

# **Dissident Gardens Study Guide**

## **Dissident Gardens by Jonathan Lethem**

(c)2016 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Dissident Gardens Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Part 1 Chapter 1 – Part 2 Chapter 1.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Part 2 Chapters 2 – 3.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Part 2 Chapter 4 – Part 3 Chapter 2.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Part 3 Chapter 3 - Part 4 Chapter 1.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Part 4 Chapters 2 - 4.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Symbols and Symbolism.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Settings.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Motifs.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Styles.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>

# Plot Summary

Note: This study guide specifically refers to the June 2014 First Vintage Contemporaries Paperback Edition of *Dissident Gardens* by Jonathan Lethem.

*Dissident Gardens* is a novel by Jonathan Lethem that recounts the lives of Rose Zimmer and her family who are Leftwing dissidents from the 1950s through to the 2010s. The novel leaps back and forth through time, showcasing different members of the family at different phases and places in their lives, all of which emanate from Rose. Rose, a Polish Jewish immigrant who survived in Europe during the 1930s, has veered Left politically, becoming an active member of the Communist movement in the United States. Her husband, Albert, is also an active member of the Communist movement, and the two obsess over politics to such a degree that they neglect their daughter Miriam.

Their politics infect every part of their lives, ultimately leading Albert to spy in East Germany, and to divorce from Rose. Miriam supports the Left wing politics of her mother, though she never becomes militant, angry, or politically narrow-minded. Miriam herself becomes a full-fledged part of the overall hippie movement, where she meets and falls in love with Irish ballad singer and Leftist activist Tommy Gogan. The two marry and have a son named Sergius. Rose, meanwhile, has an affair with a black Republican police officer named Douglas, for which the Communists threaten her. When Douglas and his wife both die, their son, Cicero, becomes something of a son to Rose, but Douglas rails against this.

Tommy and Miriam, meanwhile, continue with their Leftwing causes. Though they are heavily politically involved, they do not have political blinders the way Miriam does. Their first priority is their son, Sergius. This does not stop them, however, from risking their lives for the Left. They travel to Nicaragua to see about the Sandinista and the revolution underway there, only to be caught up by a militia awaiting its own revolution which kills them. Sergius comes to be raised at a boarding school as per Miriam's wishes that Sergius not be brought up by her mother should something ever happen to Miriam and Tommy. Years pass. Sergius later visits Cicero to learn more about Rose and the past, but Cicero does not want to talk about the past because his experiences with Rose were so tainted by politics, and because he came to care for Rose's health before Rose's death.

Sergius, meanwhile, meets a beautiful young girl named Lydia who is part of the Leftist Occupy Movement of the 2010s. Though she has a boyfriend, Lydia is happy to be sexually involved with Sergius as he drives her to Portland where he will catch a flight and Lydia will go her own way. They have sex in the airport bathroom, which arouses the concerns of the TSA because Sergius has taken so long to check in for his flight. Sergius is uncooperative with the TSA. Sergius's defiance is a small show of solidarity with the modern-day Left and the Leftist traditions of his family.



# Part 1 Chapter 1 – Part 2 Chapter 1

## Summary

In Chapter 1, it is late fall, 1955. Rose Zimmer, who works at Real's Radish and Pickle, worships Abraham Lincoln, and who is a resident of Sunnyside Gardens, is told by her fellow Communists, including Sol Eaglin, that she needs to stop seeing her black cop boyfriend. A select committee headed up by Sol confronts her in her home over this. Rose does her best to be patient, as most of them are too young to remember life in the 1930s. Rose finds it hypocritical that her fellow Communists should want to bring revolution to blacks, but not allow her to sleep with a black man. Rose's daughter, fifteen year-old Miriam, has gone to her grandmother (Rose's ex-mother-in-law), Alma's, in the Knickerbocker Apartments in Manhattan, for the evening. Miriam's father, Albert, has abandoned the family to serve the Communist Party in his native Germany as an East German spy. Rose reflects on first meeting Albert when the two were assigned to infiltrate the Gramercy Park Young People's League, which thereafter led to a hasty marriage when Rose became pregnant by Albert. She remembers having a miscarriage, but then trying again for four years until Miriam was conceived; and she remembers how martially unfaithful Albert always was. In the present, Rose tells Sol she knows he is only waiting for her to do something that would bring about actual punishment, since her love life cannot be punished in the same way.

In Chapter 2, the novel shifts back in time. After Albert leaves for East Germany, the young Miriam is given the gift of a Burl Ives record, in which he sings a song about a grey goose. Miriam is told by Rose that the Grey Goose represents the irrevocable destiny of the working class, rising up to fly. Years pass, and the novel returns to the present. Miriam repeats this mantra to her Communist friends and comrades at the bar, including Adam, Porter, and Adam's friend (a girl from Barnard College). When Rose gets home that night, she is stunned to find Miriam and Porter preparing to have sex. Rose orders Porter out, and slams Miriam for dating someone so much older rather than focusing on her education. Rose goes on to be dramatic, saying she is dying inside. She says she does not want to see Miriam with child and abandoned. Rose goes on to say she and Miriam are cast-offs. Miriam finds it silly that Rose is blaming everything on a man when a Communist, man or woman, is to be equally responsible for their lives. Miriam says she will not go to college unless she is told where her father is, and given a ticket to visit him. Rose tells Miriam to leave her alone, so Miriam goes into her bedroom.

The novel leaps ahead by years in Chapter 3. Cicero Lookins, black, gay, and fat, is visited by Sergius Gogan (Rose's grandson) for information about the old days in Sunnyside Gardens to write a cycle of songs about the Gardens, Rose, Miriam, and Tommy (Sergius's father). It is a life that Cicero has fled. Cicero says he hates Rose. Cicero explains that it was not just him who hated Rose, but that all Sunnyside did because Rose was only ever about power, was selfish, and made enemies in order to make her life look challenging. Cicero is not at all happy about being asked about Rose.



Sergius admits he knows little about his parents, Miriam and Tommy, since they died when he was eight. Sergius also knows little about the Langrushes. Cicero tells Sergius to be free of all these people, but knows there is no avoiding telling Sergius about the past.

As Chapter 4 begins, the novel shifts back in time to when Cicero is thirteen. Cicero is fascinated by chess. He is taken by Miriam to visit with second cousin Lenny, who clearly lusts after Miriam. Lenny engages Cicero in a game of chess. Miriam and Cicero then go see Miriam's fortune-teller, Sylvia de Grace. Cicero, who is very logical, finds astrology to be nothing more than lies. Miriam then brings Cicero to get some Chinese food. Cicero himself looks up to Miriam like a role model. Miriam will not read Cicero his fortune from the Chinese food place, then brings him to Dave's diner for vanilla milkshakes and egg creams. Cicero realizes these cravings of Miriam's means she is pregnant. Forty-three years pass. Cicero knows he cannot hide from the past any longer.

In Chapter 1 of Part 2, Lenny, attempting to work as a sports agent-like self-described provocateur, brings in yet another potential player for Bill Shea—this time, a pitcher named Carl Heuman. Lenny wants the baseball team itself to take on the name of the Sunnyside Proletarians. He has even had Miriam and some friends put together a theme song for the team. Lenny thinks about how meeting with Shea—wealthy, powerful, and an elite—means he is meeting with the Revolution's worst enemy. She says he will take Lenny's ideas under consideration. Lenny then goes to see Miriam and her guitar-playing Irish boyfriend, Tommy Goagn. Lenny faithfully attends each performance Tommy has at coffee shops and other such places, for it means Miriam is always there. When Lenny begins annoying Tommy with talk of baseball and intellectuals, Miriam tells Lenny to go home to Queens. Lenny thinks about how he has known Miriam since she was born. Lenny thinks about he himself has been born three times: first in 1932 when he was physically born; next in 1940 when Miriam was born; next in 1956 when the Khrushchev Thaw occurred. He recalls how his own parents moved to Israel, rediscovering their Jewish identity and faith, and how many others in the Communist movement felt betrayed or sold out by Khrushchev. Now, Lenny tries to focus on other things, such as baseball. He also considers Rose and Miriam to be his compasses: Miriam, always in flight and full of life, and Rose, the Last Communist. Lenny is angered when Miriam and Tommy get engaged, and is further angered when Carl is not given a chance to try out for the team.

## Analysis

Jonathan Lethem's structural organization of *Dissident Gardens* is as varied as the array his characters, ranging from Rose (a Jewish immigrant Communist and survivor of the Europe during the Holocaust) to Douglas (a black Republican) to their children, Miriam (a precocious girl who becomes a Hippie) and Cicero (who becomes a gay professor) to Sergius (who becomes a musician), while the novel itself leapfrogs back and forth through time. This is sometimes confusing, but careful reading and studying of contextual clues and information can give the reader an approximate sense of time. All



the lives of the characters, despite being varied, trace themselves back to the influence of Rose, and therein Lethem effectively argues through the course of the novel that family has a tremendous influence and pull on people. In this case, that family influence is primarily Rose.

Rose is presented as a strong-willed, politically-focused character to whom nothing beyond Communism makes sense or can exist for long. Rose genuinely believes a Communist revolution is coming in the United States, and her leftwing ideology forms the primary component of her life. Her daughter matters to her, but only as an afterthought. Rose is a Communist first, and a mother second. This is underscored by Cicero's own aversion to even wanting to speak about Rose. Indeed, Cicero explains the world of Rose as world that he actually fled, and has no desire to return to –not even in speaking. Nevertheless, the past, Lethem argues, is something that cannot be escaped, and so Cicero will ultimately come to divulge very limited amounts of information to Sergius, even as Cicero recalls much more in his own mind.

Cicero's primary complaints against Rose are that she is a politically-blinded narcissist, who cannot see the world beyond Communism. Lethem begins to build the argument by way of Cicero that there is more to life than politics. Readers should note that the end of Rose's marriage comes not because of anything personal or emotional, but because of everything political. Likewise, she politicizes everything in her own life –right down to the stories and nursery rhymes that Miriam learns as a small child. Miriam is not so much a daughter as she is a political future for Communism and for Rose.

Rose's family is therein heavily influenced by her politics, from Miriam to cousin Lenny. Miriam moves Left politically in high school and college, while Lenny –sexually obsessed with Miriam –follows in Rose's footsteps, though not as fervently. There is irony in his American, free-market endeavors to try to influence the team that will become the Mets even though Lenny demands to be known as an avowed Communist. Nothing in Miriam's life –even Abraham Lincoln –is seen without the lens of Communism to alter or distinguish it. The one place that Rose errs –by dating a black, rightwing Republican police officer –Communism comes to be a check against.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is Rose a Communist? Why are politics –and particularly Communism –so defining in her life as to actually define her life? What effect does this have on her life?

## Discussion Question 2

Already in the novel, Lethem's assertion that family exerts tremendous influence on other family members has bearing. How doe Rose influence the people in her family and around her so far?



## Discussion Question 3

Why is Sergius seeking information about his family, especially Rose? Despite this, Cicero is reluctant to talk about Rose. Why is this seemingly so?

## Vocabulary

mitigated, incongruous, dogma, affiliation, excommunication, alluded, repatriate, degenerate, irrecoverable, jape, perihelion, intrepitude, inanities, tenuous, non sequitur, immutable, monolithically, decrepitude, innuendo, efflorescence, implication, ambulatory, obtrusive, censure, blatant, cavort, ostensibly



## Part 2 Chapters 2 – 3

### Summary

In Chapter 2, Miriam, now married and mother to a two-year-old, is selected to be a participant on *The Who, What, or Where Game*, a quiz show. In NBC's greenroom, Miriam meets the show's current champion Peter Matusevitch, an advertising executive. Miriam thinks about how her good friend, Stella Kim, another survivor of Communist parents, would be instantly attracted to Peter. The show is hosted by the handsome Art James. Miriam is introduced to the public as a wife, mother, and community organizer as the game show gets underway. Miriam lags behind but begins to catch up toward the end of the show, as questions vary based on themes, such as *Cities in Crisis*. Unfortunately, it is challenger Graham Stone who wins, beating out both Miriam and Peter.

The novel shifts back in time in Chapter 3. Rose's husband, Albert, a German Jew, does not know where to live. The Jewish part of him wants to be in a city while the German part longs for forest and farmland. Rose journeys with Albert to New Jersey to see about a Jewish farming community called the Jersey Homesteads. The place is downtrodden and full of Communists celebrating the Fourth of July. Albert says that Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism. Ultimately, Rose and Albert come to live in Sunnyside instead, as it is a place of Leftist social activity. They move in the day Hitler and Stalin sign a non-aggression pact as World War II begins.

Years pass. Albert heads to East Germany and writes home as he can. A year after Albert leaves, Rose erects a shrine to Abraham Lincoln focused on Sandburg's six-volume study of Lincoln. Rose buries herself in Communist activities, ultimately divorcing Albert and going on to be with other men. Among them is an embarrassing fling with Sol Eagling. She ultimately comes to date black police officer Douglas Lookins to which her Communist fellows object. Douglas is a Republican, a World War II veteran, and very tough. Douglas makes Rose desired and attractive around him. However, Douglas dislikes intensely that Rose is so heavily involved with Communism, and being married with a family of his own, he has no desire to become a father to Miriam. Diane, Douglas's wife, slowly dies of Lupus. Douglas turns back to his wife, leaving Rose. Lonely and heartbroken, Rose rails against everything and everyone around her, including Miriam, who announces she is to be married to Tommy. Rose accepts this as best she can.

### Analysis

Lethem continues to shift through time. Careful reading of the text helps to orient readers to the time period, which returns to the late 1930s/early 1940s or so, given the nonaggression pact signed between Hitler and Stalin in Europe. Readers are returned to the time of Rose's marriage, where Lethem expounds upon his argument that there is





more to life than politics. Albert's departure saddens both Rose and Albert. However, the voids in their life are filled in a very utilitarian fashion. Both simply take on other romantic and sexual partners, and fill their lives with Communism. It is a life that is cold but sustaining.

Nevertheless, Lethem effectively argues here that loss is a part of life. No political philosophy, economic system, or sociocultural way of thinking can ever truly fill the voids left by genuine human interactions and loss –whether it is love lost, or a life lost. Rose's affair with Douglas ends, leaving her alone and sad. She does her best to focus on Communism and on her daughter. However, Rose struggles to accept her daughter will be getting married –meaning that she will be losing someone else in her life. Rose is unwilling to admit it, but Lethem's argument that family has a tremendous pull and influence on people is clear. Rose herself is the one being influenced and pulled, whether or not she cares to admit it. This will come to have profound implications for Rose later in life.

## Discussion Question 1

Does politics help or hinder the marriage of Rose and Albert? Why do they allow politics to play such a determining factor in their lives?

## Discussion Question 2

What is Rose's reaction to both Albert and Douglas leaving her? Why does she respond in such a way?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Rose respond to Miriam's announcement of marriage? Why does Rose respond as she does? What does Miriam's marriage mean for Rose?

## Vocabulary

cohort, invariably, rictus, galvanic, consummation



## Part 2 Chapter 4 – Part 3 Chapter 2

### Summary

In Chapter 4, the novel shifts back in time. Tommy Gogan, originally from Ireland, emigrates to Toronto after a stint in the Royal Navy where he works as a bricklayer before moving to New York with his brothers, Rye and Peter. There, they take to music. They begin writing, recording, and performing as The Gogan Boys. But when Tommy begins getting involved in the Communist movement and civil rights, Rye and Peter become upset, because no blacks have ever come to their shows and because Communists do not pay to hear music. In February 1960, Tommy meets Miriam at the home of mutual acquaintances and friends. He brings her to his apartment to play music for her, including civil rights ballads. Miriam is impressed, while Tommy likes her free-spirited nature. They interview black men and those who have suffered and name songs they write after the men they meet.

Tommy takes his own place apart from his brothers on Mott Street, which affords him greater freedom and privacy to be with Miriam. The two begin seeing each other and sleeping together. At the same time, Tommy begins pushing back against his brothers, especially Peter. As Tommy prepares to marry Miriam, he decides to split from the Gogan Boys. He looks to record a second album, independent of the Gogan Boys. Tommy wonders if he will be a failed singer, and tries to figure out whether to name his new album *Chelsea of the Soon to Be Forgotten*, or *Chelsea of the Forgettable: A Sob Cycle*. Tommy begins to realize that what Rose told him is true: The true Communist always ends up alone. Tommy realizes he does not have a second album in him, and feels very lonely.

In Part 3 Chapter 1, many years pass. Cicero is a college professor at Baginstock College in Maine, where he teaches psychology. Sergius sits in on one of Cicero's classes. Cicero lectures that it is possible intellectual dallying and raking about may become a part of sexual life, and in turn infects everything the intellectual sees or does. Cicero talks about how the problem with utopian ideologies is that they pit themselves against the bourgeois family, which is hopeless and overreaching because human beings begin life with a mother and a father as reality before heading out into the world. Lewis Starlign, a student, says it sounds pretty Freudian. Other students are confused about what they are supposed to be talking about. Cicero tells them they are talking about their mothers. Cicero knows the nineteen year-old kids in his class cannot speak intelligibly about their mothers.

Cicero does not even like speaking at all about his own mother. Cicero thinks about his father, who was scorned and praised for his work as a black police officer, and is proud that his father was a clean police officer. Cicero does not even mind that his father was a Republican, as many blacks at that time were –from Jackie Robinson to James Brown. Still, Cicero knows it was Rose's insistence on his education that led him to accept the Guardians Association Scholarship Award which in turn propelled him to his



current place in life as a professor. Cicero and Sergius meet up with Sergius's new friend, Lydia, who as part of the Occupy Wall Street movement at Occupy Cumbow has been playing one of Tommy's songs on guitar. Sergius explains the *Forgotten* album is a precursor to the forgotten *Ninety-nine Percent*. Sergius has decided to drive Lydia to Portland. Cicero realizes he has missed an opportunity to unload and unburden himself of Rose by actually speaking to Sergius about her.

In Chapter 2, the novel shifts back in time to October 14, 1958. Albert writes to Miriam in letters over the course of twenty years, telling her he is proud of the young woman she has become. He applauds her decision to travel in Europe, advocates for Communism, congratulates her on her marriage, discuss history (especially World War II history, specifically the bombings of Guernica and Dresden), and notes he has remarried a woman named Michaela and has had a son named Errol. Miriam writes back, telling her father that he and Rose are fighting a war that no longer exists, and not seeing the world for what it is. A note at the end of the letters points out that the final letter was likely never seen by the addressee.

## Analysis

Readers are transported back and forth through time from the 2010s to the 1960s, a time distance of more than half-a-century. This travel underscores Lethem's argument that the past is inescapable. Sergius showing up to ask Cicero about a past he would rather be free of is further proof that the past is inescapable: Sergius himself is a living embodiment of the past. Cicero refuses to speak about the past, except in very limited ways. Cicero's own past with Rose was that much of a problem that he has a sort of mental, emotional, and even physical aversion to wanting anything to do with that past.

The reader should understand this as rejection not only of the past, but of Rose herself. Cicero's aversion to Rose, again, comes largely because who Rose was as a person was nearly indistinguishable from who she was as a Communist—and Rose's Communism overpowered everything around her. As such, Cicero is influenced in a very negative and Cicero was not even blood-related family. Rose became something of a surrogate mother to him after the death of his own parents. Ironically, despite Cicero's hatred of Rose, he does credit her influence toward helping him where he is today, thanks to her insistence he accept the Guardians Association Scholarship Award. Family has a tremendous influence and pull on people and Rose has certainly exercised such power in Cicero's life.

Miriam's own life has wholly been a product of influence from Rose. Miriam leans left politically, but her approach is not militant like Rose's. Rose seeks political revolution; Miriam seeks a cultural change and comes to identify with the peaceful Hippie counterculture. She marries a man of the Left, who prefers guitars and music to guns and bullets. As such, there is great symbolism in the guitar itself which is an instrument of peaceful change. While their politics are important in their lives, they are not the sole determining factor. Consider that Miriam reaches out to her father not for the purposes of politics, but of family. Miriam's attraction to Tommy is not political, but romantic.



## Discussion Question 1

Much more is revealed about the relationship between Cicero and Rose. What was their relationship like? Do you think it is understandable why Cicero wants nothing to do with Rose, even in memory, or do you think he is overreacting? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Miriam take after her mother? How does Miriam differ from her mother? What do you believe accounts for this? How does Miriam compare and differ from Cicero in his handling of Rose? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Miriam reach out to her father? What is their relationship like over the course of time? Why does this seem to be so?

## Vocabulary

embittered, absolution, lugubrious, egalitarian, supersensitivity, phantasmal, prerequisite, revivalist, involuntarily, antipathy, prerogative, nonsemantic, incumbency, inflection, amalgamation, putrefied, corporeal, intelligibly, abhorrent, innumerable, prodigal, pyramidal, politics



# Part 3 Chapter 3 - Part 4 Chapter 1

## Summary

In Chapter 3, it is Halloween in the late 1970s. Lenny dresses up as Abraham Lincoln. He meets up with Miriam and Tommy, who are having a Halloween party with their Wesbeth commune. Cicero is also in attendance. Lenny is sexually turned on just by looking at Miriam, and is glad his Lincoln costume hides it well. On the way home, Lenny narrowly misses being killed in a train accident, as he departs the subway for Rose's apartment, where he sleeps with Rose. The two end up arguing over whether Miriam is the greater revolutionary, or Lenny is. Rose considers Lenny a cheap revolutionary because he never made one enemy worth making. Rose tells her that such a visit can never happen again. As Lenny leaves, he is pursued and shot at by a group of IRA attackers, to whom he has sold fake German gold.

In Chapter 4, Douglas dies of an embolism. Cicero is now a junior at Princeton. Lenny's body is sent to Israel for burial. Rose comes to watch *All in the Family* whenever she can, and takes to watching the people living in the Gardens. As more and more people die, Rose's world gets smaller and smaller. Rose heads out to one funeral after another, watches Archie Bunker deliver the eulogy at Stretch Cunningham's funeral, not realizing Stretch is Jewish; and then goes on to imagine herself sitting down at the bar with Archie. She finds in Archie an unrepentant member of a generation long gone, the exact opposite of her politically. In her imagining, Rose comes on to Archie, but Archie turns her down. Rose is amazed to learn that Archie and his wife, Edith, are foster parents to a Jewish child, who is family to them and about whom they do not care what religion she is. Archie wonders why Rose did not take in her own grandson.

In Part 4 Chapter 1, the novel shifts back further in time. Sergius is a school kid, his parents now dead. He thinks about his upbringing, considering himself to be full hippie and half-secular Jew. He remembers how his father, Tommy, drifted into Quakerism while his mother Miriam, consented with a shrug to having Sergius brought to Quaker meetings. Sergius remembers how his parents flew to Nicaragua, a trip from which they did not return. In the present, Sergius attends Pendle Acre, a liberal boarding school at which Harris Murphy, an old friend of Tommy's and Miriam's, is a teacher. Sergius decides that the school and Quakerism will be his parents in life. Over time, Sergius forgets his parents, keeping what memories he can, and forgetting what never can be. Murphy, in particular, becomes an important fixture in Sergius's life. Sergius comes to hate and want to kill the people who killed his parents, so Murphy reads Sergius the *Lamb's War*, which is about making war not with weapons, but with words.

It is also Murphy who encourages Sergius to play the guitar. Sergius later visits with Stella Kim, his mother's best friend. They are thrilled to see one another. When it comes time for Sergius to decide whether to go and live with his grandmother Rose, or to remain at Pendle Acre, Sergius decides on Pendle Acre. The years pass, and Sergius comes to support different causes and movements, such as the anti-nuclear weapons



movement. Sergius and Stella Kim go visit Rose in the nursing home where she now resides as her mind is going quickly. There is some recognition on Rose's part, as she calls Sergius Cicero. When Sergius asks Stella Kim about Cicero, Stella Kim explains.

## Analysis

As the novel jumps back and forth through time, the theme of loss becomes central to the plot. Rose and the other characters begin to age, and their lives begin to play out. Loss is unavoidable in life, even for the unrepentant Communist like Rose. The IRA kills Lenny after he sells them fake German gold. There is a great moral crisis that occurs therein, as the sanctity of the family bond has been defiled by sexual relations. Miriam and Tommy go to Nicaragua, and are never seen again. Sergius refuses to go and live with his grandmother, preferring school and Murphy over Rose. Rose, because of her own lifestyle, is deprived of everyone around her especially her own family. As Lethem reminds readers here, family has a tremendous influence and pull on people. Clearly with Rose, it is not always for the better. In fact, it is rarely for the better when even her own grandson refuses to come and live with her. Rose's imaginary conversation with Archie Bunker slams this point home to her.

The reader will recall that, earlier in the novel, Rose told Lenny that the last true Communist would always end up alone (Part 2, Chapter 4, p. 192). Here, Rose's prescient understanding of the politically-driven life comes true. Rose ends up alone. There is nothing heroic, triumphant, or even exciting about this. It is merely a sad, true, and tragic turn of events –one which Rose brought about. Still, Rose's left-wing influence can be felt through the company her daughter kept, by way of Murphy. It is Murphy and the liberal boarding school which Sergius attends that helps bring Sergius Left politically. It is clear that, while liberalism may have a place alongside conservatism in the United States, far-left movements like Communism were never going to take root. And so those who advocate for such extremism end up not only voices in the wilderness, but wrong voices in the wilderness. Rose has staked her entire existence on something which did not come to pass, and now she is alone and unrepentant.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Sergius manage to get over the deaths of his parents? Why does he refuse to have anything to do with Rose in getting on with life?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Sergius compare to his mother, his father, and to his grandmother politically? What do they all have in common? Where does Sergius differ? Why?



## Discussion Question 3

Why does Lenny sleep with Rose? Why is this such a moral issue, especially with respect to the sanctity of family bonds and blood?

## Vocabulary

berserk, scandalized, inhumanely, scurrilous, demesne, conspiratorially, belligerent, expunged, palliatives, predilections, sardonic



## Part 4 Chapters 2 - 4

### Summary

In Chapter 2, Miriam and Tommy are in Nicaragua to see about the revolution. They fall in with some other foreigners (such as a botanist they suspect of being a CIA operative, and Fred from California) and a group of soldiers under the command of El Destruído. The revolutionaries are not Sandinistas, and say they are waiting for the next revolution. El Destruído motions for Tommy to play his guitar. El Destruído decides to bring along Tommy while leaving Miriam in Fred's hands. Miriam realizes they are being separated and will likely soon be dead. Miriam knows that at least her son is safe, and knows her son will not end up in Rose's hands thanks to Stella Kim's efforts.

In Chapter 3, the novel steps ahead in time. Cicero is contacted by a social worker who reports Rose has been found wandering four miles from her apartment, and has only V-8 juice and some sardines in her refrigerator. She is to be taken to the Lewis Howard Latimer Care Facility, to which Cicero signs off on as he is the closest possible family member that can be reached. Cicero goes to Rose's house to sort through her possessions and bring some to her place at Latimer. Rose, who has regained some lucidity, seeks an enemy for her current situation –from the death of her daughter to her being committed to Latimer. Rose's greatest enemy is herself, however, as Cicero must prod her to eat and care for herself as best she can while Rose behaves angrily, such as trying to go on a hunger strike. Rose keeps notes on index cards to help her remember important things, including people from her past. Rose says that if it was not for capitalism, they could have had a Communist revolution in America. Cicero, meanwhile, writes a book called *The Vale of Attrition*, and shows it to Rose who is not impressed. It is during this time that Cicero learns about the struggle over who will have custody of Sergius.

In Chapter 4, Sergius and Lydia become sexually involved as he drives them both to the Portland airport, with Lydia even masturbating him while he is driving. Lydia reveals she has a boyfriend, and will be staying in Portland to return to New York for the Occupy movement. She then brings Sergius into the women's room to have sex with him in a stall. Returning to his flight, Sergius is picked up by security and put into a small room. A supervisor explains this is because Sergius entered the airport at a certain time, but did not check in until an hour and-a-half later. Security asks about Lydia, but Sergius refuses to tell them anything about her. The supervisor explains that the airport that let the master mind of the 9/11 terrorist attacks through, and will not risk anything again. Sergius is told to place his hands on the table, and orders are sent out to pick up Lydia.

### Analysis

The true Communist always ends up alone as Rose's situation evinces. Her entire family has either died or refuses to have anything to do with her until long after she is





dead. There is more to life than politics, and Rose ending up alone is proof that living one's life only about such things makes a life less dimensional, less meaningful, and less joyous. For Rose's part, it is clear that Communism never had a chance in the United States, and her refusing to accept this is not noble sacrifice, but self-serving intolerance and close-mindedness. She cannot accept that there are things beyond Communism. Rose lost time with her family. Even Miriam and Tommy are undone by their Leftism, as it leads them to the wrong place at the wrong time, and they are killed by a militia.

Still, Rose's influence continues to be felt. The reader should note that many Americans still seek a leftward movement politically, but do so by other means. The Occupy Wall Street movement is the present-day incarnation of Communism, though many of its members are peaceful. Occupy is organic and spontaneous while Communism was planned and organized. Occupy exists at any time and place while Communism is meant to be a defining moment. In the end, even the Occupy movement fades away. Rose herself provides the explanation –that the free markets and American freedom ultimately mean things such as Communism (and, by extension, the Occupy movement) can never take root. In a symbolic act of solidarity with his family ancestors and parents, Sergius refuses to cooperate with the TSA, staging his own form of protest.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does the true Communist always end up alone? Why does Rose end up alone? Why does she refuse to recognize her own prophetic vision for the future of the true Communist?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Sergius refuse to cooperate with the TSA? How is this indicative of Rose's ultimate influence on his own life?

## Discussion Question 3

Do you think Sergius's refusal to cooperate with the TSA is a true statement of defiance, or just idiocy given the situation? Why?

## Vocabulary

benighted, inevitability, prerequisite, convivial, variegations, preponderance, munificence, patronize, polymorphous, adamant



# Characters

## Rose Zimmer

Rose Zimmer is the mother of Miriam, mother-in-law of Tommy, grandmother of Sergius, aunt of Lenny, ex-wife of Albert, and something of a mother figure to Cicero. Rose is a Jewish Polish immigrant to America, having left Europe in the dark days of the 1930s. Strong-willed and obsessed with Communism, Rose has little time for anything else in her life. Even her marriage to Albert and her romantic relationship with Douglas, as well as her relationship with her daughter, come second to Communism. Everything in life Rose does or sees is through the lens of Communism including Miriam's nursery rhymes and storybooks. Rose refuses to accept that Communism can never manifest itself in America, and refuses to see how the country changes—especially through the 1980s. As a result, her selfishness and die-hard Communist activism drive away her family, leading her to die essentially alone—though her influence ensures her entire family will be left-of-center politically.

## Miriam Zimmer

Miriam Zimmer is the daughter of Rose, the wife of Tommy, the cousin of Lenny, and the mother of Sergius. Miriam is brilliant, kind, and beautiful, and struggles with her mother's insistence on politics over family in almost all situations. Miriam moves left politically, falls in love with Tommy, and has Sergius by him. She and Tommy use music to bring attention to the plight of working class people, and travel around the world to do good for those who have been wronged. Miriam and Tommy are ultimately killed in Nicaragua during one such trip, but not before Miriam ensures her best friend, Stella Kim, knows that Sergius is to never be given in custody to Rose.

## Sergius Gogan

Sergius Valentine Gogan is the son of Miriam and Thomas, and the grandson of Rose. Sergius is raised by family friend Murphy at the Pendle Acre school after the death of his parents. Sergius learns to play guitar, and desires to write songs about his parents, so seeks out Cicero after learning of his existence from Stella Kim. Sergius is rebuffed by Cicero, who does not wish to speak much about the past. Sergius then meets and befriends Lydia, learning more about the Occupy movement through her, and having sex with her at the airport. There, Sergius refuses to cooperate with the TSA as a symbolic movement of solidarity with his parents and grandmother in their Leftist bent.

## Cicero Lookins

Cicero Lookins is the son of Douglas Lookins, and is the pseudo-son of Rose, being watched over by her after his own parents die. Cicero is black, gay, and a professor at



Baginstock College, and resents his life with Rose because of Rose's overbearing, selfish, and politically-unforgiving nature. Nevertheless, he is grateful for her for urging him to accept a scholarship, and helping move him into academia.

## Lenny Angrush

Lenin "Lenny" Angrush is the second cousin of Miriam and nephew of Rose. A pragmatic Communist who wants the Revolution to come but also wants to be rich in America by way of the free market, Lenny is in love with Miriam and spends much of the novel sexually obsessing over her. Lenny is ultimately shot to death by IRA thugs after selling them fake gold.

## Stella Kim

Stella Kim is the best friend of Miriam. Bronx-born and a graduate of Hunter, Stella and Miriam first meet at Yippie Headquarters. It is Stella who helps to ensure that Miriam's desire that Rose never gain custody of Sergius is possible.

## Tommy Gogan

Tommy Gogan is an Irish-born American musician who has a musical folk act with his two brothers, Peter and Rye. Tommy meets and falls in love with Miriam, ultimately marrying her and having Sergius with her. Tommy and Miriam write songs with Leftist politics in mind, hoping to change society and culture peacefully. They travel around the world promoting such things, but are ultimately killed by militia in Nicaragua.

## Sol Eaglin

Sol Eaglin is one of the leaders of the Communist movement in New York. He has a brief affair with Rose, and later comes to admonish her over her relationship with Douglas. Sol comes and goes early in the novel, but ultimately dies along with the Communist movement in time.

## Lydia

Lydia is a young girl and member of the Occupy movement who befriends and sexually involves herself with Sergius. The two travel to Portland airport together, where they have sex even though Lydia has a boyfriend elsewhere. When she leaves Sergius for New York, she is ultimately picked up and detained by the TSA due to Sergius's unwillingness to answer questions.

## Archie Bunker

Archie Bunker is a fictional television character who becomes a contemporary hero of Rose's. Despite their diametric difference in politics, Rose sees Archie as a holdout of his generation while she is a holdout of her Communist movement. Yet, whereas Archie eventually though reluctantly adapts to changing times, Rose never does. This is most telling when Rose's lifestyle prevents her from being able to take care of Sergius, while Archie is able to take care of his niece because he is at least open enough to look beyond his differences and his world-view.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Lincoln shrine

Rose's Abraham Lincoln shrine symbolizes the extent to which Rose is a narcissist and committed to the Communist cause. Rose idolizes Lincoln because Lincoln was a great changer of sociocultural norms; and because he was killed for what he believed in. Rose, too, is willing to die for what she believes in, and as such, will never alter or change her views on Communism.

## Sandburg's Lincoln books

The Lincoln volumes written by Sandburg symbolize the kind of memorial Rose wants. The volumes make up the center of her shrine to Lincoln. Rose intends to be a heroic leader of the Communist Revolution in America, and so wishes to have books like Sandburg's written about her.

## American freedom and free markets

American freedom and free markets symbolize the reason why Communism never takes hold in America. While in other countries, Communism is seen as the great leveling force of all people, freedom and free markets are seen as the great leveling force of all people. Because Americans know they have it in themselves to succeed or fail, and because Americans have such a wonderful economy, they have no desire to have anything to do with Communism –let alone how bloody and violent it is in Europe.

## Rose's Communist lifestyle prediction

Rose's prediction is symbolic of her own fate. Rose's prediction, spoken to Lenny, is that the true Communist will always die alone. This is because the revolution and Communism must come first before even family and love. Rose never alters her adherence to Communism, and so drives away all those who would otherwise love her. In the end, she dies alone.

## All in the Family

All in the Family is an American television sitcom which symbolizes changing times. In the show, the very traditional Archie Bunker must face changing times despite not wanting to alter his own world view until needed. Rose comes to watch the show religiously, finding a similar soul in Archie.



## **Tommy's music**

Tommy's music symbolize the peaceful approach of the Left to sociocultural change. The music Tommy plays and the songs he writes are about working class people who have been forgotten. Miriam comes to help Tommy write some music, and when they marry, they continue writing and playing as they travel around. Unfortunately, Tommy's music cannot save them from the militia in Nicaragua.

## **Fake gold**

Fake gold symbolizes idiocy on Lenny's part. Lenny, looking for some easy money, sells fake German gold to the IRA. Having been unsuccessful at all else he does, he believes this will be beneficial –until the IRA finds out the truth. In response, they hunt him down and kill him.

## **Index cards**

Index card notes symbolize Rose's Alzheimer's struggles. As Rose ages, and as her memory goes, she begins keeping notes about her life, her past, people she knows, and other important pieces of information. She does this so that she will not forget these things, including who has been in her life that has died or that she has lost.

## **Stella's promise**

Stella's promise to Miriam symbolizes the bad-blood which still exists between Miriam and Rose. The promise consists of Stella looking to prevent Rose from gaining custody of Sergius should anything ever happen to Miriam and Tommy. This underscores just how much Miriam does not want Rose to raise Sergius. Stella's promise is brought to fruition when a judge determines that Sergius will be allowed to remain at boarding school rather than being sent to live with Rose.

## **Sergius's act of refusal**

Sergius's refusal to cooperate with the TSA is a symbolic act of solidarity in keeping with the Leftist work of his family. Sergius refuses to tell the TSA Lydia's name after having sex with her in the bathroom and causing a security situation. Sergius also refuses to cooperate with them in general about himself, revolting against the system the way his grandmother and parents did before him.



# Settings

## Sunnyside Gardens

Sunnyside Gardens is the commune in Sunnyside, Queens, New York, where Rose lives and raises Miriam. It is a hotbed of Left wing activity sanctified by Lewis Mumford and Eleanor Roosevelt, and is a neighborhood of buildings which surrounds a communal garden. The area remains well-kept and together as the decades pass, but the area itself sees a wide-ranging shift in the actual Leftist movements associated with it. The militant Communism of the 1940s and 1950s gives way to the Hippie movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and which all ultimately pave way to softer Left wing movements between the 1980s and 2000s, culminating with the Occupy Movement of the 2010s. It is these Left wing dissidents that give the novel, *Dissident Gardens*, its name.

## East Germany

East Germany is where Albert moves when the Communist Party calls on him to engage in spy work. Albert, though saddened to leave Rose, loves Communism more than his wife. The time Albert spends in East German leads to growing distance between him and Rose, and in turn leads to their divorce. In East Germany, Albert begins a new life with a new wife and a new child, and is visited by Miriam sometime in the 1960s. They correspond over the course of two decades, but eventually, Albert stops responding. It is presumed he is dead as his letters end up in German secret police archives.

## Baginstock College

Baginstock College, located in Maine, is the college at which Cicero teaches psychology. It is where Sergius travels in order to speak with Cicero about the past, and where Cicero refuses to speak too much or too openly about Rose. It is from Baginstock that Sergius leaves with Lydia for Portland, and it is in Baginstock that Cicero comes to brood over the past.

## Latimer Care Facility

Lewis Howard Latimer Care Facility, located in New York, is where Rose is committed when her mind begins to go. It is Cicero who signs the paperwork to have her committed to the place, and it is Cicero who visits Rose there regularly. Often, Rose does not recognize Cicero, but still he goes to see her despite the past he has had with her.

## **Portland Airport**

The Portland Airport is where Sergius drives Lydia after meeting her in Baginstock. They have sex at the airport which, thanks to the timing, creates a security situation. It is in the airport that Sergius is picked up by security and questioned. Sergius's unwillingness to cooperate leads to Lydia being picked up as well, which in turn creates an even larger situation than needed.





# Themes and Motifs

## There is more to life than politics

There is more to life than politics, argues Jonathan Lethem in his novel *Dissident Gardens*. While politics may be an important part of life, it cannot be the whole of one's life. If it is, it pushes away love, family, romance, friendship, other interests, and more. In the novel, it is Rose who struggles to live beyond the confines and scope of Communism –and she ends up alone as a result.

Rose has been a committed Communist for most of her life. Her entire life has revolved around Communism and paving the way for the Revolution in New York. Everything else in Rose's life, including family, comes second. Rose has delusions of grandeur about being at the forefront of the Revolution. She is saddened when Albert leaves to serve the Communists in East Germany, but does not allow her emotions to get in the way of the greater good.

Rose's selfishness and narrow-mindedness, as well as her emotional coldness, come to drive away Miriam, her friends, and others. Still, Rose remains obsessed with Communism, oblivious to the nature of America's sociocultural landscape and the hurt she is causing those around her. As she keenly and accurately predicts to Lenny, the true Communist ends up alone.

As Rose ages, her family and friends all either die or flee her. This includes Miriam and Tommy, who are so opposed to Rose that Miriam will not even allow Sergius to live with Rose should anything ever happen to Miriam in her travels. Consequently, Rose ends up alone. Only Cicero, who realizes Rose has no other options, decides at the last minute to step in to care for Rose at Latimer. Because of Rose's Communist adherence, she misses out on love, family, friendship, other beautiful things in life –and so dies alone and largely shunned.

## The past is inescapable

The past is inescapable, argues Jonathan Lethem in his novel *Dissident Gardens*. The past heavily influences the present, and no matter how bad the past is, it cannot be avoided. The past, whether it is recent or distant, is no less relevant.

Sergius does not know much about his past, particularly the lives of his parents and his grandmother. He seeks to honor them in song, and in so doing, must learn more about them. Because of this, he visits with Cicero to learn about the past that is at once Sergius's, and not his (Sergius's past includes his parents, but his past does not directly include the past lives of his parents). The past is thus very relevant to Sergius, not only because of his blood relation to the past, but because of his desire to write songs about it.



Cicero has gone to teach in Maine because he wishes to forget the past. It is Rose's overbearing, selfish, and uncompromising nature that have driven Cicero away. Yet, no matter how far Cicero runs from the past, he cannot escape it. The past returns to him both physically manifested in Sergius and in Sergius asking for the past; and in Cicero recalling the past himself. Cicero is forced to confront the difficulties of his own youth.

Having learned some things about his parents, Sergius travels to Portland, prepared to catch a flight. At Portland's airport, Sergius is detained by security for the strange timing of his movements, which he knows have raised suspicions. Rather than cooperating, Sergius taps into his family's past by giving security a hard time and staging a microcosmic form of rebellion against "the system," which in turn is a symbolic show of solidarity with his family roots.

## **Communism never had a chance in the United States**

Communism never had a chance in the United States, argues Jonathan Lethem in his novel *Dissident Gardens*. Despite the United States having a strong political slant to the Left between the 1930s and the 1970s, the core of America –freedom and free markets –meant that no permanent shift Left could ever occur. The Reagan presidency in the 1980s demonstrated this by dramatically shifting America back to the Right. Despite this contextual background, Rose continues her pursuit of Communism.

In the 1930s and 1940s, on the heels of the Great Depression in America and with the rise of Nazism, Italian Fascism, and Japanese Imperialism throughout the world, America seems ripe for a Communist Revolution. Rose and the Communist Party seek to foment Revolution and to overthrow the American system of government to replace it with rule by themselves in a Communist fashion. It is among the reasons why Rose is so vocal and fervent in her beliefs.

Unfortunately, despite the expanse of American government, government programs, and government role in daily life between the 1930s and 1970s, core fundamental American principles, ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and practices remain unshaken. These include a belief in the individual over the State, individual freedom against the State, in faith and family over the State, and in free markets among many other differences with Communism. Americans may have thought the New Deal was important to deal with the Great Depression, but to shift as far Left as Communism –in addition to the brutal violence of Communists throughout the world –is something no real American will stand for.

This is made even clearer with Reagan's 1980 election when government shrinks and individual liberties are increased while the government plays a far less active role in daily life. This is completely at odds with Communism, and despite the booming American economy and rise of freedom –in addition to the collapse of Communism worldwide –Rose persists in her adherence to Communism. Miriam herself notes the world has changed, and so too must ways of doing things –but Rose refuses. She remains a selfish, militant Communist to her death –and thus, dies alone.



## **Family has a tremendous influence and pull on people**

Family has a tremendous influence and pull on people, argues Jonathan Lethem in his novel *Dissident Gardens*. Family is the root from which all society and culture emanates. In the novel, Rose serves as matriarch of her family –something she has no desire of doing –and influences those around her more than she thinks, even though her nature drives them away.

Rose is a lifelong, unrepentant, unchanged Communist. She has delusions of grandeur in which she will help lead the Communist Revolution in America. Motherhood and family are a secondary part of life to Rose. Indeed, later in life, she realizes that motherhood is all she has left –and this, rather than comforting her, horrifies her, because to Rose, motherhood is a faceless, nameless task which consigns her to normality and irrelevance rather than love and comfort. Her coldness and desire to advance Communism no matter the cost drives an irreparable wedge between herself and everyone around her.

Miriam and Cicero are negatively affected by family in terms of family itself by Rose. Miriam is so put off by her so-called mother-daughter relationship that she does all she can to stay away from her mother and Communism, and when married, ensures that Sergio will never be raised by Rose should something happen to Miriam. This is an extreme position borne of the horrible relationship between Rose and Miriam. Cicero, at the same time, wants nothing to do with Rose later in life to the point that he flees New York for Maine, and refuses to even speak about her except in limited amounts many years later.

Rose's Leftism, however, influences all those around her as well, though to far less violent degrees. Miriam marries a Left wing songwriter, and the two become involved in the hippie movement, various Leftist movements through the 1970s, and are ultimately killed by their support of Left wing movements globally when they visit Nicaragua. Sergio moves Left politically thanks to family traditions and the influence of Murphy. Sergio ultimately comes to stand in solidarity with his family when he defies cooperation with the TSA at the airport in Portland, challenging "the system" in the process.

## **Loss is an unavoidable part of life**

Loss is an unavoidable part of life, argues Jonathan Lethem in his novel *Dissident Gardens*. Loss –by way of estrangement, defeat, and death –can either be embraced and dealt with, or ignored and ultimately succumbed to. In the novel, it is Rose who must deal with loss –and in so doing, refuses to deal with it.

Rose, as a Communist, is wholly devoted to the Cause of Communism. Nothing else compares –not even family. Rose is saddened when Albert must go to East Germany, but believes it is all for the greater good of Communism. Her loss of Albert is dealt with



by ignoring it and focusing on Communism –and her marriage ends as a result of her choosing to ignore her sense of loss and marriage in favor of Communism.

Rose also comes to feel a sense of loss when Miriam decides to get married. Although Rose has never been particularly close to Miriam, she has (without admitting it to herself) valued Miriam being around. With Miriam gone, rather than trying to find ways to keep in touch or to apologize for the past, Rose recommits herself to Communism. When Lenny dies, Rose does just the same. She does not dwell on his loss, reach out to others, or reconnect with family, but rather recommits to Communism.

Ultimately, Rose's single-mindedness about Communism and her refusal to deal with loss leads to her being alone herself. She has lost the struggle for Communism but will not admit it. She has lost all of her family and friends, but ignores this. She ends up with memory loss in Latimer, which in turn proves to be ironic: even memories of the past are lost to Rose. It is almost as if Rose's refusal to deal with loss has manifested itself in actual memory loss.

# Styles

## Point of View

Jonathan Lethem tells his novel *Dissident Gardens* from the third-person omniscient perspective from the point of view of an unnamed narrator. The narrator speaks with a God's-eye view of all people, places, and times in the novel, stitching together a plot that spans more than half-a-century. The narrator thus acts as a common unifying voice, drawing together different, distinct lives, places, events, and personal stories that are bound together with their having Rose in common. This allows the reader in turn to have unrestricted views and understanding of each character and the situations in which they find themselves. This allows for great dimensionality with the lives of the characters, making them complex and very much human in their endeavors. This is especially true of Rose who, though cold, is by no means inhuman. Readers learn the inner thoughts and feelings she has, even when she outwardly denies them or refuses to act on them. Because of this, the reader understands every character even when other characters cannot understand them.

## Language and Meaning

Jonathan Lethem tells his novel *Dissident Gardens* in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for two primary reasons. First and foremost, the simplicity of the language allows the narrator to, in a singular, recognizable, and consistent voice, tie together the lives of distinct characters over several decades in time into a single overarching plot. Second, it allows Lethem to clearly and effectively communicate important points, themes, and ideas. For example, it is made abundantly clear that a life devoted wholly to politics is not easy –or a fulfilling. “The true Communist always ends up alone,” Rose explains in Part 2, Chapter 4, on page 192. Consider also how effectively Lethem lays out how inferior Rose believes motherhood to be on page 268 in Part 3, Chapter 4: “It was only her womb that had relegated her to where she now felt she belonged, in the ranks of history’s losers...” Or consider, simply, Sergius’s act of solidarity and defiance on page 356 of Part 4, Chapter 4: “Fuck you.”

## Structure

Jonathan Lethem divides his novel *Dissident Gardens* into four major parts, with each part being divided into chapters. Both parts and chapters are given numbers and titles relating directly to events contained within them. For example, Part 4, Peaceable Kingdom, deals with the most recent wave of American Left wing movements of the 2010s, with emphasis on their peaceful nature versus the way Communism was violent in the 1950s. The chapters themselves are often very long, and tend to focus primarily around one or two major characters in the novel. The chapters themselves leapfrog back and forth through time, rarely ever being continuous with the next. Each step

through time, forwards or backwards, fills in a piece of the overall plot. For example, Part 4, Chapter II reveals the actual fate of Miriam and Tommy after their deaths were only mentioned in previous chapters.



## Quotes

Rose had been a single mother before she was made a single mother.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 1)

**Importance:** When Rose marries Albert, it takes them four years to conceive Miriam. With her husband so devoted to the Communist Party, Rose must essentially raise Miriam on her own while Albert is unfaithful to her. As such, she is very much like a single mother –something she is already used to by the time Albert leaves for East Germany to work as a spy.

For don't kid yourself, Rose was all about power. The power of resentment, of guilt, of unwritten injunctions against everything, against life itself. Rose was into death, Sergius!

-- Cicero (Part 1, Chapter 3)

**Importance:** Sergius comes to see Cicero for more information about his mother, Rose, and Sunnyside Gardens. Cicero reveals the Communist world of Rose is a world that he fled in haste, having hated it and hated Rose. Cicero explains that everyone hated Rose because Rose was only ever about power, about herself, and creating enemies in order to make her life look challenging.

Communism is twentieth-century Americanism.

-- Albert (Part 2, Chapter 3)

**Importance:** When Rose and Albert seek a place to live, they decide to try the Jersey Homesteads. It is a Communist farming commune. Celebrating the Fourth of July, Albert declares that Communism is the modern form of Americanism –independence and revolution. This underscores just how politically committed to the Communist cause Albert and Rose are. This becomes critical in understanding why Albert will move to East Germany in the coming years while Rose will remain a Communist long after the appeal of Communism has faded to all others.

The true Communist always ends up alone.

-- Rose (Part 2, Chapter 4)

**Importance:** Tommy, who has left his family music act to begin a solo career, finds he does not have a second album in him. His heavy turn toward the political, especially the Communist, leaves him empty of being able to record another album. Lonely, he reflects on Rose's warning, that the true Communist always ends up alone. This is as true of Tommy musically as it is of Rose in life in general. While former comrades, lovers, and family members have moved on, Rose remains an unreserved and unrepentant Communist. There is more to life than politics, but Rose does not see this.

Rose Zimmer was an affect beyond Cicero's powers of transmission.

-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 1)



**Importance:** Sergius visits Cicero in the 2010s to ask him about his mother, and the past. Cicero is not forthcoming about his mother, having fled life with her because of her demanding nature, and her unyielding politics. Cicero realizes that part of his inability to talk about Rose comes about because there is no easy way to actually put into words what Rose was like, and how she affected his life.

You two are alike, still fighting the war. Grieving over those charred bodies, some here, some there. Meanwhile not seeing the present world for what it is.

-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 2)

**Importance:** Miriam corresponds with her father, Albert. She speaks candidly about her parents, telling them that, by now (1978) they are holdouts in fighting a war that no longer exists. The world has changed, and is not the same world of the 1930s, 40s, or even 50s. This reflects Rose's statement that the true Communist always ends up alone, as the true Communist is so ideologically blinded they cannot see reality.

The Last is a man abandoned by history. He should have been at the inception, forging a bloody Communism in the teeth of czars...

-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 3)

**Importance:** Here, the narrator speaks of Lenny, calling him the Last Man of Communism. Lenny heads to Rose's house, where he sleeps with her. The Communism they have preached and promoted has left them behind in the dust. The world has moved on, but they have not. Lenny still lusts after Miriam, though Miriam is clearly not interested, while a freer and more equal world make Rose's Communism ancient at best, and violent and deadly at worst.

It was only her womb that had relegated her to where she now felt she belonged, in the ranks of history's losers...

-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 4)

**Importance:** As Rose grows older and her friends die, she realizes she has achieved little in life beyond motherhood. The political revolution she wanted to help foment has never come to pass; and she no longer feels as if she belongs anywhere important. She feels as if the only identifying feature in her life now –motherhood –relegates her to who she considers to be the true losers of history, people who never made a name for themselves.

Rose existed. Communism, not so much. And for what did Rose exist?

-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 4)

**Importance:** Here, the narrator explains Rose's conundrum. Having based her life solely on politics, specifically Communism, Rose wonders why she now exists since Communism is in serious decline. Within a few years, Ronald Reagan will hasten the collapse of Communism and the end of the Soviet Union, leading people like Rose to realize their sole purpose for existing no longer exists. Rose is now in a new phase of her life.





You remembered what you kept. You remembered, maybe also, what you wanted. What you couldn't keep or reasonably wish for was forgotten.

-- Narrator (Part 4, Chapter 1)

**Importance:** Sergius does his best to deal with the death of his parents by letting school and Quakerism be his new parents. He also struggles with memory, separating reality from things that never happened, and separating what actually happened from things he wishes could be or would have been. This helps him to forget and to move on –but becomes the base from which he will one day seek to learn more about his family.

It's wherever you are, right now.

-- Lydia (Part 4, Chapter 4)

**Importance:** Sergius is taken aback by Lydia's explanation of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Communism was always about militancy, ideology, and revolution –a strict set of guides, principles, and practices. Occupy, though it has many of the same goals in mind, is amorphous: it does not follow any guidelines or procedures. It simply happens without any real planning or organization. It is all about living in the moment, not plotting for the long-term future. It demonstrates how times have changed between Rose's world of the 1950s, and the America of the 2010s.

Fuck you.

-- Sergius (Part 4, Chapter 4)

**Importance:** Here, detained by the TSA at the Portland airport, Sergius signals his own form of revolution and revolt by refusing to cooperate with authorities. This is in deference to his own family's history of raging against a system, justly or unjustly, rightly or wrongly. In the present, it does not help Sergius not to cooperate since the TSA is concerned with safety, but it does make him feel as though he is in solidarity with his parents and grandmother.