

San Francisco Chronicle Sept. 1996

THE WALL OF THE SKY, THE WALL OF THE EYE

By Jonathan Lethem

Harcourt Brace; 294 pp.

With the appearance of this first story collection, acclaimed Berkeley novelist Jonathan Lethem reaffirms having one of the most fertile imaginations among America's young writers.

Like Stephen King, but with a far more subtle terror, Lethem draws us into the world of childhood nightmare, often by putting an inventive twist on common fantasies.

In "The Happy Man," for instance, Tom, the narrator, lives in Hell. But he's only intermittently dead. The vacillating Lazarus returns from Hell regularly to provide for his widow and young son. The darkly funny Lethem implies the shallowness of human interaction by suggesting that few people will even be able to tell Tom is dead: "Most people won't know the difference.... You'll be able to carry on most conversations in a perfunctory way. You just won't seem very interested in personal questions.... And you won't be very affectionate."

Ironically, Tom's Hell is a macabre Hansel & Gretel kind of world populated by a witch ("The most beautiful woman I've ever seen, actually") who perpetually delays serving breakfast, and a sexual predator called The Happy Man, who may provide the key to a repressed Hell Tom had known on Earth.

Other fanciful settings with clear metaphoric implications include an urban drug scene where users find themselves accompanied by panther-like aliens called "sufferers" from whom they cannot free themselves ("Light and the Sufferer") and a party where a couple invites virtual reality versions of all the lovers either has ever known ("Forever, Said the Duck").

Lighter, but just as cogent in its implications, is "Vanilla Dunk" which presents the world of professional basketball some 15-20 years in the future, when players are doled out the skills of earlier basketball greats and teams have names like the Pan Am Nuggets and the IBM Warriors.

Lethem's greatest talent clearly lies in creating surreal story premises that manage to be at once novel, engaging and insightful. He does not yet, however, execute each tale with equal finesse. Sometimes he ignores characterization to absorb himself solely in plot, and his prose style often suggests cursory revision. "The Sleepy People," for instance, contains sentences like "She propped his head and shoulders slightly, just because it seemed righter for daytime." Few students in freshman comp would fail to seek a more precise adjective than "righter."

In two stories, however, Lethem's prose reaches admirable heights.

Lethem gives new meaning to "Hardened Criminals" in the tale by that name. There, Nick Marra is sentenced to a jail whose walls are made from the semi-petrified bodies of career criminals, their brains kept alive by chips. Nick finds himself shut into a cell where among the literally hardened offenders is his own father, who no longer even remembers Nick or his mother. Nick's assignment--and he has no choice in whether or not to accept it--is to learn from his father about a previous inmate who'd attempted a presidential assassination.

Unfortunately, the other best tale in the collection cannot be named in a family newspaper, but its title is a two-word alliterative designation for a quintet of sexual encounters. Again, Lethem puts literal spins on familiar terms, in this case descriptions of erotic bliss rhapsodizing how time stops or the earth moves, as an obsessive sexual attraction lures a couple into progressively more grotesque levels of baseness and disaster. Thematically perhaps the most fully realized of the stories--in more mundane form, we've been there--it displays the kind of descriptive precision Lethem achieves at his best, as with this sketch of Cornell Pupkiss: "He wore a hat and a trench coat, and shoes which were filigreed with a thousand tiny scratches, as though they'd been beset by phonograph needles."

With few dull moments and scores of memorable ones, Jonathan Lethem underscores why a growing audience consider his a future of major promise.