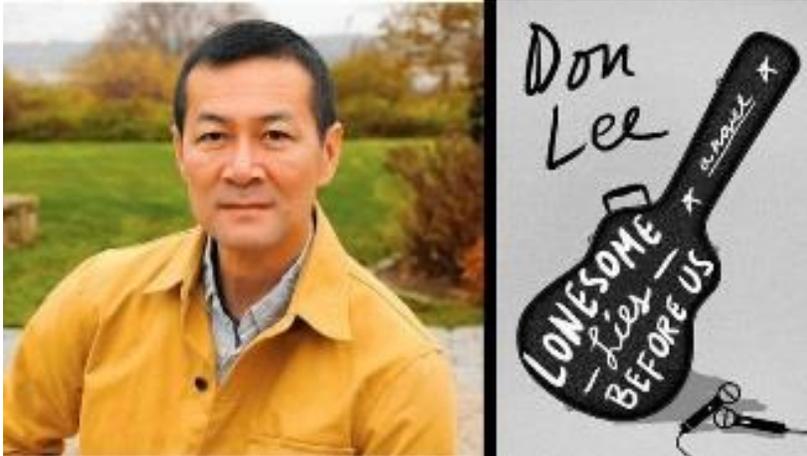


Don Lee's story of an alt-country musician yields remarkable depth of emotion



Lloyd Sachs

Chicago Tribune

Don Lee's lovely, affecting new novel, "Lonesome Lies Before Us," is about Yadin, a singer-songwriter in his mid-40s whose continued use of "alt-country" to describe his neglected music tells you how far from relevance he has sunk. A native Midwesterner transplanted to the economically tested town of Rosarita Bay on the northern California coast, he's living in a house he inherited from his grandmother.

Yadin works for his girlfriend's father laying carpet. His girlfriend, Jeanette, thinks he has shelved his artistic aspirations, which she regards as distractions from the demands of real life. But having secretly written a bunch of new tunes, he hopes to record one final album — "not to try to revive his career, but as a coda, a valediction." The clock is ticking — he is losing his hearing to Meniere's disease, the ravages of which have put a major dent in his career. And who knows how long it will take the bank to approve a loan for his homemade project?

Most novelists would let Yadin's sad, soulful tale carry the day and employ Jeanette as a literary backup singer. But for Lee, her life is no less meaningful — or, in a spiritual sense, magnificent — in all its heartbreaks and derailed hopes. Once an aspiring photographer, she is now a housekeeper at a local resort. She is so good at her job, she is promoted to floor manager — a step up that only highlights how down her life has been.

She and Yadin are perfectly companionable — they sing together in the choir of the Unitarian Universalist Church — but they rarely make love. "I'm not a sexual person," she told him at the outset, establishing conditions to which he is agreeable. Enter Mallory Wicks, Yadin's long-ago girlfriend and bandmate back in North Carolina.

he discovers she is staying at Jeanette's resort, indulging her passion for golf, he can't resist going to see her. Twenty-three years after breaking up with her, he still pines for her, keeping up on her every career move. To his surprise, she is equally familiar with his various recording projects.

Self-pampered, cosmetically altered, but still tough-edged, Mallory insists on helping him out with his recording and lobbies him to go after a major record deal — something he steadfastly opposes, having had his fill of corporate types. The tension between them brings back their conflicted past.

The title of the novel, taken from one of Yadin's new songs, has a double meaning. Yadin says it refers to the state of lonesomeness that lies ahead. But in more significant ways, it addresses the "lonesome lies" — the sad, unexceptional mistruths — that can shape people's lives. Yadin and Jeanette don't know why they lie to each other or withhold information about tragic events in their lives — for Yadin being abandoned by his father, for Jeanette losing her first lover to a car accident and subsequently discovering unwelcome truths about him.

Few novels capture the mindset and methodology of making music as vividly as "Lonesome Lies Before Us." Lee worked closely with prolific indie artist Will Johnson in crafting Yadin's brooding lyrics, which are inspired by the spiritual quests of poet Gerard Manley Hopkins and the works of alt-country greats like Gram Parsons. The descriptions of Yadin's sessions with Mallory, returning to her roots as a violinist, are transporting.

But in his lyrical embrace of work as noble and uplifting (the influence of the late U.S. poet laureate Philip Levine is alive on these pages), Lee pays just as much attention to the sundry details of Jeanette's job. With wry humor, he documents the hot-button issue of flat bottom sheets vs. fitted elastic. (Room attendants support the fitted revolution because those sheets are easier to change; management opposes the conversion because it would involve modifying folding and pressing machines and require more storage space.)

Like a great album — Parsons' "Grievous Angel," let's say — "Lonesome Lies Before Us" is both a collection of brilliantly realized moments and a work that transcends the sum of its parts. There are no minor observations in this novel, no scenes that don't matter. In the end, the depth of feeling attained by the exceptionally sensitive Lee lingers, inspiring more spins through his songlike prose. A novel more full of life, musical and other, is hard to imagine.

Lloyd Sachs is the author of "T Bone Burnett: A Life in Pursuit."

'Lonesome Lies Before Us'

By Don Lee, Norton, 336 pages; \$26.95

# In Don Lee's 'Lonesome Lies Before Us,' a singer tries to make one last comeback

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By Mark Athitakis June 8

Early in his fourth novel, "Lonesome Lies Before Us," Don Lee repeats the old joke about what happens when you play a country song backward: The wife comes back, the dog comes back and so on. But Lee strips the gag of its humor. His songwriter hero really could use a chance to rewind his life. "His overturned pickup would roll back onto its tires," Lee writes, as if getting your life in order were a magic trick. For the characters who populate this smart, downbeat novel, it can be.

The man telling the joke is Yadin, an erstwhile singer-songwriter who now lays carpet in a San Francisco suburb. His girlfriend, Jeanette, is a housekeeper at an upscale resort. How upscale? So upscale that it attracts guests like Mallory, a country superstar who was Yadin's musical and romantic partner years ago. Cue the love-triangle crisis: Does Yadin relive the past with one woman or soldier on with another?

You've heard that song before. But Lee's novel isn't simply a romance. Nor is it even really a novel about music, though he's plainly immersed himself in country-rock and the music industry, going so far as to solicit a working musician, Will Johnson of Centro-matic, to help craft some of Yadin's lyrics. (Smart move. As anyone who's read Jonathan Franzen's "Freedom" knows, even good novelists tend to be wince-inducing lyricists.) What Lee has written is a subtle novel about how people on the edge of a financial cliff are forced to sacrifice their ambitions.

Consider Yadin's particular struggle. A gifted but shy songwriter stuck with an unmarketable, pockmarked face, he's released a handful of albums that earned him a small cult and a little money. A decade after giving up on music, he's declared bankruptcy, his house is underwater, and he has hefty medical expenses for treating Meniere's disease, which is wrecking his hearing. But, thunderstruck by the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, he's moved to write again, and he's squirreled away enough cash

to record a comeback/farewell album in his home. You root for him, deeply: Rock-and-roll mythology demands that his scruffy lo-fi recordings and earnest demeanor translate into airplay, sales, magazine covers and Bonnaroo sets.

But Lee's too much the clear-eyed realist to peddle that myth, and it's wrenching when Mallory characterizes his home-brew sessions as "down to the level of a bad demo or bootleg." Yadin could accept her charity, even introductions to label honchos — but that would require undermining the careful humility that life has beaten into him.

Jeanette knows the feeling, too, having been forced to abandon her college-age dreams of activism and photojournalism for the security of cleaning rooms, a job Lee describes in high definition, from the folds of the bedsheets to the arrangement of shower soaps. And because we know her to the marrow of her grinding workday, it sets her difference from Mallory into stark relief. When Mallory condescendingly asks, "Haven't you ever had a dream?" she shoots back: "None of us can afford to be romantics. It's something you would never understand." It's a palpable hit, coming from the woman who's just tidied up Mallory's room of high-end makeup and handbags.

If Lee had dwelled exclusively on the friction between his three main characters, he'd have delivered a thoughtful working-class tale burnished with some Dylanesque wisdom. But Lee also weaves Yadin and Jeanette in a matrix of larger social pressures. Will legislation forcing hotels to use fitted sheets lead to layoffs at Jeanette's resort? Will police cutbacks nix Yadin's next carpet job, and will privatizing the library upend a family that's had a positive influence in both their lives?

If "Lonesome Lies Before Us" isn't the best American novel of the year, it's one of the most *American* American novels. It's intensely concerned with the civic institutions that shape everyday lives and with who's affected when they disappear. That's too much weight for the average country song to bear, but Lee's novel carries it just fine.

**Mark Athitakis** is a writer in Phoenix and author of "*The New Midwest*," a book of literary criticism.

## **LONESOME LIES BEFORE US**

By Don Lee

W.W. Norton. 334 pp. \$26.95

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## **The Best New Fiction**

**A painter cultivates his guilt and alienation to the benefit of a secret masterpiece-in-progress. Sam Sacks on new novels by Percival Everett, Don Lee and Courtney Maum.**

By

Sam Sacks

June 9, 2017 5:14 p.m. ET

The melancholy artist in Don Lee's "Lonesome Lies Before Us" (Norton, 335 pages, \$26.95) is Yadin Park, an alt-country singer-songwriter who put out a few cult-favorite records before an inner ear disorder ended his music career. At 46 he's managed to stabilize his hearing loss, find work in a small California town laying carpet and take up with a woman named Jeanette, a housekeeper at a nearby luxury hotel. Since he and Jeanette have never quite recovered from youthful heartbreak, theirs is a caring but cool relationship. "They might have been together more out of attrition than anything resembling ardor," she privately admits. Their arrangement is further strained when the old songwriting impulse revisits Yadin and he determines to sink his savings into recording and self-releasing one final album.

The story moves neatly between the points of view of Yadin and Jeanette, accelerating at the appearance of Yadin's first love, Mallory, who rose to short-lived country-music stardom on the strength of some of Yadin's songs and now wants to take part in his comeback record. Mr. Lee plucks familiar chords with a sure hand, glancing on themes of grief, jealousy and second chances.

But what really stamps this book on the heart is Yadin's vulnerable spiritual journey from loneliness toward something like grace. He seeks "a connection to the numinous" in love, at church -- even through poetry, after a librarian friend introduces him to Gerard Manley Hopkins. It's music, though, that keeps calling him back, giving him a way to transform his sorrows in spite of his disability. Yadin recalls a quote from his songwriting hero Townes Van Zandt: "There's only two kinds of music: the blues, and zippity-doo-dah." There's no doubt about which kind Mr. Lee is playing.

[theawl.com](http://theawl.com)

## Songs of the Voiceless - The Awl

by Pete Tosiello June 20, 2017

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### Don Lee's affecting new novel

The characters in Don Lee's new novel [Lonesome Lies Before Us](#) are reduced. They have health issues, financial issues, and legal issues. They live in dying towns and work in dying industries. They have destructive compulsions and addictions; people and institutions have let them down. Luckily, the drama and pathos lie not in how they're reduced, but in how they deal with it—or, more frequently, how they don't.

A past winner of an American Book Award and an Edgar for his 2004 debut novel [Country of Origin](#), Lee's previous fiction took questions of Asian-American identity head-on. *Lonesome Lies Before Us* is his third book set in the Northern California town of Rosarita Bay, a fictionalized Half Moon Bay, where jobs are scarce and locals are beholden to the fruits of fickle tourism. It's here that Yadin Park, a mostly forgotten songwriter in his mid-forties, has settled as a carpet installer, still writing songs during idle hours and halfheartedly (though not for lack of trying) dating his boss's daughter, Jeanette.

Novelists have long been enamored by songwriters, and not only because of the likenesses between the two crafts. Where painters, sculptors, and even athletes are ascetics for their art—adherents of intense training, laborious development, and hard-won expertise—songwriters are defined by moments of enlightened inspiration rather than slow mastery of method. They are impulsive romantics, the greatest of whom both inform and reflect the mass mind.

Save for his being a brilliant alt-country composer (can anything be respectably alt-anything, anymore?), Yadin was never a fit for the scene. Despite a small and committed fanbase, he refused to make commercial concessions and never grew comfortable performing, dulling his stage fright with booze and drugs while working his way deeper into debt each year. If that weren't enough, his recording career was cut short by Meniere's disease, which has gradually robbed him of his hearing. To limit the damage, he seeks to eke out a quiet existence in Rosarita Bay, minimizing the risks of his former lifestyle by any means possible—strict dieting, steady day labor, and a stable if passionless love life.

Jeanette, too, is self-conscious and unfulfilled, cleaning rooms in Rosarita Bay's one resort by day, passing long nights with Yadin in a rented bungalow, and tending to her aging father on weekends. Once an idealistic hippie and aspiring photographer, she's grown cold and disillusioned in middle age, laid off from a job at city hall obviated by automation. Although an avowed atheist, her sole release comes via her involvement in the local Unitarian

Universalist church, the existence of which, like most everything else, is threatened by budget cuts.

The Unitarian church as captured by Lee is a fascinating, frustrating outlet for its small congregation of conflicted, compromised attendants. Steeped in Bay Area leftism but riven by the local economy, they join services for fraternity and polite life coaching which more often than not stops short of substantive guidance or authority. For Yadin, the terror of stepping on toes, the church's inability to even espouse or deny the existence of God, amounts to a shameful spinelessness not unlike the one he perceives in himself and his neighbors. Services are directionless; the choir sings '70s folk songs. Yadin grows cynical of the ambiguity and dazed political correctness, relishing existential jokes:

How does a UU begin a prayer? To Whom It May Concern. Why do UUs have trouble singing in the choir? They're always reading ahead to see if they'll agree with the next verse. What do you get when you cross a Jehovah's Witness with a UU? Someone who knocks on your door, then says, "I don't know why I'm here."

Further exercises in futility take the form of tense town meetings where neither the bickering civil servants nor pleading citizens can fend off impending doom, and the public forums succinctly convey competing forces dividing the town and even individual households. While virtually all of the participants are socially progressive, underemployed minorities, they're tempted by the decidedly red state concerns of labor unions, home ownership, and factory jobs undercut by immigrants, outsourcing, and technology. In his clipped omniscient narration Lee is never guilty of proselytizing; among the sizable cast there are neither heroes nor villains, and he executes a tender empathy while managing not to look down upon his largely helpless characters.



The lives and circumstances Lee outlines seem harrowingly dismal in the abstract, so the novel's greatest triumph is the dignity he grants them. They're believably average people with believably average relationships of the sort most novels would reasonably bypass. Manual laborers all, they're being slowly killed by the source of their livelihoods, working backbreaking jobs because they have to and then immersing themselves in seemingly frivolous hobbies—music, poetry, supermarket tabloids—because they have nothing else to do. In the stark, at times stilted dialogue, Lee evokes how little friends and lovers ultimately know about each other, and the temptation to hold the past against one another. In efforts to assert his own manhood and leave something to his children, Jeanette's ornery father seems at once selfish, pathetic, and distantly compassionate, diverting the narrative from self-pity. "Being depressed is a hobby only rich people can afford," he tells Jeanette in typical aphorism. "You're too old for ideals," he later advises her.

With all the grasping for faith, love, and validation, there's a lot here for such a quiet, earnest book, but Lee keeps it moving with a modest plot. A shadowy figure from the past blows into town, raising the stakes and threatening to upend Yadin and Jeanette's paper empire. Characters are introduced in their diminished present, then given backstories via Ghost of Christmas Past-style flashbacks. While beautifully rendered, the revelations are grim. Among the hushed sadnesses of family businesses, inherited property, and marriages of convenience, even the most seemingly compatible people are irreconcilable in their damage and yearnings. Revisiting his past, Yadin recognizes the massive consequences of seemingly minor events, and how easily he could have spared himself a harsh adulthood. In his characters' interactions, Lee presents the debilitating reality that all relationships are, in some sense, parasitic.

The book struggles in its portrayal of music. Like Nick Hornby's [Juliet, Naked](#) and Rob Yardumian's [The Sound of Songs Across the Water](#), it relies on the poignancy of visceral ballads that don't actually exist. Like Hornby and Yardumian, Lee transcribes the lyrics in their bare form, which is, of course, only part of the equation. Yadin seems oddly inarticulate for a supposedly great songwriter, especially one with so much material at his disposal.

Against the backdrop of blue-collar warfare Yadin's friends find his devotion to music trite, and the urgency of a literary novel like *Lonesome Lies Before Us* may be similarly questioned in our current moment. But virtually of its themes—generational divide, working-class anxiety, the implications of local politics on our way of life—seem intensely vital if not outright prescient. The haunted residents of Rosarita Bay are united by their lack of control, and knowing better than to wish for escape hope merely for consolation. "Yadin had never been happy, and didn't know if he ever could be," the narrator proclaims in Lee's frank eminence. "The best he had ever managed was not to be miserable." Desperate for grace and solace on anyone's terms, he finds it in one-sided conversations with his long-dead brother.

It'd be easy to label *Lonesome Lies* a tragedy, but I think that implies a fall from grace or a fatal error. If Lee's passive, ghostly characters have a fatal error it's that they can hardly be called actors at all, ambivalent participants in wavering deviations from the status quo. In wars of attrition, *Lonesome Lies* finds, there are no winners.



## 'Lonesome Lies Before Us' a portrait of artist as singer and humble seeker

Jim Higgins , Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

10:30 a.m. CT June 2, 2017



(Photo: Melissa Frost)

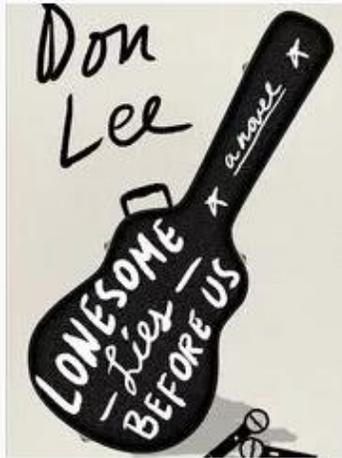
By naming Townes Van Zandt as a character's musical hero, novelist [Don Lee](#) signals something about the people of "Lonesome Lies Before Us." Seen from a distance, they may look like shambling losers. But from the inside, they're soulful people, bearing up under heavy burdens.

Yadin Park, the memorable front man of Lee's novel, is a middle-aged alt-country singer-songwriter with his modest musical career receding in the rear-view mirror. He ekes out a living post-bankruptcy installing carpet, his future complicated by intermittent flareups of Ménière's disease, which is destroying his hearing.

Yet this beleaguered fellow, in the eventful days depicted by Lee in this novel, is humbly approaching greatness of soul. In a remarkable sequence, Park happens upon a lecture about Gerard Manley Hopkins in the local library, and becomes fascinated with both Hopkins' highly compressed poetry and life as a Catholic convert and Jesuit priest. (English teachers: Get the pages here on Hopkins' "Pied Beauty" into your classroom packets.) Park's spiritual quest will take him in unusual directions.

Lee took pains to make the musical aspects of this story believable, collaborating with songwriter Will Johnson on the lyrics of several of Park's songs. Lee and Johnson will appear in conversation at 7 p.m. June 15 at Milwaukee's Boswell Books.

Park dates his boss' daughter, Jeanne Matsuda, a 39-year-old housekeeper at a fancy resort and spa in their otherwise declining California town. Lee's treatment of how the resort communicates to housekeepers its obsession with service is the most satirical element of the novel.



Lonesome Lies Before Us: A Novel. By Don Lee. W.W. Norton. 336 pages. \$26.95. (Photo: W.W. Norton)

There's nothing satirical in his writing about Jeanne, who has been shaped by bad luck, heartbreak and a wrong choice or two into an anxious, dutiful woman. She and Park have low-key companionship built on convenience more than romance. Both wonder if they should want more, from each other or from others.

Mallory Wicks, Park's long-ago musical partner and former lover, now a singer-actress famous enough for celebrity treatment, shows up unexpectedly at the resort, precipitating crises all around and stirring Park's memories of finding his musical voice. Coincidentally, or perhaps not, Park has been writing songs again, hoping to self-release one final album while he still can — assuming he can scratch together \$7,000, no simple matter.

Lee's novel shares some of the character of alt-country music, low-key and trafficking in folks who will never be gold-card members. Deftly, he finds gentle comedy in the town's tiny Unitarian Universalist congregation while also respecting the impulses that brought them together. (And thank you, sir, for informing me about the prison-cassette industry.)

While the modest Park would blush if he heard me say this, "Lonesome Lies Before Me" is also a novel about art, and about what Samuel Beckett called the "itch to make" even when all of the possible rewards of making have been stripped away:

"He started writing spontaneously in his notebook. Not reflections or thoughts or prayers. Songs. Very straightforward songs — plaintive, understated ballads, almost subversive in their simplicity, in their nakedness and sincerity. He remembered something Townes Van Zandt had once said: 'There's only two kinds of music: the blues, and zippity-doo-dah.' ... That was what Yadin was doing. He was writing the blues."

## IF YOU GO

Novelist Don Lee will appear in conversation with songwriter Will Johnson at 7 p.m. June 15 at [Boswell Books](#), 2559 N. Downer Ave.

<http://www.jsonline.com/story/entertainment/books/2017/06/02/lonesome-lies-before-us-portrait-artist-singer-and-humble-seeker/354040001/>