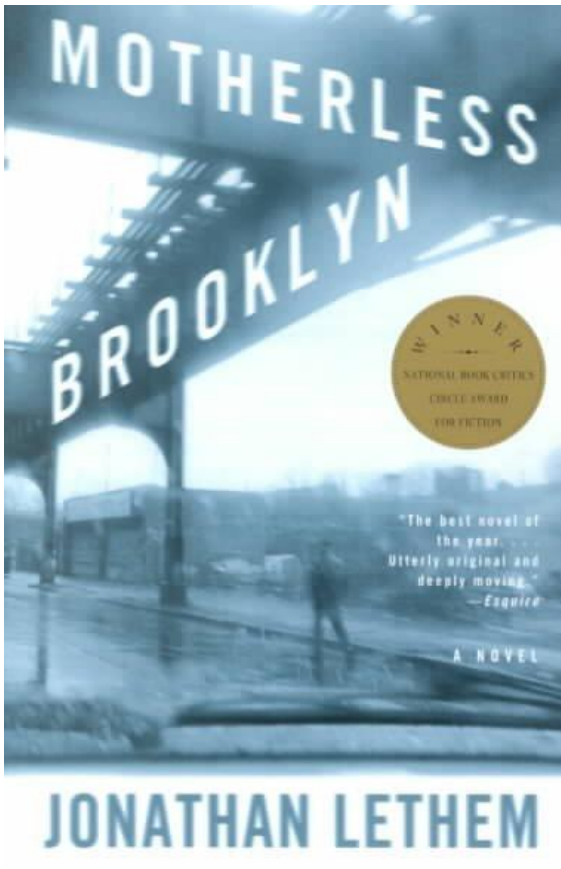


## Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1336369>

### About the Book



Lionel Essrog, former denizen of St. Vincent's Home for Boys in Brooklyn and Tourette's syndrome-afflicted detective, is a Minna Man. He, along with three fellow orphans, runs mysterious errands for wiseguy Frank Minna and his detective-agency-slash-car service. When a stakeout goes wrong and Frank gets knifed, Lionel goes looking for the killer. The plot takes wild twists and turns, marked by indelible characters and acrobatic wordplay. Essrog, with his lovable tics and compulsions, embarks on a journey that is as much an existential search as it is a manhunt. In Jonathan Lethem's deft hands, even Brooklyn itself becomes one of the main characters in this deliriously funny novel.

Lethem is a literary risk-taker, in full command of his conflated and inventive art. *Motherless Brooklyn* turns the detective story on its head; it's an audacious homage to the hard-boiled crime novels of the '30s and '40s by way of Jorge Luis Borges, but like Lethem's past work, it defies easy categorization. It is both his most accessible and strongest work to date.

### About the Author



Jonathan Lethem is the author of five novels, including *Gun*, *With Occasion Music*, and *Girl in Landscape*. His novel *Motherless Brooklyn*, was named Novel of the Year by *Esquire* and won The National Book Critics Circle Award and the Salon Book Award. He is also the author of the story collection, *The Wall of the Eye* and the novella *This Shape We're In*. He edited *The Vintage Book of Amnesia*, guest-edited *The Year's Best Music Writing*

2002, and was the founding fiction editor of *Fence Magazine*. His writings have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, *McSweeney's*, and many other periodicals. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

## Awards

*Motherless Brooklyn* was a New York Times Notable Book, and was Booklist Editors' Choice for Best Fiction in 1999 (<http://www.booklistonline.com/awards>). It also received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction (<http://www.nationalbook.org/>), and a Gold Dagger for Best Crime Novel of the Year in the Dagger Awards (<http://www.thecwa.co.uk/daggers/index.html>).

## Reviews

### *Booklist* \*Starred Review\*

Here's a detective story with a unique twist: the narrator-protagonist, Lionel Essrog, out to solve the murder of his boss and mentor, suffers from Tourette's syndrome. Lethem's latest novel is a seriocomic takeoff on the genre that breaks down barriers by getting inside Lionel's head. It also tosses Zen Buddhism and the Mafia into the mix, treating both with a serious irreverence that other writers often shy away from. The plot's a simple one: someone has set up Frank Minna, the shady owner of a Brooklyn car service cum detective agency, for a hit. Years earlier, Minna had plucked four misfit teenagers from St. Vincent's Orphanage and chose them to be his errand boys. Now, as grown men, they work, or rather worked, for Minna as drivers/detectives. (Minna Men, declares Lionel.) One night, Lionel and another of the four, Gilbert Coney, stake out a Zen center on New York's Upper East Side while Minna, wearing a wire, goes in for a conversation. The upshot is that they screw up and Minna is "taken for a ride" and murdered in Brooklyn. Who ordered the hit? Was it the Zen abbot or perhaps two ancient Brooklyn godfathers who may or may not be homosexual lovers? Lionel's description of the investigation--complete with Tourette tics and observations--is a tour de force of language. The descriptions of the buildups to the tics are masterful, and the tics themselves, especially the verbal ones, are in the best tradition of the Zen non sequitur--thus neatly, and securely, tying the narrative and the plot. But the interesting thing is the subtle way in which the verbal outbursts work upon the reader: at first you are stunned, but in time, as with his colleagues, Lionel's strange behavior and outbursts merely extend the boundary of normal behavior.

### *Publishers Weekly*

Hard-boiled crime fiction has never seen the likes of Lionel Essrog, the barking, grunting, spasmodically twitching hero of Lethem's gonzo detective novel that unfolds

amidst the detritus of contemporary Brooklyn. As he did in his convention-smashing last novel, *Girl in Landscape*, Lethem uses a blueprint from genre fiction as a springboard for something entirely different, a story of betrayal and lost innocence that in both novels centers on an orphan struggling to make sense of an alien world. Raised in a boys home that straddles an off-ramp of the Brooklyn Bridge, Lionel is a misfit among misfits: an intellectually sensitive loner with a bad case of Tourette's syndrome, bristling with odd habits and compulsions, his mind continuously revolting against him in lurid outbursts of strange verbiage. When the novel opens, Lionel has long since been rescued from the orphanage by a small-time wiseguy, Frank Minna, who hired Lionel and three other maladjusted boys to do odd jobs and to staff a dubious limo service/detective agency on a Brooklyn main drag, creating a ragtag surrogate family for the four outcasts, each fiercely loyal to Minna. When Minna is abducted during a stakeout in uptown Manhattan and turns up stabbed to death in a dumpster, Lionel resolves to find his killer. It's a quest that leads him from a meditation center in Manhattan to a dusty Brooklyn townhouse owned by a couple of aging mobsters who just might be gay, to a zen retreat and sea urchin harvesting operation in Maine run by a nefarious Japanese corporation, and into the clutches of a Polish giant with a fondness for kumquats. In the process, Lionel finds that his compulsions actually make him a better detective, as he obsessively teases out plots within plots and clues within clues. Lethem's title suggests a dense urban panorama, but this novel is more cartoonish and less startlingly original than his last. Lethem's sixth sense for the secret enchantments of language and the psyche nevertheless make this heady adventure well worth the ride.

### *Library Journal*

The short and shady life of Frank Minna ends in murder, shocking the four young men employed by his dysfunctional Brooklyn detective agency/limo service. The "Minna Men" have centered their lives around Frank, ever since he selected them as errand boys from the orphaned teen population at St. Vincent's Home. Most grateful is narrator Lionel. While not exactly well treated--his nickname is "Freakshow"--Tourette's-afflicted Lionel has found security as a Minna Man and is shattered by Frank's death. Lionel determines to become a genuine sleuth and find the killer. The ensuing plot twists are marked by clever wordplay, fast-paced dialog, and nonstop irony. The novel pays amusing homage to, and plays with the conventions of, classic hard-boiled detective tales and movies while standing on its own as a convincing whole. The author has applied his trademark genre-bending style to fine effect. Already well known among critics for his literary gifts, Lethem should gain a wider readership with this appealing book's debut.

### **Literary Criticism**

*Jonathan Lethem and Lydia Millet*

Lethem, who won the National Book Critics Circle Award for his fifth novel *Motherless Brooklyn*, grew up in Brooklyn and Kansas City and trained as a painter before turning to writing in his early twenties. Recently he's offered some of his short stories for free to filmmakers and others who wish to adapt them, through his own version of the open-source movement, which he calls the Promiscuous Materials project. He also recently married for the third time and in May 2007 had a baby son, Everett. His most recent novel is *You Don't Love Me Yet*, out in paperback from Doubleday.

Like Lethem, Lydia Millet has a young child--two in fact; a four-year-old girl and a boy born a few months ago. She is the author of six novels, the latest of which, *How the Dead Dream*, was published by Counterpoint in January and is planned as the first in a trilogy. Millet, who won the PEN USA Award for Fiction for her early book *My Happy Life*, grew up in Toronto and now lives in the Arizona desert where she writes and works for her husband's endangered species group, the Center for Biological Diversity.

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[Lethem]: I was thinking I'd like to begin by asking you what you're reading at the moment. I'm reading *Darkmans*, by Nicola Barker. I would give you a brilliant, extensive impression of it if I weren't completely exhausted from putting the baby to bed. We've lit a fire and *The Princess Bride* is on television, so my brilliant extensiveness will have to wait for my next email. Still--what are you reading?

[Millet]: *I'm an ADD kind of reader. I usually have a few books going at once. But like you, I have a baby, and mine is only three weeks old. So reading time is at a minimum and all there is for me right now is Alan Weisman's The World Without Us, a Christmas present, which is both nonfiction and a bestseller. Both abnormal for me. But I'm caught up in it. It's fun. Who wouldn't like to know what the world would look like after a highly selective apocalypse limited to homo sapiens? The premise, if you don't already know it, is: how would the earth fare if you snapped your fingers and all the people were instantly gone? Raptured off skyward, or spontaneously combusted? Of course our fall is more likely to be a long plummet, but it's still a great conceit.*

*Plus, did you know that a tire is one giant single molecule? That's what Mr. Goodyear and his vulcanization gave us. I mean a whole tire, one molecule. You could have knocked me over with a feather.*

I've been eager to get my hands on that Weisman book. Am I right that it projects its human absence onto the island of Manhattan, or was that just a delightful dream I had--or an old *Twilight Zone* episode I am generously crediting in recollection to my dreamlife? As it happens, I'm working on a novel about a version of Manhattan invaded by weird harbingers of animal life--specifically, an out-of-control tiger (I warned you I was preying on your extinction-of-species beat, didn't I?). The recent news from the

San Francisco zoo weirdly trumped--or, if you prefer, as I do, to think of it in terms of *Robert's Rules of Order*, "seconded"--my motif.

I'll be trying to get my mind around that one-giant-molecule notion as I drive into town on the recently and irregularly plowed Maine roads on my four molecules today, in order to send this email from the signal at the library.

And yes, like you, I usually have too many books going at once, and I'm always vowing to simplify, to unify. As I am with projects. It always appears that I am on the verge of knocking out the last few extracurricular assignments--reviews, essays, stories for anthologies (or written interviews ...)--and *becoming* what I idealize, the "pure novelist." I never am pure. Another commitment, made in some sleepwalking or Ambien-trance-state, always emerges on the horizon. I suppose this is just life. The novel is a very impure form, so why should the making of novels be concentrated like the tasks of Zen monks? Probably Zen monks are always knocking out little side assignments too.

Anyway, mine right now are: 1) Write an encyclopedia entry on Thomas Alva Edison, Eadweard Muybridge, and the introduction of the motion picture, and 2) Write a poem "about the death of something." I've suggested, perhaps perilously, that I'll be writing about the death of my cynicism. The problem being that it is a somewhat zomboid creature, capable of rising from the grave at the suggestion I write a poem. At the moment this seems to be happening on a daily basis.

Perhaps inevitably I'm falling into a sort of diaristic style here. I guess there isn't going to be any margin in pretending that we're doing anything other than what we're doing--acting as if we're doing an interview when we're really writing emails. What's an interview, anyway? The only times I'm sure I'm in one I'm sure I hate them. Conversations are better--almost anything is better. It also seems to me that, by the nature of this sort of pretending, we already know each other. Though we've met, briefly, this, in fact, feels like our real introduction.

But--disclosure here, or what Hollywood would call "the backstory"--I did get in touch about two months ago to say that I'd just read *How the Dead Dream* and was completely transported. Two months later it still occupies the spot of the best book I've read since the last time I read a book so good. (Which was possibly *Remainder*, by Tom McCarthy, which shares some peculiar virtues with yours.) I read your novel in one long sitting, in loose photocopied galley pages, on a train between Cologne and Berlin, stealing them from my German editor as he was reading them beside me. He was on chapter three when I started. Then I caught up with him and passed him (no knock on his reading speed--English is his second language). Does this make my life sound exotic? Sleight of hand, if so. Our first baby arrived this year and those three days of my German book tour were about the only exotic ones of the past year. The rest was beautiful boring domesticity.

I do have one extremely specific question for you about *How the Dead Dream*: Were the early chapters influenced, by any chance, by Steven Millhauser's novels about childhood--*Edwin Mullhouse* and *Portrait of a Romantic*?

*To answer your question about influence, first, it's been so long since I read Edwin Mullhouse that I can't remember it anymore, so my best guess is, if my book looks like that book, I stole from it unconsciously. The way I always steal is the way most writers steal--we can't help it. Language and consciousness are so permeable. Sometimes, though, I want to steal and fail to steal, such as with Thomas Bernhard, whose style I always consciously want to imitate but can't bring myself to because it's too singular, too theft-proof.*

*Edison you say? I wrote a story about Edison, which was in Tin House just now, about his role in the electrocution and filming of Topsy the elephant--which has been converted to a heartbreaking short video anyone can see on the Internet. Brief, grainy, heartbreaking--the great beast falls in slow motion to its knees. ... That part of my story was true, but then there was a made-up part about Edison lusting after a drug-addict Hungarian manservant. [Editor's note: John Haskell's I Am Not Jackson Pollock has an incisive story about Topsy's electrocution as well.]*

*Lately I'm captivated by animals. I find that any literature that isn't populated by them seems dry to me. Animals are like rock stars, they have that charisma. So I'm delighted there are tigers in your Manhattan. In my misbegotten screenwriting career (in a nutshell, the usual story: I wrote several scripts and no one ever bought them), I once wrote a kind of blockbuster feature about an apocalyptic scenario where plants and wild animals take over Manhattan--nature runs wild and the city is gone in no time. It was a mess, but I liked it. According to Weisman, the subways would be some of the first things to go, in the sense that they'd be flooded right away. The subways are vulnerable, the bridges are vulnerable. Central Park would revert to swamphood, if I recall correctly. Right now I'm at the point in the book where he talks about the Panama Canal and how it would cease to exist. The canal was Teddy Roosevelt's baby, and arguably the largest feat of earth-moving engineering in history. But apparently it would be gone long before Mount Rushmore, which bears Roosevelt's pince-nez. Weisman calculates Rushmore could last seven million years. If aliens landed once we were all gone, Rushmore might be one of the last traces of us remaining. Perfect in a way. After all we're a tacky civilization.*

*And about your upcoming poem--if you were a cynic, I'm glad that died. Cynicism is boring, finally. Like words without animals or music without rock stars.*

Your approach to influence is very traditional and probably appropriate: to forget it. (Not that I'm claiming to be sure the Millhauser is reflected in *How the Dead Dream*. ... but it was for me!) I have a strange tic which sometimes serves me well but may in fact damn me in the eyes of readers and critics who don't want to be irritated by self-

consciousness: I remember influence. And then, usually, mention it, either inside the text, or in some outside remarks, or both. In a way it's probably a form of excessive literalness, that I feel the need to keep pushing attention--my own, and others'--to the fact of literary intertextuality. It should be a thing I can take for granted by now.

I like your description of Thomas Bernhard's innate resistance to being anyone's influence. I think of course he would prefer not to be, or claim to prefer it (I read an interview with him in *Harper's* Readings section that was hilariously over the top in its nihilism toward writing and writers generally). I've often thought that Thomas Berger and Don DeLillo were the two writers who held the greatest sway over me yet whose prose most resisted my appropriation--perhaps Christina Stead qualifies too. Yet I go on trying to morph my prose into theirs all the time. That sustained tension of the resistance becomes itself a kind of energy or fuel I like.

I remember seeing that death of Topsy film, in all its shocking horrible glory, as part of a documentary about the history of Coney Island in the great days. I had no idea then it was an Edison film, but then I hadn't arrived at any personal interest in Edison at that point. (Anyway, Edison himself didn't really "direct" most of the Edison films.) Did you know that the science of keeping premature babies alive in little heated tents was developed not in a scientific or medical surrounding, but as a Coney Island sideshow? "Come pay to see the marvel of tiny squirming embryos, fighting for their lives!"

*No idea. That trumps tires being one giant molecule.*

As for animals, your words are music to my ears. Novels need animals. I was recently reading an essay by Mary McCarthy, a quite brilliant, free-ranging one that she first gave as a lecture in Europe, called "The Fact in Fiction." At the outset she defines the novel in quite exclusive terms, terms that of course made me very nervous: "... if you find birds and beasts talking in a book you are reading you can be sure it is not a novel." Well, as the author of at least one and arguably two or three novels with talking animals in them, I felt disgruntled. McCarthy is one of those critics whose brilliance dedicates itself often to saying what artists shouldn't do--like the equally celebrated and brilliant James Wood, with whom I disagree constantly. For me, the novel is by its nature impure, omnivorous, inconsistent, and paradoxical--it is most itself when it is doing impossible things, straddling modes, gobbling contradiction. But anyway, when I lived with McCarthy's declaration for a while, I found myself replying, "But in the very best novels the animals want to talk, or the humans wish the animals could talk, or both." And that's certainly the kind of book I'm trying now. The tiger and the other animals in my Manhattan are desperately hoping to say something to the humans, and the humans, some of them, are listening hard. The failure of the conversation is, as in your own book, most tragic.

*It sounds great. The animals that want to talk, the people that want them to ... exactly. But to the critics--it's so easy, and so exhilarating, to denounce things. Isn't it? But*

*prohibitions like that--"It's not a novel if it has talking animals in it," "It's not a novel if it has philosophy in it"--besides being snobbish and condescending, serve more to elevate the critic than to advance or innovate the form. In fact, I think it's a sign of an art form losing power in culture when its arbiters try to define it by its limitations, what it can't or isn't allowed to do. Shoring up the borders of the form, in other words, to isolate it and make it puny. Novels should do anything and everything they can pull off. The pulling off is the hard part, of course, but my feeling is if you don't walk a line where you're struggling to make things work, struggling with ideas and shape and tone, you're not doing art. Art is the struggle to get beyond yourself. And if you want to use talking animals to do that, and you can make them beautiful, nothing is verboten. Look at found art, I don't know ... visual artists like George Herms or the Kienholzes or people like that, Warhol before--the avant-garde, the innovative, has to include, not exclude. Once you exclude you're calcifying. You're well into middle age and headed for death.*

Well, I adore this rant. You said it, so I don't have to.

*I want to know more about the book you're working on. Can you give me a teaser? Is it a wild tiger? A zoo tiger? An imaginary tiger? A tiger like the one in that Life of Pi book about the guy on the raft? Is it a so-called genre-bender, like so much of your work? Is it apocalyptic?*

Well, in the omnivorous tradition, I'm tempted to say yes, all of those: wild imaginary zoo tiger, and the book an apocalyptic genre-bender, yes, all of it, yes. And, in the other tradition, of nervous novelists who only have a couple hundred pages of draft and are afraid of talking too big about unfinished work, here's what I can tell you: this one is a sprawling, aggravated, unreliable black comedy set on the Upper East Side, with a tiger on the loose and other animals lurking. The tone is contemporary, possibly "realist," but the events shade increasingly toward the kind of ontological horror-story I associate with H. P. Lovecraft and Philip K. Dick. The main characters are a retired actor (really a former child star), a dyspeptic and paranoid cultural critic, a hack mayor's aide, and a ghostwriter of books--her specialty is in as-told-to books by injured athletes, frostbitten Everest climbers, and so on. I'm very happy with it so far.

*I can't wait to read it. Especially the parts with the paranoid critic.*

Did I mention he has a wandering eye? I don't mean as in "an eye for the ladies." I mean one of those eyes that migrates wildly in his head while you are trying to talk to him.

*Speaking of which, can I ask you about your latest book, You Don't Love Me Yet? Which is the story of some would-be rock stars? I want to ask the obvious autobiographical question, since we don't know each other yet. And maybe I should be*



*scurrying around the Web trying to figure this out for myself, but I'm just gonna ask. Did you ever want to be a rock star? Are you a rock star manqué?*

Oh, yeah, *You Don't Love Me Yet*. May I admit that nothing is further from my thoughts at the moment than that book? Well, I can at least be polite and answer the simple question: I was the lead singer (or lead mutterer) in a rock band in San Francisco for about four months. I think we played three or four "gigs," which were of course all parties thrown by forgiving friends. Our name was the pronunciation-suspect "Emma The Crayon." It never should have been allowed to happen, in the sense that my muttering never reached even the Lou Reed level of speech-singing, which I suspect should be policed as a basic threshold for credibility at the microphone. I have since retreated to the cowardly vicarious role of lyricist for some of my friends' bands. I'm collaborating with Walter Salas-Humara of the Silos on an album's worth of songs right at the moment.

*You're so lucky. I wish someone would ask me to write rock songs for them.*

Well, it seems to me from where I stand that there are a lot of musicians out there who thrive on collaboration with writers. If you're really looking for it, I bet I could scare up some kind of arrangement for you. Maybe we could even create a kind of clearinghouse for these needs, like a dating service. Call it VICARIOUS ARTS, LTD.

*The Mekons did a collaboration with Kathy Acker. Though it wasn't my favorite project of theirs, I desperately wish that had been me. If you can hook me up with the Mekons, I will be your slave forever.*

Ah, why don't you just shoot for the sky? Can you think of a rock band that has less need of writing help than the Mekons? Let me see what I can do.

My question for you now is: how does it feel to declare you've begun a trilogy? I've always wondered. When did you know you wanted to write one? What are your favorite trilogies, and do they have continuous characters and situations, or only thematic similarities? How will yours operate--do you know yet?

*The trilogies I know are mostly genre, though I have a friend who's writing what she calls a roman fleuve, a "stream" novel--Kate Bernheimer, who's doing this lovely three-part fairy-tale series on the Gold sisters, three fictional sisters whose lives she depicts in terms of fairy-tale myths, symbols and structure. Of course there are other literary examples. I remember in college reading Durrell's Alexandria Quartet, for instance. But when it comes to serial novels I think more of children's lit I liked, or sci-fi--say Lloyd Alexander in fantasy, which I liked growing up, or C. S. Lewis or Edward Eager, or more recently Philip Pullman, and people like Jack Vance. But I decided impulsively on the trilogy idea, as I do on almost everything. In this instance, I knew I wanted to write about the same characters for a while and also that I didn't want to write a long book*

*again because it's more difficult to sustain tone in a long book. Also, with a newborn and a three year old, I have the practical equivalent of a short attention span. Anyway, the second book is done and the thematic similarities it has are pretty embedded and obscure. Except for aloneness and dogs. Those are obvious. But it deals with the same characters as the first from a different point of view--the father of Casey, a character in the first book, who works devotedly for the IRS.*

Oh, now I'm excited. I wanted to know more about several of the characters in your book. Now it makes perfect sense. And this is a kind of trilogy-writing that stirs my imagination, like Durrell's, which you mention: the multiple-sides-of-same-story. I suppose in a way I wanted to write that kind of trilogy with *The Fortress of Solitude*, only I wanted it all to be inside one cover. When people object to that book, it's always the disjunctive strategy-and-viewpoint switches--which were, of course, for me, the whole point of writing it, to build a structure capacious enough to hold those kinds of disparate realities. In fact, I'm sort of doing it again in the new one, but in a way I think is likely to seem more agreeable, because I won't ask the reader to begin completely again. Instead, I'm weaving the contradictions into a single narrative, so that by the time you've agreeably finished reading my agreeable tale I hope your head will have exploded. That's always what I'm really hoping most to do, by the way. Explode heads.

*What writer doesn't want to do a little head-exploding? My husband always accuses me of fetishizing the poignant--he says I married him for the same reason I got a pug dog. And it's true that there's a particular combination of desire and failure that explodes my own head--the state of wanting-passionately-and-being-incapable-of-getting. Something about frustrated desire breaks my heart and compels me at the same time. And I basically interpret literature as one great frustrated gesture. In fact, I interpret most art that way: a grand moment of desire for union, for understanding, for everything. A moment that, to most people living on earth, passes unnoticed.*

I'm so pleased by this definition that I'm going to suggest it should be the end of our talk. Except perhaps for this wisecrack: it's a good thing you decided to be a novelist, because in the alternate universe where you didn't, you would have obviously been doomed to a career in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. We're all better off in this universe.

Source: Lethem, Jonathan, and Lydia Millet. "Jonathan Lethem and Lydia Millet." *Bomb* 103 (Spring 2008). Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey Hunter. Vol. 295. Detroit: Gale, 2011. Literature Resource Center.

<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

## Discussion Questions

1. For readers who come to *Motherless Brooklyn* with little knowledge of Brooklyn, what devices, beyond straightforward descriptions, does Lethem use to capture its distinctive atmosphere?
2. Lionel's wordplay includes variations on his own name--Liable Guesscog, Final Escrow, Ironic Pissclaim, for example. How does this particular quirk serve to establish Lionel's sense of himself and his place in the world? Is there an internal logic about the variations or are they simply haphazard?
3. The Minna Men are all orphans, first introduced as teenagers. Discuss how each of them carves out an identity for himself and why this is important to them. How do the initial descriptions Lionel provides of Tony [p. 39], Gil [p. 40], and Danny [p. 42-43] foreshadow the relationships among the four as adults? Do their characters change in the course of the novel?
4. Does Minna see himself as more than a boss to the young men? Does he make a conscious effort to turn the group into a family or does the family feeling develop from the needs of the young men themselves? What evidence, if any, is there that Minna's interest in them is emotional as well as practical? In what ways does Minna's relationship with his own mother and older brother influence the way he treats the Minna Men?
5. Why does Lionel say "it was Minna who brought me the language, Minna and Court Street that let me speak" [p.37]? What parts do Tony, Gil, and Danny play in helping Lionel accept his Tourette's Syndrome? How do their individual ways of dealing with Lionel differ? Which man's support is the most significant to Lionel both as a teenager and as an adult?
6. In describing Gil's explanation of Minna's kidnapping and murder, Lionel says "English might have been his fourth or fifth language from the sound of it" [p. 94]. Why does Lethem include this observation and other examples of mangled language throughout the book? How do they put Lionel's own "language difficulties" in perspective?
7. In addition to Lionel's wonderful, often poetic riffs, what other specific language patterns does Lethem employ to bring the various characters to life? For example, how do Lionel's conversation with the homicide detective [pp. 109-111], his initial encounter with Kimmery [p. 135] and his interview with Matricardi and Rockaforte [pp. 176-177] create impressions of these particular people that are independent of Lionel's own perceptions?
8. What role does Julia play in the novel? In what ways is she the stereotypical "dame" of other hard-boiled detective novels and films and how is she different? Do you think

Julia is right when she says "No woman would ever want you, Lionel. . . . That's not really true. They might want you. . . . But they'll never be fair to you" [p. 297]?

9. Is Kimmery also a stock figure in this tradition? How does Kimmery's reaction to Lionel's Tourette's behavior differ from the reactions of the other characters? Does the brief, romantic interlude between Lionel and Kimmery advance the plot and if so, in what ways? How does it affect your understanding of Lionel? Is Kimmery "fair" to Lionel?

10. The Zen Buddhist communities in New York and Maine are not at all what they seem. Are the characters who participate in the Buddhist Zendo--Lionel's brother, Gerald, Julia, and Kimmery--influenced by Buddhist teachings? Do the principles of Zen Buddhism (either as expressed in the book by Kimmery or from your knowledge) illuminate some of the themes Lethem explores?

11. Does Lionel in fact become a "real detective"? Do his techniques fit your definition of detective work? Kimmery, for example, is skeptical about both his intentions and his working style [p. 255]. Do you think her evaluation is accurate? In other detective books you may have read, are the heroes completely removed from the personal aspects of the cases they investigate? Is the solution to Minna's murder fully satisfying in light of the evidence presented in the rest of the book?

12. At several points in the book, Lethem makes direct reference to the genres that inform *Motherless Brooklyn*--both the classic detective novel and "wiseguy" novels and movies. For example, Minna teases Gil for saying "piece," rather than "gun" [p. 8]; and Lionel asks "Have you ever felt, in the course of reading a detective novel, a guilty thrill of relief at having a character murdered before he can step on to the page and burden you with his actual existence?" [p. 119]. In another passage, Lionel compares himself to the standard set in detective literature: "So many detectives have been knocked out and fallen into such strange, swirling darknesses . . . and yet I have nothing to contribute to this painful tradition" [p. 205]. Why does Lethem include these references? Are they simply there for "comic relief" or do they serve another purpose?

13. By using Lionel as narrator, Lethem is following a long tradition in detective fiction. In what ways would the impact on the reader be different if a third-person voice told the story? Why do you think he chose to use a narrator with Tourette's Syndrome? Is this purely a literary device, giving him the opportunity to play with language as an author? Do the classic detective heroes--for example, Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade and Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe--have quirks comparable to Lionel's?

14. Does the title of the book refer only to the four orphans who make up the Minna Men? In what ways is Brooklyn itself "motherless"?

15. The *Voice Literary Supplement* wrote "Lethem loves to cross-wire popular genres and watch the sparks fly." In addition to the conventions of the hard-boiled detective novel, what other genre does Lethem draw on in *Motherless Brooklyn*?

## Multimedia

### **Author Jonathan Lethem (Radio Broadcast)**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1450914>

A discussion of the author on NPR.

## Further Reading

### ***Ecstasy of Influence: Nonfictions, etc.* by Jonathan Lethem**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1395079>

(Call number: 814.54 Le)

A career-spanning anthology of writings incorporates several new essays and includes numerous celebrity portraits as well as the author's musings on topics ranging from sex in cinema and drugs to cyberculture and graffiti.

### ***Fortress of Solitude* by Jonathan Lethem**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1209001>

(Call number: Fiction Lethem)

This is the story of two boys, Dylan Ebdus and Mingus Rude. They are friends and neighbors, but because Dylan is white and Mingus is black, their friendship is not simple. This is the story of their Brooklyn neighborhood, which is almost exclusively black despite the first whispers of something that will become known as "gentrification." This is the story of 1970s America, a time when the most simple human decisions--what music you listen to, whether to speak to the kid in the seat next to you, whether to give up your lunch money--are laden with potential political, social and racial disaster.

### ***Chronic City* by Jonathan Lethem**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1340455>

(Call number: Fiction Lethem)

Chase Insteadman, a handsome, inoffensive fixture on Manhattan's social scene, lives off residuals earned as a child star. Capitalizing on the rapturous and heartbreaking love letters he receives from his teenage sweetheart and fiancée, he lives a life of cloistered ease--that is until a pop critic with a conspiratorial countercultural savvy and a voracious paranoia force him to confront the answers to several mysteries tightly intertwined within the tragic fabric of the city itself.

### **Author's official website**

<http://jonathanlethem.com/>

News, information, and resources from the author.

**Read-Alikes** *Source: NovelList*

**Geek Love** by Katherine Dunn

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1022078>

(Call number: Fiction Dunn)

A side-show family that has decided to ensure that they will always be in demand, by breeding a fresh supply of freaks. Not to everyone's taste, but a surprisingly influential novel.

**Valis and Later Novels** by Philip K. Dick

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1340512>

(Call number: Science Fiction Dick)

The third and final volume of an overview of the author's work features novels written during his later years, including "*A Maze of Death*" and "*The Divine Invasion*," when the themes of religious revelation became predominant.

**Ready Player One** by Ernest Cline

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1388165>

(Call number: Science Fiction Cline)

*Ready Player One* takes place in the not-so-distant future--the world has turned into a very bleak place, but luckily there is OASIS, a virtual reality world that is a vast online utopia. People can plug into OASIS to play, go to school, earn money, and even meet other people (or at least they can meet their avatars), and for protagonist Wade Watts it certainly beats passing the time in his grim, poverty-stricken real life. Along with millions of other world-wide citizens, Wade dreams of finding three keys left behind by James Halliday, the now-deceased creator of OASIS and the richest man to have ever lived. The keys are rumored to be hidden inside OASIS, and whoever finds them will inherit Halliday's fortune. But Halliday has not made it easy. And there are real dangers in this virtual world.

**Extra!**

Choose a gripping film noir mystery to watch as a group following your book discussion. Films such as *The Third Man* or *The Maltese Falcon* would be appropriate. Look at AADL's Film Noir section for more ideas!

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/search/callnum/DVD%20Film%20Noir>

*Summaries from AADL.org Catalog*



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