JONATHAN LETHEM

In Conversation with Paul Holdengräber

A Farewell to Brooklyn

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LIVE from the New York Public Library

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Celeste Bartos Forum

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No idea what this music is—can you hear me? What was that music? It was quite extraordinary. I would quite prefer the music of *Superman* as I come onstage. My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of LIVE from the New York Public Library. Though a summer has gone by now, and I should have a new motto, I could not really find one, so I am still saying that the goal of LIVE from the New

York Public Library is to make the lions roar, to make this heavy institution dance, to make it levitate when we are successful.

I would like to welcome you all to our Fall LIVE from the New York Public Library lineup and tonight is a bittersweet farewell to Jonathan Lethem, more about that later on, it probably won't be a real farewell, but I took it upon myself really to invite Jonathan not because he's written a new book, you know, usually the case is, "writer writes book and pays penance by coming to the library to present book." I mean, that's a usual way things happen. Publishers call me, publicists, a whole industry is behind the—I actually would someday like to do something on the book tour as a phenomenon. Maybe the last event I do will be on the book tour. But here really it is simply because I felt that the moment has come, and it was necessary to invite him before he leaves us, to have an evening with him so the reason of having Jonathan today is not a new book, but an oeuvre, to use the French word, a whole body of work, and certain obsessions that we share and that we will discuss.

Later this season, I invite you to come hear conversations between Angela Davis and Toni Morrison; David Grossman and Nicole Krauss; Antonio Damasio and Marina Abramović; Ruth Reichl, Rene Redzepi, and David Chang;an evening celebrating the *National Lampoon*, and the Robert Silvers Lecture, this year given by Derek Walcott, and another by Slavoj Zizek, as well as an evening with Lady Antonia Fraser, Keith Richards, Zadie Smith, and Jay-Z. Now, Keith Richards in particular I was inspired to invite him because you may or may not know this but Keith Richards has said that when he was a

child he wanted to be a librarian. He erred slightly from that vocation. He wanted to be a librarian. He said that there are two institutions that mattered greatly when he was growing up in England. One was the church, which belongs to God, and the other one is the library, which belongs to the people. He said the library is a great equalizer, so with that in mind I felt that we had to invite Keith Richards, mainly to speak about his vocation, which he didn't follow.

I would like to encourage all of you to become Friends of the New York Public Library for just forty dollars a year, which is rather a cheap date. You can get discounts on all LIVE tickets and much more. As always, I would like to thank our independent bookseller, 192 Books. Jonathan Lethem will sign books after our conversation. Before signing there will be time for a Q and A. A question—I have calculated this—takes about 52 seconds to ask, a good question about 47 seconds. Mine will always be quite a bit longer. Keep yours brief and let's have fun hearing the answers. More about that later. I would also like to greet all of those of you who are watching us online on fora.tv. I am told we are being streamed live online now. It sounds quite wonderful. So hello to everyone out there.

Jonathan Lethem is an American novelist who was born in 1964 in Brooklyn, New York. The son of a painter, he followed in the footsteps of his father when he enrolled in the High School of Music and Art, where he painted, made animated films, and generally nurtured his identity as a visual artist. At Bennington College in the early 1980s, he abandoned painting for writing, and dropped out midway through his sophomore year.

Lethem spent the next decade living in Berkeley, California, where he worked as a bookstore clerk, and more about that, too, and wrote in his free time. His first short novel, *Gun, with Occasional Music*, was published in California in 1994. Since then he has returned to Brooklyn and published many acclaimed novels, including *The Fortress of Solitude* and *Motherless Brooklyn*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award. His stories and essays have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Esquire*, *McSweeney's*, the *New York Times*, and others.

One of the essays, "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism," rather than "on" plagiarism, has had a huge influence on my thinking, the best thing ever written of its kind, and I'm not sure anything like this has ever been written, so it's the best in its kind, alone in its kind. I highly recommend you read it now, tonight, if you have not yet. It is in *Harper's* magazine, February 2007. I suggest you download it and upload your mind.

Lethem is the recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship Award, which is called "the genius grant," and his most recent book is *Chronic City*. This fall he will relocate to California, where he will replace—replace is not quite the right word—the late David Foster Wallace as Roy Disney Class of '51 Chair in Creative Writing at Pomona College. Please warmly welcome him to this stage.

(applause)

JONATHAN LETHEM: Thank you, Paul.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You're very, very welcome.

JONATHAN LETHEM: It was nice.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It was good?

JONATHAN LETHEM: I'll try to live up to it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I pronounced your name correctly.

JONATHAN LETHEM: You pronounced my name correctly.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Because when we spoke initially, I said "Leth-em," and you said, "No, think of it as lethal."

JONATHAN LETHEM: If you think of lethal—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'll know that I'm pronouncing it right. Now, I was wondering because I spent yesterday night as I usually do not sleeping. I wonder, do you suffer from insomnia?

JONATHAN LETHEM: Well, I don't have the luxury of insomnia right now, because I have a six-month-old baby in the house, so my lack of sleep is dictated by this little beautiful, you know, twelve-pound person, so when I can sleep, I do. When I'm allowed to sleep I do. Actually, I have insomnia when I'm traveling. I had insomnia last night. And I do think of it as a luxury.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: A luxury to have insomnia?

JONATHAN LETHEM: Yeah, I think so.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How do you mean? This is quite interesting.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Well, those hours alone, thinking. I used to look at it as some sort of—well, you know, don't you find that a lot of the things that were once oppressive become your pleasures in life? Like flossing. I mean, I used to think it was really—even to have to go to sleep, when I was very young I felt burdened by it. Now, of course, that became one of my pleasures. And then it seemed it was robbed if I was, you know, suffered insomnia. But now I feel if I can lay awake alone in a darkened room and just be by myself, that's not so bad. That's not so bad, you know. I've learned to—learned to savor it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I feel, I mean, the way I express it always is that I feel I keep the night company.

JONATHAN LETHEM: The hour—there's a poet I know named Laure-Anne Bosselaar, who has a book called *The Hour Between Wolf and Dog*. I don't know if she made up that phrase or not.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That's another phrase that probably will keep me up at night. Now you wrote this little essay. I'll read the first paragraph, it's quite a paragraph, it's called, "So who is Perkus Tooth anyway?" "I'm onstage after giving a reading, blinking in confusion again at a question I've been asked by a member of the audience. The question is one I anticipated and rehearsed answering for years before I was ever faced with it and which as it happens I've answered aloud in public a few dozen times already by now. You'd think I'd know the answer to it. You'd think I'd memorized the better answers I'd given in the past. Might have honed a version of a sincere reply I'd be comfortable offering up or as honed a lie or jape or confection to stand in its place, one to entertain the audience and the question's asker and in the process distract them from noticing I'd avoided the question or I can hear you suggesting I could simply reply with humble and unrehearsed honesty as though the question had never occurred to me before but was certainly worth an answer. The difficulty is that at this moment I can no longer recall what I believe to be the truth."

Now, in that spirit, in the spirit that you just outlined, I'd like to say that the questions that I will be asking to you today are very open source. They are very much based on our affection I think for Lewis Hyde and perhaps for Lawrence Lessig and for how we met

around Suzanne Vega, and some of them are my own, but many of them actually come from members of the public here, some of your fans. It's a wonderful mash-up of questions. Some of them are mine, some are only partially mine, and some of them are absolutely not mine. Now I think what will be interesting based on what I read before will be to see how these questions come to you, how the audience later on asks you *their* questions. You can't ask the question that I've already asked that you've sent to me. And also I'll be interested in your responses. Maybe some of the questions I will ask you you have answered many times, as you said.

Now, in the introduction you wrote to *A Meaningful Life* by L. J. Davis, you mention the "complexly uncomfortable facts in the case are the facts of my childhood." It has fueled your writing, you write. How would you define that discomfort?

JONATHAN LETHEM: Well, what I'm thinking about in that introduction to L. J. Davis's book—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's a marvelous book—

JONATHAN LETHEM: *A Meaningful Life* is again Dean Street. A Couple of blocks of a street in Brooklyn in the early 1970s that for me have been—you know, a kind of—they were a stage where drama of coming of age was enacted and they're permanently mysterious, charged, uncomfortable, attractive, you know, romantic, you know, a few hundred yards of pavement and slate and you know, a wall of row houses. You know,

brownstones and brick row houses in Brooklyn that by now are you know gorgeous and all those houses when they change hands, they change hands for millions of dollars.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You mean gentrified.

JONATHAN LETHEM: They're gentrified. They were always gorgeous, but they were decrepit, and their beauty was in ruins when I, you know, I came to consciousness in that neighborhood. My parents were bohemians. My father is a painter, he's still alive, they were committed radicals, which doesn't mean that their commitments or their beliefs were necessarily always consistent or completely well worked out, but they projected a very powerful image of a possible world, an idealistic notion that I only gradually came to understand was a countercultural myth. It wasn't the center of the American story, even *then*, and it certainly was about to be, you know, shrunken down to a very small margin in the story of American culture, but, you know, you take your parents, you take your life, you take the block you grew up on, you take the world you're given—as a child—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You can't quite choose it.

JONATHAN LETHEM: It's the universe. So my parents' ideals said that as a poor, left-wing, you know, bohemian, scruffy, white family we were allowed to take possession of one of these houses in this neighborhood full of abandoned houses, Dominican families, Puerto Rican families, and a very small handful of the very first, you know,

ambitious gentrifiers, “the brownstoners” they called themselves, whom we resembled but believed ourselves to be apart from. *They* had a program of displacement and gentrification. *We* were coming to live in a neighborhood.

In many ways that ideal was enacted. I went to the public schools while all the other white kids I could see around me were being exported, not distantly, but exported to Brooklyn Heights, to Saint Anne’s or to Brooklyn Friends or Packer Collegiate. I was, you know, at one point I was one of I think three white children in an entire school, P.S. 38 on the corner of Nevins Street and Dean.

In other words, I was a very weird kind of reverse minority, packed full of this passionate idealistic belief that the Civil Rights era represented a triumphant and complete story, that racism had been eradicated in our society, because my parents were so defiantly proud of their participation in that story and rightly. Of course, we now know, we *always* knew, if you weren’t six years old that the world wasn’t that simple. But I had to learn it very, very, very gradually and emerge from this script to understand that what was, you know, what was passionately *wished* by my parents in installing me in this situation was not something I could make reflected in the situation as I experienced it, that in fact I was going to be a kind of a subject to an involuntary experiment in, you know, in—I was an emissary, basically. And I’ve often tried to speak of this in terms of kind of a theater, because it always—when I wrote about being bullied in *Fortress of Solitude*, what I wanted to capture most of all was the sense in which it was like a—had qualities of being a conversation and a game and a transaction and a dance. It had so many scripts layered

so deeply inside of it, all of them of course completely beyond the enunciation of *any* child, or any of the participants, even a grown-up who intervened could never begin to unpack what was going on. But it was there anyway. I knew, and the other children knew, and we were, in a sense, putting on a little show about it, over and over again, a very uncomfortable show, at times.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That's uncomfortable.

JONATHAN LETHEM: So L. J. Davis, right, so there's this terrific, neglected novelist among the brownstoners, and proudly. L.J. will be the first to tell you—he came to renovate brownstones. He came to buy up as many of them as cheaply as he could and, you know, and make them look good and help improve that neighborhood. He wrote cover stories for *New York* magazine you know circa 1973 saying, "Brooklyn is where it's at," the kind of story you saw again in the nineties when it really was plausible, it was a little bit ludicrous to write that story in 1973, but he was willing something, along with a scattered handful of other people, he was willing something into existence. Well, L.J., who both sent his children to the private schools in Brooklyn Heights *and* adopted a pair of black daughters from the surrounding impoverished neighborhood, so his own house was like an allegory of the contradictions in this neighborhood. He also wrote these unbelievably dark, unflinching accounts in his novels of what it really was like there then, and there's very little else that—there's very little else in the way of evidence. Paula Fox's *Desperate Characters* is another tiny shred of evidence, you can catch a hint of it

there, but L.J. was even deeper inside that experience, and so it was immensely moving to me to have a chance to reintroduce that book of his, because it's like a—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Which one now finds quite easily, the *New York Review of Books* publishes it.

JONATHAN LETHEM: It's as near as a novel can come to being like a documentary film about the place that I grew up in.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: When you think about your parents do you ever think—growing up with them—do you ever think of the Philip Larkin poem, "This Be the Verse"?

JONATHAN LETHEM: No, I don't really. I mean, my relation to my parents is complicated in many different ways. You know, my mother, who was the—my mother was a New York kid, she came from Queens, she went to public school, she—she, you know, very much—she, she was street-savvy, and she was the reason that my parents felt confident moving into that neighborhood, in many ways. She knew how to relate to all kinds of neighbors, she knew how to navigate. My father was a farm boy, he grew up in the Midwest, was the black sheep of a large Midwestern family, discovered he wanted to be a painter, came to New York, went to Paris on a Fulbright, but he was not worldly about city life in the way my mother was, so all well and good, except then my mother

began to be sick and eventually to die, in the middle of my childhood, so the script kind of got broken.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Right, you were fourteen.

JONATHAN LETHEM: And as long as she was there, there was a kind of—she was a brilliant emissary. She was a real New Yorker. She had—You know, when you see me depicting a character in like *Motherless Brooklyn* like Frank Minna, this guy who goes into every store and talks the language at every storefront and knows how to play every—you know, knows how to work all those scripts, in the theater of a Brooklyn or a Queens neighborhood. That was my mother. But we lost our navigational system, you know, when she died.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You have described Manhattan as a human dry run for the virtual reality, a place both persistently real and unreal. Elsewhere you have said New York was a virtual reality for a long time before there ever even was a description or idea of it. *Chronic City* takes place in a nebulous Manhattan existing someplace between the real and unreal. Why does Manhattan, more than any other city or place, strike you as a virtual reality?

JONATHAN LETHEM: Well, I mean—It's a remark that I—you know, I don't want to become too ponderous trying to flesh it out. I mean, I—It's a provocative remark. But I do feel—you know, when you think about the story of New York City, it's—it's the

future. It's, you know, the secular *commercial* metropolis. It's the first great city founded for other than nationalistic or religious purposes. It's founded as a commercial venture, right, and it becomes a permanent laboratory for enterprise, experiment, invention, and then it also becomes the great capital for, you know, it takes over from Paris at some point in the twentieth century and becomes indisputably the capital of arts culture.

It's the most—it broadcasts the most powerful and therefore the most universally resented image of its own importance, self-involvement, self-enclosure, and it's, you know, the place where fake reality was invented. Madison Avenue is the—you know, the place where, you know, or Madison Avenue and Hollywood are the two places where—where the idea of selling the sizzle, not the steak, arises. And what is virtual reality but the sizzle and not the steak? It's—the invention of the fake is centered in the life of this place.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So it's natural in some way that now you are off to California, you know, having on this stage Werner Herzog, not so long ago, he says, you know, "Los Angeles is the only city with substance in America," which is of course also quite a provocation. So you're leaving us for another fake reality, is that right?

JONATHAN LETHEM: I don't think anyone has the luxury of living in a real reality anymore, so I don't even worry about it. I mean, that's really one of the subjects of *Chronic City* is, "Quit worrying. The intermingling happened. We're just going to have to negotiate it now." The virtual and the real—you know, the Reese's Peanut Butter Cup is

done, it's you know, the chocolate and the peanut butter are completely together. And it's not a question anymore of, like, somehow sorting it out or purifying—you know, let's like create some—you know, reinstate the boundaries of the real and exclude the virtual. It's so completely over. It's not even something that I think we should be worrying about in those terms.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So it doesn't make you anxious?

JONATHAN LETHEM: Well, it makes me very anxious, but the anxiety is in this task of making a meaningful life inside this fact, and embracing it adequately and negotiating it, you know, honorably, not somehow rewinding the tape.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You have said that your trip to—about your trip to Pomona, you told Scott Timberg, somebody I knew from my California days that you are choosing to live near the Claremont campus because I am all about—and I quote you here, "I am all about middle-aged, family values lifestyles right now." Now, can this be true?

(laughter)

JONATHAN LETHEM: Yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You? You, really?

JONATHAN LETHEM: Of course, absolutely. I'm here playing the obliging the sort of wishful exciting image of the you know, the solo operator, the independent operator, the life of the mind, but I made this enormous commitment to my family—I have these two tiny children, I have tried to whittle things like book touring down to the very minimum. You know, I used to be able to, you know, pretend to be in a rock band and fool around with collaborations with filmmakers or whatever. I have to be very, very—I have to lead a very simple life now. If I'm ever going to write a novel again, it has to be just about the only thing I do besides, you know, changing diapers and making meals, and this teaching job is marvelous. This unbelievable teaching job landed.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's a dream come true, and it's a complicated dream come true.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Yeah, sure, it is complicated, but I'm not ambivalent about it. It's a very—I mean, leaving New York City is bittersweet for me. What's being left behind, friends, walking on Dean Street, being in this library, all sorts of things, that's bittersweet, but what I'm being drawn to I have no hesitations about. It's a kind of a fulfillment, actually, of a lifelong, you know, flirtation with academia. I've always loved that environment. And, you know, even when I dropped out of college I moved to Berkeley, began living right in the shadow of that gigantic university there, pretty much only dated grad students and was mostly *taken* for a grad student by people there, and worked in a bookstore where all I did was sell, you know, university press books to my

new friends and, you know, and I—for a long time I prided myself on being the only—not only nonprofessor, but the only person without even a bachelor's degree who'd written an academic satire, because I did write one, a long time ago, called *As She Climbed Across the Table*, so this environment has always been very attractive and charged for me.

Frequently I think of it in terms of my parents' idealistic, utopian notions about creating a—you know, a sacred space, an exalted space, where, you know, where people can live in an atmosphere of a devotion to the arts, or to culture, to the life of a mind, where, you know, a special level of civility or, you know, sublime perfection of everyday life might be attained. Of course this is exactly what's always doomed to failure. It was doomed in my parents' idealization, and I'm sure, you know, anyone who's familiar with university settings, you know, knows how short they fall of utopian aspiration, but it's the effort, it's the yearning, it's the notion that there might be an enchanted zone, there *might* be a place where something utopian can be enacted, even if very briefly. This is really one of my obsessions in my work, you know, is the temporary utopia.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The brief encounter.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Yeah, you know, I mean, in *Fortress of Solitude*, you see the character passing through this idealization of the moment when hip-hop was invented in Brooklyn, you know, when it was a kind of pure folk art, not yet commodified. People plugged turntables into the lampposts, and suddenly there'd be a party. This was

temporarily a real thing. And then again he goes to a science fiction convention, which however homely that kind of gathering may be, it is like a hotel in the Midwest suddenly gets taken over by people who all feel and think and believe a certain way, and they just live there and dwell there for, you know, seventy-two extraordinary hours and then they all take off their costumes and go back to their, you know, their day jobs, but for a little while there was this utopian moment there, and this constant pursuit of—you know, I mean, Burning Man in the desert. The idea of—there's this writer named Hakim Bey who describes this thing—the TAZ, the temporary autonomous zone, it's a condition that you, you know, brew up and then you go and you dwell there as long as it can be sustained and then you accept that it's going to dissolve.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And that's what academia will be?

JONATHAN LETHEM: Right. Of course it's going to be Burning Man night and day. **(laughter)** I will be on fire, in fact. That does describe anyway some of my attraction to that environment, and also my reservations or the things that have kept me—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The fear, the fear.

JONATHAN LETHEM: When I got to Bennington and it wasn't—didn't sustain me, I was too quickly disenchanted. You know, I dropped out of college in a kind of spirit of "You can't fire me, I quit." The minute anything was wrong, it was all wrong for me. So this was a chance to, you know, maybe—I don't know—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Find more resonance and wonder and find maybe some level of attention.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Yes, maybe, and maybe get health insurance for the whole family. **(laughter)** I mean, it's also—it's a very simple form of security. I am—you know, I'm pushing fifty and I don't want to be kind of scrapping and on the road and doing these like impromptu gigs all the time for the quick, you know, honorarium, I want to stay home with the kids, and it's a blessing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I kind of want your life when you describe it that way, just having turned fifty, just very recently—

JONATHAN LETHEM: Happy birthday.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Thank you. and getting my first pair of jeans after thirty-three years. I never, you know. The last time I wore a pair of jeans was when I was seventeen. Feels good.

Before firing yourself or leaving or abandoning academia as a student in Bennington, you found ways of entertaining yourself there quite deeply, and I must say the parts of you I love best are the obsessive parts, the parts that are just totally and utterly absorbed by

something and in this particular case what you were so utterly absorbed by was creating this film society.

JONATHAN LETHEM: I ran the Bennington Film Society.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And I don't remember it, because the first teaching gig I had was at Williams College, and I used to drive the eighteen miles, go to the Blue Benn Diner, and then go and see some cool students at Bennington, which was quite different from the students who were rather pusillanimous at Williams College. But when you were running this film society, you were in search of something that maybe you're in search of now as well, which is this form of intensity.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Well, it's also another version of a little perfect world. There's literally a square building called Tishman, a windowless building on campus, which because I was a student worker, I had to have some job to be at Bennington because I needed so much—so much financial aid, by running the film society I could hire myself as the projectionist. So I would—First I had to run for election, and as a freshman, it was very peculiar that I ran and then beat all these well-known, you know, juniors and seniors who wanted to run the film society, but I was completely obsessed, and I think people just saw me, and they were like, "Oh, God, let him have it, that kid is so annoying."

And then I was in charge, so I could hire myself, and I fired all the other projectionists, and when a film would come in. We were supposed to three screenings of every film,

twice a week, they'd be a film twice a week, and so I would screen it at, you know, at seven and ten the night before and then at noon the next day and then I'd pack it up and ship it back to the rental place, and so I would see these movies three times in less than twenty-four hours and you know it was like that building became my little utopian preserve, but also I was a little bit like a troll under a bridge. I didn't let anyone else, you know, do anything I didn't approve of in that space, so yeah.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And what you approved of back then was particularly a passion you developed for Westerns, and in particular a passion for John Ford, and in particular a passion for John Wayne in *The Searchers*.

JONATHAN LETHEM: It was a—it was a—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And you speak about it fantastically, I must say this—it's not undue flattery—in *The Disappointment Artist*, I just love that essay, which is called, I think "An Obsession." Monument Valley counts for you, have you been there?

JONATHAN LETHEM: I've been to Monument Valley, it's funny, I was just talking about this. Yes, I went to Monument Valley and I genuflected before the shapes that I saw in the Searchers but I also it always also makes me think of someone I know who is an even greater obsessive, the film scholar Joseph McBride, who went to Monument Valley in the seventies and found some of the Native Americans who'd worked with John Ford as extras in *The Searchers* and had them lead him to the ruins of the burned cabin

from that film and he took a vial of ashes, which I sort of envy him owning those ashes, **(laughter)** but, Paul, the thing about that encounter that I had that I describe in the essay. I was guessing that I liked the film, I hadn't seen it yet when I—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And you got quite upset with the reaction.

JONATHAN LETHEM: I got really angry at people for—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: For laughing.

JONATHAN LETHEM: I defended a film I hadn't seen yet and I accused them of kind of heresy for not liking it, and then I had to watch as it unfolded, and it's actually a film that presents tremendous awkwardnesses, and it's very embarrassing and squalid. The humor is very broad. There's a lot that you can—it's indefensible, it's very, very hard to—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But you came to its rescue.

JONATHAN LETHEM: I wanted to protect this.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You know, my story about Monument Valley is I drove from Philadelphia to California. I got a fellowship at the Getty, I was a jolly good fellow before it went to the magic mountain, still in Santa Monica. I met a writer who I wonder

if you know, Cees Noteboom, a Dutch writer, who we discovered within about two minutes of speaking to each other that we both loved Westerns, that we both had a passion for Monument Valley, and he said to me, "You know, when I was walking in Monument Valley, I felt as though I was walking on subtitles." **(laughter)** That image was so powerful.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Europeans love Westerns, and they see them, I think, in—for them it's like an allegorical space, it's not a human space. Which is one of the ways in, which is to stop looking at it as sort of bogus history and to start to see it as like a Beckett play, characters on a blank page, so, yeah, with subtitles, I guess, if you're in Europe, but they're—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But also he was walking, you know, the space, I think he also meant that the space where he was walking on Monument Valley was where the subtitles appeared when he was watching the film, so he was literally walking on them, so, you know, it was kind of a sacred space for him at that moment seeing it. But you watched those movies three times, you were saying, but you've been known to do much worse, in some way. You've been known to watch some movies twenty-one times.

JONATHAN LETHEM: I just finished watching parts of a movie. I just wrote a book about a film that will come out in November.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What is it?

JONATHAN LETHEM: I wrote a book about *They Live*, it's a John Carpenter kind of horror/science fiction movie from 1988 with a strong satirical political under, you know, subtext, it's hardly a subtext, it's really blatant. The main character is a homeless construction worker who wanders into Los Angeles and finds a pair of, basically, magic sunglasses that reveal that yuppies are actually invading aliens who'd come to suck the lifeblood out of—It's an allegory of Reagan-era America and completely, completely relevant ever since, but so—so I just watched *They Live*, I had it on my computer while I was writing this little book, it's just like a hundred-page monograph on *They Live*, and I was thinking about how many—

I mean, film writers didn't have this privilege. When you read, you know, Joseph McBride on *The Searchers*, or, you know, David Thomson writing about a Warren Beatty movie in the seventies, you might have gotten to see the film three or four times and taken notes, frantically. You wouldn't necessarily have control of that, but all I had to do was keep this disc in my—in my computer as I wrote it. The film was literally playing behind my words. And I'd rewind scenes, I could freeze stills at will. You can obsess so much more extensively than a film writer ever might have been able to, before, you know, and I wasn't wearing holes in a print, in a celluloid print, or degenerating videotape.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You write in one of the chapters that you watched *Star Wars* I believe twenty-one times.

JONATHAN LETHEM: But that was a mistake. **(laughter)** That was a mistake. I should have stopped at nineteen.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You're forgiven. You've also said that if one had to find a source that you have been so interested yourself in the whole notion of influence, the probably—the most, the deepest possible source for the origin of your inspiration would come from Hitchcock.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Well, I think he is one of the artists I can—who I find myself abiding with, you know, he's a life companion, and there are just a few that feel that—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Who are some of the others? And before you even answer that question just stay one more minute with Hitchcock. Is his religious background important to you?

JONATHAN LETHEM: Well, this is a funny thing, is I don't—I'm very. I have—I lack the—I'm almost autistic about spiritual matters, I don't catch it, I don't—I don't have the instinct.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Have you tried?

JONATHAN LETHEM: I mean, I've made myself as available to it as I suppose I feel I should have, but, then again, that's part of being autistic about it. I don't know what even trying would consist of, particularly, besides sitting for longer hours in—you know, I mean, the place where I failed to practice spirituality was in Quaker meetinghouses, which are very, very lovely places, and, you know, if you like insomnia, sitting in silence with other people is even more attractive. It's a very, very human, resonant, you know, the rooms are beautifully modest. You know, Quakers believe in unadorned churches. There's no oppressive air of ritual or no intermediaries, they've done away with, you know, paternal figures between you and the Light. There's just you and others working to be humble in this communion, except I never could attain it, not even the beginnings of it, and I was—I felt obliged to pretend that worked, to act like I was close or that it was—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Meaningful in some way.

JONATHAN LETHEM: —meaningful to me but I just being polite. It's not–it doesn't happen for me. But all of this is to say, I was very glad to be raised as a Quaker, and in fact when I was presenting myself as a credible candidate for this teaching job, one of the things I realized was I'm comfortable in group facilitation, that's the sort of the drab, kind of PC-sounding word for it, because I went to so many Quaker youth organization weekends. I mean, I was really, until I realized I didn't fit in that whole environment, I was doing a lot of work to become like a good peer leader and a good group facilitator and I even interned as late as my freshman year in college. Bennington has this thing called the NRT—nonresident term—it's a way of not heating the buildings in January

and February—and so they send you off to do something in the world, and I went back to a Quaker youth organization and interned as a kind of a no longer peer, but I was somewhere between one of the adult leaders and the, you know—I carved out a special role for myself, and that's where I really learned to sit with a group and act like I knew what they should do with an hour or two of their time, that's why I feel okay in a classroom.

Long way around to—when you asked about Hitchcock's religious obsession, my first thought is, "no no no it's not that, because I don't believe that I care about that," but on the other hand I have tended to have an intense responsiveness to morbid Catholic artists—Graham Greene, Muriel Spark—you know, again and again and again I find that novelists that I really, really vibrate with are, you know, have the same kind of troubled background in English, usually, Catholicism. I don't know why.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's partly why I was asking you. Interesting that you mention Graham Greene, because as I wished to ask you about one of the very first jobs you held, making sandwiches, which led to a good understanding of how to deal with customers in a bookstore. Graham Greene in *The Power and the Glory* writes "there's always a moment in childhood when the door opens and lets in the future." And it strikes me as very powerful and there you were making sandwiches and learning that you should not use the phone, that you should in fact not use the phone, and deal with customers who are right in front of you and then, when we spoke over the summer, I found you in and you told me to look it up and it's quite fascinating in a bookstore you I think own in part,

Red Gap Books, in Maine, which is in Blue Hill, Maine, and was founded in 2009, I read, "by Marjorie Kernan, André Strong, and Jonathan Lethem as a place to keep our strong interest in all things bookish lively. It has a wide choice of used books at reasonable prices. The sections include top"—I like that very much, I wonder if you wrote the copy for this—"the sections include top-quality fiction, art, Maine, photography, sailing, nautical, film, philosophy, etc. Espresso and café tables make it a pleasant place to hang out."

JONATHAN LETHEM: Yeah, I think Marj wrote that copy. And I'm a kind of a shadow partner. I mean, I've spent—unfortunately—for the same reasons that, you know, that I've moved into this complacent middle-aged phase that we were talking about—the emphasis on family, I'm not in that shop, even when I'm in residence up in Maine, I'm not in that shop as much as I'd enjoy being. Marj and André really run it, but I take this incredible, you know, smug pleasure in being a bookseller again. It just feels very right to me and having these sort of these shelves that I go and fondle and straighten and price and erase books, you know, the prices in used books. It's so—it's restorative for me. It's something I did, you know, and—there, maybe my spiritual practice hides, in this adoration, this horrible adoration of these talismanic objects.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why horrible?

JONATHAN LETHEM: Well, I just mean it's very materialistic, even if it masquerades as a love of literature. Actually, I'm a book collector and I've always revered these

things. Where was I just—Oh! Lydia Davis has this amazing story where she's writing about motherhood and about how she has this dictionary she cherishes and she says, "I actually, every time I touch this dictionary, I am conscious of the effort not to harm it, to leave it no more damaged."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Beautiful. Beautiful.

JONATHAN LETHEM: It's an ancient book that she cares immensely for and then she says and it's a—kind of a twist of a knife, very typical of her work, she says, "Yet, with my son a living human being placed in my care, I cannot say the same thing." And she draws this forward in her typically disturbing and intense way and then leaves you to draw your own conclusions. But, you know, I do sometimes wonder at how much care I've lavished on what are finally, you know, treasure, physical possessions.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You feel a form of tactile inebriation in some way, and I recognize the fetishist in you.

JONATHAN LETHEM: You know, I think the reason I'm drawing it into a kind of uncertain moral standing is because right now so many people who feel that same tactile inebriation are claiming it as a kind of higher moral value, like against—as a bulwark against the electronic world, the—the world of ether, books are some sort of—but you know what books are, they're both—they're treasure and a technology—they're a

delivery system. You know, it's really not a moral value to love them the way I and I bet a lot of us here do. It's just a thing in life that I've spent a lot of time at.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Interestingly enough, I feel that when you are saying to me, it's just a "thing," you don't believe it.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Well, then, as I said, if I'm confessing any spiritual practice, it may be in this gap that you're detecting.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think you are, because when we were upstairs in the special collections room and you were holding and maybe even slightly fondling the George Eliot handwritten lists of books she had read and some of her manuscripts. It was something I felt was happening to you.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Well, I was looking for a getaway. **(laughter)** Could I actually make—you know, this evening would be nice but it would be much, much more exciting to get out this building with the George Eliot in my pocket.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm sorry.

JONATHAN LETHEM: I would have gladly thrown you over, Paul.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm so sorry. Interestingly enough, it strikes me that you—you now work in a particular way. You have I think two computers, or at least you have one computer, I read, which is disabled of having Internet.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Yeah.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You asked someone who works in electronics to not let you have either e-mail or Internet and he said, "But I can hide it for you," and you said, "no, no, no, I just don't want it." So that speaks, I mean, if you were lying down now I would say to you it speaks of a fairly addictive personality.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Yeah, I was just protecting myself from distraction. And it's sort of like the way I can't afford the luxury of insomnia anymore, to write novels while being a committed parent, I just don't think I can fool around. I can't Web-surf anymore. It's not okay. But again, I'm very—I have these reservations about anything that might seem to be some sort of. That second computer, that disabled computer, it's not like my moral computer, it's just—it's not a superior or exalted computer, it's just a practical necessity for me, because I *will* check my e-mail, like anyone would, and I just can't let that go on.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: If you had to update and maybe you are updating "The Ecstasy of Influence," how would you do it?

JONATHAN LETHEM: I don't think it can be updated. I think it's a timepiece already. I mean, after you get things like David Shields's own manifesto, which pushes a similar exploration into new turf and after the way it's been—you know, kind of become part of Internet lore, and I'm very proud of that. I think it's the most linked-to thing in the history of *Harper's* Web site.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Read it, please.

JONATHAN LETHEM: No, I don't feel—More than any other piece I've ever had in my hands, it doesn't belong to me. It never belonged to me. It was sort of, you know, I was summoned to be the orchestrator of that thing, but I feel it would be impossible to find an entrance to rework it. If anything, you know, I want to argue with it myself now, or find ways to play against it, but it seems very distant from me.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Some of your major work, including the epic *Fortress of Solitude* and *Chronic City*, employs elements of what one might call surrealism or magic realism. Do you actually see yourself as part of a certain tradition in this regard? If it doesn't feel like magic realism, it doesn't feel like the magic realism of Gabriel Garcia Márquez, and presumably Latin American authors are not the core inspiration for your exploration of the alternatives realities, but I'm sure there are some key influences here,

and I would like to know where you might situate yourself if indeed these names make—have a meaning. I remember in that regard Paul Valéry once was asked about where he belonged and he said, "you know, one doesn't quench one's thirst or inebriate oneself with wine labels."

JONATHAN LETHEM: Yeah. I have a hostility to the term magic realism, and I'm often too polite to express it, but, you know, because people often are offering it as a description of my work in praise. They're trying to say that they've responded to what I'm doing and that it seems valid to them, and in fact they're often specifically offering it as a way of distinguishing—even if this is unspoken—distinguishing those features of my work that they're calling "magic realism" from down-market—indigenous down-market notions like "science fiction" or "fantasy."

But I really find it a particularly useless phrase, because I find both terms are dubious, the "magic" and the "realism," because what it presumes is that everyone consents to what realism is and that realism is this placid, sturdy, you know, resilient, universally recognizable thing and that now, "oh, we're going to sprinkle some magic on it," and I just feel like absolutely not, I don't agree about the realism, and I don't want to reach for the magic. I don't *like* magic. I always thought that magicians were, you know—like Doug Henning—really horrible people. And—it's, so it betrays.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Who is he? An American magician?

JONATHAN LETHEM: Yeah, you can find him on YouTube, I'm sure.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We are all YouTubeable.

JONATHAN LETHEM: And probably he's a really nice guy.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And comes from a good family.

JONATHAN LETHEM: He's probably watching us streaming right now.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And screaming.

JONATHAN LETHEM: And he's turned to his wife and said, "Why did he say that?"

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Too bad.

JONATHAN LETHEM: So that term actually, I mean, I am letting myself become aroused. It specifically—"magic realism" betrays everything I understand about how I arrived at the way I make the work I make, okay? Because I just thing realism as a consensual, you know, default for fiction is gone. Mimetic techniques, many of which I employ myself with great relish, when I learned to do like good mimetic techniques, I was totally thrilled, but they are in the employ of a fiction, as I understand it, that

fundamentally understands itself to be an artifice, a fiction, okay? So magic realism, I just don't want to get anywhere near those two words together. I don't like them.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think you've been quite clear. In *Chronic City* your characters are intimidated by a gigantic novel entitled *Obstinate Dust* by Ralph Warden Meeker. This is an allusion to David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, perhaps. Speak about David Foster Wallace as a contemporary, as an influence, perhaps, as an inspiration for the fictional novelist Ralph Warden Meeker. This, of course, has extra relevance given the chair you will occupy.

JONATHAN LETHEM: It's a strange, very particular and striking destiny to go and now sort of occupy this—I mean, putting aside his accomplishment as a writer, he happens to have been one of the most beloved teachers in the classroom, I think, in our generation of writing teachers, or maybe teachers per se. We don't have privilege to be inside that relationship. No one who wasn't his student really knows what is being discussed. But something very special occurred, because people testify again and again to what he gave in that transaction, so it's a sort of a mark to aspire to, and it will be very much in—you know, it's local there. I won't—because three years have elapsed, I won't—and it's just an undergraduate school—I won't actually teach students who worked with Wallace, but it still—it's going to feel very close at hand.

Yes, the reference in *Chronic City* that book is a kind of a reference to *Infinite Jest*, although actually when the characters open up the book and begin reading it aloud on the

subway what they encounter is quite a lot more like another titanic kind of imponderably ambitious novel, *Dhalgren* by Samuel Delany. So in my mind the fictional book inside my book combines features of *Infinite Jest* and *Dhalgren* but, you know, I'd begun that—I'd begun *Chronic City* and had already written that reference into the book before he died, and I didn't know at first what to do with it, it was sort of staring at me after he committed suicide. Of course it felt horrible to think I was supposed to take it out now because it would be like, oh, I'm obligated to erase him from my book the way he's erased himself from the world, was unthinkable, but at the level that I placed the reference it might seem to be a chafing or scornful one, and so I was stuck staring at it and trying to penetrate its future in my book, and I ended up bringing it back and intensifying its place in the book, so it becomes—it deepened for me.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How do you come up the names of your characters? I mean, I've written down a few. Chase Insteadman, Laird Noteless, Richard Abneg, Thatcher Woodrow, they seem overdetermined like a Pynchon novel and I was just wondering, where do you find these things? I mean, I'm always, when I ask where do you find them I'm always reminded of Leonard Cohen's line, if he knew where inspiration came from he would go there more often. How do you come upon these names?

JONATHAN LETHEM: Well, I mostly—I mean, I don't have a great answer, there's no, like, algorithm or word game I play to generate them. I feel my way to them but I do think it's like most things in the language that you use. It begins with listening, and it

always strikes me that for instance, Paul Holdengräber, that people have much more interesting names than we mostly acknowledge because we take them for granted, and that many of them would seem quite overdetermined if they were placed into fiction. And so, I actually, I guess I have a slight chip on my shoulder. Because, it's as if people think all the characters ought to be named, you know, Paul Smith and Jonathan Wilson.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think Paul Holdengräber has a future. Certainly when I was teaching it was quite complex for students, they usually would say Paul "Hold and grab her," which was quite natural.

JONATHAN LETHEM: I guess I hear a lot of very exciting names as I move through the world.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why not use them?

JONATHAN LETHEM: I just think of course the ones in fiction should be at least as memorable and sometimes, yes, I'll push them into another degree of strangeness, partly because I have an interest in fiction that feels simultaneously like it's depicting our world and that it has an air, just a little itch under the skin, of allegory. I don't want it to be real allegory, where you can just boil it down and translate all the terms into some, "oh, he just means this and this and this." I dislike allegory in its real sense, but I like, you know, for instance, as a kid, I was always very turned on by reading the annotated *Alice in Wonderland* and realizing that so many of the things in Lewis Carroll were references to

Victorian ditties or notions that he was making fun of and that contemporary readers might translate. But I knew that I preferred my own blissful ignorant first encounter with it, where these things had an air of translatability, but I was on the other side, they seemed charged with potential interpretations, but I couldn't *make* the interpretations. So sometimes I want the names to feel that way, like if you worked really hard, you'd get somewhere, but you'd never do all that work, you'd never do it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Have you maintained a passion for graffiti? Have you, for instance, seen the recent movie *Exit through the Gift Shop*?

JONATHAN LETHEM: I want to see that. I've heard that it's good.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Tremendous. Banksy.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Yeah. I'm interested in graffiti, but I don't—I mean, I'm interested in that movie, but I don't think of Banksy as graffiti in the sense that I—you know, for me it has a lot to do with this experience of the vernacular culture of New York City as I grew up inside it, the birth of hip-hop and the forms of communication and possession that teenagers placed over this half-ruined, half-mad, half-dystopian city because in the early seventies, you know, the collective, you know, feeling about New York was it was over, it was ruined, it was being abandoned, and, you know, that was a very thrilling, dangerous, but thrilling kind of place to grow up inside, because it felt like maybe it was going to be turned over to us to play in. A lot of these ruined buildings

were—and ruined lots—were, you know, were our zones, and you know, if you put a piece of graffiti up in 1971, it might still be there in 1985. If you put it in the right place, no one might ever be troubled to scrub it off. The conscious street art that formed, you know, I have varying likes and dislikes, but I don't relate it so directly to this stuff.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Because it has become commodified.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Because it begins with a self-conscious, you know, art theory or art commodification, which is fine, many wonderful artists begin in self-consciousness, but this isn't the case with the graffiti culture that I was documenting a little bit in *Fortress of Solitude*.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: There's a Web site now where you can find every possible product you might need as a graffiti artist. Art Primo, you just go there and you can see every possible—

JONATHAN LETHEM: There are a lot of fetishes around that world now, and, you know, I suppose I'm complicit with that in a way by making the graffiti so legendary in you know in the places I've written about it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In closing, when we were talking about your departure, you mentioned that it coincides not only with your middle-class aspirations but also with rather ambitious projects that you are undertaking now. So the middle-class aspirations

might be modulated, as it were, by the ambitious projects. And I wonder if you could slightly disclose what they might be.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Yeah, slightly. You know, the great quote about that is Flaubert, which is "Be ordinary and bourgeois in your everyday life so that you may be violent and original in your work." And it's not, you know, "*and* be violent and original," it's "so that." For him it was one procedure enabled and opens the other.

I'm starting a very big crazy novel about Queens, about Sunnyside, and it's set at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, principally, although it sprawls a bit and almost gets to the present day, certainly will go through the seventies and eighties a little bit. In that sense it's structurally the most like *Fortress of Solitude*, and in a way you could almost call it a *Fortress of Solitude* for my mother's generation instead of my own. It's about the place, time and place, where she pulled away from her outer-borough life, brought herself out of the ethnic enclaves of Queens. In her case, she was a red-diaper baby, and Sunnyside was a place where communists, had gone, you know, again, initially to set up a perfect socialist suburb, and then with the Stalin purges being revealed in the mid-fifties, they all were embittered and disappointed and had to stare at each other and not talk about their beliefs anymore.

And my mother grew up in this place with these very specific kind of disappointed communists all around her, and she pulled herself out of Queens, dropped out of Queens College at age seventeen and kind of ran away to Greenwich Village, where the first

stirrings of the folk scene were happening, and she hung out on MacDougall Street, so I'm sort of with you with the—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What year would that be?

JONATHAN LETHEM: Sixty-one, you know, fifty-nine, sixty, sixty-one, sixty-two, so I'm sort of taking this raw material of my grandmother and my mother as a bridge from the fifties to the sixties and one version of an American leftist commitment, you know, American communism, explicit communist belief and then the kind of birth of the new left counterculture and the folk scene in Greenwich Village.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We shared a common experience in April, by two or three days apart, both interviewing, or conversing with, Patti Smith. For me it was, ahhh, I just have to admit it in front of everybody, I just fell in love, and I wasn't prepared for it, as one often is, when one falls in love, one isn't quite prepared for it. What—I'm sure you grew up listening to a lot of Patti Smith. I discovered Patti Smith as I turned fifty, and I'm wondering what did you learn that evening or afternoon when you interviewed her, what did you learn that you didn't know about her? That's not the fifties—late fifties, early sixties, rather she was talking about the grittiness of New York that she misses now—

JONATHAN LETHEM: It's funny you followed my rambling just then with this question, because she actually reminded me—unexpectedly reminded me of my mother in her physical presence, in a way, in person was very, very different from the image she

projects, and that that was as intense as anything that was exchanged personally, and she's a very, very beatific, warm person, to be—*splendid* person to be in the presence of, and, you know, she sang a song onstage for me, I don't know if she did this for you, Paul.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: She did.

(laughter)

JONATHAN LETHEM: And she sang it looking into my eyes.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: She didn't do that for me.

JONATHAN LETHEM: And I have to say that overwhelmed any anything we were, any yakety-yak. That was the takeaway was she sang a song looking into my eyes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I must say she did do something for me which was quite special. I don't mean to outdo what she did for you, but the way I was aroused was she wrote to me the day of the event, not having communicated before, saying that she very much liked the idea of going to see the special collections, and we took her up. And she touched Virginia Woolf's cane, and her knees were sort of trembling, saying "Paul what are you doing to me?"

JONATHAN LETHEM: She's a real collector.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: She's a fetishist, I mean, she's really, a deeply, and she—in this message she wrote to me saying that she very much liked and was looking forward to going and seeing these special items, the last line, I think after her signature, was "shall I bring my guitar?" And I remember thinking and she had said before that the ideas were cool, and I was trying to say to myself, "Okay, Paul, remain cool." I was pacing up and down in my apartment, thinking, "I'm not going to respond immediately," and then I said, "Well, if you'd like to bring your guitar, please do." She—one of the things I discovered is that she adores opera, I mean, as you know from the book, she really just, and adores Maria Callas.

JONATHAN LETHEM: It's another thing, is her book, if you guys haven't read it, it's an extraordinarily good memoir, just a great book to read.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: *Just Kids*.

JONATHAN LETHEM: I'll tell you one thing that we said that stayed with me. A lesson to writers, I mean, something that happened in our conversation I feel I'll bring into the writing classroom. I mean, in the past, in her poetry and in some of the prose poems that she's published, Patti Smith has been a very esoteric, verging on abstract, writer in many ways, and she knows this and, you know, made herself into that kind of

writer, but this narrative of her life with Mapplethorpe is pure testimony, pure storytelling, and it's built out of, you know, the most fundamentally sound kind of scene construction.

And I asked her, "Where did this come from and why is it so different?" and did she consciously put aside the more esoteric or evocative, you know, poetical style that was as far as I knew her only writing style to that point? She said, "Well, I was writing this book for Bob," for Mapplethorpe, and he didn't ever have any patience with her abstract stuff, and she wanted it to be a book he would have liked to read, so she was always consciously excluding anything that wouldn't have worked for *him*, and that that's how she ended up in this place, and I just thought, you know, she's—obviously it's a very moving thought, since the companion is gone, the recipient is gone, but this idea that you get to that kind of honesty and that kind of persuasiveness by remembering that you're writing *to someone*, that every book, every piece is a piece of transmission, a letter, essentially, from you to a listener. Some listener.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Jonathan Lethem, thank you very much.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: There is a microphone, and there may be some good questions.

Q: I'm interested in your painting: Why you gave it up, do any of your old paintings exist, and are any for sale?

JONATHAN LETHEM: Well, that's an interesting question. You know, I grew up with my father's painting, and he was, I mean, he *is*, still, my first and deepest model of commitment to art practice. He just goes into his studio every day, and it bothers him if he doesn't, and he just makes work, and this was so meaningful to me and then I also had this sort of weird luck, genetic luck, of I inherited his, you know, hand-and-eye thing, I can kind of impress people, I can draw in a way that—that turns on art teachers and made them think I was a hot ticket, but in some other sense I was always so utterly *unlike* him in my engagement with language, narrative, storytelling, I always—as many museums and galleries as I was taken to—and enjoyed being taken to—as a kid, and I have a lot of, you know, art vocabulary, art literacy, it was books that blew me away and that I took into myself, and it became personal.

So the game, the dance as a kid of being a little art prodigy, felt very exciting to me. It was—I was making myself into the kind of person that I wanted to be, because the two are not that distant, you know, having a life as a painter, having a life as a novelist, both involve a lot of the same fundamental commitment to solitude and, you know, of self-interrogation of your interests and influences and trying not to repeat yourself and trying to avoid clichés. You know, so the training for one was perfectly applicable to the other, and it was fun being an art kid, it meant that in high school instead of going to, like, social studies or math classes, I was doing things like—I mean, in high school, I carved

marble, stone, you know. By the time—even before I'd gotten to college, I spent hundreds of hours in art classrooms, and that's just a nice way to spend your teenage life.

But I somehow knew I was meant to be a writer, I just, I had another kind of thing going on between me and the books, so the one was always lurking behind the other, and I was never actually in doubt of it, just as it happened. Thank you.

Oh yeah, right, oh! So—a very small handful of the paintings exist, and I think they're in my dad's storage space. A few of them. There's only two or three that I would ever let anyone look at and they're mostly just really sophomoric. One of the weird giveaways is the way I painted was very narrative and cartoonish and there were all these characters, and sometimes even words would come in. I painted a lot of words on the canvas. It was like they're begging you to say, "Oh just go and start writing."

There's a book called *The Writer's Brush*, which is a big coffee table compendium of paintings and drawings by writers and it's very flattering, because it goes all the way back to, like, Victor Hugo and you know, Borges has a drawing in there, and there are lots and lots of—you know, John Ashbery has collages and John Updike has cartoons in it, because he was a cartoonist before he was a novelist. I think I'm the youngest person featured in it, so it is sort of neat to be like bringing up the rear in this, you know, this compendium of dilettantes.

I know I was not ever really a painter. I don't like that kind of like, you know, even when I do fool around now I don't pretend that anyone should look at it just because I'm a writer, you know. It's a real commitment, and I never made it. In fact the best of my art teachers saw through me. They saw the facility was like I was just kind of like, "Hey, look at that," and they would often try to have these stern talks with me about how they could see I wasn't really *there*.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It will be interesting to see how the students will feel when you see through *them*, now. It will be difficult, because in some way some of them will probably be writing to impress you.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Yeah, but very few of them will be as obnoxious as I was at that age. I was really—because I'd gone to art school as a teenager and because my dad was a painter and I could just play the role so confidently. When I got to college and I was—when I talk of these best of my art teachers who confronted me, I'm talking about at Bennington in the first, you know, year or two there, I was really a jerk, because I was acting like I was going to have an art career without caring about one. I just seemed to think it was mine to be had, and they needed to step up and say something. I was fooling around, whereas for me, even though I was much worse as a writer—when I first started writing I didn't have any of those advantages, I was quite incompetent, but I was in the grip of something that mattered to me, and the commitment was real. The talent, you know, took quite a long time to show. I mean, I was not encouraged by the people who I

showed my first writings to. But it didn't matter. I was just—There I was doing what mattered to me, and it was different.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In some of—in one of the last essays of *The Disappointment Artist*, you write about this what I love is this level of utter absorption. You say "I couldn't bear to listen to Talking Heads records, even the ones I'd previously revered, after *Naked* and after David Byrnes's early solo records. That subsequent music seemed to me, to my fierce acolyte heart, a betrayal of the idea of the Talking Heads, as if David Byrne were an unworthy steward of the art he'd partly created. All their music became poisonously embarrassing to me at the moment I realized it wasn't as good as I'd claimed it was, and no band is as good as I claimed Talking Heads were in the years I adored them. I suffered other similar if milder divorces. From the surrealist painters Magritte and de Chirico, from Jean-Luc Godard and Brian Eno and David Bowie, these disappointments I managed to modulate, these artists are less like ex-lovers and like friends I keep in my address book but call less often than I used to. It was my splits from Talking Heads and Stanley Kubrick and Don DeLillo that left me indignant, ashamed, and unmoored, as breakups with a girlfriend or a wife, wondering who'd failed whom." And then you say, "attempting to burrow and disappear into the admiration of certain works of art I tried to make such deep and pure identification that my integrity as a human self would become optional, a vestige of my relationship to the art. I downloaded art into myself."

Love these, love these words.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Thank you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's as if for you to exist in that world you need to set up such a high expectation that a natural disappointment will come.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Yeah, I'm guilty of loading the stakes and then I sometimes have made that problem a subject in my work. I mean, both you know Dylan Ebdus in *Fortress of Solitude* and Perkus Tooth in *Chronic City* are trying to make culture sustain them, like food and oxygen. You know, they're trying to get—and human companionship. They're trying to make a whole world out of their cultural stuff, and it fails them, so I guess I exist in a kind of a tension between that semireligious reverence and the more pragmatic, you know, the fall, the disappointment of being finally, you know—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let down?

JONATHAN LETHEM: Cast back, well, let down, but also in a sense returned to the other parts of being human. You know, I've made a life in culture, but, you know, one of the things we've spoken of, you know, almost flippantly here, I also sustain myself in the, you know, the life of my family now, and it's best to have both of those things. I mean, not specifically two little children or any other kind of family arrangement, I'm not proposing a preference, I just mean a human life.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Unless there are other questions, I think it's not a bad thing to end on "a human life," but there is another question, so we might end on not a human life. Go ahead.

Q: Well, so, I'm also a writer, and I guess as many writers, I have a lot of anxiety, so I was given the advice to exercise more, so I was excited to read in an interview that you write on a treadmill.

JONATHAN LETHEM: I tried to set this up, and I'm going to set it up again in California. I built it myself, and I'm not very good at these kinds of constructions but I got a computer with a wireless keyboard, so the two don't have to be attached, and the keyboard was sort of weirdly—with a combination of like wood, and I used these weird pieces of hardware that I found and bungee cords, I kind of have the computer screen is tilted up and the keyboard is across where, you know, you ordinarily program the treadmill, and I never really was able to make this work, but I really am excited about the idea that I might find a way to do it and even just the fact that I was sometimes walking and writing seemed really revolutionary to me.

I mean, there's this—I was just speaking of being an art student and carving stone, I mean, I had amazing arms in high school and you know there is this sort of joke about painters live forever because they're like up on their feet, you know, moving their arms around and writers all sit, you know, you're moving the least part of your body

(laughter) and then one day you just fall over and they don't even notice that you died. **(laughter)** So I want to try to find a way. I do miss—it's not like I think that there's some difference that will happen in the writing, but, you know, with the zero sum of my family life, you know, if I could combine a little bit of aerobics with all of those hours that I spend twitching my fingers, it would be a very good thing.

Q: I feel like it defuses the anxious creative energy that would otherwise go into—like I just get sleepy, because after I exercise, I just get sleepy.

JONATHAN LETHEM: I guess I never got up to a good enough pace to get sleepy. Thank you. Thank you for the question, good luck with the work. I see somebody.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Come on up.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Come on up.

Q: Sorry, I'll try to make it quick. I know you're trying to wrap it up. I was curious about the seed stage of when you write and if basically if something that ended up as a novel ever could have been expressed as an essay or vice versa, or, like, how that unfolds for you, basically.

JONATHAN LETHEM: Thank you. Well, you know, I don't ever feel like I've mistaken one thing for another in that way that I think you're proposing. You know,

novels, they don't just suddenly, you know, you don't sort of have one seed, and you see a little sprout a couple of days later and you're writing a novel. For me, anyway, they're this accumulation of sometimes to begin with things I don't know are related to one another, different feelings, different set pieces, different kinds of character or story or crisis or something that I begin to put into relation to one another, and I begin to think, you know, for instance, "oh the graffiti and oh the, you know, the being bullied and superheroes and, you know, liner notes and soul music and this kind of character that I never have done before. Oh this all does belong together and I'm thinking about it for a reason," but this happens over a period of years.

I mean, I've always been thinking about a novel for years, even if it's in very nascent, very inchoate ways, before I begin anything. Before I even take a note, I've usually been kind of mulling or just living with some half-formed stuff that starts to clump together. Novels are really—you know, it's a very baggy art form, even the least baggy novels, even the most apparently slim and elegant and on-point novels that you can think of, they still have so many different things in them compared to most other art forms, they're so various, the numbers of characters and situations and sentences and, you know, and approaches, usually, that are all hiding under that one umbrella, so that for me is always this agglomerating kind of thing whereas a short story or an essay is not the opposite, exactly, but it's when something seems to have a very clear container around it, it just doesn't agglomerate, instead it sort of sits there. It doesn't mean I don't sometimes think about this for years. There's an essay I want to write right now that I've had the title and the idea for it just sitting for a long time, and I kind of know exactly how it's going to

work, and it just needs writing, and it doesn't open onto other territories, it doesn't complicate, it just—it's just waiting, so that's an essay.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Thank you so very much. We will miss you. Thank you very much.

(applause)