

# **Motherless Brooklyn Study Guide**

**Motherless Brooklyn by Jonathan Lethem**

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## Plot Summary

Motherless Brooklyn is at once a traditional detective story and a playful send-up of many elements and tropes common to the genre. The first indication that this is the case is the unconventional aspect its narrator, Lionel Essrog, brings to the table. He introduces himself to open the book with a description of his particular 'quirk,' which is a fairly severe case of Tourette's syndrome, which causes him to compulsively blurt out frequently obscene and inappropriate words as well as to compulsively touch those with whom he comes into contact. The necessity of curbing and harnessing these impulses is among the principle struggles that Lionel engages in throughout the novel.

More externally, Lionel is engaged in getting to the bottom of the mystery of the disappearance of his mentor and employer, Frank Minna, a savvy street hood who adopted Lionel and several others from St. Vincent's Home for Boys, an orphanage in Brooklyn, folding them into a group of livery cab drivers-cum-operatives referred to as Minna Men. It is this rag-tag group, which Lionel deals with on a daily basis, and they provide the novel with its title.

Lionel's tics cast him as an outsider of sorts, and he is viewed by other characters throughout the novel as being deficient in one way or another as a result of his condition. It is this degree of removal from the other characters that simultaneously poses a challenge in his quest for information and offers him an opportunity to gain access to sources. It also allows for some opportunities for amusing wordplay on Lethem's part.

Throughout Lionel's journey to make sense of how things have come to be this way--his mentor gone, his life seemingly without guidance, a constant sense of danger imperiling his heretofore steady life--he is brought into contact with an array of characters and character types who serve both to advance and reveal a plot that is at once little more than standard hard-boiled detective fare, but also, a perverse inversion of that genre. He deals with a femme fatale as well as an apparently hapless innocent, an exotic heavy who provides physical menace in every scene in which he appears, double crossers, informants, and the like abound. And yet, for as much as this book is a by-the-numbers example of the standard private detective yarn, it nevertheless seldom fails to take an opportunity to turn each and every one of these elements upside-down or inside-out. Just as Lionel cannot resist doing so with the words he hears and reads, so too, it seems, does Lethem feel compelled to invert and subvert the conventions of the genre in which he is working.



# Chapter 1

## Summary

The book opens with a scene in which Lionel is on a stakeout with another Minna Man, Gilbert Coney, on orders from Frank Minna himself. It is unclear why the two have been given the assignment, but Lionel explains this is typical of the assignments or 'errands' on which the Minna Men are frequently dispatched. On this particular occasion, they are staking out a Zendo on the Upper East Side. Lionel records a woman's entrance into the Zendo as well as the name Ullman with the intention of reporting this detail later to Frank Minna.

Minna himself appears almost immediately and informs the two they are to serve as backup as he enters the Zendo. Minna gives Lionel a pair of headphones to listen in on Minna's conversation in order to provide either to enter the building as backup or to follow him in another car. While Minna is inside the Zendo, Lionel is harassed by a doorman who claims Gilbert wants him to join him inside.

Minna signals he will need Lionel and Gilbert to tail him before being escorted out to another car by a 'giant'. In attempting to follow, they lose sight of the car. Lionel then determines based on what he takes to be coded language that Minna is relating to him over the radio that Greenpoint, a predominantly Polish neighborhood in Brooklyn, is where Minna has been taken. They arrive to discover Minna has been beaten and stabbed, but is still conscious. He instructs Lionel and Gilbert to take him to a hospital. They drop Minna off at the ambulance ramp and are instructed to wait in a lobby while the doctors attend to their boss. During this time, Lionel's Tourette's symptoms become very apparent, and he begins blurting out segments and inversions of the 'string walks into a bar' joke. As soon as Lionel completes the punch line, he and Gilbert are informed Minna has died during the doctors' attempt to save him. The pair leave the scene with a plan to avoid any official documentation or investigation.

## Analysis

Lionel's tics provide the most suitable point of entry for discussing the nature of the book. In this chapter, the book's opening is something of an introductory monologue for Lionel, both as a means of inviting the reader into the plot and to adjust to the narrator's peculiar way of speaking and thinking. He makes explicit the condition he suffers from, the fact that he is a 'Freak Show', will have a great deal of influence on his ability to relate the events that transpire. Lionel's tics, though, it should be noted, are unique to him. He is not a poster child for Tourette's Syndrome, and, as he notes, everyone's case of the disease is unique.

In his case, the compulsions he feels are very severe. He must eat exactly half of the White Castle burgers he and Gilbert have bought, he must touch objects a certain



number of times (on this stakeout that number is six, which he mistakenly deems to be a lucky number for the night), he must complete the jokes he is in the midst of telling even when it is absolutely inappropriate to be doing so. This compulsion is both a character attribute of Lionel's--a result of his disease--and a means of foreshadowing that this is a mystery that will be solved, if only because its protagonist is too compulsive to allow it to be left with any loose ends.

## Vocabulary

echolalia, copralalic, filibuster, redundant, escrow, quivering, supercilious, pierogi, zendo, etude, Rastafarian, arbitrage, egalitarian, triage



## Chapter 2

### Summary

The second chapter, which is told in flashback, seemingly without regard for the traumatic events that have unfolded in the book's opening, tell the story of how Lionel and the rest of the Minna Men came to be given their peculiar stations in life. Lionel describes himself as a bookish loner before being handpicked along with three others by Frank Minna to help him with a 'moving job'. Of the four boys, the natural leader is Tony Vermonte, the oldest and sole Italian of the group, and a charismatic braggart. Lionel and Gilbert are the same age, and while they do share some kind of bond, it is clear Gilbert favors (as do most of the boys) the older and more confident Tony. The last boy chosen in the group is Danny Fantl, a quietly confident, even detached basketball prodigy who alone among the boys feels little need to prove himself to anyone.

The four boys are told they are a 'moving company', but it is obvious Minna has them employed in some variety of thieving. Minna enlists the boys (now Minna Men) on subsequent jobs and they begin to coalesce as a unit. Lionel's verbal ticks begin to manifest when he blurts out the name for the moving company's initials, L and L--least lonely.

After a number of jobs, the group is brought to meet Minna's bosses, two old gangsters named Matricardi and Rockefeller after stealing a truckload of musical instruments. The two men casually offer the instruments to the boys, who understand the gift is too much and should therefore be refused and they part ways. Later, Minna instructs the boys they should not repeat or if possible even remember the two men's names.

Later, the L and L moving company is invited to Minna's mother's house for Christmas. It is here when they briefly meet Minna's brother Gerard, who has been 'upstate', before he leaves the lot of them to enjoy their 'orphan party'.

On a subsequent job, Minna appears with his van's windows smashed in. Tony suggests someone had tried to send him a message, to which Minna demands he repeat and explain himself. After a tense discussion in which Minna accuses Tony of fancying himself a real wise guy, Minna kicks them all out of the car and tells them to walk home. As they are making their way, Lionel's tics erupt once more, irritating Tony (in fact, his tics are direct and profane insults to Tony) prompting the older boy to smear dog feces on Lionel's face.

After five weeks of absence, Frank reappears along with his brother Gerard to explain he would be going away 'upstate' for an indeterminate amount of time. Before leaving, Frank gives Lionel a book about Tourette's syndrome. Later, the boys find Minna's van which had been demolished and left near the expressway.



Lionel peruses the Tourette's text and even persuades the home's nurse to help him become officially diagnosed with the disease so he can receive medication to help him deal with it, but it does not agree with him. The four boys grow and grow apart, Lionel becoming increasingly estranged as his condition separates him from any group into which he might otherwise fit in. Just before Lionel and Gilbert are about to graduate from high school (long after Danny and Tony have given up on school) Frank Minna reappears to reform the group of Minna Men. This time, instead of being L & L Movers, as L & L Car Service, which is, as he explains, a front for an unlicensed detective agency.

## Analysis

The second chapter of the book, told almost entirely in flashback, provides a great deal of information, particularly regarding the nature of the relationship between Frank Minna and the narrator. It is clear Minna means a great deal to Lionel, whose life prior to being enlisted as a Minna Man was painfully lonely, a point driven home by his suggestion of the name for the moving company. It also becomes clear the only occasions in which Lionel receives approval or affection from anyone, are coming from Minna. Lionel is not apparently the favorite of the bunch; for example, when the boys steal the truckload of instruments, Lionel and Gilbert are consigned to make do fending off cargo in the bed while Tony and Danny sit in the cab with Frank.

Nevertheless, Lionel ascribes a great deal of his development to the confidence Minna instills in him. Despite his frequent use of the term 'freak show', which occurs in several conversations between the two of them, it is clear Minna does not say such things in a pejorative manner. Rather, he seems to reinforce a sense of value in Lionel 'we're all freak shows' at one point, and later 'turns out you're not the only freak out there' when giving Lionel the book about Tourette's.

We also learn a great deal about the nature of Minna's work, his relative importance (or lack thereof) on the street, and are thereby given some insight as to what is later to befall him. This acts as foreshadowing after the fact, or dramatic irony in that the first thing the reader really knows about Minna is that he is going to die. Only after he is dead are we able to see his relative vulnerability and caution in the scenes with the old mobsters and the scene in which his van has been vandalized. So much of who Lionel is and believes himself to be is defined by Minna--his opinions and even verbal tics seem to come wholesale from the man who took him from St. Vincents and made him a Minna Man--and this chapter informs the reader of exactly why this is the case. At the end of the chapter the reader is reminded this mooring is gone, and Lionel will now have to deal with the death of Frank Minna both as a mystery and as an existential crisis of his own.

## Vocabulary

Quaker, freshet, triangulation, roiling, manic, mutilated, pornographic, oblivious, ambushes, utterance, contextualization





## Chapter 3

### Summary

Lionel and Gilbert return to the office to find Tony and Danny have already been informed by the police of Minna's death. Tony assumes a leadership role in Frank's absence, and the four Minna Men debate over how to deal with the situation. Danny repeatedly ponders who will break the news to Minna's widow, Julia that her husband has died. While Gilbert is sent to track down Ullman because he has a friend in Sanitation, Tony decides he will attempt to get into the Zendo. Before the group splits up, Lionel takes Frank's beeper and watch, which had been left in the car during the preceding drama. He then goes to visit Julia.

He finds her in a slip and heels packing her things into a suitcase, among them a pistol. Julia says tells Lionel the Minna Men killed him, which he denies, explaining about the giant. She doesn't believe him, but he insists, adding the detective service is in her name, and so she cannot leave. She asks Lionel to zip up her dress and briefly places his hands on her breasts. She then tells him she is leaving town to go to a place of peace, leaving the city.

Outside Julia's apartment, a detective is waiting. He attempts to detain and question Julia, but she refuses and leaves; in departing, she says Lionel is her alibi. The detective questions Lionel. He mentions Matricardi and Rockaforte, but Lionel plays dumb. He tells the detective he intends to catch Minna's killer, and the cop leaves him alone. Lionel returns to the office where he receives a call from Gilbert's friend in the sanitation department informing him Gilbert is being interrogated for killing Ullman. Lionel goes to the precinct in an attempt to speak to Gilbert, but is unable to do so. He meets with Loomis, Lionel's friend in Sanitation and asks him for Ullman's address. The pair return to the L&L office to find Danny has returned. The two have a brief but tense discussion before Lionel goes upstairs to his apartment above the office to eat his sandwich and listen to Prince.

### Analysis

In this third chapter, we see Lionel make his transition into detective mode. First, in his confrontation with Julia, and then shrugging off the detective, he deals with two of the standard tropes of hard-boiled detective fiction. It is well-travelled territory for the protagonist of such a novel to either resist or succumb to the advances of a partner or employer's sensual widow, and Julia seems to be as cooperative a stock character in this regard as Lionel is unconventional as a protagonist. She is half-dressed when she is introduced, speaks with the world-weary voice of a woman who is liable to do just about anything at this point, including surprising acts of sex or violence.



Nevertheless, she makes off without much of an incident, immediately followed by a scene in which Lionel is braced by a police officer looking for traction on the case. Lionel's condition allows him to play the part of the smart-talking private detective in a surprising way, as his verbal tics simply exhaust his questioner to the point at which he no longer has the patience to deal with him.

The brief digression into a description of Prince's music allows for both the reader and Lionel to relax after what has been a bit a taxing day.

## Vocabulary

menacing, phosphorescent, disillusionment, profile, vibration, obliterate, galumphing, hydraulic, alibi, confiscating, caustic, industrious, titillate, oscillate



## Chapter 4

### Summary

The chapter reads:

(in Tourette dreams you shed your tics)

(or your tics shed you)

(and you go with them, astonished to leave yourself behind)

### Analysis

It is clear this chapter is Lionel asleep. It recalls another 'idiot' narrator in American literature, Faulkner's famous 'My mother is a dead fish' chapter from *As I Lay Dying* in its relative brevity, but says something different about the narrator. At first, it seems Lionel would be relieved to be relieved of his tics, but then the reader learns it is his self he is relieved of. His sleep, perhaps then, is nothing but tics. The chapter is ambiguous, as dreams tend to be, particularly those in the middle of taut novels.

### Vocabulary

astonished, tics



# Chapter 5

## Summary

The next morning, Lionel wakes and heads up to investigate the Zendo on his own. He questions a doorman, not the one he had been harassed by the night Minna was killed. He rings the bell to the Zendo five times rather than six today (a new totem). The girl they had seen enter the Zendo on their stakeout answers the door. Her name is Kimmery and she lets him in to answer a few questions about the Zendo. She explains the Zendo was founded by Roshi, and further explains some things about Zen Buddhism as practiced at the Zendo. Lionel thinks she is somewhat helpless and naive, and he departs, but promises to come back later for Zazen, or sitting.

When he leaves the Zendo, Lionel is abducted by a crew of sinister doormen. They put him in a car and somewhat haplessly go through the motions of intimidation, even going so far as explaining this is their intention in between bouts of internecine bickering. Lionel gives them the nicknames Pimples, Chunky, Pinched, and Indistinct based on their most prominent facial features. Minna's beeper goes off in Lionel's pocket; it's Loomis, calling with information on Ullman's address. The four doormen give Lionel a cell phone, but take it away from him when they hear the name Ullman, who they later reveal was a friend of theirs, and further disclose they work for the big man Lionel is pursuing. They also inform Lionel it is their goal to throw Lionel off-track so he does not go snooping around into matters concerning Ullman's death or that of the big man. The four flee the car, in tandem, with the parting words 'we're men of peace' and 'screw this'. This leaves Lionel to investigate the car, which he has correctly surmised as being a rental. In the glove compartment, he finds it has been leased to the Fujisaki Corporation on Park Avenue, also on the Upper East Side.

He calls L&L on the cell phone the four left in the car, and talks with Tony who suggests they meet up to pool resources. Lionel ascertains Tony did not, in fact, investigate the Zendo on the previous evening as he had stated he would. Tony asks Lionel where he is, and he lies, saying he is in Greenpoint. Lionel asks if Tony slept with Julia, which Tony evades. Lionel erupts into a series of Tourette's tics and the two hang up.

Lionel enters the building the Fujisaki Corporation is listed at and is met with a gang of doormen dressed in the same uniform as the four who abducted him earlier. They deny anyone of the name Fujisaki occupies the building, and ask who he is. Lionel gives them the name Frank Minna. He then has to touch all of them and in doing so, gets himself thrown out of the foyer. He calls Loomis to get him to look into the records of the building on Park Avenue.

Almost immediately, he receives a page from a number in Brooklyn, which turns out to be Matricardi and Rockaforte. They offer their concern and sympathy for him and ask him about Julia's whereabouts before asking him to come in to the Brooklyn house to



meet with them. He agrees to do so, and then buys space in the obituary page for Minna, telling the woman taking the call “Just say ‘detective’.”

## Analysis

In this chapter, Lionel is outside of his native element of Brooklyn, particularly the neighborhood of Cobble Hill which had been his entire world. Instead he is snooping around in exotic and rarified places. The Upper East Side is wealthy and anonymous, a matter Lionel notes when pointing out the awnings on the buildings sport only the address number rather than an ostentatious name as one would see in other wealthy neighborhoods. His first investigation into the Zendo is also marked by more discussion of Buddhism than of the case itself, as Kimmery, his first target, has very little information to offer him about Minna’s death. Kimmery is also the first innocent-seeming person Lionel has encountered. This makes her both trustworthy and vulnerable in his eyes and suggests she may be in danger later in the novel. Lionel himself suggests she leave the Zendo soon for her own well-being, but she prevails, convincing him instead that he return.

What follows is a long comic set-piece with the bumbling doormen of peace sent to intimidate Lionel who inadvertently confirm to Lionel he is on the trail and assuring him he will be up to the task of getting to the bottom of the mystery of Minna’s death.

His conversation with Tony makes it even more clear Lionel is flying without a net, so to speak, as his home base is occupied by Tony, who he doesn’t trust, and who seems to be acting as an adversary. To cap this off, the conversation with the clients confirms this notion that Lionel is indeed treading on dangerous ground, but in doing so, he has stumbled onto the right path. Nevertheless, he remains very much alone in a strange place, with tethers only to a dead man, and a naive girl he has just met.

## Vocabulary

relegation, savored, thwarted, obsessiveness, pulverize, conspiratorially, dwindling, morphic, resonance, embankment, pretentious, charisma

# Chapter 6

## Summary

The chapter opens with Lionel flashing back to his days working for Minna, and how they'd been blissfully ignorant of many of the facts surrounding their work for Frank, and the Clients. In particular, Minna's hiatus 'upstate' stands out as having been untouchable, never to be explained. Specific jobs include the disposal of a Volvo that the group presumes has a dead body in its trunk and the dismantling of a street fair Ferris wheel. Each incident demonstrates the group dynamics at play among the Minna Men. In particular, that Gilbert doesn't want too much part in anything too dangerous, that Tony is frequently mistaken about things (he is corrected for suggesting Gladys Knight is the spokeswoman for the psychic hotline), and that Danny is, above all the others, a cool customer.

When the action returns to present day, Lionel is meeting up with the Clients. The Degraw street house, which in Lionel's youth they had boasted was kept exactly as Matricardi's mother had kept it and was now almost entirely abandoned, dusty, and empty. The Clients ask Lionel to track down Julia and entreat him to join up with Tony in investigating Frank's death.

Lionel walks out to the car and finds Tony has been waiting in ambush for him. After getting in the car, Lionel gleans from their conversation not only has Tony been talking with the Clients, but they have been keeping him in the dark about certain matters. Essentially, that he and Tony are both being played against one another in much the same way. Tony seems particularly interested in knowing whether Lionel has told anyone about the Park Avenue building. When Lionel says the Clients asked him to track down Julia, Tony pulls a gun on him and the two of them have a guarded discussion in which Tony attempts to warn Lionel off the case. Tony suggests he knows more about Ullman's death than he has let on, and intimates he has long meant to supplant Minna. They are interrupted in this conversation by the homicide detective's pistol tapping on the window of the car.

The detective takes Tony's gun keys and tells them both to get in the front seat. He questions them from the back seat with his gun trained on each of them. He tells the two of them Julia has gone to Boston (although it is not yet known how she learned of Frank's death) and he knows about the nature of the work they do for Minna. During the course of the interview, Lionel and Tony act together to confound the detective, who threatens to involve the FBI in the case before letting Lionel go.

Lionel returns to the Upper East Side to sit in the Zendo, but first calls Loomis, who informs him the Park Avenue address is a building for the exceedingly wealthy. Fujisaki is the management company for this very elite building, and Ullman, it turns out, was their accountant.



At the Zendo, Lionel is greeted by Kimmery once more, and she tells him there is going to be a delegation of monks sitting with them, which has caused something of a stir among the crowd. During the sitting, Lionel recognizes his four captors from earlier in the day, but does not call any attention to himself. Roshi enters with the six famous monks and is followed shortly thereafter by the 'Polish Giant'. In the course of sitting and listening to one of the visiting monks' preach, Lionel realizes Roshi is Frank's brother Gerard. Upon making this realization, Lionel once more erupts into a cavalcade of verbal outbursts. The disturbance provokes one of the monks to warn and strike Lionel with a large paddle, which Lionel turns and tears away from the monk prompting Roshi/Gerard to signal the Polish giant into grabbing Lionel and taking him away. The giant offers Lionel a kumquat before knocking him out with a pistol.

Lionel is awakened by Kimmery, who has brought him his shoes. The two go to her apartment nearby. The place is bare; she is subletting illegally. There, Lionel finds a pamphlet for a Zen Buddhist retreat called Yoshii's in Maine whose heading on the cover reads 'A Place of Peace'. Lionel tells Kimmery Roshi is involved in a murder, but she dismisses this notion. He explains about Frank's death and how he was present to all but witnessing it. Kimmery later tells him that many of Roshi's students do their work service at the Park Avenue building. She tells him she thinks it is okay that he is strange, and even that she likes the way he talks inadvertently. They have sex and Lionel makes Kimmery promise not to return to the Zendo for a few days. While she is asleep, Lionel takes her keys and leaves.

## Analysis

At this point in the novel, Lionel is beginning to make lots of connections and put pieces together. It remains an untraditional whodunit, in that the elements involved are certainly bizarre, and several plot points are not explicitly made clear. For instance, there is lingering doubt as to the actual existence of the giant, who no one other than Lionel will acknowledge as existing. Further, we see how Lionel's condition is both an asset and a liability to him in the course of his investigation. It provides some amusing wordplay as he shouts in the Zendo, but clearly tips his hand as he tries to infiltrate the corporation. More importantly, we see how his obsessive use of language allows him the insight to recognize Roshi as Gerard Minna, both through the joke Frank had told him and through his restless permutations of it in his mind. This associative thinking would not be available to the reader if it were another type of novel, and the fact Lionel leans on his compulsive tics to be a more effective detective is another way in which Lethem plays with the genre's conventions.

## Vocabulary

sojourn, encompassed, promenade, peddler, ruptured, temperament, yearning, disconsolately, belligerence, proverbial, jaded



# Chapter 7

## Summary

Lionel sneaks out into the night and, after confirming with the doorman who had hassled him before Minna was killed that the giant had put him up to it, uses Kimmery's key to enter the Zendo. Inside, he finds Gerard Minna/Roshi in his private quarters. He tells Gerard a joke and lets him know that he knows about the Park Avenue building. Gerard explains to Lionel Frank had a hand in managing the Park Avenue property, and he was the real source of Frank's money. He and Ullman had been embezzling money from the building's owners, and it was this that had brought about both of their deaths. Roshi, on the other hand, had merely provided the staff for the building from among his field of acolytes in exchange for free use of the space the Zendo occupied. Roshi explains the Fujisaki Corporation poses a genuine threat, particularly to Tony, whose ambition to be like Frank has put him in considerable jeopardy. He laments Lionel and Tony have not come together in their grief over Frank's death. He is disturbed when Lionel remarks the Clients are involved in the matter, and warns Lionel they are dangerous men of whom he should steer clear. Lionel makes certain Kimmery is not going to be in any danger in this matter, and Gerard assures him she is not, commending him for his concern.

When Lionel returns to Brooklyn and the L&L office it is very late at night, almost two-thirty. Inside, he sees Tony and Danny. He waits outside to watch them, and when Danny is called out to take one of the bartenders from the nearby Boerum Hill Inn home after closing time, Lionel spots the giant lurking in a humorously small car. Lionel considers his options, buys some sandwiches at the local shop, and eventually decides to call Tony to warn him of the danger he is in. Tony instead threatens and admonishes Lionel for leaving him with the cop and being a freak show.

The next morning, Tony pulls out in one of the L&L cars with the giant and Lionel, respectively, on his tail. They leave New York altogether and go all the way into Connecticut, at which point the giant peels off, presumably to head them off at their destination. Lionel guesses they are headed to Maine. Lionel calls Kimmery several times trying to explain himself and what he is doing, but in doing so, annoys her to a point where she stops picking up the phone. He eventually finds Yoshii's retreat on the coast and inquires with a local fisherman about the place. Lionel learns that Tony and the giant have rented out one of the man's fishing boats to get to the island a short while before he arrived. Lionel finds Julia at Yoshii's restaurant. When the Fujiskai Corporation enters, it consists of the six famous monks from the Zendo now clad in black suits. Lionel has difficulty with the food offered to him, and at the end of his meal, instead of a check, he receives a note from Julia exhorting him to meet with her at a nearby lighthouse. He has another brief Tourette's driven exchange with the Fujisaki monks, who recognize him from the earlier outburst, before leaving.

Outside, Lionel finds Tony is dead and then notices the giant bearing down on him in his car with a gun pulled. They have a chase, Lionel manages to get the giant to crash his





car and injure himself severely. He reports to the Clients Tony is dead and cuts off further business with the pair before giving them Gerard's whereabouts.

## Analysis

This is the climax of the novel. It has all the action and chasing and car crashes and mostly wraps everything up. But inasmuch as this is a traditional hard-boiled detective novel in the vein of Philip Marlowe (who is name checked in this chapter) books, not every motive has yet been sussed out. Instead, we are left with an unsatisfying pile of dead bodies, a few unpunished villains, and a hero who is just happy to get away with his own skin and satisfy some part of his urge to make amends for his mentor's death.

## Vocabulary

deranged, ostensible, grope, monastery, munificently, mingy, Seminole, kumquat, gastronomic, sentinel, tantalized, emporium



## Chapter 8 - 9

### Summary

Chapter 8 - The penultimate chapter in the book is a departure in style from those preceding it and the one following it. It opens with a fairly neutral account of how Julia came to meet the Minna brothers, first Gerard, and then Frank. She is described as having been raised with Alan Watts lectures on tape which inform her youth, but leave her unsatisfied, disconnected with the world. She comes to live in a Zen retreat center in Maine where she eventually meets the two Minna brothers. While Gerard's manner of speaking resembles that of the Buddhist Watts, Frank lives a life of bustling immediacy as defined by the activities of Brooklyn hoods. She and Gerard become lovers for a time, but later, as Gerard becomes more involved in his meditation, they pull apart. Frank's greater immediacy becomes attractive to her, and they become lovers eventually. The two brothers had put themselves in danger by taking some of the stolen cargo they were charged with apprehending on behalf of their Mafioso bosses. It is as a result of the peril of this betrayal that they had gone up to the Maine retreat, but when Frank falls in love with Julia and convinces her to return with him to Brooklyn it puts both of the brothers in danger.

He strikes a deal with the mobsters, pinning the lion's share of the blame for their transgressions on Gerard and pledging to be an errand boy for the Clients. If he is ever to gain knowledge of Gerard's whereabouts, he is expected to turn his life over to the two mobsters. Later, after Gerard had struck up a deal with a group of Japanese monks who saw an opportunity that was denied to them in their native country to establish Zentos in Maine and New York, Frank confides in Julia with this information. Gerard put Frank into contact with the wealthy Japanese company as a business venture for his younger brother, but it was not long before his old habit of skimming some off the top made trouble for them both once more.

At this point the narrative switches back to the style that has characterized the rest of the book, taking up during a conversation between Julia and Lionel. The pair sift through the details of the case and determine that Gerard in a fit of panic over being discovered by both the Clients and the Fujisaki Corporation, hires an assassin to kill his brother in order to preserve himself. This is actually where Lionel and the other Minna Men found themselves entangled in this situation, putting Tony and Lionel in harms way for their close connection with Frank Minna. The two discuss the probable impetus behind everyone's actions and ultimately, Julia pulls a gun on Lionel suspecting him of fabricating the giant and having been responsible for all of the recriminations and death that have preceded. He pulls Tony's gun on her, and he is tempted to pull the trigger by his Tourette's impulses. They put their guns down and throw them both into the ocean along with (in order to satisfy Lionel's Tourette's) the beeper, the cell phone, and (figuratively) Julia. Lionel returns home to Brooklyn, two shoes light.



Chapter 9 - The final chapter serves as something of an epilogue to the novel. It relates what has become of the surviving characters of the story. Lionel imagines Gerard's assassination to open the chapter and then fills in the details of the lives of those left in its wake. L&L has become a legitimate detective agency--to the point at which their business suffers. They also have become a real car company with Danny at the helm. He relates what became of the Zendo, but it is clear this does not matter much to him. Lionel makes a food recommendation and then leaves with a contemplation of those who had died, but mostly of the tragic Julia, left alive but never happy. He resorts, finally, to a series of choice rephrasing of Frank Minna's characteristic sayings, specifically to 'tell your story walking'.

## Analysis

What is immediately apparent about this chapter is the shift in tone at the outset. For the first time, Lionel's compulsions do not dominate the telling of the story. Instead, it seems he is receiving the information from a very calm, detached Julia as she would tell her tale if it had belonged to someone else. As a means of tying up the loose ends, this is necessary, as it would be unlikely for the book to satisfy any of the information the reader would like to have at this juncture. The shift to the dialogue between Julia and Lionel also provides another opportunity to keep the seed of doubt alive for the story that Lionel has had more to do with the actions of the novel than he himself has let on. The tale of the Minna brother's foolish entanglements has been told, and the reasons for all of the preceding action is laid bare. Pretty by-the-numbers for a novel of this type.

## Vocabulary

anachronistic, remuneration, Nantucket, vibrant, posture, chaotic, practitioner, homely, harassed, efficiency, gratification



# Characters

## Lionel Essrog

The narrator and by far the most important character in the novel. His journey from the comfort of his Brooklyn-based, petty criminal environment into the mysteries sown by his mentor's tragic betrayals is the main thrust of the novel. He is characterized as a 'freak show', the nickname Frank Minna gave him as a young man, because he suffers from Tourette's syndrome. Ironically, this condition is at turns useful in his quest to uncover the truth about Minna's past, and learn how to live in the absence of his role model.

## Frank Minna

A small-time hood who brings the Minna Men together to do his bidding. He is an exciting, charismatic character prone to joking and tossing out repeatable turns of phrase. He is prone to biting off more than he can chew, we learn, which is his undoing. It is a drive to understand more about Minna as well as to avenge his death that leads Lionel on his quest.

## Gilbert Coney

The rather stolid, but agreeable member of the Minna Men. Gilbert is so cooperative he spends most of the book in lockup on suspicion of a murder he did not commit and still returns to work with those who left him there afterward.

## Tony Vermonte

The pushy 'leader' of the Minna Men. Tony's insistence that he is destined to take on a wise guy's role in life places him in opposition to several characters, including Minna, Lionel, and eventually much more formidable foes.

## Danny Fantl

The only member of the Minna Men who seems to genuinely be secure in who he is. His serenity and confidence sets him apart from the remainder of the group. His natural calmness serves as a suitable source for comparison with the various Zen practitioners who still demonstrate significant desires where Danny expresses few, if any, save for a desire to play basketball as a young man and to be left alone as an adult.



## **Matricardi and Rockaforte**

These are the two Italian mobsters who employ Frank Minna. Their manner of speaking is a cartoonish rendering of the peculiar Italian diction common to similar stock types in other novels. They also provide a passive/aggressive menace in their overly polite manner and thinly veiled threats.

## **Roshi/Gerard Minna**

Frank Minna's older brother. He is the spiritual leader of the Yorkville Zendo and it is the threat posed to his life by both the Italians and the Japanese that prompt him to call in a hit on his brother Frank. Even when confronted with this matter, remains Zenlike and calm, as though he has managed to escape the normal conditions of family obligations and morality.

## **Julia Minna**

Frank Minna's sad and lonely wife. She had been brought to Brooklyn from a Zen retreat in Maine where she had first been involved with his brother Gerald, but found both ways of living extremely lonely and isolating.

## **Kimmery**

Kimmery is a student at the Yorkville Zendo and is a calming presence for Lionel. She is skeptical of the nefarious dealings of her Roshi, but aides Lionel in his course of discovery. She is delicate, but very trusting.

## **Loomis**

Loomis provides information and comic relief. He also bothers Lionel throughout the novel.

## **Detective Lucius Seminole**

A competent man charged with investigating Frank Minna's murder. He is out of his element in the heavily Italian neighborhood where L&L does its business, and doesn't think much of any of the Minna Men.

## **Ullman**

Ullman is a Maguffin. That's all you need to know about him.



## Objects/Places

### Minna's Beeper

Lionel uses Minna's beeper as a means of staying in touch with other characters in his pursuit of Frank's killer. At some point, it becomes a means by which others can garner his attention. He eventually discards the pager in the ocean at the end of the book.

### Cars

L&L is a courier service, so it makes sense that much of the action of the novel takes place in cars. However, little of this action is done while driving. Lionel is apprehended on several occasions and questioned or threatened in cars. It is only late in the novel in which the plot is advanced while Lionel is behind the wheel of a car.

### Sandwiches

Lionel eats approximately eight sandwiches over the course of a two-day period--more, if you count the White Castle burgers he is eating at the novel's opening. The book's final chapter is called good sandwiches, and in it, Lionel recommends one to the reader. He finds comfort in this food.

### Neighborhoods

As the story progresses, Lionel is brought to a vast array of neighborhoods within New York City. He has a set of opinions about many of them, particularly those closest to his home in Brooklyn. As he is drawn further afield from his familiar neighborhoods he is able to act more confidently.



# Themes

## Food

Lionel is fairly obsessive about food. His contemplation of sandwiches in particular provide fodder for several of his insights and opinions. He finds distracting comfort in food for its ability to be manipulated and considered in very particular ways, an outlet for his Tourette's impulses.

## Jokes

Frank Minna instilled in Lionel a deep affinity for telling jokes. The fact that jokes have very particular methods and orders of telling also provide an opportunity for Lionel to exercise his obsessive streak. Many characters besides these two are presented as either proffering or responding to jokes in the novel and more than one chapter ends with the telling of a joke.

## Popular Culture

Many characters, including Lionel make multiple references to popular culture. Bearing in mind the novel itself is something of a pastiche of a particular form of popular entertainment, the detective novel, it is worth considering the many ways in which various characters have allowed different forms of popular culture to influence their opinions and actions. Tony, for instance, has seen a lot of gangster movies, while Lionel holds forth on Mad magazine at one point.

## Zen Buddhism

Given that so much of the novel's action takes place in a(n)ot-all-that-)honest-to-goodness Zendo, it is in keeping a good amount of the novel deals directly with this theme. Scenes between Lionel and Kimmerly feature explicit discussions of Zen Buddhism, and several of the novel's characters relate a strong desire to practice a zen-like life. This is contrasted by the narrator's spasmodic eruptions of diction and by Danny's seemingly natural Zen-like unflappability.

## Ethnicity

On numerous occasions in the book, character's ethnicities are discussed in indelicate terms. Tony identifies with Minna through his Italian heritage. The giant they pursue to Greenpoint is referred to as a Pierogie-eating giant, presumably under the conception the man is Polish. Many characters are defined in terms of ethnicity by Lionel as an

expression of his Brooklyn upbringing. Other characters also define others according to their ethnicity on many occasions.

On another note, this very tendency seems to be lampooned in the depiction of the old Mafiosi with their comically stock diction as well as the severe and distant manner in which the Japanese characters are presented.





# Style

## Point of View

With the exception of the first half of the second-to-last chapter, the book is told entirely in the first person point of view of Lionel Essrog, an unlicensed 'detective' on the hunt for the man responsible for his mentor's death. He suffers from Tourette's syndrome, a compulsive condition that prompts him to rearrange words and phrases in often profound and profane ways both in dialogue and in narration. This imposes extreme influence on the novel as a whole.

The section that does not conform to this point of view stands in stark contrast to the rest of the book and seems comparatively distant in third person, relating the actual reasons behind the novel's often convoluted plot.

## Setting

The majority of the novel is set in New York, and there is a vast disconnect between the parts set in Brooklyn, which seem awash with nostalgia (many are actually told in flashback) or, at least, comfort. Those parts which take place in Manhattan are laced with apprehension. As the novel progresses, the setting becomes larger and larger stretching all the way to Maine. This serves as a rough analogue of the narrator Lionel's expanding worldview.

## Language and Meaning

There is much to be said about the use of language in *Motherless Brooklyn*. Obviously, the close first person narration is enhanced by the narrator's compulsive desire toward spontaneous wordplay, but also, there is a host of characters with distinct voices in this novel reflecting contrasting attitudes toward themselves and others. Naturally, Lionel's tics provide the richest fodder to discuss how the novelist uses language. At parts, it seems to serve solely for comedic effect. At others, it is essential to understanding how Lionel sees the world. For example, the two terms Lionel inserts most often (besides eatme!) into his echolalia are barnum and bailey. While he himself never makes the connection between the two, he opens the book by calling himself a carnival barker, and is nicknamed freak show.

Further, the most peaceful speakers in the novel are the most menacing. Both the Clients and Roshi/Gerard have extremely deliberate and considerate manners of speech, but both parties represent violent threats to the Minna Men for even taking an interest in seeking out the truth in Frank's death.

Finally, it is worth considering that while Lionel blurts in conversation, and even in his interior monologue, he is able to render other characters' speech to the reader without interruption. It is not made clear why this is the case.

## Structure

The structure of the novel is somewhat constrained by the strictures of the detective fiction genre. Of course, Lionel, the detective is compelled to go through a certain set of hoops in order to get to the bottom of the mystery, among these are: a scene in which his partner/boss dies, a scene in which his widow gives him unsatisfactory information, a scene in which the police treat him as a suspect in his boss's death, a scene in which it is revealed what his boss has done to bring this death upon himself, a scene in which the detective is knocked unconscious. There are more, but these are just a few of the genre's conventions the novel plays out.

One of the ways in which this is not an entirely conventional novel by genre standards are the many ways in which the novelists juggles the timeline around, providing different types of information from different periods to offer the reader insight into each character's motivations in different ways.



## Quotes

Life depended, rush the Zendo' was what I said aloud. 'Use the bathroom, start the car. (Chapter 1)

Don't tug the boat. (Chapter 2)

And all talk was finer on the fly, out on the pavement, we learned to tell our story walking. (Chapter 2)

Want to catch him as much as miss him as much as a sandwich. (Chapter 3)

Guys like you could kill me and you still wouldn't scare me. (Chapter 5)

And Gerard had a lot of damn gall to renounce the borough. (Chapter 6)

Rama-lama-ding-dong-died in his sleep. (Chapter 8)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

To what extent is Lionel defined by his Tourette's? Does the fact that his disease is the most apparent thing about him an accurate means of determining his character, as so many other characters seem to conclude? Are his compulsions the most important reason for his drive to get to the bottom of the Minna murder? What does it mean that the further he ranges from Brooklyn the more understanding people seem to be of his condition?

## Topic 2

How do the conventions of the mystery pose a problem to the author in creating an original work? Where he does diverge from the standard forms and expected twists of such a narrative, is it effective? How do the ironies in place, such as the menacing Zendo or the narrator's seeming inability to function normally affect the novel's attempt to operate simply as a detective story?

## Topic 3

On several occasions, Lionel expounds on the various ways in which the Minna Men are discrete aspects that in concert combine to match Frank Minna's character. Is this accurate? In what ways do Lionel, Tony, Danny, and Gilbert conform to or diverge from this notion? Is Lionel even aware of Frank Minna's actual character?

## Topic 4

Lionel's relationship with Frank Minna is a complex one. On the one hand, he looks up to and actively seeks Minna's approval, and on the other he knows this approval to be matched with some degree of disregard. How does Minna's treatment and opinion of Lionel shape who the narrator is? To what extent does Lionel distort his perception of Minna in order to create a more suitable father figure out of Minna than he actually perhaps deserves?

## Topic 5

Is Lionel's eventual success in doubt at any point of the novel? Is he ever in any real risk? How does this suspense, or lack thereof affect the reader's reception of the novel?



## Topic 6

What are we to think of Julia? As a character, she represents, sequentially, a femme fatale, a lonely heart, and once more an unsavable soul, and yet she is in part responsible for the fate that befalls the Minna brothers. She seems to exhibit little in the way of sorrow over the deaths of the two men she loved, so why does Lionel feel so sorry for her at the end of the novel?

## Topic 7

What is the reader to make of the representation of Zen Buddhism in *Motherless Brooklyn*? Various aspects of the way are presented by turns earnestly and with a great deal of skepticism, which comes out on top? Does Lionel's streetwise (if that's what it really is) Brooklyn upbringing prevent him from accepting this as a viable means of attaining happiness? What does it mean that many Buddhist characters are capable of the same violence as those who subscribe to no way of their own? How does Danny's apparent calm without the Buddhist influence complicate the novel?

## Topic 8

Who is a better talker, Minna or Lionel? How does talk make both such compelling characters? How much of Lionel's talk comes from Minna, and conversely, how much does Minna's appreciation for Lionel stem from the younger man's ability to combine words in unexpected ways? What does this say about Lethem's efforts as a novelist in this case?