-known essay, 'The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism' (2007). The revelations in the chapter come less from the exegesis of 'Influence,' although Brooker perceptively traces the dense intertextuality of the essay, in which something as simple as the section title 'LOVE AND THEFT' can be traced from Bob Dylan to Eric Lott to Leslie Fiedler and then back to an essay collection on Dylan to which both Lethem and Lott contributed (14). Rather, Brooker claims new ground by discussing Lethem's embrace of influence and 'second use' in relationship to his contemporaries' responses to the topic. When Lethem's fellow Brooklynite Jenifer Egan is asked about her influences, for instance, she is willing to discuss them but also wants to maintain what Brooker describes as the 'mystique' of authorship (30). In response to similar questions, Jonathan Franzen and Richard Price are (as one might suspect) far more prickly and defensive. As Brooker points out, 'the rhetoric into which all these writers fall remains noticeably different from Lethem's much more determined bid to place such source materials in the foreground of discussion' (32). So, for instance, something as minor as the name of the

fictional Camden College, which Dylan Edbus attends in *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003) clearly marks a debt to Donna Tartt, Jill Eisenstadt, and Bret Easton Ellis, all rough contemporaries of Lethem's at Bennington College (from which he dropped out after a year) and all of whom set fiction at a thinly disguised version of their alma mater named either Camden or Hampden (41).

Chapter Two, 'Genre,' covers another area frequently discussed in Lethem's scholarship. Again, Brooker transcends the commonplaces of this discourse by showing what Lethem's intermixing of genres produces and synthesizes, noting some vectors in the trajectory of Lethem's work while also acknowledging the difficulty of establishing a clear timeline or progression through his highly varied career. Rather than endorsing the pervasive idea that Lethem has 'gone straight' over the course of his career, moving from experimental science fiction to literary realism, Brooker compares him to Thomas Pynchon, whose later work may seem more aesthetically conventional but continues to mix mimetic realism with symbolism and formal experimentation. Brooker is especially revelatory in his attention to Lethem's short stories, which have received far less critical commentary than the novels and nonfiction. Reading two short stories from the 2015 collection *Lucky Alan*, he identifies traces of Donald Barthelme and deems them 'two of Lethem's most experimental stories to date' (77). At the chapter's end, Brooker notes what makes Lethem such a fascinating figure while also such a challenge in terms of crafting a grand analytical narrative: 'A quarter-century into his career as a novelist, he could plausibly announce a forthcoming work that would be a space opera, soap opera or some combination of the two' (81).

Genre also plays a key role in Chapter Three, 'Worlds,' which offers close readings of three of Lethem's early novels—*Girl in Landscape* (1998) *As She Climbed Across the Table*, and *Amnesia Moon* (1995). As Brooker demonstrates, while each of these novels is most obviously indebted to science fiction, they each also draw to some degree on multiple genres, including the Western film, the postcolonial narrative, and high-postmodernist ontological fiction as first defined by Brian McHale: 'All three novels dramatize processes of world-making and the challenges they bring, while also undertaking such processes themselves as works of fiction' (117). In each reading, Brooker addresses a critical suspicion towards Lethem—do these genre mashups produce anything new, or are they merely showy exercises in formalism? This suspicion may fuel the relative dearth of Lethem scholarship, especially in relationship to David Foster Wallace, a contrast noted with concern in the book's introduction (8). Lethem's expansive imagination produces an incredible variety of fictional worlds—but what does his work tell us about the world we live in? For Brooker, these early novels establish a career-long

fascination with ‘space as a social construct,’ ‘contested, even colonized territory’ in which world construction and social control are deeply interlinked (117). The political nature of Lethem’s work remains under-analyzed in contemporary scholarship, and Brooker’s arguments here establish intriguing lines of inquiry for future work.

The final chapters offer two more thematic entry points for Lethem scholars, both centering on substantial close readings of *The Fortress of Solitude* to explore Lethem’s interest in superhero comics and New York City. In Chapter Four, ‘Heroes,’ Brooker supplements his attention to *Fortress* with an examination of *Omega the Unknown*, a ten-issue revival of a 1970s comic that Lethem co-authored with Karl Rusnak. In its attention to what one character calls ‘Franchise Theory’ (151), *Omega* offers a compelling metaphor for Lethem’s *oeuvre*—what marketers today might call the Lethem Extended Universe. Whether or not Brooker would use the same language, he clearly demonstrates how Lethem’s obsession with influence, second use, and intertextual connections, so explicitly manifest in his nonfiction, interviews, and editorial work, is rooted at least in part in the conventions of superhero comic franchise. Chapter Five, ‘Streets,’ returns to *Fortress* alongside *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999) and *Chronic City* (2009) to consider Lethem as a New York writer: his ‘relation to the city is one of the major recent instances of those profound relations between writer and place that have marked modern literary history: Joyce’s Dublin, Woolf’s London, Pessoa’s Lisbon’ (156). In these readings, Brooker focuses closely on Lethem as a stylist, noting how he shifts the focalization of his urban descriptions from novel to novel and therefore produces wildly divergent renderings of the same city. His reading of a key plot point in *Chronic City* can stand in for the treatment of New York across all three novels: ‘Against the emphasis on a shared urban experience, the hint is that reality might be radically relative’ (189).

Brooker encapsulates both the challenges and the possibilities that Lethem’s work poses to scholars in his conclusion, arguing that ‘To read across Lethem’s work is to realize how densely his words are woven together’ (196). Due to this density, Lethem scholars may often find themselves wanting Brooker to incorporate additional texts into his readings; ‘Streets’ seems to cry out for a comprehensive reading of *Dissident Gardens* (2013), for instance, and *A Gambler’s Anatomy* (2016) would sustain a compelling analysis in Brooker’s discussions of influence and genre. And as the title’s galaxy metaphor suggests, even more significant realms of this space remain unexplored. How, for instance, does this college dropout and endowed writing professor fit in relationship to what Mark McGurl has defined as ‘The Program Era’ and the dominant influence

of the creative writing workshop on contemporary fiction? How does his work speak to economics and social class, especially given its pervasive nostalgia for an urban, middle-class, bohemian lifestyle that feels financially impossible in 2020? But these gaps are outweighed by the book's catholic approach to close reading, which elucidates numerous compelling and unexpected parallels among Lethem's prolific output. In *S/Z*, Barthes described a text as 'a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginnings; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one' (qtd. in Brooker, 2). Building on Barthes' work, Brooker labels Lethem's output as 'an array of signals sent back and forth across its continually expanding space' (200). While Brooker succeeds in demonstrating the often disorienting and decentered nature of his object of study, *The Galaxy of Writing* provides a compelling and engaging map that will sustain expansion and revision by future Lethem scholars.

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**Competing Interests**

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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