

## Lethem's 'Alan' powerful storytelling

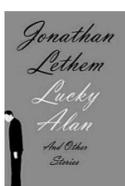
By Mike Fischer

MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

"We're these dreamy fools, drunk on narrative, who see the world around us in metaphorical terms."

So said Jonathan Lethem, when I interviewed him last summer — true to his long-standing, genre-bending focus on how we tell our stories and what that says about who we are, as we struggle to find readers willing to share our solitude.

In "Lucky Alan," Lethem's new collection of nine stories, his preoccupation with narrative exhibits the customary ambivalence of a writer who also has been aware always that however vital our stories can be, they also potentially confine and reduce us, limiting our



**LUCKY ALAN**

By Jonathan Lethem

Doubleday, \$24.95

ability to write something new. Just think of the controlling fictions being spun by the bad guys in Lethem's breakout novel, "Motherless Brooklyn" (1999).

In one of the stories in this new collection, marginalized cartoon characters find themselves moored on an isolated atoll akin to the Island of Misfit Toys; they desperately seek release from the neglected back-page panels in which their lonely lives unfold ("Their Back

Pages").

In another, the life of a critic paid to review porn increasingly resembles the material he watches — even as he insists he rises above it ("The Porn Critic"). In a third, two young book-selling fans of a reclusive writer come to define themselves and the writer through their own exclusionary and elitist insistence that they alone truly know how to read him ("The King of Sentences").

As occasionally happens with Lethem, these and a few more of this collection's stories feel like overly cerebral experiments, cleverly — even ingeniously — elaborating on a central conceit that takes the story hostage, leaving little air for anything else. They're smart, but they sometimes lack

heart.

Conversely, there's plenty of heart in the title story, one of the few that's set in Lethem's native New York City. "Lucky Alan" revolves around efforts by the extravagantly named Sigismund Blondy, theater director and film savant, to reach the younger Alan, caught in "a fiery aura of loneliness."

Sigismund fails, but in doing so he learns something about how he's perceived: Alan had taken Sigismund's well-meaning efforts to befriend the neighbors as attempts to enlist them all "as figures in a shadow play," with the neighborhood serving as a "stage for theatrics." Lethem suggests Alan might even be right, while still being entirely wrong to castigate what Sigismund has done.

## Terrorism winner in Mid East evolution

By Tod Robberson

DALLAS MORNING NEWS

Arguments about Middle East history bear a frustrating resemblance to the physicists' conundrum of an irresistible force clashing with an immovable object. No one ever seems to win.

In "Anonymous Soldiers," however, author Bruce Hoffman makes the startling but persuasive argument that, in fact, there has been a winner in the battle among Jews, Arabs and the West for superiority over the tiny crescent of turf now known as Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. The winner, Hoffman says, is terrorism.

Prepare to be deeply disturbed by this book. Hoffman, an authority on terrorism at Georgetown University, challenges popular characterizations of the valiant struggle of Jews to carve out their own nation.

What if it turned out that Israel's freedom fighters bore a much closer resemblance to Carlos the Jackal than George Washington? What if it turned out that al-Qaida's leaders actually drew inspiration from terrorist strategies employed by radical Jews in Palestine during the 1930s and '40s? Hoffman lays out in richly researched detail the case that terrorism and blackmail are what formed the foundations of Israel's independence.

"Anonymous Soldiers" opens at the end of World War I. A gigantic power vacuum loomed over the post-Ottoman Middle East. The great European powers, working through the League of Nations, carved up the region, and Britain emerged with authority to rule over Palestine.

With anti-Jewish sentiment spreading in Europe, Britain recognized the need to expand Jewish immigration quotas to provide a refuge in Palestine, but as soon as it did, Arabs reacted with a short-lived, largely rural campaign of terror raids on British forces and Jewish communities. When the British pulled back on the idea of expanded Jewish immigration quotas to appease the Arabs, Jewish factions erupted.

Among the activists were Yitzhak Shamir, of Lehi, and Menachem Begin, who led Irgun. Both would eventually become prime ministers of Israel and, ironically, vociferous critics of the Arab terrorist tactics they themselves had employed.



**ANONYMOUS SOLDIERS: THE STRUGGLE FOR ISRAEL, 1917-1947**

By Bruce Hoffman  
Knopf, \$35

POETIC DIVERSITY FOR NATIONAL POETRY MONTH by Roberto Bonazzi

## Poetry — it's alive and well in U.S.

April is National Poetry Month. The diversity of these poets and their recent collections attests to the quantity and quality of poetry being published by independent imprints and university presses.

Dave Oliphant's wandering narratives in "The Cowtown Circle" (Alamo Bay, \$15.95) rummage through the underbrush of seemingly trivial memories until readers trip on a significant epiphany or wise turn hidden in these brief three or four line stanzas.

His cleverly subdued style allows making almost anything into a poem. Those on music are most fascinating because they are evocatively characterized, while a roving eye observes details that display a confidence and a caring. The same is true of the "Maria" poems — a mixture of the love, charm and soft comedy that long marriages can reveal.

B.V. Olguín's "Red Leather Gloves" (Hansen Group, \$12.95) emerges authentically from his perspective as an undefeated amateur boxer, examining the seedy side of machismo. The gritty narratives express what it means to train for coaches in a gym, to be hungry since you had

to run on fight day to make weight, and to overcome real fear and pain. Exploring boxing terminology as titles and themes — knockout, gladiator, killer instinct, the sweet science, pound for pound — Olguín counterpunches clichés into human reality. Most portraits are of losers, has-beens, or liars, but odes to Muhammad Ali, Ray Mancini, Ronnie Shields and Emile Griffith, as well as poems on the jab and double right cross, are enlightening.

Tad Cornell's resourceful

imagist poems from "In Whom Is My Delight (Juggling Teacups, \$18.95) are often satirical and laced with insight and playfulness. The way into this poetry is one's delight in writing a way through thinking. Five sequences are seamlessly

fused into one grand book by variations of a witty voice. The first narrates incarnation, reflecting Chesterton's views. The second is a

social worker's monologue of ethical crisis. "Today I am an 'on call' worker, and so/the phone may ring, and I be majestically shot/into my own denial before the cock's crow ... /All this before my foot even touched the floor./Go figure. He also serves who doesn't care." The third peers into the brain of poetry, where he has "staked my life/on an obsolete craft," discovering that "It's only when you can't find the last thread that clarity/mystery can occupy the same space at the same time." "Suite" sings as confessional poetics in the fourth: "Compelling as/masterful origami, the point is fragile, elegant pointlessness." The last recalls Shakespeare in sonnets to the body: "The garden of the moon is utter gift/like heart to heart and spousal loin to loin/or sighting land when all you had was drift." Cornell's drifting and musing images are unforgettable.

Judy Hogan's epic love poem, "This River" (Wild Embers, \$14), reveals the ecology of the muddy Haw River in North Carolina, which flows like the

Volga in Russia, where her unrequited love resides, and with whom they created a sister-city exchange. "We are working/together beside our two rivers which, though six thousand miles apart,/rush toward the same ocean." Poets

have imagined rivers of time, yet she asks, "What is ocean but the river that holds/the world in place and reminds it of eternity?" Hogan personalizes rivers in natural, unforced imagery. "This river has two/incarnations. She is the Volga at night/not letting me sleep; making me listen/to the urgent message her moonlit water/carried me as I stood, half awake/my heart's door swung open ..."

Jerry Bradley's funny, conversational verses in "Crownfeathers and Effigies" (Lamar University, \$15) are typified by "Subject-Verb-Complement": "Consider the oddity of love's grammar:/The first person gives way to a familiar

second,/Conjugating in time another he or she ... /he single lover made plural, two become one./No wonder we are confused./When I say I love you,/The compliment is resisted,/And no matter how hard I try to verb you,/I end up speaking always in a passive voice."

David Bowles' first book of poems, "Shattering and Bricolage" (Ink Brush, \$15.95), draws on varied sources — spiritual imagery from old Mexico, the Far East, India, ancient Greece, the Texas borderlands — turning all into

original collages. "Emptiness" reveals useful poetics: "Thus taught the master:/Constant practice. Learn all forms./ Once they are mastered, empty yourself of technique/of desire to control./Then, when the time comes,/art itself will move your hands/spontaneously,/your body a conduit/for universe's will." Every aspiring artist should follow this advice.

Sybil Pittman Estes' "Like That" (Alamo Bay, \$15.95) includes a hefty selection from four volumes, plus excellent

new poems of directness and honesty. The title poem narrates a remembered tale: "One peacock in full color:/a kaleidoscope."/That's Christ, all right, returning/to us: unexpectedly, with serendipity,/wonder, and



brilliant struts./ His ever relenting/grace." Her previous collections, including "Seeing the Desert Green" and "Candled in January Sun," feature personal poems of vulnerability and contrarian verses that do not flinch from their viewpoints.

Alan Gann's "Adventures of the Clumsy Juggler" (Ink Brush, \$15) keeps a busy life in balance, and his talking verses are funny. Most are not as deadpan as "On Becoming the Best Poet in the Room": "After shooting Billy Collins/I took his last cannoli/out of the oven/and left it to cool/by an open window/while wondering/what to do about Mary Oliver?" — but they are often entertaining in this first book.

Dede Fox's "Postcards Home" (Ink Brush, \$15) is a second book of precisely crafted poems that reveal a deep melancholic empathy for all, even her betrayers. Of "Poetry" she

writes: "Wrapped in cellophane,/ Some poems are understood/In a single glance./ Others offer a glimpse of meaning,/As if seen through diaphanous layers/A soaring ballerina's skirt." The last stanza reads: "Long for that/gift of clarity,/moment of grace,/ perfect gem,/millisecond of connection,/antidote to pain."

Roberto Bonazzi's Poetic Diversity column appears regularly in the Express-News. Reach him at [latitudesinternational@gmail.com](mailto:latitudesinternational@gmail.com).



The Cowtown Circle  
by Dave Oliphant



In Whom Is My Delight  
by Judy Hogan



Crownfeathers and Effigies  
by Jerry Bradley



SHATTERING AND BRICOLAGE  
by David Bowles



Adventures of the Clumsy Juggler  
by Alan Gann



Postcards Home  
by Dede Fox

## 'Dead Wake' chronicles Lusitania sinking

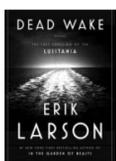
By David Hendricks

STAFF WRITER

Author Erik Larson loves the moment of collision.

In his newest book, "Dead Wake," the collision is an explosive one. It's the German torpedo that hit the English passenger liner Lusitania and sunk her in just 18 minutes off the coast of southeast Ireland. The 100th anniversary of the sinking that killed 1,198 people, 123 of them American, will be May 7, making Larson's book timely.

Larson may be best known in Texas as the author of "Isaac's Storm," about the September 1900 hurricane that annihilated Galveston. In "Isaac's Storm," Larson alternated the point of view between descriptions of the developing hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico with the daily life in Galveston of its lone weather



**DEAD WAKE: THE LAST CROSSING OF THE LUSITANIA**

By Erik Larson  
Crown, \$28

watcher, Isaac Cline, to dramatically depict the collision course.

"Isaac's Storm" is a man-vs.-nature tale. "Dead Wake" is a man-vs.-man story, but Larson uses the same narrative technique to develop rising tension in the book even though all readers know what is coming.

The collision course begins in New York City, for one side, and the German submarine port of Emden for the other side. The luxury liner Lusitania begins its trans-Atlantic voyage on a day when New York City's newspapers warn that German

submarines are sinking all types of ships around the British isles.

Larson uses personal written recollections of the survivors — there were 764 of them — to depict the nervous edge among the passengers as the cruise ship crossed the ocean toward a war zone.

German U-20 submarine captain Walther Schwieger meanwhile sets out looking to boost his tonnage-sunk numbers and has the green light to sink any ship he encounters.

Larson paints an accurate picture of Schwieger's deadly reputation and describes the living conditions in the submarine, especially the dank smells of unwashed crew members. Larson quotes Schwieger's log notes and provides a clear description of how the submarine operated as the U-20 circled the British isles.

Meanwhile, in London, a

secret British government office is tracking Germany's submarines, unknown to Germany, by intercepting coded radio communications. The British authorities, led by Winston Churchill, have the German codes to interpret the submarine positions, but the government places its top priority on protecting its military ships.

In Washington, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, hoping the United States can remain neutral in the European war, is obsessed with convincing Edith Galt to marry him after his first wife died.

Amid all kinds of variables, the timings of tides, incidences of fog, the lack of a British military escort ship and the three-quarters speed of the Lusitania, the submarine and the passenger ship finally are in position. At 2:10 p.m. on a clear day and a calm sea, a single torpedo is sent on its way to the Lusitania.

nia.

The ship listed to its starboard side so severely that the lifeboats became difficult to deploy. The ship sunk so quickly that the only people rescued were those who could survive in the water long enough for boats to arrive from nearby Queenstown, Ireland.

The United States didn't enter World War I until two years later, but the nature of Germany's U-boat attacks, especially on the Lusitania, began to turn the tide of U.S. opinion toward intervention.

Larson compiled a great deal of research for the book, but does not reveal any significant new information from what other excellent books have reported. With the anniversary so near, though, Larson's storytelling ability renews the episode with newly felt freshness.

[dhendricks@express-news.net](mailto:dhendricks@express-news.net)