

San Francisco Chronicle Feb. 1997

## AS SHE CLIMBED ACROSS THE TABLE

By Jonathan Lethem

Doubleday; 224 pp.

Academia is like the military: often profoundly useful, yet pervaded by values and behaviors that are outright silly, generally a result of taking itself far too seriously. That's why both academia and the military are ripe for parody.

Now, Jonathan Lethem, whose mind is always rakishly tilted at a delightfully absurdist angle, tosses his fourth novel squarely onto the pile with DeLillo's *White Noise* and Smiley's *Moo* and has a ball turning the academy into the caricature it often is even without their aid.

Anthropology professor Philip Engstrand is the perfect choice to relate this comic parable. After all, his field of specialization is "academic environments, the departmental politics and territorial squabbles, the places where disciplines overlapped, fed back, and interfered."

Engstrand's love life is about to come undone. His girlfriend, particle physicist Alice Coombs, assists Professor Soft, who is literally opening new worlds for her. Soft, who'd been "compressing matter, in an attempt to create a new universe," has created a void, a tangible nothingness, a right-here-on-campus black hole.

Dubbed "Lack," this vacuum becomes a campus celebrity, "a charismatic mystery," with a voracious but capricious appetite, swallowing, for example, a bowling shoe, a fountain pen and pistachio ice cream but refusing a ski cap, blueberries and a postcard of Copenhagen.

When Alice is placed in charge of Lack she begins to fall in love.

Not that the romance between Alice and Engstrand had been perfect in the first place. Their communication needed help: "We maintained a little cult of leaving things unsaid. Somehow we were wiser with our mouths shut"; probably true, as Engstrand's idea of endearments runs from "I feel an initial singularity, pressed against your spherical symmetry" to "You complete me. I'm not sure I really exist, except under your observation."

So, when Alice falls madly, obsessively for a total vacuum, maybe she has simply rejected the garrulous pedant for the ultimate strong silent type.

But perhaps there's more. "Yes, I love Lack," she tells Engstrand.

"I was too real for you. You wanted to meet someone imaginary.... Lack's an idea, Alice. He's your projection...."

"Well, he's a much better idea than a lot of others I can think of."

Obviously, where love is concerned, Alice believes she has stumbled out of Plato's cave and seen the light, or, in scientific terms, found pure love as opposed to applied love. Just as obviously, Engstrand thinks her simply the latest woman to project her fantasy of ideal love onto a blank screen and jump in.

Can Philip Engstrand save his love from the nothing she pines for? Lethem provides a lot of fun along the way to finding out. Most impressively, he even makes us care.

Lethem's fictional northern California campus becomes a wonderful lampoon setting. Here, students seize buildings to "protest the treatment of Roberta, a manatee savant" and social science grad students apply for grants "to study the spray of athletes on a playing field following an injury... the disbursement of bodies around the epicenter of the wounded player... and the sympathy or skepticism implicit in the stances chosen."

Between the laughs, serious concerns and provocative ideas slip through. Not since "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" has "nothing" become such a something. In this world equidistant between David Hume, Freud's concept of "thanatos" and *Horton Hears a Who*, Lethem shows us how much nothing can become something if we venerate it, it depending on us for its existence as we, in turn, fall prey to its incorporeal allure.

Would scholars really leave their flesh and blood lovers to throw themselves fanatically into the study of "tiny nothingness"? Some faculty spouses will tell you it's the story of their lives.