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GIRL IN LANDSCAPE

By Jonathan Lethem

Doubleday; 272 pp.

The task of most young artists is to find their own voice. As Miles Davis noted, "Sometimes you have to play a long time before you can sound like yourself."

At 34, Jonathan Lethem has already mastered many voices and made each his own. Rather than a signature angle of vision, his signature has become approaching each story from another eccentric angle.

His new novel veers 180 degrees from his 1996 *As She Climbed Across the Table*. There, a college professor finds a black hole right here on earth. In *Girl in Landscape*, people flee Earth to outer space to find substance firm enough to build their lives on.

Fourteen-year-old Pella Marsh's world is coming apart. Her feckless politician father has just lost his election and become a shell, her Brooklyn's atmosphere has disintegrated to the point where people can't go outside without a protective cone, and the mother she adores dies from a brain tumor almost immediately after the book opens.

There's nothing for her father to do but lead "his motherless children and their sorrow aboard a tiny ship where they were frozen alive for a trip that lasted 20 months, but seemed to them an eye blink, a dream."

It's no dream. It takes them to a futuristic frontier, the Planet of the Archbuilders, where the bulk of the novel takes place.

The original, ingenious Archbuilders are long gone, off to new celestial adventure, leaving only their ineffectual hermaphroditic descendants. Gradually, their planet has been taken over by expatriated Earthling pioneers. Lethem freely exploits the planet as a metaphor for white encroachment on America's West.

"This planet belongs to the Archbuilders," says Pella's father, only to be told, "I'm just talking about moving them out of our settlement. They don't care. They've got plenty of other places to wander around." Their emigration itself is governed back on earth by an office that sounds oddly like the old Bureau of Indian Affairs.

But Lethem never lets his story sink under the weight of its issues. He's more intent ON its local habitation and some names. On this dull planet where food is abundant but always made from potatoes, the Archbuilders have black leather skin coated with black fur. They have names like Lonely Dumptruck and Gelatinous Stand, and their farflung dialogue wanders along the periphery of other's comments.

Settler Earthlings include Diana Eastling, a biologist; a lesbian couple; Hugh Merrow, a painter who gets banished for a sexual encounter with an Archbuilder; and the self-possessed loner, Efram Nugent.

Nugent, along with Nature, prompts the most intriguing of the novel's developments: the sexual dawning going on inside Pella in her new world.

Lethem's work always displays fascination with sex. Clearly, he is here intrigued by the feminine awakening: mysterious, life-affirming, mythic and complex, unlike the male, which is 95 percent a matter of waking up one morning and feeling, "Whoa, I want 'em. Damn these pimples."

Her attraction to the adult Efram scares Pella, makes her want "to be lost in childishness, in her own ebbing childhood." Yet, she also wants "to be more than a buzzing gnat" to Efram; "she wanted his notice." If Efram's age puts him beyond reach, and it's not clear it will, there's 15-year-old Doug Grant nearby, who wants to be just like Efram. And, confused or not, motherless Pella is already woman enough to go after what she wants.

Just how all this works out may or may not satisfy readers, as the novel teeters a bit unsteadily toward its resolution. The cast is cluttered, and the plot drifts. Lethem also grows inconsistent portraying younger characters; his eight-year-olds sometimes act fourteen, sometimes four.

Still, Lethem takes major new strides in this novel.

His language has never been more poetically descriptive: "Clipped onto the side of the train, they roared through the black tunnel, their faces lit in bursts by the colored lights of the ads that strobed out of the darkness, eye-blink retinal tattoos." And, for all the light-years remoteness of its setting, *Girl in Landscape* is oddly convincing, mastering one of the cardinal rules of fantasy: the more removed the incidents from everyday reality, the more realistic the everyday details have to be.

Lethem fans, whose numbers swell, will have to decide if this is his best yet. They will agree, though, that once again he takes a bold, inventive step.