



Gun, With Occasional Music

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Gumshoe Conrad Metcalf has problems—there's a rabbit in his waiting room and a trigger-happy kangaroo on his tail. Near-future Oakland is a brave new world where evolved animals are members of society, the police monitor citizens by their karma levels, and mind-numbing drugs such as Forgettol and Acceptol are all the rage.

Metcalf has been shadowing Celeste, the wife of an affluent doctor. Perhaps he's falling a little in love with her at the same time. When the doctor turns up dead, our amiable investigator finds himself caught in a crossfire between the boys from the Inquisitor's Office and gangsters who operate out of the back room of a bar called the Fickle Muse.

Mixing elements of sci-fi, noir, and mystery, this clever first novel from the author of *Motherless Brooklyn* is a wry, funny, and satiric look at all that the future may hold.

Gun, With Occasional Music Details

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From Reader Review Gun, With Occasional Music for online ebook

Punk says

Sci-fi noir detective story. It's Blade Runner meets Who Framed Roger Rabbit? and exactly as goofy and dark as that sounds.

Conrad Metcalf is our narrator, a Private Inquisitor in a world where direct questions are considered rude and question marks are flashy punctuation. The story's filled with products of evolution therapy: talking kittens and mobster kangaroos, plus the mysterious babyheads -- toddlers with advanced intelligence that hang out in babyhead bars and babble their babyhead talk. I can come up with my own reasons for most of these things, just take gene therapy, bioengineering, and cloning and project it forward twenty years, but it would have been nice if the story could have given me a hint to their origins in this fictional universe.

Above all, the novel is a mystery, though a failed one. It suffers from the ultimate drawing room "You may be wondering why I've gathered you all here today" infodump, where we all sit down and hear what *really* happened. It's a mark of how poorly the mystery is constructed that these answers don't appear in the natural course of the narrative and instead require an infodump for resolution. The mystery plot is weak, but the universe Lethem created makes up for the lackluster detective story.

The book is funny but disturbing, playful but violent. The fly-leaf actually got it right for once. It says, "It's funny. It's not so funny." Exactly.

Amanda says

HOLY WOW! what a great book! Maybe not 5 stars but most definitely a solid 4 and a half. Don't have the time to expand on that right now but if you like weird, original noir like nothing else you've ever read, then pick this one up! So happy i already have another of his books, Amnesia Moon, which i'll be enjoying very soon!

Still says

The quotation from Newsweek's review of this novel that appears on the front cover is quite accurate: **"Marries Chandler's style and Philip K. Dick's vision"**.

I was also reminded at times of Jack O' Connell's "Quinsigamond" series of futuristic crime thrillers: Word Made Flesh, Box Nine, Wireless (Quinsigamond #2), and The Skin Palace.

This novel is set in near-future Oakland.

The police investigators are known as "Inquisitors" and if you cross them, you'll have your karma card punched. Your karma card gets punched (or demagnetized) and you lose karma credits.

Lose too many karma credits and you wind up in the Freezer.

Too much time in the Freezer and you'll wind up with a slavebox installed at the base of your skull and

turned into a mindless laborer or a sexbot servicing brothel clients.

Everyone is on mind numbing drugs such as Addictol or Forgettol or Acceptol.
In this hellish future world reality is just too harsh for normals to function.

The lead character is a private inquisitor -a former Inquisitor gone rogue.
He's hired to follow the wife of a client around to make sure she isn't cheating on her husband.
In the process he interrogates an evolved sheep, commiserates with a fellow P.I. who happens to be an evolved ape, and gets in a few scrapes with a very tough character who happens to be an evolved kangaroo named "Joey". He also runs into a sleazy group of dangerous alcoholic "babyheads".

"You killed her", I suggested.

"I don't remember," he said. "I killed a lot of people."

"You loved her." ...

"I don't remember," he concluded. His face fell slack.

"Try harder," I said. "This one was special. You loved her and you killed her."

...

"His eyes cleared and his jaw set. "I suppose I did," he said. "The two sometimes go together." He smiled through his beard. "Women are already split in two from the floor halfway up, you know. I just finished the job."

"It's a set up." ... "We're meant to believe she forgot to insert her death control device," he went on. "But I for one don't buy it."

"I'm not tough," I said. "You don't understand."

"Take the money."

"I'm not for hire," I said. I'm still working out the remainder of [his] fee. Until then I'm booked up."

She didn't say anything.

I opened up my drawer and got out the cigarettes, put one in my mouth and offered her the pack. She refused. I lit mine and took a big drag.

The building around us was quiet, deathly quiet, and outside my window the night was like a dark nullification of the existence of the city. But underneath night's skirts the city lived on.

Disconnected creatures passed through the blackness, towards solitary destinations, lonely hotel rooms, appointments with death. Nobody ever stopped the creatures to ask them where they were going - no one wanted to know. No one but me, the creature who asked questions, the lowest creature of them all. I was stupid enough to think there was

something wrong with the silence that had fallen like a gloved hand onto the bare throat of the city.

Paul says

Gum-shoe Conrad Metcalf is a Private Inquisitor, once an Inquisitor (Police with wide ranging & draconian powers), who consolidate their power to completely control the populace at large. Their powers are such that media is rigidly controlled to the extent that newspapers carry photos only (no text) & even the photos promote the successes of the Inquisitors in keeping order, the cases real & imagined. The populace are further controlled by drugs, free of charge. Although there are variations on the effects of these drugs, they all have “addictol” as their base, with variations such as “forgetol”, “regretol”, “acceptol” & others to further control & render those addicted malleable & oblivious to the Inquisitors machinations. The same boffins who produce these mind controlling drugs, have made children obsolete & kids are now force grown to adulthood & commonly referred to as “baby-heads”. In addition, the same technology has produced “evolved animals”, able to walk upright & talk. These evolved animals are used as servants & lackeys. Citizens carry a Karma card, with points deducted at the whim of the Inquisitors, for infractions or purely to intimidate. Having a zero rating can get one put on ice, to be defrosted at some indeterminate time in the future. Or not. Some 'inmates' are thawed out & secretly used as mindless slaves, to serve as miners & prostitutes.

“I often try to guess a person's karmic level before they even begin talking & I was quickly working up a pretty low estimate for this guy...

He couldn't have been more than twenty-five, but he'd taken a long fall a short time ago. Pieces of the man he'd been were jumbled up with the new guy, the lost soul. My guess was he'd been that better man as recently as a couple of weeks ago.”

Metcalf is hired to follow Celeste, the wife of a prominent & influential doctor. When the doctor himself turns up dead, Metcalf finds himself at loggerheads with the law & criminal elements alike.

“I wanted to hit her as much as I wanted to fuck her & she probably wanted to be hit as much as she wanted anything.

So I hit her.”

Crikey!

This book is my second by Jonathan Lethem. In this book's description, it's likened in style to Philip K. Dick meets Raymond Chandler. Dick's vision, Chandler's wit & I would add Dashiell Hammett's hard-boiled aesthetic, with a touch of Orwell's 1984/Animal Farm. It's a witty, satirical blending of Noir, Hard-boiled mystery & Sci-Fi & one of the most innovative & original books it's been my pleasure to read this year, in this genre or any other.

An easy & ecstatic 5 stars from this reader. Highly recommended.

Penny says

I see now what all the fuss is about. This is a fantastic book. The writing style blew me away. I really enjoyed it and found the humour particularly brilliant. The dystopian world Jonathan Lethem builds is presented so casually and is actually one of the most terrifying I've ever read of. Sure, many aspects of this world have been in other books, but not quite like this. And there's just something about how this is written that makes you laugh while a chill runs down your spine. It's really rather remarkable.

The story itself is interesting with a great ending to the mystery. But I do think that the most interesting part of this book was the world in which it took place. Babyheads, evolved animals, make, karma, the freezer house, the taboos of the time. Loved it. And so well written! I'd never have guessed this was his debut.

Lea says

Sci fi, maybe? Definitely noir. This is one of the most unusual and interesting books I've read . . . maybe ever. The only thing that comes close are the bizarro titles I've read this year, but this has the extra bonus of being three times the length of most of those books.

Conrad Metcalf, PI (Private Inquisitor), lives in a world where conversation is frowned upon, and asking questions is permitted only by professional Inquisitors. Everyone functions by using drugs (Forgettol, Acceptol, etc), and you're likely to run into evolved animals and babies -- making Lethem's world here one of the most colourful I've seen outside of those bizarro titles.

There is a mystery (or several) to be solved, but the real pleasure is in exploring a society so vastly different from our own.

This is true noir here -- Metcalf isn't going to find happiness at the end of this book, and the resolution is as bittersweet as it is inevitable.

This is one of my new favourites, and I would highly recommend this to anyone looking for something truly different from anything else out there.

Leo Walsh says

I've never read Jonathan Lethem. He gets great accolades, and has a new book out. So while waiting for my library to buy his new book, I pulled "Guns With Occasional Music" down from the shelf. It read like a Sam Spade, so I decided to check it out. I'm glad I did. The story was a good, hard-boiled detective tale.

My problem with the book were varied. The big one was some silly science fiction concepts that, to me,

made no sense. For instance, there are scientifically altered "evolved" kangaroos, apes and cats. And instead of having normal children, people have "baby heads." I was like. "Why in the heck would anyone devote their lives to making an "evolved" sheep? Makes no sense. Another science fiction thing that makes no sense is their using cryogenic freezing to "punish" criminals. Instead of going to jail, you'd be frozen-off for a few years and then thawed and released after your sentence had been served. Which does not seem to be a deterrent to crime.

On the upside, the main character, Conrad Metcalf, a Private "Inquisitor," is a man of firm moral convictions that is hell-bent on finding the truth. Even when he runs up against a conspiracy among the higher-ups of the real police -- AKA Inquisitors -- he charges on, knowing full well that his course was dangerous.

Sure Metcalf has flaws. He's a drug addict. And he's too much a lone wolf to be a family man. And, true to detective noir form, he ends up slapping the femme fatale -- no matter how I cut it, a physically stronger man abusing women doesn't sit well with me. Even in fiction. But unlike the other Inquisitors in the story, at least Metcalf hunts for the truth until the bitter end.

So I'm divided on the book. It's a great postmodern homage to hard-boiled noir. But a lot of the science fiction goofiness made me feel I was in a Stephen Wright monologue where he apes Chandler. Which works for Wright, who wants some yucks. But it wears thin over a 270 page story. Especially in the context of an extended, well-thought-out, often realistic and gritty murder mystery.

Three stars. But since it turns out that this is Lethem's debut novel, does hint at his successful career. Because the guy's got chops.

Darwin8u says

"Sometimes it's better not to think in questions, but I can't seem to get out of the habit."
? Jonathan Lethem, Gun, With Occasional Music

Science fiction slams into a hard-boiled, noir pulp (imagine 'Who Framed Roger Rabbit' written by Chandler and directed by David Lynch'). Fun, quick and in parts even close to brilliant. Lethem is one of those writers I'd stamp with "Most Likely To Disappoint Me". He has a ton of potential, but far too often I see that potential sizzle away. Most of that energy, however, was captured in this book.

Mandapants says

"Gun, with Occasional Music" is the best kind of science fiction- you barely know it's science fiction at all. Every aspect of the world Lethem has created is in service of the plot, even the bits that seem overly goofy or derivative at first, not the other way around.

The story is a slab of thick noir starring the every-P.I. Metcalf. Lethem casts the heavy as an evolved kangaroo, and his world also features 3-foot tall evolved babies. While this could come off as "Disney Does Noir", there's very little here to remind us of Baby Herman from "Roger Rabbit". And animals, quite frankly,

aren't always cute.

The book is bleak in all the right places, with just enough wise-ass contrariness to offer a little hope. The ubiquitous etaphors are apt. And the story ends as it should, as the world and its players dictate that it must. No little green men can save you now.

Andrew says

Excellent. His style is as cold as Hammett's, and the moral core as strong as Chandler's. And any book that says both "In Los Angeles it's illegal to know what you do for a living" and "Tell him next time he wants to talk to me, don't send a marsupial" should be in everyone's library.

This character develops, is one thing somewhat new: he loses his early self-consciousness about his metaphors, and eventually solidifies enough to end a chapter with the brilliant line: "It was time to stop fucking around." The love scene says: "The thing I wanted wasn't lost in the past at all, and it never had been. It was lost in the future. A self I should have been, but wasn't. A thread I'd let go of in myself, thinking I could live without it, not seeing what it meant."

In a mean, pulpy sort of way, it's wrenching. It seems important that Metcalf's eventual solution is to surrender to the future, to allow himself to skip ahead to whatever future is next -- part of him is still lost in the future that could have been, but he embraces the actual future without sacrificing that sense of loss. So that's the key, here, and that's a good thought: you feel the loss of your possible selves keenly, but you throw yourself blindly, with relief, into the future that is. Your pain goes with you. So does what you've done, because you refuse to forget. It's okay that it's sort of trite; originality and subtlety are not the detective's virtues.

Mariel says

Book, with constant boredom. Answers, with no questions. Questions, with no answers on the tips of tongues or inside cheeks (maybe ass cheeks). Music, with no tone. Gun, with no bullets. Who signed off on the license? Déjà vu that reminds of nothing. Is that the appeal of genres to remind of nothing and feel the welcoming coma with dreams that someone else plants there and you wake up before you can see anyone's faces? The eye from that book, the nose from this... "Make me look beautiful!" "But I liked you before..." (I like some of Lethem's books a whole lot. Some are on my favorites shelf. That doesn't mean I liked this at all or make allowances for first time authors. Boredom is boredom. Side parenthetical over.)

Paul Auster called. He wants his book back from the discount pile. Chandler, Dick and all the other genre-y hard-boiled "The statuesque blonde had to pick my doorway to stand in and suck out all of my secondhand smoke before I could get hard" stuff I hate called and reminded me that I try to never read this kind of thing. If they are using the formula it has to be because they don't want to be different. The answers are built in. Or is that the questions?

Naivete called and it wanted its easyness back. Sense and cynicism called. They wanted their basis of reality back. My life called and said that it wanted itself back from me.

A tragic waste of time (yes! I said it! TRAGIC). It's a detective novel that asks no questions. It doesn't answer questions so much as pretend to answer them with hard-boiled dialogue that breaks before it can be snappy. *"Truth and justice," I said. "I wonder if you really know what the hell it is you're talking about, or whether words just keep pouring out because of the thing they did to your brain. Truth and justice. Nice, easy words."* Babies and animals have been genetically modified. They are called evolved. Evolved from what, and for what purpose? Metcalf is a private investigator or inquisitor (there's not enough distinction). A dying breed without going into what it used to be like. People don't ask questions except for the inquisitors (vaguely sci-fi gestapo like cops. You'll end up frozen Han Solo style if they don't like your answers. Prison, if you're lucky enough to know people with enough money). *"It meant waking up with a monkey on my back, but hell, it was my monkey."* No, this does not pass for reasoning!

But WHY? Just because it sounds like it sucks? Do you mean that people numb themselves to make it through their tedious day to day live?! That there are people who have no idea that bad things happen and there are people who do know and they both get drunk the same? Really? Now what do you want to say about that? If you want to get drunk then say that.

Metcalf had surgery with his girlfriend to switch their gender sensors. She ran off and stuck him with the senses of a woman. He can still get it up, if he chose to. He doesn't except to sorta fall in love like that in the woman in my doorway kind of way every time a ballsy woman wears lipstick. So why the sex sensors thing? Why was this even in the book? It was mentioned several times and nothing else happened with it. Was that to sound sci-fi enough for someone who wanted to read sci-fi? There was nothing about him that said I think differently from before woman senses. Nothing said woman. Nothing said anything but I wanted to write a "cool" drug sniffing hard-boiled detective stand-in standing for nothing type. So... why?

There is a kangaroo, Joey (Kangaroo Jack called! It wants his sucker punching Joey back!), working for some big bad guy because there has to be a bad guy. There has to be another guy in Metcalf's place so says this book. Okay, why?

Lethem wanted to throw in shit like talking kangaroos and people on drugs like Acceptol and Forgettol. Why do people want to take drugs to forget what they are currently living so as to not live at all? C'mon ask questions if you want to be a private investigator so bad and mourn the day people didn't roll over. The book rolled over. Ugh! Just admit it then!

Where did their karma cards come from? Who decided what depleted your karma and what was a good deed? Why is the hero as feckless as the world he doesn't really try not to sink in? (He takes their drugs too, for example.)

Elevator music, answering machine music, dentist lobby music, on the way to collect an award music, commercial jingle music... Time to stop and think drown out the mind music. The music says wah wah we are all so numb and the album art is of a cool disaffected person. The video bimbo is a statuesque blonde with bright red lipstick. The kangaroo can borrow his outfit from Rick Springfield's dog.

Also, the mystery sucked. I already know who killed the sheep. It was these guys!.

"I could have my mind erased

And still not know exactly what I don't already know." - Modest Mouse

P.s. It doesn't make sense that a kangaroo would work for a p.i. They are hardly inconspicuous! The bigotry towards evolved animals was thrown in there. Metcalf hates them without ever wondering why. It is hinted

they have marginally more rights. Why were they made? Why are they working for anyone? Why throw them in there for muscle? Anything? Do you even care, Lethem? Why did the guy on drugs to make him not care care about his fading place in life (a job no one cared about)? WHY?

P.s.s. The book called. It said... P.s., I forgot to care.

Richard says

This is a fun and quick read. But in the days after I finished it, I found that my impression took a bit of a dip as I pondered it, and it lost its four-star rating in the process.

But first, a curiosity: this is the second off-beat mystery novel set in Oakland that I've read recently. The other one, *Swing: A Mystery* by Rupert Holmes, isn't SciFi at all, but also involves a musical theme which is even more central to the plot.

As the blurb and other reviews have remarked, *Gun, with Occasional Music* has a fantastic element. Definitely not magical realism: the tone of the novel is pure big-fisted Raymond Chandler noir. But both animals and babies have undergone "forced evolution" which means guns, sneers and snide language are often aimed at our protagonist by sheep, monkeys, kangaroos and toddlers. This does lend a surrealistic feel, but is more like *Who Censored Roger Rabbit?* (the source material for the 1988 film). And Philip K. Dick is best known for confronting questions of identity and existence, which Lethem never taps into here. (But see postscript, below.)

What we have here is a basic noir detective story set in an uncertain time with some scifi elements. Lethem channels the attitude of Raymond Chandler/Dashiell Hammett well enough, and the amalgam of genres is handled pretty well. In fact, he does the detective story better than Philip K. Dick did in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* .

But it doesn't take too much thought to realize that Lethem didn't put too much effort into this. He doesn't *have to*, of course, but without the extra push he doesn't earn the extra stars, either.

This is definitely taking place within a dystopia. The general population is kept numbed with mind-control drugs and heavy censorship. But who is doing the controlling, and why? The only authorities shown are the local cops ("inquisitors"), and they have their own petty political battles and succession crises, and they clearly aren't at the top of the pyramid, but we never get a hint of who or what is in charge of the big picture. What is so feared that so much control is desired?

With evolved animals taking most menial jobs, should there be massive problems with underemployment of humans? Where are all those people, and how do they feel about this? There are hints that the animals are resented, and that killing them isn't considered murder... Something happened before this story took place that re-branded police investigators are "inquisitors", eliminated written journalism, and conditioned the population to feel uncomfortable about asking questions? Not a hint about what took place, and in many ways such traumas have left disturbingly few collateral changes.

The time and place also feel anachronistic. The general technology (cars, no cell phones) recalls the publication date of 1995 and keeps things from feeling too futuristic, but then those animals and "babyheads" (the forced-growth toddlers) are absurdly out of place. And within the first few pages our hero is

complaining about bleeding gums and I'm thinking "they've figured out how to turn sheep into sentient beings (albeit still dim-bulb sex toys) but haven't advanced dental care?"

Lethem has given us a minor delight of an adventure story, but things simply aren't thought out well. Put this story in the hands of Ridley Scott and you might get a miracle of a movie, but don't expect too much from the book.

Postscript: amended a month after reading.

I just returned to a reading a bit of Philip K. Dick after an absence of decades, and I can definitely see the similarity to Lethem's book. But it wasn't where I had thought it might be. PKD's signature, in my mind, is in presenting questions of identity and existence, which are absent here. It is the existential mires his protagonists run into that makes him so interesting to movie makers and new audiences so many years after his death.

But PKD also used the Chandler/Hammett hard-boiled writing style, which Lethem did replicate quite accurately. Characters are socially isolated, with no friends in which they can place heartfelt trust. Caution, even paranoia, is so pervasive it has become boring. Authority is corrupt and inefficient, using arbitrariness and barbarism to instill fear and fealty. Drug use is casual. Violence is frequent and indifferently meted out, sometimes in the most curiously impersonal way: the fellow standing in front of you with the baseball bat isn't your enemy, just another peon doing his job, and he might chat with you in sympathy before breaking your nose and ribs, then help you up and express concern over whether you'll be able to make it home.

?

Michael says

The style and voice and plot are pure Raymond Chandler, set in a weird future of talking kangaroos and mind-altering drugs. It's a wild ride that's largely successful, though not as ambitious as other futuristic genre mash-ups (for example, China Mieville's *The City and The City*), in part because it hews pretty closely to a standard Chandler-esque plot and in part because the futuristic elements aren't quite as developed. Still, there are moments of sheer brilliance here.

sologdin says

Like Morgan's Takeshi Kovacs, this is detective story set in scifi setting with some dystopian flavor (all descendent of Asimov's Baley-Olivaw)--that makes it part of the *nerd-boiled* sub-genre.

I suppose nerd-boiled fiction isn't really for me. It's got some cool ideas (articulate animals & infants, lotsa creative narcotics, Hindu ideas for law enforcement), but generally it appears that it solves dystopian fiction's universal problem of slick setting/stupid story by superimposing the standard detective narrative over the Evil Future setting. The resulting elixir combines the drawbacks of both and, having too little space for development, edits away the benefits of either. (I still like Asimov, just because, though.)

Recommended for those who pick the scabs off other people's lives, neophyte gunsels, and people who look over-age.

Mattia Ravasi says

Video review

Manages to offer some of the most unforgettable world-building I've ever read without pausing the action for more than a few words at a time. Offers an absurd dystopian future that's just absurd enough to be convincing. Fuses hardboiled with scifi as seamlessly as to be unfair. Rocks.

Eric says

In the same way non-inquisitors are not supposed to ask questions in this novel's setting, readers shouldn't ask too many questions, lest the thin facade Lethem built crash down and reveal his underdeveloped world building. Questions such as how society came to a point with such controlled media, freely available addictive drugs, evolved animals and "babyheads," and yet so few other technological advancements. Altered Carbon takes a similarly noir approach to science fiction, but Richard K. Morgan's universe feels real and lived in, while this feels like an Old Hollywood set.

Also, do women really need to be slapped in the face in every noir book? Was it not already clear this was noir inspired without that? And this from the P.I. that was gender transformed to have female sexual responses, a confusing subplot that did not serve the story in the least. Seriously, why even mention it? Just to make the story needlessly weirder? Or are we supposed to believe his attitude at the end of the book -- which made no sense -- was in some way related to not being a full, complete male? I think that may be overanalyzing a text that isn't that deep. The end really wanted to have the gravitas of 1984, but it just didn't feel earned in the least. (view spoiler)

Don't get the idea I hated this book from my above criticism. It was okay, as long as you don't expect too much from it. But it is definitely not the best example of noir, science fiction, or dystopian literature, although it is a fairly interesting, if underdeveloped, mix of all three.

Craig says

I wanted to like this book, I really did. A nice little mixture of the standard down-on-his-luck detective story and the dystopian science fiction future setting, with some humor mixed in - what's not to like, right? Sadly, it turns out there isn't much I can say for it. Lethem gives us this cobbled-together society with evolved animals, "evolved" babies, this wonderful mixture of government-issue chemicals that pretty much everyone imbibes with regularity, and a karma-tracking system - but why? Where did any of this come from? How did this society come to exist? And if we don't know any of that, why should it really matter that the main character is being chased around by a gun-toting kangaroo instead of a regular guy?

Blah. World-building shouldn't be at the expense of story, but if you're going to come up with some quirky new future society, it pretty much ruins the effect if you just throw a bunch of random crap together and

don't bother to explain how it got that way.

Also? The "mystery" was boring. And the resolution I suppose *sort of* made sense, just not in any sort of way that I managed to care about. So it pretty much failed at that too.

Can you tell I was a bit disappointed?

Liked the writing style though. Lethem definitely has a nice touch with the language.

Rob says

In *Gun, With Occasional Music*, Jonathan Lethem gives us science fiction's worthy successor to Raymond Chandler. Though this is the easy take-home message from nearly every quoted newspaper columnist, book jacket blurb, and miscellaneous reviewer -- they also all happen to be right. Even a cursory familiarity with Chandler's pulp noir will ring through with startling clarity to readers of this novel. The cadence of the narrative, the hard-boiled dialogue, the archetypal characters... Lethem's Conrad Metcalf is a well-executed Philip Marlowe cover song with just a little bit of record scratching thrown into the background for texture.

On the other hand, those same columnist quotes, blurbs, and reviewers all seem to liken Lethem to Philip K. Dick. Personally: not seeing it. It's a bit of a stretch, some optimistic name-dropping to match up Lethem's mystery/noir heritage with some similarly classic science fiction antecedent. The ubiquitous drug use? Sure, okay -- that's a bit Dickian. A Möbius fold of reality unraveling around the narrator in some palpable and thoroughly eldritch fashion? Not so much. More than PKD, the scenes in this novel played out in my imagination as fearfully symmetrical to Cronenberg's take on Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* -- substitute Jim Henson-esque "evolved" animals for Mugwumps but otherwise that's it, right down to Peter Weller as Conrad Metcalf.

Or maybe Punk's review has got it down: "It's Blade Runner meets Who Framed Roger Rabbit?"

Where was I? Oh right...

A part of me desires to do a chapter-by-chapter deconstruction of the text, to get all scholarly about it and run the blockade of Chandler's lineage here. I want to look for the hidden significance of the doctors as urologists, to get semiotic on names like "Catherine Teleprompter" and "Danny Phoneblum". But instead I'll just give a positive nod. It's a fun, noirish scifi romp with all the right moves and delivers slightly better than expectations.

UPDATE: Upon second reading: holy crap I didn't realize just how *bleak* that ending was, the first time around. Just the way that Metcalf's whole world collapses around (despite his... success?) and how he takes his exit.

See also:

Maureen says

somebody lent me this book because they know i love my noir, and the book pays off in that regard but the notion that this is science fiction or a successor to pkd is confusing to me -- the world lethem introduces us to has drugs coming out the wazoo, and there are evolved animals yes, but really? that all seems window dressing, a spin on what is primarily a detective story. lots of what i would consider the speculative elements don't actually seem to go anywhere -- why is text outlawed? what's this about musical news? i never did understand the society that the story spins out in -- these sci-fi elements don't seem to signify.

it also felt a helluva lot like chandler in terms of plotting: who killed who and for why now? does it matter? not really. a good beach book, i think. i'd give it 3.5 stars but i can't get excited enough about it to give it 4 -- it's good writing but something about his voice seemed a little smarmy at times, perhaps because it was his first novel?

Dan Schwent says

When down and out private inquisitor Conrad Metcalf's last client turns up dead, Metcalf takes up the case to find out who killed him. Can he find the killer before he runs out of karma and winds up in the deep freeze?

If Raymond Chandler and Philip K. Dick spent an evening together doing hard drugs, this would be the book that would result. Lethem weaves together the sci-fi and noir elements together so tightly that an evolved kangaroo doesn't seem out of place after his first appearance.

The world of *Gun, with Occasional Music*, is a bleak totalitarian version of a future California. A future where everyone carries cards noting how much karma they have. When you run out of karma, you wind up in deep freeze for a period of years. A scientist named Twostrand invented a process to create evolved bipedal animals out of ordinary ones like kittens, kangaroos and sheep. Eventually the process was tried on babies, creating the grotesque babyheads. Almost everyone is addicted to a free drug called make that's used to keep the populace under control. Interested yet?

Metcalf's case is a pretty standard one but Lethem injects it with freshness. Metcalf is the prototypical noir private eye with a self-deprecating sense of humor. More than once, he congratulates himself on his use of metaphor. *Gun, with Occasional Music*, reminds me of the movie *Hot Fuzz* in that it's both a satire of noir and also one of the better 30's style noir novels I've read in recent memory, much like *Hot Fuzz* was for action movies. You wouldn't think that a book featuring a gun-toting kangaroo would be a good example of noir but the proof is in the pudding.

I'd recommend *Gun, with Occasional* to fans of noir, bizarro, Philip K. Dick, and other strangeness.
