

5-2016

Like a Character in a Truffaut Film

Trevor Lance Seigler

Clemson University, tseigle@g.clemson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses

Recommended Citation

Seigler, Trevor Lance, "Like a Character in a Truffaut Film" (2016). *All Theses*. 2319.

https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/2319

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

LIKE A CHARACTER IN A TRUFFAUT STORY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts, English

by
Trevor Lance Seigler
May 2016

Accepted by:
Keith Lee Morris, Committee Chair
Keith Lee Morris
Nic Brown
Dr. Joseph Mai

Abstract

I composed these two stories in my two different Fiction Workshop classes, they both deal with mortality and the concept of what we do and how it affects others. I would like to think that they also exhibit some of the genre-bending notions I absorbed from reading Jonathan Lethem, who is the subject of the critical essay.

Dedication

To my mother, who never said “no” to any book that I wanted from the library. Also, to my niece, who is a storyteller in her own right.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank the members of my committee (Keith Lee Morris, Nic Brown, and Joseph Mai, as well as Jillian Weise) for pushing me to work for this degree, and to earn it through better writing. I also want to thank all the teachers and professors from my multiple times here at Clemson (as an undergrad and as a graduate student) for opening my eyes to the wider world out there beyond the confines of my small home town. My peers in the MAE/MAPC group deserve thanks, I couldn't have picked a better group to be in while pursuing this degree. And to my family, who has supported and loved me all along the way.

Table of Contents

	Page
Title Page	i
Abstract	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
 CHAPTER	
I. Like a Character in a Truffaut Film	1
II. Jesus Riding a Flame-Breathing T. Rex While George Washington Weeps Tears of Blood.....	9
III. The Fantastic Meets the Ordinary: Jonathan Lethem’s Postmodern Fictions	15
Works Cited and Sources.....	22
Works Consulted.....	23

Like a Character in a Truffaut Film

Patrick's first thought was this: "I shouldn't be here." Everyone around him was in black and white, wearing old clothing, period-appropriate clothing if this was where he thought it was, which seemed to be the 1962 French film *Jules and Jim*. He recognized it as a cafe or bar that the title characters met up in for a couple of scenes in the film. He'd seen it over and over after Professor Jennings screened it in his Intro to Film class last semester and Patrick had certain sections of the film memorized, not just the dialogue but the lighting, the costumes, the cinematography and camera angles, the way that each in turn and together made him feel about particular scenes.

What he couldn't figure out was how *he* was here, clearly out of place in the clothes he'd been wearing that night, the night he was coming over to Emily's with some beer, to complement the pizza that she was planning on making by hand. They'd been hanging out but it wasn't anything serious. He was kind of hoping tonight would change that, but when he went to change the station on the radio because a Nickelback song came on, another pair of headlights from the opposite side of the street seemed to close in....

He couldn't tell how long ago that had been. It could have been the same night, or six months later, or hell, six years ago now. Or he could just now be here. He couldn't figure it out, but here he was in one of his favorite Truffaut movies (if he had to be honest, it wasn't his favorite overall; *Shoot the Piano Player* was funnier. If only he'd ended up there, or maybe one of the Antoine Doinel films. But that was just his luck). And gradually, the actors speaking their dialogue stopped and started to look at him. He was out of place, which wasn't unusual for him throughout his life, but this was different. He was *really* out of place here.

"Excuse me," a female voice whispered, in English but heavily accented, "but what are you doing here?"

Patrick couldn't help but try his best De Niro. "You talking to me?"

"Why yes, of course," the voice said again, and now Patrick put it to a face. She was an extra in the scene, with no lines but she was supposed to be laughing at something supposedly being said to her. She had come over behind him and was standing now with him, against the wall. They weren't supposed to be the focus of the scene, but they were. Jules, Jim, and everyone else was eyeballing them, unable to move on. Patrick felt his throat get dry, which is where the glass of beer he was holding came in handy. He took a sip and then said, "Pardon me." It came out as English in his head, but he wondered if he had said it in French.

The scene resumed. But there was a palpable tension in the air. The extra escorted him to her table, where her date was making nonsense noises and gesticulating so as to continue with his part of the scene, even though she had gotten up from the table. He was very committed to the craft.

"You don't belong here, do you?" The extra was looking him directly in the eyes now. She was good-looking-enough, which might explain her casting as an extra but not as a featured performer, or even someone with a line or two, more than a

minute's worth of screen time. Patrick noticed that, while everyone else was speaking in French (complete with subtitles, at least for Jules and Jim), she seemed to speak to him in English. "You're speaking to me in English," he said, stupidly. She smiled.

"Yes, well, technically I'm speaking French, but you don't speak it and for the purposes of our conversation, my French is converted into your English, so that any subtitles you might need don't get in the way of what Francois is trying to achieve with the main action. It's a happy accident that you can understand me, because otherwise you'd not only be trespassing but you wouldn't be made aware of it. Oh no, don't get defensive; I merely mean to suggest that you are not of this film originally, and therefore you are trespassing. But you are here now, and you will remain so unless you find some way to leave."

Patrick was slightly confused. "How... why am I... did I...?"

The extra shrugged her shoulders. "I have no idea," she said as she took a drag from her cigarette, "how any of it works. Perhaps you were an actor? I think how I got here was that part of my soul was captured by the camera, and when I died that part was activated here and now I am preserved in cinema. As to how you got here, I have no fucking clue."

Patrick blushed. "Well, I did a little summer stock back in Michigan." When she looked confused, he tried to explain. "It's a state, in America. Looks like a glove reaching for a... well, never mind. Anyway, the performances were recorded, that's about the only thing I remember being filmed for, I think."

"I have heard of this Michigan, of course," the extra said. "Isn't that the one with the penis?"

Patrick blushed. "It's the Upper Peninsula you're thinking about, I'm from the lower part of the state... yeah, it kinda does look like a penis."

"So you are from the mitten?"

Patrick nodded. "I am... was."

"You still are. You're just not there anymore. As to how you ended up here, who knows? But you are, so let's make the best of it. Would you like to see the audience for the film today?"

"What do you mean, 'audience'?"

"Just what I said," the extra laughed. "If you and I are talking right now, that means someone is screening the film, perhaps in a cinema or most likely on a television. When the film isn't being shown, we can do whatever we want within the film, but as you see Jules and Jim, they are supposed to leave now, but something's holding them back. They're, how you say, frozen in time?" It was true, Patrick noticed, that Jules and Jim weren't moving or talking anymore. They weren't frozen in a jumpy style, like you used to have with VHS tapes, so it must be a DVD. Maybe Professor Jennings was showing it again, to one of his film classes. Or it could be that some curious soul somewhere out there, in the real world, was watching the movie and had gotten interrupted, a phone call from a relative or friend or a pizza place trying to find the address. It could be anywhere out in the world, or "world," and if he was being honest he wasn't sure that he'd even get a sniff of where he'd been. The life he could've had. But still, his curiosity was nagging him. He got up and walked,

there was a point where he could tell where a screen was up, but he could just peer through to the other side. It looked like a classroom, in one of the buildings Jennings usually taught in for sure, and there was a commotion of sorts, which Patrick could not quite make out. Someone had fainted, perhaps, or needed air, and some of the people gathered around this poor soul were folks that he recognized, acquaintances or old friends, one or the other. But who were they around? Was it Jennings? No, he was standing there next to the window, his face white as a sheet but fully awake and eyeing Patrick. So he *was* being shown a world that he recognized; it couldn't have been scripted as such without drawing the howls of protest from an audience or a beginner-level screenwriting course. One of the students around the fallen figure moved and Patrick could just make out a familiar face, soft and lovely. Emily. Poor Emily.

Patrick tried to say something, but the film was paused. When Jennings un-paused the action, the scene had already moved on, but instead of the dialogue for the scene on camera, the subtitle read as follows: "Please tell me she's alright, please tell her I'm sorry."

CLEMSON, SOUTH CAROLINA – It sounds like something straight out of Woody Allen's classic *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, but in real life. Students at a film screening of the Francois Truffaut classic *Jules and Jim* got the shock of their lives Tuesday when they allegedly saw a recently deceased friend among the crowd of a bar scene in the film.

Associate Professor Wayne Jennings' Film class on 20th Century French Cinema was startled by what they say was the appearance of Patrick Nolan, a recently deceased first-year graduate student, in one scene in Truffaut's film, which came out over fifty years ago. One student, fellow graduate student Emily Avery, 25, was rushed to the hospital after collapsing over the alleged sighting. Sources indicate that the two were close, though their relationship status at the time of Mr. Nolan's passing is unclear. Ms. Avery's student film was screened prior to the Truffaut showing, in honor of Nolan's recent passing.

Nolan, 25 at the time of his death, was killed two months ago in an automobile accident just outside Central, South Carolina. He was originally from Lansing, Michigan.

Professor Jennings, who is up for tenure this spring, spoke to reporters about French cinema, spiritual properties associated with film in certain cultures, and the importance of Truffaut as a chronicler of French life through his films. When asked about Nolan, he offered these brief words: "Patrick Nolan was a student of mine. During his last semester as an undergraduate he took my Intro to Film class to fulfill a requirement, and we became friends. His passing was an enormous shock to me personally, but I'm happy to report that he's not really gone. Every time I screen *Jules and Jim* from now on, I will be on the look-out for him."

Ms. Avery was released from the hospital and returned to her apartment in Norris. At press time, she could not be reached for comment.

“So you’re dead and stuck in this movie? So what? Parts of me are in this, in *Fahrenheit 451*, in some of the other movies I did... I don’t see how you’re so special.” Oskar Werner wasn’t one to mince words, Patrick felt, as he and the guy otherwise known as “Jules” sat in the cabin that they shared with “Catherine” (Jeanne Moreau). Moreau herself was very much alive and well, and not too fond of how the film that contained her most celebrated work was being ruined by “this upstart American actor/spirit/whatever the fuck he is, ruining my best work all for his silly girlfriend or whatever.” But Catherine in the film seemed enamored with him, and kept hinting that she’d allow him to enjoy her favors, so long as they didn’t violate any codes of decency. Patrick didn’t have the heart to tell her about hardcore pornography.

“Yeah, I don’t know why I’m in *this* movie, though,” Patrick said, “it’s a good movie and all, but I feel like I’m a hindrance to the plot moving forward, or moving at all. Don’t get me wrong, I love being a part of this, but it’s *Jules and Jim*, not *Jules and Jim and Patrick*.”

“Yes, indeed. You know, Truffaut and I got along when we were making this film, but I let the fame go to my head. I was an absolute diva on *Fahrenheit 451*. Good thing Francois never made cameos in either of those two, or he’d hear me say that.”

Patrick looked confused. “You mean Francois... I mean, Truffaut, he’s trapped in his movies too?”

“I wouldn’t say ‘trapped.’ After all, this beats the actual physical decay of the real-life body we all inhabit for a certain number of years. And yes, he did some cameos in his films but he also appeared in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, with Spielberg. Not a bad actor, Francois... pity about the tumor.”

“You said... physical decay?”

Oskar smiled. “Yes, of course. Your body, my body, Francois’ body... all gone now, bones in mine and Truffaut’s case, you’re probably decaying flesh at this point depending on how cheap the embalmer was. This is all that’s left of us, and it’s either Heaven or Purgatory depending on who you ask. Then again, maybe Francois was cremated...ah, I can’t recall. An actor has to drink deeply of their role, inhabit it with their soul, so perhaps naturally parts of that soul get left behind, preserved there on the screen.” He paused to sip his beer. “Of course, that doesn’t explain you, here in this film where you never belonged to begin with.” Patrick wondered again how he’d ended up in movies; there had been the video of the play in Michigan but that couldn’t... though come to think of it, he may have appeared for a moment in Emily’s film-class project. It was at this moment that he remembered her directing him, and remembered the earlier awkwardness of the day’s shoot, when he’d seen her setting up her camera in the quad and tried to manufacture an excuse to go up to her and say hello. She waved him over after seeing him in her viewfinder and asked if he’d be part of a crowd-scene she was shooting. Then she thought it over and decided nah, he should be a lead character, in fact *the* lead, a private eye all cynical and romantic in a

fedora that Patrick bought from a store downtown. Two days later he was kissing a girl that he barely knew, the actress in Emily's film, a business major from Massachusetts who had been cast as the female lead. It was supposed to be like *Alphaville* in that what they were doing was a sci-fi dystopian romance in common but "futuristic" structures around campus. The girl had no lipstick on and was a heavy smoker. The movie had been screened for Emily's class, they had laughed at the right times and even the scene where Patrick accidentally hit his head on a low beam in a doorway. He and Emily had had dinner that night, the first time that he'd been to her apartment. Through a boozy haze she'd kissed him, and that kiss felt better than the one he'd shared with the chain-smoking lead, but just a kiss and nothing more (they both had stuff to do the next morning). The night had ended with a promise of more time spent together, a promise that...

Patrick began to think aloud. "I'm not supposed to be here, you're right... maybe I could jump into other movies, somehow, like I found myself in this one..."

Oskar shrugged again. "You could try. I know parts of me are in all the movies I did, maybe you could hone in on that part of my soul that's still connected to the other roles... I don't know, it doesn't make any sense. But then again, what is 'sense' when we're talking about art?"

"I do know Moreau would be happy if I wasn't in here anymore, ruining the movie."

"I remember her, damn good actress. But in terms of you 'ruining' her work... fuck that."

IMDB Plot Summaries (November 12, 2016-January 4, 2048)

Fahrenheit 451 (1966): The original film, featuring Oskar Werner as a firefighter in a future society that bans literature, gets a new twist when an unidentified new character comes on the screen towards the end, among the "book people." Viewers report that the man, who like the other characters is supposed to memorize and recite a complete book, is speaking aloud passages from *The Great Gatsby* but with uncertainty. He ultimately disappears from the film upon further viewing, but the characters spend their time now wondering where he went to and asking about him.

Friday the 13th (1980): A bunch of young, attractive camp counselors would ordinarily be murdered one-by-one by the stalker-killer of the film (in this case, the mother of the subsequent killer in the films, hockey-mask-clad Jason), but they are all sent packing by a young man who appears in the film, reveals that the mother is trying to kill them, and lectures them on the dangers of illicit drug use and unprotected sex. With the mother put away, the camp counselors live and the horror-movie classic becomes simply a film in stasis, at least until the young man who stopped the killings leaves. Then the counselors return and the horror classic turns into a typical Eighties sex comedy, with drugs and illicit hook-ups rampant for the film's running time.

Battleship Potemkin (1925): Sergei Eisenstein's masterpiece about the 1905 uprising in Odessa, against the Russian monarchy and naval authorities, nearly gets off the rails when a young man in modern-day clothing appears aboard the ship and seems to not know what's going on with the tensions of the crew. He is promptly thrown overboard. But now the sailors, once intent on overthrowing their despotic officers, bond with those figures of Tsarist authority and delight in eating the maggot-infested meat that they share with officers.

National Lampoon's Animal House (1978): Sharp-eyed viewers of this college-comedy classic noticed a young man who wasn't there originally, in the initial party scene at the Delta House. He seems to be having a good time, laughing and joking with the other extras, spending a lot of time talking to Doug Kenney (the co-writer of the film, who has a minor part). Gradually, though, he starts to grow reserved and not as sociable. Bluto (John Belushi) tries to cheer him up by hitting himself in the head with a beer bottle (a scene that originally came later in the film, opposite frat brother Flounder (Stephen Furst)). But the new character vanishes eventually, leaving Peter Riegert and Karen Allen's characters' (Boon and Katy) romance in tatters as she pines for the now-disappeared young man. Also Stork (the character played by Doug Kenney, who died from a fall in Hawaii in 1980) disappears, turning up in *Porky's* to protest its obvious theft of *Animal House's* template for its source material.

"Can't it wait until after my big scene, young man? This is the moment when you know the aliens aren't bad guys like in most movies, that they're simply fellow creatures that we should build a relationship with."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Truffaut, but it's taken me a long time to get here, and I thought maybe you could help me. I tried to catch Hitchcock in one of his movies, but his cameos are so brief and I think Cary Grant doesn't like me much because Eva Marie Saint's character started flirting with me on the train instead of him."

"Ah yes, word travels fast in our semblance of a world. Alright, how may I help you?"

Patrick looked around the mock-up military base somewhere in desolate Wyoming. "I think I've had about as much fun as I can have, screwing up movies. Not that I enjoy screwing up movies, of course."

Francois Truffaut laughed. "But some movies were made to be screwed up, of course. Funny thing, when I was a critic I thought 'one man behind the scenes' – the director, the *auteur* – was the person who made the film. It's much more collaborative, and of course now that I'm no longer on the plane of the real, so to speak, it's even more work to make sure that the movies we're in come off as planned. Nothing but work, work, work, and my whole notion of the 'auteur' is, of course, a false religion."

"I get that now, seeing as so many classic movies are ruined because of me."

"Oh, no, they are like anything touched by a human hand, they're malleable even now, when they're supposedly 'finished.' All directors are perfectionists, they're

always itching to go back and change things. You're just a temporary disruption, like all human beings are in life, 'real' life anyway. We are born, we live, and then we die. And if we're captured on film, even for a minute, part of us always survives. But you are an editor, of sorts; your presence affects the films, they're forever touched. Unless Lucas goes in after you and once again re-edits his movies. I don't believe he liked your decision to murder Jar Jar, by the way."

Patrick blushed. "I just thought it needed to be done."

Truffaut smiled. "But of course it did."

"Is there a heaven, though? Or a hell?"

Truffaut thought this over. "No, there is just the cinema."

"So I'll never see Emily again. She could be dead for all I know, or just... I just don't know. How long has it been since I died?"

"Oh, I have no idea, young man. Time isn't really a concern here anymore, other than the running time, of course. But there may be something other than cinema. There has to be, for those who didn't get to be on-camera."

"But how do I find it?" Patrick asked. "I've done so much... I'm so tired. I look for her, for anyone I knew, whenever I realize that the film I'm in is moving. Sometimes I'd see friends or family, but it's becoming harder to do so. Maybe they're all gone. Maybe, maybe I should go find them. Maybe I could stop going from movie to movie. Make an exit, even just the illusion of an exit."

Truffaut scratched his chin. "Maybe... hold on," and with that he went up to Richard Dreyfuss, who of course wasn't Richard Dreyfuss but his character, because the actor was still living. Their conversation, between Truffaut the director and Dreyfuss the character (Roy Neary), ended with Dreyfuss angrily walking away, but Truffaut beamed as he turned to Patrick.

"I think we have a solution, of sorts. Temporary, of course; you'll crop back up in some other film, no doubt. But I can give you the satisfaction of an illusory departure, at least."

Patrick looked at him. "I... don't know what you mean."

Truffaut smiled. Then he nodded at one of the military officials.

IMDB Review: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977)

Rating: Five Stars

Written by: Emily Avery, October 30, 2055

In the climactic final scene of Steven Spielberg's classic, Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss) is replaced at the last minute by a familiar face, a young man I once knew when I wasn't so obsessed with watching movies just to see if he was in them. Patrick Nolan, who died some years ago, is now the person picked by the aliens to board their ship. He turns to wave goodbye to the crowd, who are startled by this new presence that they hadn't anticipated (in either the original theatrical cut or the "special edition" re-release a few years later). The film leave us unsure where the ship, with its new passenger, is heading. But perhaps if we all re-watch the film, we can see this new character one more time. We can rewind it, or start over from the beginning. The

movie is never over, the old stars never die. Chances lost can be chances gained again. Also, Francois Truffaut (playing the French scientist) seems to be even more moved by this event than he was in the original release, when it was Neary leaving. Or maybe he was that emotional before, and I just never noticed.

Jesus Riding a Flame-Breathing T. Rex While George Washington Weeps Tears of Blood

I

“Isn’t it just lovely,” my mother-in-law asked us. “It” was an object that she’d just brought into our living room, and whatever else “it” was, it was not lovely. “A real conversation piece, in my professional opinion.”

“My goodness, mom,” my wife Molly said, trying to hide her unease, “wherever did you find such a... thing?” I was genuinely speechless myself, one of the few times in my life that I could say that. I was just trying to process “it,” however impossible that seemed.

“Find it? Why, silly, this is all the work of my friend Hiram! It was a gift.” Gladys laughed as if this was the most obvious thing in the world. “I told you about him, right? I started writing to him as part of our church’s outreach-to-prisoners program and we just hit it off.” She paused and then turned to me. “Now Alan, I suppose you’re going to say that I’m silly for letting this convict and dangerous criminal into my life, but the truth is that Hiram wouldn’t hurt a fly. He just had a little crop going outside his house that the police said he shouldn’t be growing. He’s served his time and he is reformed. No judgment.”

Why she told me all this, I don’t know. I hadn’t even considered bringing up the idea that Gladys was consorting with any sort of criminals. Hard to conceive of my straitlaced mother-in-law throwing away her social position in our little town to be with a dangerous felon, but she had been lonely since her husband passed away two years ago. He was a hard-ass former Marine, and he used to ask me before I proposed to Molly if I’d ever seen another man’s head blown clean off by mortar fire. I had to demur. Turned out he’d been stateside during Vietnam through Desert Storm; flat feet kept him in the rear working at recruiting stations. But he’d seen *Full Metal Jacket* so I guess he felt qualified to hold that over me for some reason. To say that I didn’t miss him would be unfair, if accurate.

What we were looking at, what Gladys had presented us with, was a sculpture or creature of a sort none of us were familiar with. It looked like a wolf, perhaps, or an angry dog, its fangs bared and claws extended. My mind went to the scene in *The Thing* when the dog-alien creature began to attack the other dogs; it was reminiscent of that, if not quite in the same league. It was Gladys’ way of congratulating us on finally moving out of her tiny basement apartment and into our own home.

“You say Hiram... made this?” I took off my glasses and rubbed my eyes. No, it did not get any less ugly if I couldn’t see it clearly.

“Well, his brother or cousin Eustis shot it, whatever it was... I think he said it was a wolf or wolverine but you know me and animals. If it’s not my sweet little Marnie then I don’t know what.” Sweet little Marnie was the beast that had kept us awake all night over at Gladys’, barking at other dogs, at the moon, at gusts of wind, everything but any actual intruders that might have broken in. Every night for a year I

fought the urge to set Marnie off her leash and pray that she run into oncoming traffic. You know, for her own sake.

Molly just looked at me and back at the thing there now in our living room. If we ever had kids, they would be psychologically conditioned to fear nothing if they had to grow up around this object of art. Gladys looked at her watch. “Oh my,” she said apropos of nothing, “I’m supposed to show a lovely young couple a house on the lake in twenty minutes. I just wanted to drop this off while it was still in the truck. Why, I tell you, I was stopped at a red light and I saw it in my rearview mirror, propped up against the back window... I almost had a heart attack! But it sure is lovely of Hiram to think of you two. He wanted me to deliver this specially to you.”

Molly and I exchanged looks that seemed to ask the same questions: does Hiram know our address? How quickly can we pack and be out of here in case he does?

“Oh, listen,” Gladys said, turning back to us as she stood at our front door, “I want you two to come to Sunday service and meet Hiram. He is just so talented and he loves the Lord, which is always good. Alan, he may have a business proposition for you. Y’all come to the service, we’ll be serving some good fixings after in the worship center.”

Mentally I saw myself being stuffed by Hiram and mounted in a similarly fierce pose as the creature in our living room. I wasn’t too hot about going to church, either.

Later that night, Molly and I were snuggled up on the couch watching some old movie on TV, nothing I could bother to get invested in as my mind wandered over the aisles of my antique store downtown, its stock excellent but not moving. I’d gotten a lot of guff from my former father-in-law over my business (he’d wondered aloud if I even enjoyed sleeping with his daughter or if our marriage was just a ruse to steal his “vast fortune” of crappy knickknacks from all fifty states and three territories where he’d served), but truthfully I was worried that maybe I’d been wrong to be so bullheaded about it. Speculations about my sexuality aside, I’d had to face constant interference from my main rival in town, Spooner Dawes. Spooner was a local while I was an “interloper” from down in the mid-region of the state, not a mountain-bred man in the slightest. Spooner’s dad was a legend for his vast store full of all kinds of crap, and when Spooner washed out of the Coast Guard for being a little too fond of sampling the merchandise that his crewmates confiscated from Florida drug runners, he’d landed on his feet at Daddy’s store in the same town I moved to with Molly after we met in a college on the coast and she persuaded me to come see the little shithole town she was from. I always liked old junk, and when a storefront became available downtown I jumped at the chance, stocking it with all kinds of stuff collected during my years of hoarding. I had done okay for a while, enough to now move out of the basement and no longer “live in sin” with Molly (even though we’d been married when we moved in with Gladys, we eloped and that just wasn’t done in this town), but I could be doing better. Spooner was still beating me in terms of floor traffic, and nothing I could lay my hands on got asses in the store like the things he brought out. He was the go-to stop for gas station signs and other transportation-related stuff; I

could barely get my hands on Matchbox cars of a certain vintage, much less big-ticket items that man-cave enthusiasts craved. All this ran through my head, more or less, as Jimmy Stewart seemed to be bumbling his way through another movie. It took me a minute to recognize that this was *The Shop Around the Corner*.

“Hey,” Molly said, “you think we can move that... whatever to the basement? I could’ve sworn its eyes moved just now.”

“You’re being paranoid. Plus, I would throw out my back.”

Molly snorted. “You’re just afraid to touch it, pussy.”

I kissed her on the forehead. “You’re absolutely right. But you knew I was a coward and you married me anyway.”

“How else was I going to get out of my parents’ house?”

“Travel the world as a courtesan to wealthy men.”

“Oh, so I could be a prostitute is what you’re saying.”

“Not just a prostitute, but a high-priced one. Like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*.”

Molly laughed. “How about more wine, Richard Gere?”

“Gladly,” I said, and got up to refill our glasses. We were using our coffee mugs to sip down some box wine I’d gotten at the grocery store as a joke. Turned out it wasn’t half bad.

“You know,” Molly said from the living room as I poured more vintage 2015 into our cups, “this Hiram guy might be nuts or something. I’m worried about Mom.”

“Gladys can take care of herself,” I said, “plus Marnie will bite his dick off if he mistreats her.”

“Or bark his fucking ear off, one of the two.”

I walked back to the living room and stopped. The way the light was hitting the creature made it seem like... nah, of course not. But still. “You know something?”

“The wine’s getting warm sitting in that cup while you stare at the thing?”

“Well, that... I wonder if Hiram could make some stuff for the store. I mean, yeah it’s crazy, but our stock isn’t moving. We’re not getting a fraction of the foot traffic that Spooner is.”

“Spooner’s a pothead. He sells weed under the counter.”

“If that’s what it takes... but suppose we sold some more Hiram originals. You think we could thrive?”

“If the first thing we sold was that,” and here Molly turned back to look at the creature while I sat on the sofa, putting the mugs on the table. I was almost relaxed again when she screamed.

“What? What is it?”

“Please, Alan, take that thing to the basement now. Or put it out in the yard, scare away the neighborhood hooligans. Just... I don’t want to see it, ever again.”

“As you wish,” I said, and got up to find the door to the basement. It would be hard to get down there without a light, but there wasn’t any illumination down there once you got a certain way down the steps. In my mind, I saw the creature coming back to life, very awake and very pissed-off. It occurred to me that I watched too

many scary movies, but the creature let me leave the basement alive and well... this time.

II

“Why hell, Alan, I’d love to help you out,” Hiram said a little loudly while waiting in line for mac and cheese from a crock pot. He was nothing like I’d imagined; the black suit was a little ill-fitting, but that was on account of his gut, not any muscles that he may have acquired in prison, thirsting for revenge upon the world or whatnot. He was more like a mall Santa Claus, with a trim beard that could be easily grown out to accommodate beard-pulling jokesters in line for their moment with the Man in Red. I liked him in spite of myself, and could see why Gladys fell for him.

“You have no idea how much this means to me, Hiram,” I blurted out, trying to accommodate some more rolls on my overstuffed plate. Loaded down with mac and cheese, green beans, some lasagna and fruit salad, I was already pushing the boundaries of Our Lady of Eternal Rest’s generosity towards agnostic sinners like myself. The four Hawaiian rolls I’d acquired drew the eyes of Mrs. Tuberville, the church’s resident blue-haired harridan. Her look was most un-Christian at my gluttony.

“Hey, that’s what family is for,” Hiram said, and I have to admit at the time that it barely registered. I was envisioning aisles full of tacky crap, but *eye-catching* tacky crap, from the warped mind of Hiram Portis and his brother (or was it cousin? Cousin-brother?) Eustis. I could see the commercials I’d shoot for local channels, talking up the unique designs we offered at Pollack’s Potluck Antique Store. My eyes got big with greed, and also hunger. That mac and cheese was singing to me as I took my seat next to Molly, who was listening to Gladys have an animated discussion with herself about her responsibilities to young couples seeking a great place to have children. Hiram took Gladys’ hand, which drew Molly’s gaze. Ever since her dad had died (a drill-sergeant who she admitted wasn’t easy to grow up with), Molly had been wary of any suitors in her mom’s life. There had been Harry Preston, church deacon extraordinaire and hardware store enthusiast. Then there had been Max Coates, owner of the bowling alley just off the highway overpass two towns over. And now, apparently, it was Hiram.

When Hiram got up from his chair, Gladys was still in full-on Gladys mode, beseeching herself to find more lakefront property for young families because really, who didn’t want to grow up on a lake? I turned to see Molly’s eyes widen and then I turned back to see Hiram down on one knee, right there in the old gym “worship center.” I was mid-bite of one of the four rolls, having scarfed down the portion of lasagna and finding it better than expected, when Hiram took a ring out of his pocket. I was sure that Molly was screaming inside, if not vocally out loud. Gladys cried tears of joy. Molly just cried.

Even old hard-ass Mrs. Tuberville congratulated my mother-in-law. The mac and cheese was decent, if not as appealing in taste as it was in appearance.

III

It turns out that Eustis, not Hiram, was the true artist of the Portis family. Within the first month of our business arrangement, I cleared well over my projected earnings in offloading some of Eustis' handiwork not just when it came to embalmed dogs, wolves, bears, and cougars (how in the hell he got one of those is beyond me, but he swears it was locally-sourced), but he also did paintings. Now you'd expect someone named something ridiculous like "Eustis" might be one of these Lost Causers who loves to paint battle scenes where General Lee receives greetings from Stonewall Jackson for the last time, on the eve of battle at Chancellorsville... and you'd be right, to an extent. I did have the Lee-Jackson final-meeting painting, and sold it fairly quickly. But Eustis was much more imaginative than that. We were in the conversation-piece business now, and Eustis was an endless resource. Hiram contributed, too, but a lot of his stuff sat collecting dust.

"Ah, it's not a big deal," Hiram said one day, as he came by to offload some stuffed squirrels he'd turned into John, Paul, George, and Ringo, complete with little Beatles hairdos and jackets (it was merely the start, he said; his dream was to render a complete facsimile of the *Sgt. Pepper* album cover, or at least the Fab Four portion of it, out of squirrels he caught outside his new home with Gladys). "I always knew Eustis had been touched by God, and His Almighty Grace merely brushed by me to get to him. I sure wish Eustis would stop being so sacrilegious, though."

"What do you mean," I asked.

"Oh, you'll see," Hiram said with a chuckle. "Tell Molly me and Gladys leave for the cruise ship tomorrow, it leaves Charleston the night after. About time my wife and I went on our honeymoon, don't you think?"

Two days into the cruise, we received a frantic email from Gladys; Hiram had been thrown in the brig for biting off part of the ear of the captain of the vessel.

"Does this affect our business arrangement?" I said to Eustis, who had come by that day to show me his newest work. It was a new painting, easily the craziest I'd ever seen. Molly was busy filming a commercial for the local stations, wearing a low-cut and tight dress to emphasize the sex appeal of our store. Spooner Dawes was furious with us, and threatening to find his own Eustis Portis. Good luck with that, I thought. Molly and I hadn't been in the basement by ourselves since I had put the thing down there. Late at night, I could swear sometimes, I might hear a faint howling. Or it could be Marnie (we had her in our yard for the duration of the cruise; once again my fantasy of freeing her from her leash and letting her do a kamikaze attack on our lightly-travelled road reared its ugly head). Molly had been insatiable lately, in the bedroom. She would roll over after and sleep soundly through the night. She never heard a thing at night once we were done, she'd say with a wink.

"I don't see why," Eustis said. He was a real artist, I had to say. Obsessive about his work, determined to get it just right, maddening at times. This painting, the one I was staring at while Molly was practically dry-humping a throw pillow on a couch that was part of a fancy living-room set, was a measure of that. It depicted the following scene: Jesus riding what looked like a T. Rex, but this was a fire-breathing

T. Rex, while George Washington stood by in full military uniform, weeping what looked like tears of blood. Let Spooner Dawes find someone who could do *that*, I thought.

“What’s it called,” I asked. Gladys was coming home in a day or two, Hiram would likely be facing some jail time but could get a reduced sentence with good behavior.

“Well, I guess just saying that it’s Jesus riding a T-Rex while Washington cries,” Eustis said, “but I’m open to suggestions.”

“Well, whatever you call it, it’s a real conversation piece,” I said, as Molly slumped down on the couch and took a nap, her commercial now being edited for broadcast to the local antique-shopping area. “Why not *America, Land of the Free?*”

IV

Later that night, after another session with Molly (she’d been reading up on leather outfits and straps and wanted to try something like that), I ventured down to the basement. Flashlight in hand, I couldn’t sleep (I hadn’t slept well in weeks, honestly). I slowly went down the staircase, keeping my light ahead of me. When I got to the bottom, I turned quickly to the creature. It was there, fangs bared and claws reared up. Maybe I’d heard a noise, I thought; perhaps that explained my investigation at such a late hour. I looked away, into the dark void of the rest of the basement.

I looked again at the thing there on the floor. I was pretty sure it was in the same place, but I wasn’t one-hundred percent. It could’ve been bumped, maybe during a quick check of the water heater or a trip to retrieve an old tennis racket that I suddenly had a desire to see again, last week I think. Yes, that was it. I was reassured, I told myself. Nothing to see here. As I climbed up the steps, for a minute there I could swear there was a scratching sound behind me. But I didn’t turn back. I didn’t want to see what might be behind me.

The Fantastic Meets the Ordinary: Jonathan Lethem's Postmodern Fictions

In an interview with Chuck Klosterman, novelist Jonathan Lethem said that his fiction was born of the desire to blend what he called “the fantastic” with the ordinary reality of everyday life. That blending has perhaps kept him from being recognized for the postmodern master that he is. Postmodernism in literature likes to call attention to its fictive nature, with little or no interest in plot or characters, or a desire to toy with readers' expectations to show something new from something old or “established.” One need read only Donald Barthelme's novel *Snow White* or John Barth's story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* to get a taste of what that looks like, and obviously Lethem's more traditional novels of beginning, middle and end bear little in relation to such works. But what could be more postmodern than a work which subverts the notions of traditional fiction (established in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) while still telling a story? Throughout his work, Jonathan Lethem has upset the expectations of his readers, showing the ways in which we receive certain kinds of stories and how that can be subverted. His pyrotechnics, while not as explosive or showy as some of the past masters, are still impressive, perhaps even more so because they still serve the story.

Lethem's career began with *Gun, with Occasional Music* (1994) and has hit peaks of creative vision and popularity with works like *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003), and *Dissident Gardens* (2013). Never content to stay within the lines of genres like science fiction, detective potboilers, or coming-of-age stories, he continuously blends or bends the aspects of certain styles in order to meet his story's purpose and meaning. There are certain concerns that continue to pop up in Lethem's work: science fiction, fantasy, odes to culture both high and low, comic-book theatrics, gritty noir aspects of detective fiction, and the presence of absence. Taken individually, each Lethem work is both connected to previous work and separate from it. Those interests of Lethem are also reflected in his non-fiction, be it in the essays of *The Disappointment Artist* and *The Ecstasy of Influence* or in the book-length treatments of John Carpenter's *They Live* and Talking Heads' album *Fear of Music*. This genre-bending and love of specific genres not “highbrow” has not always been welcome in literary circles: Michael Chabon recounts in a 2012 interview how “I was taught early on in college and graduate school that I wouldn't be taken seriously if I wrote genre fiction” (Costello 124); Chabon won the Pulitzer Prize with a novel that dared to embrace the comic-book genre. Lethem is a prolific writer and thinker, and his work continues the work of postmodernists before him in tackling aspects of American life since the Second World War that haven't been addressed in the more respectable “literary fiction” of the same period.

Postmodernism, like many literary genres or styles, is both easy to recognize and hard to define. When exactly it started is unclear; most point to the immediate post-war era in America, from 1945 onwards, but some aspects of postmodernism and metafiction have been around far, far longer. Amy J. Elias suggests that, with the

strides made first by realism and modernism before it, “postmodernism or post-1945 fiction had nowhere to go but inward, to focus on its own medium of expression” (Duvall 16). What is certain is that “modern postmodernism,” to perhaps coin an oxymoron, had its roots in the unease bubbling under the surface of a triumphant American nation, before Vietnam exposed full-tilt the lies of the military-industrial complex. We had beaten Germany and Japan, but we’d unleashed a spectacular new weapon (in the atom bomb) to do so. Conformity was the order of the day in the Fifties, but artists like the Beats (Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs) and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., saw danger in that, and wrote against it. By the Sixties and Seventies, authors like Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and the aforementioned Barth and Barthelme came to question the very things about fiction that were generally accepted across the board. Works like Barthelme’s *Snow White* (1967) and Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) didn’t play by the rules of plot, character, and narrative; Barthelme in particular took a traditional fairy tale and, through disjointed chapters and a mixture of voices, turned it into something other than what we all know from the original fairy tale or even the Disney movie. John Gardner similarly reimagined the classic “heroic epic” *Beowulf* from the point-of-view of the “bad guy” in *Grendel* (1971), creating a sympathetic protagonist out of a character who’d previously been an unstoppable monster (at least until Beowulf shows up, of course). In *Great Jones Street* (1973), *White Noise* (1985), and *Libra* (1988), Don DeLillo turned his trademark paranoia-tinged lens to rock and roll, college towns, and the JFK assassination respectively. Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe proved that journalism could employ fictional techniques, Thompson in particular capturing the warped zeitgeist of Nixon-era America in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971). All in all, the latter half of the twentieth century was a great time to be an experimental writer.

But with the rise of more realist fiction in the Eighties, symbolized by Raymond Carver among others, the time for playful postmodernism seemed to be over. So when Jonathan Lethem came upon the scene in the early Nineties with his first published novel, he did so in something of a vacuum (though David Foster Wallace did keep the flame burning with the Pynchon-esque *The Broom of the System* and was about to unleash *Infinite Jest* upon the world). That first novel, published in 1994, signaled Lethem’s desire to blend the fantastic and the real. *Gun, with Occasional Music* concerns the work of Conrad Metcalf, a familiar figure to aficionados of detective fiction; he’s a gumshoe down on his luck who needs a solid case to help keep the creditors he owes off his back, and he’s susceptible to any attractive “dames” who walk in promising a payday that’s too good to be true. But Metcalf lives in an Oakland, California, that exists sometime in the near future, when drugs like Forgettol are all the rage and the gunman pursuing our hero as he follows the clues is an anthropomorphic kangaroo hitman with an itchy trigger finger (or paw). In what could otherwise be a passable pastiche of noir film or private-eye fiction like Chandler or Agatha Christie before him, Lethem injects a wonderful twist of science-fiction madness. As Metcalf follows the clues, he uncovers a conspiracy worthy of a Michael Crichton techno-thriller. But Lethem isn’t the first to explore a

mash-up or mixing of the genres between detective and science fiction; his favorite author did so in a work that subsequently birthed a cult classic in the world of cinema.

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sleep, by Philip K. Dick, eventually made it to the silver screen as *Blade Runner* (1982). Like Lethem's work, the film merges two genres and playfully subverts them for the story of a private eye tracking down human-like cyborgs in the dismal landscape of a future, acid-rain-drenched Los Angeles. Dick was a huge influence on Lethem as a young reader, as he discusses in his essay "You Don't Know Dick" (featured in *The Disappointment Artist*). Dick became known as a "science fiction writer" but, much like his peer Vonnegut, he ended up working in more universal themes than just rocket ships and distant worlds. In *The Man in the High Castle* (1963), Dick created an alternate universe in which the Nazis and the Japanese have won the Second World War and divided up the world amongst them, including the United States. In this world, a novel which proposes that the United States won the war makes the rounds of Dick's characters, and the author of this novel (*The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*) is in hiding. Is it science fiction? Is it alternate history? Satire? Dick's reputation as a science fiction writer precedes him when it comes to the copy of the novel that I have, bought from a local bookstore; a fantastical, futuristic "castle" dominates a weird landscape. There is no trace of any of this in the novel.

Lethem has a healthier view of his place as a possible "science fiction writer" than Kurt Vonnegut, who in his essay entitled "Science Fiction" paints the genre as a desk drawer into which literary critics can urinate. *As She Climbed Across the Table* (1997) blends his sci-fi tendencies with the stock "campus novel" template. Philip Engstrand, the protagonist, tells us of the experiments in the physics lab of Beauchamp University which result in the creation of a void known as "Lack." This void attracts Philip's girlfriend Alice Coombs, and draws her away from the very real presence of Philip in her life. Here Lethem is perhaps tackling the "mad scientist" trope popularized by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, in which a scientist unleashes something evil or unnatural on the world around him or her, while also tweaking it through the lens of a romantic comedy. Philip tries to win Alice back, but he can't seem to compete against Lack's "presence" as an absence. This theme of absence will be picked up in subsequent works, and is worth pursuing even if it leads to the inevitable psychoanalyzing of the author of a fictional work.

When Lethem was thirteen, his mother died from a brain tumor; it is no accident that many of his stories feature absent or dead parents or parental figures whose absence is as much a presence in the lives of those they left behind as anything else. The retreat many of his characters have (into the world of pop culture, where distinctions between "high" and "low" art are meaningless) mirrors his own coping mechanism for her original diagnosis, when he spent the summer of 1977 obsessively re-watching *Star Wars*. In *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003), Dylan Ebdus loses his mother through her abandonment of him and her husband Abraham; she runs away from their life in a predominantly black and Hispanic neighborhood in pre-gentrified Brooklyn to be with another man. Dylan is one of the few white kids in his school, and he routinely suffers at the hands of bullies, like his arch-nemesis Robert

Woolfolk. He takes refuge in comic books, eventually making friends with a black kid named Mingus Rude. Both their fathers (Abraham Ebdus and Barrett Rude, Jr.) are artists, albeit down on their luck; Abe is obsessed with making a film about the neighborhood that monopolizes his time and leaves little time for him to pay attention to his son, while Barrett is a drug addict and former soul singer who lets Mingus do whatever he pleases. The boys stumble across a magic talisman in the form of a ring which allows its wearer to fly. In the classic comic-book hero-myth tradition, this magic ring would lead one or both of the boys to become superheroes committed to helping their communities. But as Joseph Campbell points out in his classic work on myths, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, it's not a given that the "call to action" will be heeded by the would-be hero. Dylan and Mingus neglect the responsibility that the ring imparts to them; apart from a brief spate of trying to fight street criminals on Mingus' part and Dylan's construction of an "Aeroman" costume which he shows off while spending the summer in Vermont (missing the "Great Blackout of 1977" in Brooklyn and throughout the five boroughs), they do little with their new power apart from goofing off. "Early readings of *The Fortress of Solitude* were marked by praise for one element of the book and criticism of two others. The praise was earned for the evocative portrait of Dylan's childhood... The criticism was aimed at the fantastic, superhero thread, which many readers seemed to have a hard time knowing what to do with in the context of an otherwise realistic book..." (Cohen 175). What those readers may have failed to note was the textbook origin story of most superheroes that Lethem is referencing and subverting in this section of the novel. It's a great irony that Lethem addresses, the fact that a ring which promises escape is in fact doing just the opposite in holding the two boys hostage to their neighborhood.

Dylan's mother continues as a spectral presence, sending mysterious letters and postcards to her son as she and Croft (the man she left Brooklyn with) take their quest across the country. Meanwhile, neither Dylan nor his friend escape their surroundings; Dylan goes away to college and ends up in California, but he's drawn back to see Mingus. Now languishing in jail for an Oedipal crime that mirrors the Marvin Gaye shooting (but with a twist), he and Dylan still share the bond of the magic ring even as their lives have moved into different outcomes. Dylan is a writer of liner notes for CDs and boxed sets (a sample of which, for the boxed set of the soul group that Barrett Rude, Jr., once fronted, is the break between the third-person first part of the novel and the first-person final third in which Dylan narrates his journey back to his neighborhood and his friend), but he has never really escaped his old life in the neighborhood. Woolfolk is also in prison, and he enlists Dylan in an escape attempt by forcing him to turn over the magic ring. However, the powers it possesses don't work for Woolfolk, who plunges to his death. At the novel's end, Dylan is left to ponder what he has lost back there in Brooklyn (he never solves the mystery of his mother's location or if she is even still alive, and Mingus' family is shattered by the events that land him in jail).

Here Lethem is toying with our expectations in terms of comic book heroes, a literary genre that admittedly hasn't gotten much respect over the years (and also admittedly perhaps hasn't warranted more serious consideration in some of its forms).

But with the rise of superhero movies around the same time that *Fortress of Solitude* was published, and continuing to the present day's glut of action movies starring caped crusaders, it would be fair to say that comic books have come in for serious consideration and appreciation. Like Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Lethem uses the tropes of the comic-book hero to tell a coming-of-age story between two unlikely friends and the thing that binds them together (in the case of Chabon's book, the tie between the two main characters apart from their family bond is that they create a superhero during the "Golden Age" of comic books). He is also using the template for a hero to tell a very different kind of story. When the ring comes into their possession, Dylan and Mingus have the potential to use it to escape their neighborhood, or so they think. We're used to superheroes using their powers for good, but suppose that Superman used his strength to take over the world, or that Spider-Man used his abilities to make money (as he initially tries to do, before his Uncle Ben is murdered). Gritty superhero reboots have become all the rage over the last decade, but Lethem was among the first to use that as a literary template to upset genre conventions (again, he wasn't alone in doing so; *Watchmen* subverted genre expectations in the mid-Eighties, as did Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*. But Lethem did it within the context of a coming-of-age novel). Lethem's story is a superhero comic book, only in a format that we wouldn't expect; in his essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*, Brian McHale writes of *Gravity's Rainbow* being ultimately "revealed retrospectively to have been the world of a movie" after employing much of the techniques of films from the time period (the Forties) in which the novel is set (Dalsgaard 99). Playing with the expectations that an audience brings to a work simply because of its format is a trait that Lethem absorbed from those before him, and which he uses for his own unique purposes.

To hearken back to an earlier work in Lethem's canon, *Motherless Brooklyn* (itself a genre-bender straddling the line between detective fiction and family drama), Lethem can't be accused of "tugboating" in his stories. That phrase is used in the book whenever anyone seems to be dragging out a story and avoiding coming to the point. In much of the more experimental postmodern fiction, it's fair to say that an awful lot of tugboating goes on (indeed, that may be the purpose of postmodern fiction anyway. Barthelme's *Snow White* doesn't so much deconstruct the classic fairy tale so much as it deconstructs the *telling* of that fairy tale). It's important to look at the ways in which we tell stories, especially if (as John Barth asserts in his influential essay "The Literature of Exhaustion") the old forms of telling stories are worn-out and meaningless now. But Barth stated that all hope is not lost; those forms can be explored and exploited in new ways by daring new authors. When the essay was published in 1967, Jonathan Lethem was all of three years old. But he has certainly grown to be one of the authors most influenced by Barth's work in this regard; he melds the postmodern desire to highlight the artificial nature of fiction and story-telling without sacrificing the desire to tell a story in the first place.

Lethem's novel *Chronic City* (2009) is a sort of Dickensian trip through a Manhattan that is under siege from a mysterious "tiger" and in which its characters coalesce around Perkus Tooth (an amateur cultural critic and pot dealer). Chase

Insteadman, a former child actor (whose past work on TV and in the movies have titles reminiscent of Pynchon's pun-riddled or utilitarian fictional works within the universe of his own novels), is engaged to a marooned astronaut whose plight is his opening to mingle with the rich and powerful in New York. As the novel unfolds, one cannot be certain that what's occurring on the page is in fact actually happening; revelations in the last portion of the book call all the previous events into question, almost rewarding Perkus' belief in conspiracy theories. Each of the characters become obsessed with an object identified as a "chaldron," and it keeps cropping up as a mysterious piece of decorative art. In *Dissident Gardens* (2013), Lethem brings us a family drama built around an unlikely mother-daughter pair of Communists in Eisenhower's America. Rose holds a grudge against her absent husband, who was a spy for the Soviets when he met her. Miriam, the product of that union, creates her own myth with Tommy Gogan, an Irish folk singer who is jumping on the folk bandwagon of the early Sixties in Greenwich Village. The novel moves back and forth through time, ostensibly following their son Sergius as he tries to reconstruct their last, mysterious days as guests of the Communist insurgents in Nicaragua. But it's also the story of Rose trying to live in an era when her beliefs are against the mainstream and anathema to even some of her family members. "Super Goat Man" (from *Men and Cartoons*, 2004) is a "campus novel" in short-story form, about a retired superhero (the titular Super Goat Man) that the narrator recalls from an earlier time. At the risk of ruining a dinner party hosted by his wife (and subsequently the marriage itself), the narrator decides to remind the title character of a time when he failed to save someone in need.

Throughout his work, Lethem is not content to stay "inside the box" of whatever genre he nominally seems to be occupying in each work. In order to get to a deeper truth, and to have fun while doing it, he is willing time and again to transcend the rules of science fiction, comic-book superheroes, coming-of-age stories, family dramas, and so on. Like Pynchon, Barth, and Barthelme, Jonathan Lethem is playful when it comes to plot, narrative, and character names. But he isn't willing to sacrifice the novelistic tradition for the sake of a good punchline, and it is that desire to go against the rules of what "postmodernism" or "metafiction" is that makes his works thusly so. Tyrone Slothrop, the "hero" of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, disappears from his own story once he's served his purpose; Lethem's Philip Engstrand becomes one with the void Lack and is awaiting his lady love joining him as she climbs across the table. But he's still present, still a narrative voice that we can follow even if we're not sure where it is that we've arrived. Lethem has ensured throughout his work that it still have a story, a point to which it is building, while also defying the genre expectations that we bring to, say, a novel about detectives trying to follow leads or teenagers coming of age under the influence of comic-book heroics. He distracts us with the chaldrons of his genre-bending so that we don't notice how invested we've become in what we're reading. If a novel is to "work" in the traditional sense, it has to seduce us into entering into the world of its creation. Lethem does so while calling our attention to the artificial constraints of genres both past and present; he is equal parts John Barth and Saul Bellow, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Charles Dickens.

Jonathan Lethem has melded genres, but perhaps the most important “genre-bending” he has enacted is to make the postmodern novel a playhouse for more traditional novelistic tendencies. By playing with our expectations, indeed warping them to fit his plots and characters, he has shown new ways of telling old stories. That he can do so without sacrificing the “story” aspect of his novels, but indeed enhance them with postmodern tricks from the masters, is a testament to his talent and to his importance in American literature.

Works Cited and Sources

- Barth, John. *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice*. New York: Doubleday, 1968.
- Barthelme, Donald. *Snow White*. New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1967; First Scribner Paperback Edition, 1996.
- BookExpoAmerica. "Conversation with Jonathan Lethem and Chuck Klosterman," Online Video Clip. YouTube, March 30, 2016.
- The Cambridge Companion to American Literature after 1945*. Duvall, John N., Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*. Dalsgaard, Inger H., with Luc Herman and Brian McHale, Eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Cohen, Samuel. *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009.
- Conte, Joseph M. *Design & Debris: A Chaotics of Postmodern American Fiction*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002.
- Conversations with Michael Chabon*. Costello, Brannon, Ed. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2015.
- The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*. Cohen, Samuel and Lee Konstantinou, Eds. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012.
- Lethem, Jonathan. *As She Climbed Across the Table*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1997.
- . *Chronic City*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2009.
- . *The Disappointment Artist*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2005.
- . *Dissident Gardens*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2013.
- . *The Ecstasy of Influence*. New York: Doubleday, 2011.
- . *The Fortress of Solitude*. New York: Doubleday, 2003.
- . *Gun, with Occasional Music*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Edition, 2003.
- . *Men and Cartoons*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2005.

———. *Motherless Brooklyn*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1999.

Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. New York: Viking Press, 1973.

Works Consulted

Adnot-Haynes, Becky. *The Year of Perfect Happiness*. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2014.

Austen, Jane. *Emma*. London: Penguin Classics, 2003.

———. *Northanger Abbey*. London: Penguin Classics, 2003.

Bachelder, Chris. *Bear V. Shark*. New York: Scribner, 2002.

———. *U.S.!*. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2006.

Baker, Nicholson. *The Anthologist*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010.

Barthelme, Donald. *Forty Stories*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2005.

Bazin, Andre. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *What is Cinema? Vol. 1*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2004.

Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. New York: Grove Press, 2011.

Bellow, Saul. *Humboldt's Gift*. New York: Viking Press, 1975.

Berger, Thomas. *Little Big Man*. New York: Dial Press, 1964.

Bolano, Roberto. *The Savage Detectives*. New York: Picador, 2008.

Brownstein, Carrie. *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2015.

Burroughs, William S. *Naked Lunch*. New York: Grove Press, 2013.

Chabon, Michael. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. New York: Random House, 2000.

Clarke, Brock. *The Happiest People in the World*. New York: Algonquin Books, 2015.

Coover, Robert. *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* New York: Plume Publishing, 1968.

DeLillo, Don. *Great Jones Street*. New York: Vintage Books, 1983.

Diaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007.

———. *This Is How You Lose Her*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2012.

Dick, Philip K. *The Man in the High Castle*. New York: Berkeley Medallion, 1974.

Doctorow, E.L. *Ragtime*. New York: Random House, 1975.

Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. New York: Anchor Books, 2010.

Evans, Danielle. *Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2010.

Exley, Frederick. *A Fan's Notes*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1985.

Farina, Richard. *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1983.

Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction*. New York: Vintage Books, 1983.

———. *Grendel*. New York: Vintage Books, 1971.

Gordon, Kim. *Girl In a Band*. New York: Dey Street Books, 2015.

Hannah, Barry. *Airships*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1985.

———. *Geronimo Rex*. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.

Insdorf, Annette. *Francois Truffaut*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Irving, John. *The World According to Garp*. Boston: E.P. Dutton, 1978.

James, Marlon. *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. New York: Oneworld Publisher, 2014.

Link, Kelly. *Get In Trouble*. New York: Random House, 2015.

Morrison, Toni. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage International, 2008.

Murakami, Haruki. *The Wind Up Bird Chronicle*. New York: Vintage International, 1997.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. New York: Vintage International, 1997.

- O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. New York: Broadway Books, 1998.
- O'Nan, Stewart. *West of Sunset*. New York: Penguin, 2015.
- Percy, Walker. *Lancelot*. New York: Picador, 1999.
- . *Love in the Ruins*. New York: Ivy Books, 1989.
- . *The Moviegoer*. New York: Vintage International, 1998.
- Portis, Charles. *The Dog of the South*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.
- . *Masters of Atlantis*. New York: The Overlook Press, 2000.
- . *Norwood*. New York: The Overlook Press, 1999.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. New York: Bantam Books, 1972.
- . *Vineland*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1990.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. London: Granta, 1990.
- Russell, Karen. *Swamplandia!*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2011.
- Rutherford, Ethan. *The Peripatetic Coffin and Other Stories*. New York: Ecco, 2013.
- Salter, James. *Light Years*. New York: Vintage International, 2015.
- . *A Sport and a Pastime*. New York: FSG Classics, 2006.
- Saunders, George. *Pastorlia*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2001.
- Stein, Gertrude. *Geography and Plays*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993.
- Thompson, Hunter S. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. New York: Random House, 1972.
- Toole, John Kennedy. *A Confederacy of Dunces*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1987.
- Truffaut, Francois. *The Films in My Life*. New York: Penguin Books, 1978.
- . *Hitchcock/Truffaut*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967.
- Tower, Wells. *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*. New York: Picador, 2009.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. New York: Delta Books, 1998.

———. *Slaughterhouse-Five*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1991.

Walter, Jess. *Beautiful Ruins*. New York: Harper Collins, 2012.

———. *The Financial Lives of the Poets*. New York: Harper Collins, 2009.

Wallace, David Foster. *The Broom of the System*. New York: Penguin Books, 2004.