

Jonathan

Lethem

The  
Ecstasy

of  
Influence

nonfictions, etc

NOVELS

*Gun, with Occasional Music* (1994)  
*Amnesia Moon* (1995)  
*As She Climbed Across the Table* (1997)  
*Girl in Landscape* (1998)  
*Motherless Brooklyn* (1999)  
*The Fortress of Solitude* (2003)  
*You Don't Love Me Yet* (2007)  
*Chronic City* (2009)

NOVELLAS

*This Shape We're In* (2000)

STORY COLLECTIONS

*The Wall of the Sky, the Wall of the Eye* (1996)  
*Kafka Americana* (with Carter Scholz, 1999)  
*Men and Cartoons* (2004)

NONFICTION

*The Disappointment Artist* (2005)  
  
*Believeniks: The Year We Wrote a Book About the Mets*  
(with Christopher Sorrentino, 2006)  
*They Live* (2010)  
*Crazy Friend: On Philip K. Dick* (2011, Italy only)  
*Fear of Music* (2012)

AS EDITOR

*The Vintage Book of Amnesia* (2000)  
*The Year's Best Music Writing* (2002)  
*The Novels of Philip K. Dick* (Library of America, 3 vols., 2007–2010)  
*The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick* (with Pamela Jackson, 2011)  
*Selected Stories of Robert Sheckley* (with Alex Abramovitch, 2012)

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INFLUENCE

NONFICTIONS, ETC.

*Jonathan  
Lethem*

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The Artist's sense of truth. Regarding truths, the artist has a weaker morality than the thinker. He definitely does not want to be deprived of the splendid and profound interpretations of life, and he resists sober, simple methods and results. Apparently he fights for the higher dignity and significance of man; in truth, he does not want to give up the most effective presuppositions of his art: the fantastic, mythical, uncertain, extreme, the sense of the symbolic, the overestimation of the person, the faith in some miraculous element in the genius. Thus he considers the continued existence of his kind of creation more important than scientific devotion to the truth in every form, however plain.

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *Human, All Too Human*

The idea of art as an expensive hunk of well-regulated area, both logical and magical, sits heavily over the talent of every modern painter ...

—MANNY FARBER, "White Elephant vs. Termite Art"

You must have made inconceivable promises, unsupportable by facts, in your ardor, and that counted for something, and were you asked to hold to them, or were you not?

—ANDER MONSON, "The Essay Vanishes"

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# Preface

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## 1. Undressing “Me,” Addressing “You”

Somewhere—I can’t find it now—there’s a book with a preface in which a writer of fiction admitted he couldn’t write the preface to the book “you now hold in your hands” until he conceived of the preface as a story about a writer of fiction writing a preface; only then could he begin. Saying this, the reader of said preface was presumably drawn into an awareness that the voices in so-called “nonfictions” were themselves artful impostures, arrangements of sentences (and of the implications residing behind the sentences) that mimicked the presence of a human being offering sincerely intended and honestly useful guidance into this or that complicated area of human thought or experience. According to this belief, even an author of a manual or cookbook possessed an “implied author.”

Sure, you say, tell me something I don’t know. But let’s keep in mind that the opposite belief flourishes—i.e., that we all possess the capacity and therefore also the responsibility to testify out of some unmediated *true self*. Or, if mediation goes on, that it’s of as little importance as the jotting hand of various forgotten human scribes who happened to capture God’s words when they authored the Bible. This belief is clung to with a ferocity that suggests something immense might be at stake.

But I’ve introduced a confusion, even at the outset of this long test of your patience. The writer I mention isn’t me, or even “me.” He’s—I just remembered this—an American science-fiction writer named Robert Sheckley (1928–2005). Sheckley’s description works for me, though. I’ve never managed a routine book review, let alone an essay I thought worth reprinting, without first having to invent a character who’d be issuing the remarks the essay would subsequently record, and also figuring out what motivations this guy—call him “Lethem”—would have for working his thoughts into language. *By practical necessity I’m firmly in the doubting-nonfiction-is-exactly-possible camp*, Lethem typed insouciantly.

The reader of the preface is a fiction, too. No, no, wait, I don’t for crissakes mean you, dear fleshly friend, semi-loyal eyeball. Hey, I clasp your hand. (“A knowledge that people live close by is, / I think, enough. And even if only first names are ever exchanged / The people who own them seem rock-true and marvelously self-sufficient.”—John Ashbery, “The Ongoing Story”) I’m not looking to try to persuade you that you’re a cyborg, mosaic, site interface, or any other post-human thing. My point is more that you’re prehuman, actually. I’m addressing you before you’ve been quite willing to appear, pretending you’ve arrived in order to have someone to gab with until you get here, painting your portrait to find out what you look like—only sometimes, often, you won’t sit still.

Example: The odd fact is that naming Sheckley as a science-fiction writer cost me some discomfort, but an extremely familiar and tolerable form of discomfort, one I routinely self-inflict for the useful friction it generates in the conversation into which I’ve tossed the term. You, postulated readers: Aren’t you now divided into two teams, those appalled with me for being dodgy about Sheckley and his affiliations, and those disgruntled because they didn’t know, or want to know, his name? Have a look at yourselves, on either side of the room, like

tweens at a dance party: Shouldn't one or the other gender be exiting the floor about now?  
But stay.

Please do stay.

## 2. Self-Consciousness, Objections To

No one is obligated to care that writers sometimes, or often, think such self-conscious stuff as the above. There're onslaughts of evidence that mention of these matters annoy the hell out of some readers. Many people prefer artists to make statements along the lines of: "I don't know what I'm doing, I just go into a small, badly furnished room and out come these stories," "The songs write themselves," "The paint tells me where it wants to go," etc. Even readers with an appetite for the dynamic curlicues of intellection so typical of the prose of forthrightly self-conscious, ontology-obsessed writers (John Barth being a perfect example) can suddenly grow nauseated by a disproportion of the stuff over time (hence Barth's terrifying decline in popularity). David Foster Wallace deserves to be remembered as a great writer not because he was capable of doing PhD-level philosophical speculation as well as shunting fictional characters (slowly) through a well-described room but because he mastered a certain area of human sensation totally: intricate self-conscious remorse *at the fact of self-consciousness*. Wallace's way of loading up this indistinct area with scrupulous depiction made a lot of people feel less lonely; meanwhile, the possibility that being the depicter made Wallace feel *more* lonely has become a widely circulated armchair-shrink's allegory for the non-usefulness of self-consciousness. Because it *doesn't help*. Doesn't help the depressed person feel undepressed, doesn't help the storyteller tell the story. **Just Do It!**: the top-to-bottom scream of our culture, and a good anthem for skippers not only of prefaces to books but of entire collections of occasional pieces by those who ought to have the grace to stick to storytelling. Never mind where that slippery slope might get you, or how the attitude shears toward the same anti-intellectual currents in American life that would shovel reading novels *per se* into a trench along with a lot of other things you hold dear, if you're still with me at this point. Bias spoiler alert: I think I'm an intellectual, and I think you are, too, whether you like it or not. I can't help thinking so.

All of these thoughts fall into the category of things I can't help thinking, despite having sometimes tried not to, thinking it was my duty to do so. It turns out I can't help being the self-conscious kind of artist, one who pits himself compulsively against bogus valorizing notions of originality, authenticity, or naturalism in the arts. This is where a certain political implication comes out of hiding, and it's a political implication very dear to me. For if we consent that what appears natural in art is actually constructed from a series of hidden postures, decisions, and influences, etc., we make ourselves eligible to weigh the notion that what's taken as natural in our experience of everyday life could actually be a construction as well.

That's to say, if we pass time getting dreamy by reading stories about things that didn't really happen, set in worlds that aren't precisely our own, while acknowledging that such self-into-elsewhere dreams *are enacted by conscious means*, by acts of intention and craft (on the part of the readers as well as by the writers), it might suggest an analogous getting-from-here-to-there process: from this world, to a different one. Dreams of making real alterations in our relations to our selves and others (as well as to the systems that everywhere instill

us a dreadful foreboding that such alterations are highly unlikely) are for many people embarrassing, even rude to mention. Others grow enraged. *To comfort the disturbed, and disturb the comfortable*: what presumption, on the part of the storyteller, taking the assignment!

Yet I've got no choice, for I *am* the disturbed I seek to comfort, and also the comfortable I seek to disturb.

### 3. This Way to the Giant Abstract Octopus

Talking about what I'm doing, about how it feels to write the books published under Lethem's name, has become a habit. It's a second career, conducted within the Kabuki formalities of book touring, both privileged and burdensome. I don't mean to complain. I'm aware that having this bloggish book issued in boards by a major corporate publisher in 2011 is precisely, a measure of the aristocratic privilege accorded me by the novelist's role, akin to being borne aloft in a chair like a conquistador over mountain terrain everyone else is made to traverse barefoot and with supplies on their backs. Yet it's often weird what the polite novelist lately *isn't* supposed to say aloud. We're not meant to refute critics (though fiendish questions are devised to test our adherence to this principle). Nor should we acknowledge Internet discourse about our books—that Morlockian subverse isn't fit for mention. No, we've renounced, after a brief misguided sally, entering our names on search engines. We don't rank ourselves among our contemporaries, or attack other polite novelists for being overrated or even completely full of shit (such admissions are reserved for self-loathing grumbles between novelists, by e-mail). We don't know why we do what we do, but we're not *too* amazed with ourselves for being the lucky keepers of this universal flame. That we're modest goes without saying. Influence is semiconscious, not something to delineate too extensively, except when we've patterned our latest book on a literary monument of the past, at least a half-century old, by a master with whom we'd never dare compare ourselves, only hope to be "worthy of." We don't speak of our own career's arc, let alone of crises encountered therein, because we'd never think of what we're doing in crass terms of a career. Rather, blinkered devotionally, we "serve the needs of the book at hand," and besides are permanent amateurs born anew each time we start writing (which I suppose means we die each time we publish but that's a downer). We're always so honored to have been invited onto your radio show.

Thanks for having me. Thanks for having me. Thank God in all his mercy that *you* were willing to *have me*.

Though like any properly fame-hungry American of my generation I spent years imaginatively yearning to know what it would be like to be interviewed, I dread reading or listening to the interviews that resulted now that I've given hundreds, because I know they're riddled with such obediences. Here, I'll try not to be obedient. I want to bite the hand that feeds me, even if that hand is sometimes yours, reader.

"I'm completely in print, so we're all stuck with me and stuck with my books." The words are Kurt Vonnegut's, making bitter rejoinder to critics he believed wished to see him evaporate from the literary landscape. Vonnegut spoke them in an interview he later collected in a book called *Palm Sunday* (subtitled *An Autobiographical Collage*; perhaps not too terrible a term for what I'm doing here). I could say the same, though if I did I'd speak more in wonder than in bitterness—and I don't mean that as a Kabuki gesture of modesty. Really.

most of my heroes are partly or entirely out of print, as I always expected and am sure destined to be (as is Vonnegut, too). After all, I've written a lot of short, strange books. There's even a very small number of grown men and women in 2011 might still be interested in *Amnesia Moon*—a novel a nineteen-year-old began composing in 1983—well, that's a situation that can't sustain itself forever. It isn't meant to. In the sea of words, the *in print* is foam, sun bubbles riding the top. And it's a dark sea, and deep, where divers need lights on their helmets and would perish at the lower depths.

But I lie. I have one out-of-print book. A few years ago my friend Christopher Sorrentino and I co-authored the pseudonymous *Believeniks: The Year We Wrote a Book About the Mets*. A genuine (therefore, tormented) Mets fan, our book was sincere, and a real account of the 2005 season in progress, but since the listed authors weren't Lethem and Sorrentino, but Harris Conklin and Ivan Felt, two Flaubertian buffoons we'd invented (Conklin billed himself as "America's foremost neglected poet"; Felt was a disaffected academic), the book was fiction, too: a nonfiction written by fictional characters. It parodied Stephen King and Stewart O'Nan's (accidentally triumphalist) account of the Boston Red Sox curse-breaking championship season of 2004, and paid homage to Don DeLillo's *Amazons*, a pseudonymous faux-memoir of the first woman to play in the National Hockey League (you could look it up).

The world was as taken with *Believeniks* as it was by the achievements of the 2005 New York Mets, minus a paid attendance of two-and-some-odd million. No paperback, no translations into any language, and we couldn't get the team to let us throw out the first pitch at a game. You'd be justified in thinking that writing a fannish account of a real baseball season in the voices of two (disagreeable) fictional characters was an act on par with painting an abstract composition in oils, titling it *Giant Octopus*, then hanging it on the wall of a public aquarium and standing to one side to chortle as schoolchildren are ushered in for viewing. Well, reserve your brickbats: We did no chortling, as no schoolchildren arrived.

My point? The book in your hands wouldn't be published if I offered it under my Believenik name, Harris Conklin. "Jonathan Lethem," at least for this tiny blip in literary eternity, gets the cookie. I may seem, in places herein, exasperated with how the power of the novelist in twenty-first-century culture is circumscribed, but I grant that it does consist of power. Vonnegut wasn't feeling powerful when he made his bitter remark about being out of print, but his ability to enshrine the remark in hardcovers and keep it in circulation shows he was wrong. (The pretense-of-no-power is a symptom I want to examine, not exhibit.) There's again, if you want to drive a person mad in a fame culture, offer him only a little fame, the very least amount you can scrape up. This happens every day, but it happens in slow motion to novelists. We're like the guy who gets voted off first on *Survivor*, except instead of departing the island we walk its beaches forever, muttering.

All writing, no matter how avowedly naturalistic or pellucid, consists of artifice, conjuration, of the manipulation of symbols rather than the "opening of a window onto life." Abstract paintings of a giant octopus are all we have to put on view in my city's aquarium. We writers aren't sculpting in DNA, or even clay or mud, but words, sentences, paragraphs, syntax, voice; materials issued by tongue or fingertips but which upon release dissolve into the atmosphere, into cloud, confection, specter. Language, as a vehicle, is a lemon, a hot rod painted with thrilling flames but crazily erratic to drive, riddled with bugs like innate self-

consciousness, embedded metaphors and symbols, helpless intertextuality, and so forth. Despite being regularly driven on prosaic errands (interoffice memos, supermarket receipts etc.), it tends to veer on its misaligned chassis into the ditch of abstraction, of dream.

None of this disqualifies my sense of passionate urgency at the task of making the giant octopus in *my* mind's eye visible to *yours*. It doesn't make the attempt any less fundamental, human, delicate, or crucial. It makes it more so. That's because another name for the giant octopus I have in mind is *negotiating selfhood in a world of other selves*—the permanent trouble of being alive. Our language has no choice but to be self-conscious if it is to be conscious in the first place.

#### **4. Models for My Behavior Who Are Not to Be Blamed for What Transpires (and One Who Is)**

In the cause of transparency, I'll mention that while writing the newest pieces here I've been reading essays by Seymour Krim, Renata Adler, Ander Monson, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Marjorie McGurl, Sianne Ngai, David Foster Wallace, Randall Jarrell, and Leonard Michaels. At any given instant these present infatuations made an influence in which my own loyalties and certainties dissolved, only to re-form somewhat altered when I recovered my senses. That's against an unavoidable backdrop of my own *usual suspects* list, Vivian Gornick, David Shields, Phillip Lopate, George W. S. Trow, Geoff Dyer, Samuel Delany, Geoffrey O'Brien, Ann Dillard, and Greil Marcus, those who first made me want to try writing essays and set the standard to reach for when I tried, even as their more abiding commitment to the form kept me humble by comparison (but hey, I could kick each of their asses up and down the novel-writing block, except Delany). I'm also indebted to Manny Farber, whose original formulation of the opposition between "White Elephant Art" (big, ungainly, awards-season stuff) and "Termite Art" (prestige-immune routes of curiosity through the cultural woodwork) has proven so versatile and stimulating, to me and others, that it's in danger of floating free of Farber's first rigorous uses. Sorry.

Now, all exalted name-dropping aside, let me confess that one particular book hove over uneasily over my effort: Norman Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself*. I'll save defense of Mailer as a writer, or self-exculpation for my own fascination with him, for later, saying here just that I discovered that book at age fifteen, and have read it—or read around in it, since it's unbearable to read cover to cover—dozens of times since then. If I browse in my mental library for examples of behavior by novelists-doing-other-than-writing-novels (and the difficulties attaching thereupon), I find Mailer's *Advertisements* everywhere I turn. It's the template for throwing fiction, poetry, letters, etc. into the same collection, along with so much preening apparatus. *Advertisements* stands for the simultaneous invention, summit, and dead end of its category, and Mailer for the perfect example of the kind of writer we're defiantly happy not to suffer in our midst anymore. He's the paradigm for a novelist's willful abuse of his credibility with readers, and a White Elephant par excellence. Yet he's also the father with whom I'm enmeshed, a Big Other I feel watching me work. Disclosure: My editor had to ask me not to subtitle this book *Advertisements for Norman Mailer*. What I never even told him was that at one point I wanted it for the title.

#### **5. Some Termite Ways to Read This White Elephant Book**

Mailer offered two tables of contents, charting alternate paths through his impossible book. He also offered a list of what he considered the best pieces in the book (though nearly anyone would disagree about a couple). I won't do either, exactly. Yet even figuring anyone sure to browse and skip, let me suggest a couple of organizing patterns not alluded to in my table of contents. A few preliminary termite holes I've bored in my edifice, to get you started on your own.

First, in my own defense: I left things out. There are pieces I liked that didn't fit, just as some pieces that seemed in themselves pretty weak went in because they *did* fit. This is the sort of book. I excluded enough belletristic work (introductions and reviews, that is) to fill another volume. On the whole, I've gathered here maybe a quarter of my "uncollected" writings, if you include fiction.

"The Ecstasy of Influence" is the eye of this particular storm. Like the essay, this book's full of other voices: epigraphs, quotes in the bodies of reviews, the utterances of musicians in the two profiles, and what I've called "plagiarisms"—i.e., lifts both acknowledged and unacknowledged, both conscious and (surely) unconscious. You could, if you wanted, take this as a kind of commonplace book, or as a list of books to read after reading mine instead of reading mine. If this somehow were to become the last example of what a book was, left to the bemused assessment of tentacled archaeologists, it might be a lucky selection simply for being ultra-informative, for having gnawed at and disgorged so much of its own context, just as, if Ian Dury's "Reasons to Be Cheerful (Part 3)" were our culture's last surviving song, it would be a lucky selection because it name-checks "Elvis and Scotty," "Good Golly, Miss Molly," "Dali," "Harpo, Groucho, Chico," "John Coltrane," "the Bolshoi Ballet," and so on. That's how I regard this fate of ours, drowning in a cultural sea: reasons to be cheerful.

This preface, the title essay, and several of the newer ones ("Against 'Pop' Culture," "White Elephant and Termite Postures," "Advertisements for Norman Mailer," "Postmodernism and Liberty Valance," "My Disappointment Critic/On Bad Faith," "Rushmore Versus Abundance" and some of the interstitial remarks) make a sporadic argument about the contemporary intellectual situation for fiction's writers and readers, but with implications, I hope, for other kinds of public thinking and talking. They're more tendentious than the rest. If you're in no mood to see me skirmish with injustices less ultimately urgent than hunger, disease, and discrimination you might just want to skip them. (*Now he tells us.*) There's plenty else.

Conversely, many sections conclude with a brief piece, usually written headlong and heedlessly, in a mode I'd call "ecstatic." There are others of these, too, not at the ends of sections—you'll find them if you look. These were often commissioned pieces, for a journal or website I felt unable to refuse, with the small size of the readership guaranteed. (Harold Cohn: "Miss Stein, what is your secret?" Gertrude Stein: "Small audiences.") Some were written in annoyance, as I hurried back to my "real" work, to something destined for a book or for a periodical with *New York* in its name, something with a bigger readership guarantee (Perhaps something tendentious.) Anyway, while ecstasy isn't the guaranteed result on such occasions, it can happen. These are accidental darlings. They read in retrospect as if I gulped a lungful of helium, then burred out the paragraphs before the delirious vocal effect wore off. Putting these samples on a par with the "bigger work," giving them a second life that is practically their first, is for me reason enough for this book.

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# I

## MY PLAN TO BEGIN WITH

*Twist away the gates of steel*

*Unlock the secret voice—*

—DEVO, “Gates of Steel”

*Every book conceals a book.*

—RICHARD G. STEINER

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# My Plan to Begin With, Part One

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I came from dropping out; the only thing I knew at the start was to quit before they could fire me. My mother left college in favor of the counterculture. In the legend of Judith Lethem it was a brilliant move with no regrets, though I recall her discussing a matchbook offer from Empire State College, which awarded degrees for life experience—hers would have been for protest, encounter groups, social work, drugs. My father, a Fulbright scholar, studied painting at Columbia and in Paris, but threw over a tenure-track gig for work as a cabinetmaker, and commercial Manhattan galleries for cooperative Brooklyn ones. You ran away to make the world. Vanished into a garret and emerged with pages Prometheanly aflame. Thumbed to San Francisco. The Beat generation script sank into my deep layers even as I tired—fast—of Kerouac's novels. Your parents are the first memo to come across your desk, on a page so large you can't see past its edges. At least half of the known universe had done without higher education. In the legend of Judith Lethem (which likely lived only in my head) the other half was "the smart one," our home bookshelves her word palace (later I'd notice how many of the volumes actually had *Richard Lethem, Columbia University* jotted on their flyleaves).

I still receive congratulations for having "evaded the MFA mill," unlike my generation's cohort. At those moments I really ought to offer a blanket defense of those in the poignant and terrifying situation of trying to become a writer, by whatever means available; the dedication of MFA students often moves me to tears when I speak before them. Instead, I'm usually silent, embarrassed to explain that I was too drunk on a script at least fifty years out-of-date to even notice what had become the new template for becoming a writer. The system was invisible to me until it was too late. After all, didn't every novelist work as a clerk in a bookstore until they'd published their first book?

# The Used Bookshop Stories

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## *OPENING THE SHOP*

At fifteen I graduated from sweeping up the painted wooden floorboards and neatening the stock on the erratic, slapped-together wooden shelves and running to Steve's Restaurant for coffee ("light," in paper cups with the Parthenon on the side) and for corn muffins scorched on the grill, to opening the shop by myself. Saturday and Sunday mornings on Atlantic Avenue, in the little bookstore next to Kalfian Carpets and across the street from the tire shop, nothing doing here—our eccentric little bookshop was twenty or thirty years too early for gentrification, if it ever stood a chance.

Michael didn't really like to get up in the morning, and as the months went by he liked less and less to preside over the empty store. I was his solution, the local kid who'd be thrilled just to get credit with adults for "working" when what I was really doing was reading and puttering in the stacks, playing God of Books in this almost wholly private realm. I'd take home my "pay" in books alone, was always gathering a stack of goods in the back corridor that I'd shift into my knapsack when I'd earned them. And inside a glass-fronted case were our rare books, including a couple I coveted and saved months to earn: Henry Miller and Michael Fraenkel's *Hamlet* with a red-ribbon binding and uncut pages, and an autographed copy of Bernard Wolfe's mysterious *Limbo*. (I still own the Wolfe, but can't recall where and when I let go of the Miller-Fraenkel.)

I'd roll up the gate at eleven (having bought myself not coffee but tea and the grilled corn muffin from Steve's), pull the cart of stealable cheapo books to the sidewalk in front of the window, and plant myself at the old wooden desk to the right of the door—a sentry position against the risk of thievery—waiting for the first customer of the day, sometimes an hour before anyone wandered in. The place had no heat, and in cold months I'd be in scarf and hat rubbing gloved fingers together, waiting for the sun to hit the window and warm the storefront. We kept change in a cigar box in the top drawer, and the only time I ever left the desk for even a minute the box was scooped clean by some clever bandit, my fault, but Michael knew thievery was the neighborhood's nature and just shook his head. It counted not against me but against him sticking around Brooklyn, and soon enough the little shop moved up to a basement storefront on East Eighty-fourth Street in Manhattan—half the size of the Atlantic Avenue storefront and a hundred times more viable.

## *Paloma Picasso*

My roommate was the night man at the shop on Broadway and Eightieth, a high narrow shop with a central staircase to a rare-book level upstairs, and used records in a bin beneath the stairs. I was the night man's backup, closing the place alone on Friday and Sunday nights. The store buzzed between seven and ten on weekend nights, full of couples strolling after movie or dinner, the cash register whirring. The last hour, eleven to midnight, was pretty dead especially on a Sunday. This night, reading as usual at the counter, I was alone there apart from a long-necked beauty in haute couture who amassed a mighty pile of art and photo

books, making several trips up to the counter to drop off her accumulation, then returning to her browsing. I grew mildly curious as the expensive pile swelled, feeling a faint sexual complicity between us. Then, as in a television commercial famous at the time, she revealed her identity to me wordlessly, by paying with a credit card.

### *Chris Butler*

The hole-in-the-wall used bookshop on Bergen Street lasted probably about six months, and when the owners, a sultry hippie couple (I had a crush on her), decided to close it, I considered buying the shop and living in it as my apartment in order to make it sustainable and life in New York, affordable. I imagined myself sitting in the open shop all day, writing—it was certainly quiet enough. Instead I moved to California, where I would live for a decade after. The shop, barely bigger than a walk-in closet, became a video store, then a hot-dog joint.

My two memories of the long empty afternoons there: I was at the counter listening to WBAI the day that the jazz drummer Philly Joe Jones died. Bizarrely, another jazz drummer named Johnny Joe Jones, died within the same twenty-four hours. The disc jockey played examples of the music of both “Joe Joneses,” his tone soberly memorial, never dwelling on the absurd coincidence of their names. I’d not heard of either man before that day.

And: One day Chris Butler, the songwriter-auteur of the Waitresses, came in and struck up a conversation. I don’t know how it was he revealed himself to me, but I must have been gregarious—desperate, really, for the sort of hipster customer he appeared to be.

### *Imperious Memoirist*

An imperious middle-aged memoirist came into the store on Solano Avenue in Berkeley one afternoon. This was a vast commercial space, four used-book-lined walls stretching into a deep storefront full of tables of remainders and new books, bins of used records, and a long magazine rack high enough that it required a mirror for us to patrol shoplifters. Four or five of us manned the floor at any given time, usually two of us at the counter behind the registers.

She had a train of courtiers with her—reverential local guides, perhaps a literary escort or two. They asked us whether we had any of her books. The staff began to find their sense of privilege funny; mere clerks drawing pay, the store nonetheless belonged to us, and we judged those who entered our space. One of us spoke rudely to the imperious memoirist. The phrase “Do you know who you’re talking to?” was uttered on her behalf.

It was at this same store that we had to fend off persistent inquiries by spies for ASCAP men and women who carried clipboards and dressed like Mormons. They wanted us to pay performance royalties on the used records we borrowed from the store’s bins and played on the turntable behind the counter. The music was of course audible throughout the store, but we argued with straight faces that it was for the private enjoyment of the clerks, and, furthermore, that the customers usually only complained about the music, which was true. When they leave we’d titter behind our hands, amazed at the impoverished lives of bureaucratic stiff.

### *Lovecraft in the Basement*

The store on Livingston Street in Brooklyn had been in operation since sometime in the '30s or early '40s, no one was sure—it had been taken over by our present boss in the '70s, and he was a man who hated books. The place was a ramshackle disaster—ancient books of neglected quality layered behind decades of dubious acquisitions. Our boss offset the uncertainties—and, to him, the mysteries—of the used-book trade by offering new editions of the Bible, books on dream interpretation, and guides to civil service tests (some guys came and bought the test book for “Fireman” and then, after they failed, switched to “Sanitation Worker” or “Jail Guard”), and crates of used copies of *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. The store was deep and high and narrow, with ladders to reach the obscure stuff fifteen or twenty feet in the air. It also had a rank and moldy basement, at all times kept locked, and rumored to be full of treasure abandoned by the former owners, including a large collection of rare books acquired from the estate of H. P. Lovecraft.

The boss hired clerks who knew more about books than he did—he couldn't help that—and then distrusted them, fearing that they'd gather items of neglected value and ferret them out from the store, out from under his nose. We would. He had strict and absurd policies in place. No employee was allowed to buy more than two books a week, even at full face value. This forced me to use friends as shills: They'd come in, pretending not to know me, and I'd put items in their hands that I wished them to buy for me. We were also strictly forbidden to linger in the basement for more than a minute or two. The boss would send us down there for a specific item—lightbulbs or a box of paper bags, not books—and then nervously wring his hands and, if we took too long, begin yelling. He feared we were trying to excavate treasure from the labyrinthine, impossible dark shelves in the basement—books whose value he could only guess at, but we might know. We were. He never left us alone in the store, not for more than a few minutes.

One morning another clerk and I (the same guy who became my roommate and was the night man at the Broadway store) got up at seven in the morning and used our keys to get inside the store and explore the basement privately and thoroughly, before opening hours and the boss's arrival. For our efforts we found maybe five or six items of interest, nothing special, and certainly no sign of the Lovecraft hoard. We each quit the store within a few weeks.

### ***Conlon Nancarrow***

A stooped and frail man with an elegant goatee browsed the record bins at the Solano store, guided deferentially by a local fellow we knew as a slightly preening, semi-famous experimental musician. When with trembling hand the elder man filled out a check to pay for the records he'd picked out, the name on the check was Conlon Nancarrow, the legendary exiled avant-gardist, who'd spent decades in Mexico punching out player-piano rolls, composing music too rapid for any human performer. I exclaimed at meeting him, and called our record buyer out of his hiding place in the back of the store. We luckily had a supply of Conlon Nancarrow LPs, a remainder item, and he signed their jackets for us with a silver marker.

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## ***Book Thieves***

Word circulated among the several Berkeley stores: A ring of book thieves was plundering expensive art books and reselling them, a quick and easy racket. Our books had been identified by other clerks at other stores—and we'd been accidentally guilty of buying stockpiled books filched from our neighbor stores. The description of the thieves went out—seedy, eccentric, and gay—and we clerks at the Solano Avenue store put ourselves on high alert.

Soon enough came the day when they were detected in the store, three of them, two men and a woman, idling in the back aisles. We quietly assembled a posse of four or five clerks and, buzzing on our own outrage and adrenaline, asked them to step into the back of the store. Caught, the thieves glumly unloaded six or seven coffee-table books from under jackets and inside satchels, an astounding and brazen volume of material. We confronted them, stammeringly, made insensate with fury: How could anyone bohemian, anyone who valued books, force us clerks into the role of cops? Wasn't that a breach of some bargain? Better than that, the book thieves had looked like the ASCAP Mormons. These thieves were awkward mirrors of ourselves, gormless, shaggy, hip—clerklike. We banished them and congratulated ourselves uneasily. I've never worked in a bookstore where the clerks didn't sometimes help themselves to the books, where we didn't feel that the wares belonged more to us than to the paying customers. And one of the best and purest and most dedicated clerks I ever worked with later ended up in a federal prison, convicted of rescuing deaccessioned antiquarian books and papers from a university library with what a judge considered excessive zeal.

## ***Eldridge Cleaver, Greg Bear, Joseph McBride***

At another Berkeley store—the grandest, in the middle of the campus strip on Telegraph Avenue, a four-story palace created in the '60s by one of the legends of Californian used-book selling—famous faces among the clientele were nothing terribly special. The store tended to attract any visitor to the campus, notable scholars who'd lose themselves in the deep third-floor humanities sections, while the rare-book room and art-book shop on the top floor were host to a stream of artists, photographers, and elite collectors. We were famous ourselves, in a way, famous for our clerkly arrogance. In friendly California, we dared to sniff and snarl like New York bookstore clerks. Our totemic founding father was still present in the store, usually at the front counter, looming like Pere Ubu, spitting cigar-flavored droplets as he frowned and swore at the inferior wares offered to him at the store's buying counter, eating dim sum with his stained fingers and wearing hot sauce on his chin and collar for the rest of the afternoon. Among the rather desperate Bay Area characters who would regularly appear with a few miserable books to try to sell to the store was Eldridge Cleaver, in the last year before his death. When his books were rejected, Cleaver would only mumble and lower his eyes, wholly stripped of pride.

One quiet day the science-fiction writer Greg Bear, a large and kingly man, and at that time the president of the Science Fiction Writers of America, came to the counter to make a purchase. I recognized him—as usual, from his name on his credit card. Feeling sly, I told him that I was in fact a dues-paying member of his organization—I'd at that time sold three or four stories to science-fiction magazines, but there was no chance he'd know my name. A

that, Greg Bear widened his eyes and threw open his arms (offering a Greg Bear Hug seemingly recipient of a Socialist epiphany: Little men everywhere, even the clerk at bookstore he'd wandered into, could be encompassed in Science Fiction's legions.

Another night, working alone at that counter on a Friday, a bearded man descended from the third floor, in the company of a woman. They'd been browsing the film section, and now presented a Paloma Picassoesque stack of out-of-print film books. The man's checkbook revealed him as Joseph McBride, biographer of John Ford, Orson Welles, and Frank Capra, a man I knew had spent long afternoons talking and hanging out on the set with Welles and Howard Hawks, among others. I blurted out: "Are you *the* Joseph McBride?" Before McBride could reply to me, the woman raised her eyebrows and deadpanned perfectly: "That's the first time I've ever heard anyone put it quite that way."

### ***Closing the Shop***

Closing the shop on Telegraph was a lot of work. We'd have to visit each of the four floors and the mezzanine—did I mention the mezzanine? that place was a kind of stadium—and flush out the recalcitrant browsers and homeless people who'd lodged in the store for the evening, ignoring our warning shouts up the stairwell that we were about to close. Eventually we'd switch off the banks of lights, one at a time, in a sequence designed to chase people toward the exits, like the exit lights along the floor of an airplane. Invariably we'd get guano from people who'd made a home in one section or another, and who felt outraged to be informed that it was in fact a bookstore and that it was closing. One night a man in the grip of rage at being exiled from the third floor called me an "effete rich boy" when I turned off the lights on him (I had long hair at that time). The insult was such a non sequitur—I was a clerk!—that I found myself laughing. But I understood later that what he'd reached for in his inchoate slur was a version of the same class defiance that clerks themselves felt: The bookstore belongs to *me*, because I love it more than you.

Closing on Solano Avenue, a suburban quadrant of Berkeley, was more peaceful. I'd make the announcement—"We're closing in five minutes"—and then drop the needle on the last track of Bob Dylan's *Bringing It All Back Home*, which begins with the words:

*You must leave now, take what you need, you think will last  
But whatever you wish to keep, you better grab it fast ...*

—*New and Used*, 2000

# The Books They Read

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The Hippie Parents weren't, for all their distraction and funk, for their love triangles and LL and antiwar demonstrations, illiterates. There might have been a few of the "back to the land" variety who subsisted on the *Whole Earth Catalog* and *Possum Living*, perhaps an oil-stained VW repair manual, but the city kind, they read books, they did. You'd find the books in the downstairs bathroom, or on their bedside tables, or maybe see them unwrapped on holidays as gifts, a cherished revelation passed from one to another, shared like a joint: *Love, Sex, and the Body* by Norman O. Brown, *Couples* by John Updike, *I'm OK, You're OK* by Thomas Harris, *Another Roadside Attraction* by Tom Robbins, *Knots* by R. D. Laing. *The Hite Report*. Marshall McLuhan, Timothy Leary, Carlos Castaneda, Theodore Roszak, Anaïs Nin, Philip Slater, Buckminster Fuller. The day's best sellers, books which made their world as Malcolm Gladwell, say, and Deepak Chopra, Mitch Albom, *The Lovely Bones*, *American Psycho*, and *The Rules* made ours. In retrospect the titles are motley, contradictory, as variable as the songs on a given decade's top-ten list or a list of its top-grossing movies. But boy, they were *seeker* books, weren't they? Those people, they weren't retrenching, they had little fear of the unknown. Give them that. They were open not only to expansions of their cultural or social selves, their bodies and their arts and their families, but also to a bigger inside, a bigger *within*. The collective brain had more labyrinths back then. To reanimate the world of the Hippie Parents in any form deeper than a paisley cartoon would mean doing an archaeological reconstruction of those shelves, and then devoting ourselves to them as readers, to do justice to the world-mind that's now sunk in a sea of time like the *Titanic*. An outright impossibility. The Hippie Parents, floating far past the wreck on that sea's surface, couldn't do it themselves. The books, if they haven't been tossed into boxes and moved to the basement, or long since donated to thrift stores that couldn't move them, are ciphers, tiny headstones. We Hippie Children remember them as prospects, promises, opaque and threatening talismans. Now, after all, we were right. The books of the Hippie Parents have been returned to mystery. The Hippie Parents have forgotten them, if they ever really read them in the first place, and by the time we could penetrate their books, we had our own.

—[Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), 200

*This next piece irks me. Predating my grasp of what the personal essay is for, it sticks at the layer anecdote, never opens any door. Like hitchhiking itself, the journey is a little overrated—destination would be nice. Yet the self-portraiture is honest, even in the inadvertent sense of photograph which captures its subject ducking for cover behind his own charm.*



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