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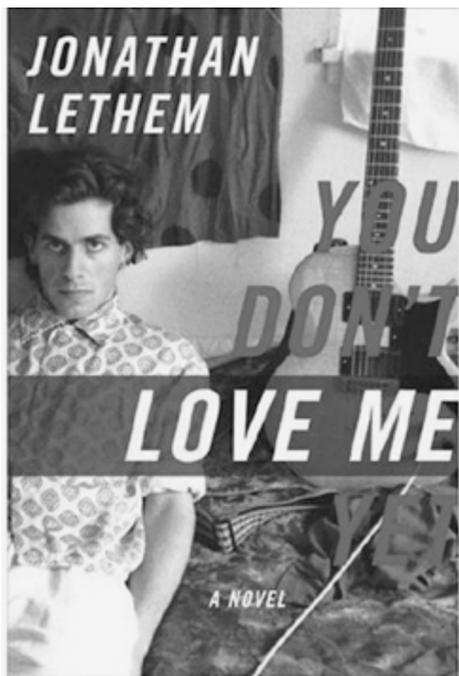
You still don't love me yet

Jonathan Lethem's latest novel rolls but it does not rock
by Dale Bridges (buzz@boulderweekly.com)

You have reached the complaint line. Unfortunately, we have stepped out for fish tacos. Please leave your complaint after this brief musical interlude."

This is the message you will hear if you dial the phone number on the book jacket of Jonathan Lethem's new novel, *You Don't Love Me Yet*. And if the latest reviews are any indication, he might be getting a few calls.

It appears that everyone in North America has heard of Jonathan Lethem and his bildungsroman masterpiece, *Fortress of Solitude*. Everyone, that is, except me.



Over the past two weeks, no less than six people have insisted (insisted) that I purchase this seminal work of literature. Apparently, if I do not read this book, life as we know it on the planet Earth will cease to exist. It's that important.

And I definitely plan to read *Fortress*. Eventually. But at the moment I'm having too much fun watching bibliophiles' faces when I tell them that the only book I know by their favorite author is *You Don't Love Me Yet*. It's kind of like telling a sports fanatic that the only professional football team you've ever heard of is the Arizona Cardinals.

One of the great things about being pathologically un-cool is that you often don't know when you're supposed to act blasé. I am fascinated by culture, but somehow I always happen to be about five steps behind any trend that's sweeping the nation. Therefore, when I go to parties and say things like, "I've been listening to a lot of ska music lately," people smile at me politely and offer to cut up my food.

This is probably why I got a kick out of *You Don't Love Me Yet*, even though no one else did. I had no idea Jonathan Lethem was supposed to be the next Norman Mailer, so I didn't really expect much from his book. Don't get me wrong, *YDLMY* was certainly not my favorite read this year, but I thought it was cute in an unassuming way—kind of like the Olsen Twins or a litter of retarded puppies.

But other critics aren't too crazy about Lethem's latest tome, a wispy, almost anorexic novel that hitches itself to the star of an underground indie band in Los Angeles as they rise from anonymous dreamers to hipster sensations virtually overnight. Part of the problem is that this is a book about rock 'n' roll, but it definitely does not rock and seldom rolls.

However, as near as I can tell, that's the whole point.

Lethem paints a portrait of four would-be musicians attempting to pursue their music in the banal, artsy world of West Coast chic. Most of the narrative is told through the eyes of the band's listless (possibly nymphomaniac) bass player, Lucinda, who is in the midst of a breakup with the lead singer, Matthew (think Mark McGrath from Sugar Ray without the shit-eating grin). Lucinda and Matthew are fairly apathetic about their own relationship, but they don't have the will power to break it off completely. The band is in a similar lethargic state, caught between artistic transcendence and service-industry employment.

This is actually a fairly insightful portrayal of the current music trend in this country. Over the last 10 years, rock 'n' roll has been hijacked by 15-year-old suburban white kids from Orange County and converted into emotive adolescent angst. Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll have been replaced by self-expression, espressos and pseudo-sophisticated musical composition (without guitar solos).

On the one hand, this is what makes *YDLMY* sweet and honest. This is not a book about fame and fortune; it's a story about some kids who don't want to grow up. On the other hand, it also makes the plot feel like a slow motion parody of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs' career.

Part of the problem is—like the characters in the book—Lethem just won't commit to a theme. *YDLMY* is a concept album without a concept. The band doesn't even play its first gig until page 103. 103! That means the first 102 pages are spent rehearsing and arguing about what to name the group (they briefly flirt with Famous Vomit Ferry, Long-Term Pity Houseguest and Monster Eyes, but—perhaps predictably—they never really make a decision).

When I spoke with Lethem, he seemed completely aware that book critics were disappointed with *YDLMY*. And, what's more, he didn't give a damn.

"I think of this book as more of a reader's book than a critic's book," Lethem says. "It doesn't need a critic to explain it—either you have a good time with it or you don't."

This is something you often hear from writers who have produced a critically unpopular novel: I wrote it for my readers.

In the case of *YDLMY*, the jury is still out. Comments from various Internet sites range from hatred to adoration for Lethem's latest novel; however, most of the responses are tepid. "I didn't really get the point of this book," wrote one reader on Amazon.com, "but I thought it was amusing."

According to Lethem, there is really no point to "get" in the book. "It's not a book that's being negotiated in the larger marketplace of ideas, because I left the ideas out this time," Lethem says. "This book is more about just a connection. It's a very intimate transaction with my readers."

This is kind of jarring to hear from someone who is the former recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship (aka the "genius grant"). However, ultimately, that's what's cool about *YDLMY*—and about Lethem. After writing a heavy, modern classic like *Fortress of Solitude*, he decided that he wanted to write something that was just pretty and fun.

I doubt Lethem would ever argue that this is an important book. That's just not why he wrote it.



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