

Men and Cartoons



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Few who have read works by Jonathan Lethem forget him. His stories and essays, always imaginative, often disturbing, have appeared in The New Yorker, Rolling Stone, Esquire, and the New York Times. "The Fortress of Solitude" was a New York Times Book Review Editor's Choice for one of last year's best books, and Motherless Brooklyn snagged the National Book Critics Circle Award. Quite a list of credits.

Now, here's "Men and Cartoons," a collection of 9 short stories, which will surely add to Lethem's already sterling reputation. Each story is sophisticated, sometimes fantastical, all explorations of the human condition.

The initial story is "The Vision," an account of a neighborhood parlor game called

"mafia." Fueled by alcohol the players are divided into two teams, "mafia" and "village," including "false villagers working to bring the village down." In the end it's a tale of loneliness, of solitary lives in a big city.

"Access Fantasy" reveals a world in which some people live in their cars trapped in a never ending traffic jam, and others dwell in apartments. How does the past affect us? That question is answered for some in "The Spray," which finds an apartment burgled and the investigators equipped with a magic spray can allowing people to see the items that have been stolen.

Mr. Lethem rounds out his collection with "The National Anthem," a correspondence in which broken relations are described.

The author has said that he grew up in a rather borderline Brooklyn neighborhood. "My parents were part of the first wave: bohemians, radicals, and artists," he continued. "So I definitely grew up in a world where my parents and their friends were living in the counterculture in the '70s. That very much shaped my perception, and I think it is detectable in my work in a lot of different ways."

How true. And, his memory is infallible as he limns scenes from those years to perfection. Lethem fans will relish his first story collection in 8 years. Each tale is amusing, touching, and, most of all, original.

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