



Lucky Alan and Other Stories

Jonathan Lethem

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Jonathan Lethem stretches new literary muscles in this scintillating new collection of stories. Some of these tales—such as "Pending Vegan," which wonderfully captures a parental ache and anguish during a family visit to an aquatic theme park—are, in Lethem's words, "obedient (at least outwardly) to realism." Others, like "The Dreaming Jaw, The Salivating Ear,", which deftly and hilariously captures the solipsism of blog culture, feature "the uncanny and surreal elements that still sometimes erupt in my short stories."

The tension between these two approaches, and the way they inform each other, increase the reader's surprise and delight as one realizes how cleverly Lethem is playing with form. Devoted fans of Lethem will recognize familiar themes and tropes—the anxiety of influence pushed to reduction ad absurdum in "The King of Sentences"; a hapless outsider trying to summon up bravado in "The Porn Critic;" characters from the comics stranded on a desert island; the necessity and the impossibility of action against authority in "Procedure in Plain Air."

As always, Lethem's work, humor, and poignancy work in harmony; people strive desperately for connection through words and often misdirect deeds; and the sentences are glorious.

Lucky Alan and Other Stories Details

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From Reader Review Lucky Alan and Other Stories for online ebook

Larry H says

I'd rate this 2.5 stars.

Full disclosure: I received an advance copy of this book from NetGalley in exchange for an unbiased review.

For someone who once unequivocally refused to read short stories because I convinced myself that rather than invest myself in characters and plots that end quickly, my time was better spent reading full-length novels (such foolishness), I've more than made up for lost time over the last few years. And as any fan of the short story knows, the richness of characterization and storytelling can actually be intensified in shorter form.

While I tend to read many different types of genres, I usually like my short stories to be reasonably straightforward. I don't necessarily need realism or linear structure, but I don't like to have to struggle to wonder what a story means, or what an author is trying to say. (Yeah, I'm opinionated that way.)

This quirk of mine may be one of the reasons that a number of the stories in Jonathan Lethem's new collection *Lucky Alan: And Other Stories* didn't quite click for me. I think Lethem is a terrific writer, and I've read several of his books, but again, I've tended to enjoy those which hewed to a more traditional narrative better than those which were a little dreamier or more surreal.

The characters in these stories are quirky, and the situations they find themselves in are often tremendously unique. Some of those I really enjoyed included "The Porn Critic," in which a young man tries to overcome the perceptions people have about him because of his job; "The Empty Room," which dealt with the craziness that results when a somewhat dysfunctional family moves to a house much larger than they know what to do with; "Procedure in Plain Air," in which a man unwittingly becomes a player in a situation he doesn't quite understand; the title story, which chronicles the narrator's friendship with a quirky, formerly legendary film director, and the dynamics of that man's relationship with a neighbor; and my favorite, "Pending Vegan," in which a man on the verge of a nervous breakdown has the bad idea to take his wife and young daughters on a trip to Sea World.

If you're a fan of stories that don't quite follow the traditional path, this is definitely a collection you should pick up. Lethem is a tremendously talented storyteller, with a voice all his own.

Nicole D. says

I have only ever loved one short story collection, and it was Salinger's *Nine Stories*. Usually with short story collections, just when you get interested in a story it ends, and then you have to start over and get interested in the next. Also, I generally find the stories hit and miss. With this collection, I couldn't wait to see what Lethem would do next! With the exception of *Lucky Alan*, which I thought was weak, every story was better than the last.

There were some very creative ideas, tons of social commentary, funny lines, and some flat out great lines: "What right did my parents have to do anything but stand stock-still for my barely attentive scorn?" - Can

you feel the contempt?

Short story fan or not, Lethem fans are in for a treat.

Rambling Reader says

I'm confused by this collection of stories. really shocked at the quality.

Chris says

This feels like a collection mandated by the publisher. At least one of these stories--written as a series of blog posts descending the number line, is six years old, and it hasn't aged all that well. Lethem is hit or miss both here and in general with his formal experiments, but I appreciate that he finds new forms to play with.

Still, the best story here is his least experimental and most realistic, the story of a father recently off his anti-depressants taking his family to Sea World, seeing only the unseemly and seedy. It would be worth it if only for this lovable sentence: "Irving Renker was a Jewish New Yorker who'd crawled out of his archetype like a lobster from its shell, still conforming to that shell's remorseless shape but wandering around fresh, tender, and amazed."

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I got an advanced reader copy from Edelweiss, with the understanding that I would provide an honest review.

I wasn't sure how I'd like Lethem in short story form, despite loving his novels (although I'm a bit behind, I don't think I've read the last two.) I really enjoyed these! He plays with the words to a greater extent than I remember him doing in the longer novels, and it's almost tangible, like he's behind the pages cackling, waiting for the reader to say, "I see what you did there."

Favorite stories:

The King of Sentences (absolute favorite)

The Porn Critic

The Empty Room

Pending Vegan

A few of the stories are a bit more experimental and not my favorite, but I wonder if they will come with illustrations. They could easily, but reading a review copy, it's hard to know.

Here are a few bits that delighted me, with the caveat that they may change in the final version:

"Blondy didn't play by the Manhattan-neighbor rules. He was provocative, voluble, grabby."
- from "Lucky Alan"

"We worked in bookstores, the only thing to do... Clea and I were custodians of a treasury of sentences much bigger on the inside than the outside. Though we mostly handled the books only by their covers.. we communed deeply with them, felt certain that only we deserved to abide with them. Any minute we'd read them all cover to cover, it was surely bound to happen. Meanwhile, every customer robbed us a little."
- from "The King of Sentences"

Allen Adams says

<http://www.themainedge.com/buzz/keep...>

Jonathan Lethem has long been gleefully subverting the tropes of genre fiction and using them to amplify the impact of his own writing. His expert folding of the weird into the everyday makes his work a reading experience like no other.

His latest story collection is "Lucky Alan: And Other Stories" – an assemblage that duly captures the anarchic spirit of Lethem's work. While these nine stories aren't perfect, their imperfections are a very real part of the book's overarching success. The variation from piece to piece comes not in terms of quality – excellence is definitely the watchword - but rather in terms of style, voice and/or choice. There's a wonderful disparity – these tales are tied together despite often presenting themselves in wildly different ways.

Though in truth, this book's most difficult-to-forgive flaw is a simple one: its brevity.

The book's titular opening story is fairly conventional relative to most of the book's other offerings. It explores the sorts of non-relationship relationships that sometimes spring from the rocky soil of urban proximity, as well as the fleeting nature of those acquaintanceships. But then you've also got something like "Traveler Home," a tale related by way of an almost stream-of-consciousness inner dialogue by a man whose inadvertent discovery of something in the woods might well lead him down the path to even stranger knowledge. It's a challenging form of storytelling that plays out with clean precision.

There's "Procedure in Plain Air," a story about an aimless Brooklyn man who finds himself recruited to hold an umbrella over a hole in the street in order to protect the hole's current denizen from the elements. It plays like a postmodern riff on Kafka, infused with a playfulness that belies the unspoken darkness lurking beneath the surface.

Perhaps my favorite of the bunch is "Their Back Pages," a surreal exploration of forgotten comics characters stranded on a deserted island following a plane crash. It's a fascinating deconstruction of the inner lives being lived beyond the panels of the newspaper or comic book. The rapidly shifting points of view and radically different voices of each player result in a hilariously funny pastiche that should by all rights descend into cacophony, yet somehow never does.

There's an art to assembling a good short story collection. Not only does each piece have to stand alone and self-contained, but the work taken as a whole should have something to hold it together. That binding element need not be overt – it can be thematic or aesthetic or stylistic – but the very best collections must have it. This one does.

Lethem's considerable intelligence is always front and center in his work; "Lucky Alan" is no exception. But it's his ability to wield that intelligence in the name of emotional connection that makes him so accessibly

transcendent. Brilliantly twisted turns of phrase are scattered throughout, lyrical constructions that elicit humor and pathos – sometimes simultaneously. The marriage between head and heart – that's the foundation upon which Lethem builds his elaborate, engaging worlds.

There's a quality to Lethem's work that can be a bit difficult to articulate – call it soul. Even in the freewheeling breadth of this collection, the weird and wild differences from story to story, that sense of soul is inherent to each piece. Whether he's mining magic from the mundane or whisking us away to the freaky fringes, that feeling of possibility – that soul – is always front and center.

“Lucky Alan: And Other Stories” is a sweeping collection that brings together many of the disparate skills and influences that make Jonathan Lethem one of his generation's preeminent storytellers. No story is like any other, but they are indisputably brothers in arms.

Marc Nash says

Master craftsman at work. Lovely turn of phrases and extended metaphors. Of the 9 stories only 1 I really didn't get on with and another so-so, but loved "Pending Vegan" and "The Porn Critic".

Ellie says

Lucky Alan: And Other Stories is a collection of short stories by author Jonathan Lethem. If you are a fan of his (and if you've read him at all, I think you must be!) then this is an experience you won't want to miss.

Every story is terrific (unusual in a story collection). Although I am primarily a novel reader, I also love short stories. A well-crafted short story can create a complete world and is an absorbing experience that can be grasped at a single sitting. These short stories deliver that and more.

One of my favorites, "The Dreaming Jaw, The Salivating Ear" is told by the builder of a blog located precariously on a cliff by the ocean in which The Formal and Justiny are engaged in a seemingly life and death battle. Although what kind of life either of these two creatures (?) have is anyone's guess. The story is like a koan which I could neither grasp nor abandon. I especially loved as it teetered near the edge of reason and began seguing into Bob Dylan songs and Yeats' poetry.

The last story, "Pending Vegan" (a state I have to admit to sharing) is a more realistic tale of a man on his own cliff edge—that of sanity, perhaps to be pushed to the edge by a trip with his wife and children to SeaWorld. The story has one of my favorite sentences of the book, "Civilizing children was pretty much all about inducing cognitive dissonance." He presents an excellent defense of this statement!

Speaking of sentences, another story (aptly titled "The King of Sentences") demonstrates the dangers of literary fandom taken too far. The story manages to be both hilarious and terrifying.

The title story is another realistic one (as realistic as Lethem gets—his stories are all tinged with a dreamlike quality). "Lucky Alan" is actually a story within a story—an aspiring actor becomes friends with an avant-garde director, Sigismund Bondy who in the course of administering a questionnaire created by Max Frisch (also a favorite author of mine) launches into an accounting of a "friendship" with the eponymous Alan.

"Lucky Alan" of course turns out to be something...well, I'll avoid spoilers and just say that the friendship is outstanding primarily for viciousness, rivalry, and bitterness. And yet it still manages to be funny.

Lucky Alan: And Other Stories is filled with anxiety and humor. It is written (as always with Lethem) exquisitely.

I was lucky enough to win this book from Goodreads First Reads giveaway. The review written is an honest reflection of my opinions about the work.

I recommend this work very highly.

Andrew says

An eclectic and wildly uneven short story collection from the author of Motherless Brooklyn and The Fortress of Solitude.

My favorite stories are "The King of Sentences," a very funny (self-)parody of literary preciousness, the brutal Shirley Jackson-esque "Procedure in Plain Air," and "Pending Vegan," a story of everyday guilt and discomfort that I related to very strongly.

The rest of the stories are a mix of quirky, charming New York City character sketches ("Lucky Alan," "The Porn Critic") and truly insufferable prose experiments and one-joke narratives that drag like a 10 minute SNL sketch (basically everything else). I found The Fortress of Solitude to be equal parts dazzling and irritating; that same ratio basically applies for me here. Maybe it applies to everything Lethem writes.

Alan says

Of course with this title, I had to read it! Seeing him read a story at my local book store was icing on the cake. I'm a fan of Jonathan Lethem's novels, but his short stories are excellent. He never wastes a word. His stories move seamlessly between realistic (sort of) and surrealistic (definitely) but always leave with more questions than answers which is a sign of a story that will stick with me for a long time. Looking forward to reading his next novel (which had a short story excerpt in the New Yorker!).

Doubleday Books says

This is an amazing collection of short stories from a literary master. Whether the story is realistic, rooted in mysticism, or found somewhere in between, each one is unique and thought provoking. Jonathan Lethem has a way of making every story he tells stick with you long after you've finished turning the pages.

Wayne McCoy says

'Lucky Alan' by Jonathan Lethem is a collection of nine short stories. I've read a few books by Lethem and

this collection is a winner.

His style ranges from realistic to a sort of magical realism. A man weaning himself off anti-depressants takes his family to Sea World. Another man writes critiques of porn, then feels awkward bringing guest over to his house with it's piles of video tapes. A family buys a house and leaves one room empty, but why? A group of back page cartoon characters find themselves marooned on a desert island. A couple go looking for an author famous for his sentences.

There isn't a bad story in this short collection. The strange can inhabit our lives at any time, and Lethem seems to understand this. Even better, he can articulate it with the most amazing prose.

I was given a review copy of this ebook by Doubleday Books and NetGalley in exchange for an honest review. Thank you for allowing me to review this great ebook.

Silea says

The general rule of thumb is that short stories have to end with a punchline. Something fundamental must occur in the last few sentences, something that makes the whole story suddenly make sense, or challenges the fundamental assumptions the reader had when they started, or changes the reader. Something needs to happen at the end to make the story, short though it was, worthwhile.

And, well, that just doesn't happen in this book. Some of the stories have a small revelation near the end, but nothing that made me pause in the slightest. Most, however, just kinda petered out. Stuff happens to people, and then the story ends. The End.

I was, not once in these pages, moved. I wasn't challenged, i wasn't enlightened. I wasn't even really engaged. These stories are like overhearing a conversation on the train: it's surely vitally relevant to those who participate, but as an eavesdropper, at best you get a discrete snicker or eye-roll out of it, but you forget about it by the time you've stepped onto the platform.

Barbara Wahl says

Dimenticato!

Lethem non ha il fiato necessario per i racconti, intenso e raccolto, è un animale da romanzo.

Questa raccolta è una tale delusione rispetto alle precedenti letture di Lethem: "Il giardino dei dissidenti", un lavoro di altissima caratura tra architettura, civiltà, razze e pregiudizi e "La fortezza della solitudine", immersione totale in un mondo alieno che diventa nostro, che decido subito: lo dimentico, non l'ho mai letto, se l'ho letto, ero distratta, soprattutto, era distratto lui...

Daniel Kukwa says

The first story had me hooked...but it was all downhill from there. This is more of a collection of stories yelling "look how witty, experimental, and existential I am", as opposed to a series of stories that make me want to delve further into the book. I'm sure this might hit some reader's sweet spot...but it totally sail past

my own.

Marcos says

This short story collection is a mixed-bag. Yes the sentences are dazzling. But this time the stories left me feeling awfully cold, distant and oddly unmemorable.

Chaitra says

I started this immediately after I read Mark Dunn's rich in letters fable *Ella Minnow Pea*. I also have a habit of reading short stories in alphabetical order. This meant starting the book with *The Dreaming Jaw, the Salivating Ear*. It felt, in the initial stages of the story, eerily, like I never left Nollop - the crusty seaside "blog" was written in similar overly formal, archaic and arch fashion as *Ella*. It changed once the story progressed, but I was hooked. There was an added advantage - this was the weakest of the nine stories comprising the book. They don't always fit a format or a style or even a genre, but I found merit in all of them. Particular shout out to *The King of Sentences*, a story of two stalker-y bookish nerds who decide to worship a particularly reclusive author. It made me laugh out loud. In all, this collection is a huge step up from *Dissident Gardens*, which I loathed with a vengeance.

Hans says

Eclectic collection of 9 stories by Jonathan Lethem. The obsessively, literary, stalker-noir "The King of Sentences" was my hands down favorite. I also have a soft spot for the oddities found in "Procedure in Plain Air" and "Their Back Pages." Though the lines that I want to transcribe for you come from "Pending Vegan." Perhaps I should let you discover them for yourself. (And don't feel bad if you decide to skip over "The Dreaming Jaw, The Salivating Ear.")

[Oh...by completing this book, this pushes Jonathan Lethem above the "James Patterson line" in my Most Read Authors list. That feels really great.]

K says

Like others, I generally liked the collection, though my reaction was mixed. The first story, "Lucky Alan," is very interesting. You really get into the first-person character's head, and his portrayal of Upper West Side NY is right on the money. I don't quite "get" part of the ending, but that's okay.

Another first-person story, "The Empty Room," in which a young man looks back on the strangeness and downward spiral of his parents (father especially) also is evocative of a life and a time and a place. It carries a whiff of unrealism, with the man's girlfriend a little more frank about sex, drugs and nudity than you'd find in all but the most outlandish person. But it's solid.

I really liked the one about a young man who's mistaken by his nerdy friends as the wild one, and how that

goes awry. And the one about a father taking his kids to Sea World is memorable in its way, too; unlike many of the stories, it ends on a hopeful note.

A couple of stories are quite experimental. One has non-human characters who are speaking non-human words, but are living among humans. Because it's done in dispatches kind of like a diary, it works reasonably well because different people and non-people interact. Another story is all fragments and glimpses. There probably aren't a half-dozen sentences in that one that are more than four words.

The writing is elegant in these stories, and it changes with characters and from one story to another. There's humor, both regular and dark. And there are interesting, humorous observations, such as the father's feeling on the trip to Sea World that moving through the park is like being eaten, digested and excreted by a large sea animal. Same with the way the narrator of the first story describes how people treat each other in New York: seeing each other and making a nodding gesture of familiarity, but only rarely getting to know each other, and then when they do get to know each other being the subject of gossip.

Overall, a good quick read, but with more than enough to make you read slowly and think.

Daveski says

Giving this 4 stars might be slightly generous - there are indeed a couple of really fantastic stories in this collection, but there are also several that didn't do a whole lot for me. Still, the ones I liked really hit home with me - I liked "The Dreaming Jaw, The Salivating Ear" so much that I immediately read it again. "Procedure in Plain Air" and "The King of Sentences" were also favorites.

Lethem's short fiction is often really weird, but that's what I love about it. Definitely recommended to fans of his, maybe not so much if you are unfamiliar with his stuff.
