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Motherless Brooklyn
By Jonathan Lethem
Doubleday, \$23.95
310 pp, pub date 10/1/99

Thumbsucker
By Walter Kirn
Anchor Books (Doubleday), \$14.00
300 pp, "on sale date" 10/19/99

Reviewed by Daniel Akst

From a certain perspective Judaism can seem the Tourette's Syndrome of religions, a cult of compulsivity and ritualized behavior, mystical bobbing and mysterious imperatives.

It's OK, I'm Jewish. I'm allowed. Besides, I've just finished Jonathan Lethem's irresistible new novel *Motherless Brooklyn*, whose mesmerizing anti-hero is Lionel Essrog, a half-baked private eye with a serious case of Tourette's. An esrog, for Gentile and apostate alike, is a citron, which along with pieces of myrtle, date palm and willow are used in the fall ritual of Sukkoth. The esrog has to be as nearly perfect as possible, and by some accounts represents the heart, but the four items together also stand for the four letters of God's name in Hebrew.

"Wheels within wheels," as a character in Lethem's book might say. Lionel is one of four motherless Brooklynites rescued from a Catholic orphanage by Minna, a small-time hood whose God-like stature for them never diminishes despite years in the service of his bogus car service, which really just runs errands for grander hoods.

Minna's Men, as they call themselves (Minute Men? Minor Men? Miner Men? it's hard not to do the kind of thing Lionel does compulsively throughout) are kept in the dark by their mysterious God. They carry out assignments in ignorance, unclear why they're tapping a given phone or unloading a certain truck. One night Lionel and a colleague are staking out a Manhattan brownstone, upscale and alien to these sons of the boroughs, when their boss is abducted from it and murdered. For the rest of the book, it is Lionel's project to find out who did it.

Much of the time *Motherless Brooklyn* is such a staggering piece of writing that frankly I couldn't have cared less who the guilty party was. The book is a detective story, with all the advantages and burdens that that entails, but putting Lethem on the shelf with mystery writers may be like stacking Melville next to Jacques Cousteau. As you might expect, the plot is hard to follow and the women are mainly props, but never mind all that. The story here is Lionel Essrog, who is simply dazzling.

As the narrator, he's a wonderful outlet for Lethem's substantial gifts and a clear window onto his world, the Byzantine obsessions of his mind boiling at times on the edge of genius, as if the ghost of James Joyce were vying with Daffy Duck and Art Carney for preeminence in his head. "Lyrical Eggdog!" he shouts in mid-sentence, no more able to contain himself than a volcano would be. "Logical Assnog!" At other times Lionel reminds us of Augie March or Billy Bathgate, seeming to the world a kind of idiot savant when he is really just an inexperienced savant, his powers of observation the sharper for it. "All talk was finer on the fly," he explains having learned from Minna, in his best Bellowish, "out on the pavement, between beats of action: we learned to tell our story walking."

That's the way it is in New York, for which the author's feel is visceral, if not downright chromosomal. This goes double for Brooklyn, where Lethem now lives. The accents, class distinctions, highways, neighborhoods, grocery stores, flavors, scents and yes, car services in a certain corner of that storied borough are made vividly tangible, arising from these pages as if scratch-and-sniffs were embedded in the margins. (All the more shocking, then, to catch the odd error; brownstones are made of sandstone, not brick, and Manhattan's East 80s are known as Yorkville, not Yorktown.)

At one point, fed up with "Brooklyn's unchangeability," Lionel wants change: "I longed to disappear into Manhattan's amnesiac dance of renewal." And listen to him describe a neighborhood newsstand called the Casino, which makes its money on lottery tickets: "There was something tragic in the way they stood obediently waiting, many of them elderly, others new immigrants, illiterate except in the small language of their chosen game, deferring to anyone with real business, like the purchase of a magazine, a pack of double-A batteries, or a tube of lip gloss. That docility was heart-breaking. The games were over almost before they started, the foil scraped off tickets with a key or a dime, the contrived near-misses underneath bared. (New York is a Tourettic city, and this great communal scratching and counting and tearing is a definite symptom.) The sidewalk just outside the Casino was strewn with discarded tickets, the chaff of wasted hope."

I loathe traditional mysteries. Usually, there is no mystery at all except whodunit, and it never really matters. All the true mystery one wants from fiction is absent somehow as the characters plod wearily through their ritualized steeplechase. "Existential mysteries" often fail me as well; I read Paul Auster's *City of Glass* with more admiration than pleasure. But *Motherless Brooklyn* managed to overcome these accumulated prejudices. According to one account, an esrog is supposed to be "the fruit of goodly trees." I can imagine the same about Lethem's strong new novel, which I read as compulsively as its hero confronts life.

Compulsion is also what gives shape to *Thumbsucker*. Justin Cobb, the narrator of Walter Kirn's savagely funny new novel of teenage angst, is a black hole of desire, and the book begins with his difficulties weaning himself from the thumb that, even at the age of 14, he uses to fill his seemingly bottomless need.

But while it's an apt metaphor for adolescent self-absorption, thumbsucking is only the beginning for Justin, who tries everything from marijuana to Mormonism in his quest to fill the void left by his loopy and self-absorbed parents (and all the other loopy and self-absorbed people who populate his world). The result is a deft and hard-nosed reinvigoration of a classic contemporary American form: the coming of age story featuring a disaffected but hyper-aware teenager, especially a boy.

Like any good obsession, *Thumbsucker* can be deeply satisfying. Kirn has an assassin's eye not just for observing people but for the world around him, and Justin's laconic voice is dead-on, the product of iron discipline on the part of an author who avoids even the slightest wasted gesture. Justin's family and small-town Minnesota acquaintances have the air of hyper-real parody that surrounds the characters on the *Simpsons* (and believe me, this is high praise).

Despite his troubles, Justin Cobb is no nihilist. He's more like Binx Bolling, Walker Percy's alien anti-hero in *The Moviegoer*, who's conducting a search even though he isn't sure what he's looking for. Justin just doesn't make as big a deal about it, which is probably to his credit. Nevertheless, following firmly in Binx's footsteps, he too recapitulates Kierkegaard's "stages in life's way."

First there's the aesthetic stage, which is hedonistic; Justin's stay in this one takes the form of thumbsucking and drugs. But this is never satisfactory, and so he moves on to the ethical stage, in which he tries to save a pair of mistreated babies; one is an actual infant, the other Justin's own childish father. Finally, there is the religious stage, in which he takes a leap of faith to become a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The leap, of course, is what will set him free, although not in the way the Mormons think.

It's a fine, funny read. And yet when it was all over I felt ever so slightly cheated. It's not really fair to wish that a book like this would break your heart, or at least give it a damn good try, yet survivors of a wretched adolescence (just about all of us, as far as I can tell) will want that nonetheless, and *Thumbsucker's* refusal means it never quite generates the horsepower of, say, Isabel Huggan's *The Elizabeth Stories* or Frank Conroy's classic memoir, *Stop/Time*.

Paradoxically, Justin's play-along ironizing and pursuit of anesthesia make this brilliant performance seem almost too easy. There isn't a speck of honest-to-God overwriting in *Thumbsucker*, which is almost weird in a book about a subject as operatic as teenage life, and the yearning that may be the central characteristic of adolescence, while explicit throughout the story, somehow isn't fully felt, perhaps because the author, like his laconic anti-hero, is trapped in the authenticity of the persona he's created. Kirn succeeds so brilliantly in inhabiting the self-involved, drug-addled persona of a smart but troubled teenage boy that the pain of those around him come at us blurrily, from a little distance, and never quite able to penetrate the anesthesia of the absurd.

There are advantages to this aside from accuracy. The portrait of Justin's macho father, especially during their father-son island fishing adventure, and of his beautiful but credulous mother, who seems to live from disappointment to disappointment, are tragicomic triumphs steered well clear of bathos thanks to the narrator's unwitting reticence.

Thumbsucker is a reminder that adolescence is big enough to accommodate both Salinger and Meat Loaf. By combining the best of both, it has earned itself a place on the crowded raft of classics that have bobbed up over the years from the great sea of teenage misery.

Daniel Akst, who passed his adolescence in Brooklyn, is the author of St. Burl's Obituary, a novel.