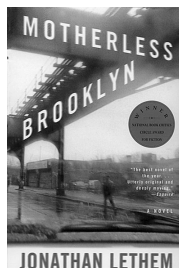


“Tell Your Story Walking”

SONG BY DEB TALAN



SONGWRITER'S STATEMENT >

“I read *Motherless Brooklyn* by Jonathan Lethem two summers ago. The story and its characters really lingered with me, so I wrote “Tell Your Story Walking” to explore what remained. I was inspired by the range and emotional layers in this book—no joke, I laughed, I cried. I hope I captured a little of the swagger and vulnerability of Lionel Essrog and his cohorts.”

—Deb Talan

LYRICS >

Tell it to the judge, man.
Tell it to your motherless reflection.
In a sock and one shoe, after the great defection
He said, tell a lie sometimes
Tell the truth when it suits you
And when you've lost your way, tell a story.

Tell your story, (tell it, tell it)
Tell your story to anyone who'll listen.
Tell your story, don't stop talking
Just tell your story walking.

Listing through Carroll Gardens on the way to Cobble Hill
I stopped at a psychic's dusty, wilted windowsill.
Forgot what she told me, mostly
But I remember one thing she said
“You may slip and call some lousy f*** your friend
But in the end you'll come out even, then...”

And it's a sorry, frightful thing
When you want to cry, but you can't keep from laughing.
Outside the church that's so quiet, it dares you to shout
You put a hand to your mouth to stop the rain.
You do a Saint Vitus' dance, to the sky you raise your voice
This is your chance, you have no choice
You tell your story....

SOURCE >

MOTHERLESS BROOKLYN BY JONATHAN LETHEM

Motherless Brooklyn is an off-key whodunnit, a detective novel told from a quirky angle. The narrator and protagonist, Lionel Essrog, is an orphan whose Tourette impulses drive him to bark, count, and rip language apart in startling and original ways. Together with three veterans of St. Vincent's Home for Boys, he works for small-time mobster Frank Minna's limo service cum detective agency. When Minna is murdered, Lionel sets out to discover whodunit and why.

MUSIC ►

The first thing you hear on this track is the vocal - that grabs your attention and keeps you focused on the voice for the rest of the song. The vocals are supported by a solid light groove underneath. One can't help but connect the idea of 'walking' with the rhythm of this song. The chorus always brings us back around to the message of "tell your story walking" by repeating the phrase several times. The tone of this song might be heard as a bit melancholy but the vocals are so strong with the intention to pull you through even the hardest emotions. There's a light organ part that plays in the background. The placement and sound of this instrument implies distance and history. This contrasts nicely with the urgency of the lyric - which is prescriptive using the command form. Tell your story - don't waste time, and don't let your story disappear.

SUITABILITY ►

Both the novel and the song contain strong language, and the novel includes descriptions of sex, generous and amusing but frank. This may affect your choice to use this unit with high school students. The book is too difficult for beginner readers but has been enjoyed in an adult literacy book group (see lesson plan.)

LESSON SUGGESTIONS ►

RECAP ► This song is most effective as an after-reading activity, to recap the story. What specific incidents does the song recall? Is it true to the book?

“GANGS” ► What unites the Minna men? What kept them together? In what ways did Frank Minna benefit from creating this gang?

To broaden this discussion:

- ask about student/s' experience of gangs (noting that this may be a sensitive topic for some); when does a “group” become a “gang”?; reasons people join gangs; alternatives to gangs
- read and discuss other texts about gangs (news reports, articles from the newspaper, Granta number 80 on “the group”)
- do internet or library research to find materials on gangs
- watch films about gangs (for example, “Gangs of New York”, “Westside Story”, “Colors”); compare the gangs they show with the ones your student/s are familiar with; question stereotypes; link with media literacy; predict later lives of characters from the films
- lead into considering larger groups. What makes some people identify and stick together on the basis of color or ethnicity? Discuss good and bad reasons and outcomes, benefits and dangers. The PBS documentary “Two Towns of Jasper” about a racist murder in a small town has an excellent discussion guide available from Active Voice. Other films about racism include “American History X”, and many examples of rap address the issue. Younger student/s may want to perform their own or their favorite artist's work.

THE FIGURE OF “THE OUTSIDER” ► How is Lionel different, and how does this become his advantage? (For example, people under-estimate him so he gets away with a great deal.) The outsider is the focus of many stories

... LESSON SUGGESTIONS ►

and songs: ask student/s to collect examples and present them in essays, drawings, songs, poems, or costumes. We all feel like the outsider in some situations: this may be a good topic for journal or poetry writing.

THE TITLES ► In what ways is *Motherless Brooklyn* a good title for this book, and “Tell Your Story Walking” a good name for the song? What did you expect from the titles? Where in the story do these names come from? (“motherless Brooklyn” p. 71; “tell your story walking” pp. 69–70). What other name would you give either the novel or the song?

METAPHORS ► The orphans are “as incoherent as a verbless sentence” without Minna (p. 91). What does that mean? Select and discuss other metaphors from this image-rich novel.

NEUROLOGICAL CONDITIONS ► There is useful and interesting information on the internet about both Tourette’s Syndrome and St. Vitus’s Dance (from the song). This could be a web research topic for your student/s. The Tourette Syndrome Association includes an excellent lesson plan in the section on Education and Advocacy, and lists children-focused films and texts about the condition: see www.tsa-usa.org.

Oliver Sacks’ accessible accounts of Tourette’s Syndrome and other neurological conditions make fascinating follow-up reading for interested students. Do books like *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* help to influence public opinion towards greater tolerance and understanding about people’s differences? “Tell it, tell it,” the song repeats, and on page 192, Lionel points out that talking about Tourette’s is another tic. While the syndrome is a serious condition, most of us can think of less intense ways that we repeat or obsess. Lionel’s Tourette’s makes him shout out a scrambled version of what’s on his mind. How does this tendency add tension to the unfolding story?

ADVICE ► Ask what students think about the song’s advice to “tell the truth when it suits you” and to “tell your story walking”. The songwriter has chosen to use the second person (“you”). What is the effect of changing this to the first person (“I”) or the third person (“he”)? Students think of someone who has guided them, wisely or otherwise, and jot down the advice. They use their notes as the basis for a poem. Alternatively, they design posters giving advice to younger students, parents, teachers, or peers. They can begin by completing the statement “If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it is that ...”

LOSS ► On pages 126–29, Lionel mourns for his murdered father-figure, Frank Minna. What are the elements of Lionel’s ritual that night? Did you find this a moving section of the book? Why? Through what rituals, traditional or unique and personal, do people mark death and loss? This could become a research project.

GENRE ► *Motherless Brooklyn* is a detective story. What detective stories do you know, as books or film or TV shows? Use examples to draw up a list of the usual features of this genre.

... LESSON SUGGESTIONS >

Because we have come to expect a particular form for a mystery or detective novel—we feel that we know the “rules”—many writers choose to tease or subvert these expectations. For each of the features in your list, discuss how Jonathan Lethem follows or breaks the “rule”.

What is the classic fictional detective like? In what ways does Lionel resemble and differ from the established type? (For example, he is a loner, as many detectives are, but not from choice or desire.)

Fiction that flouts genre conventions in interesting ways gives the reader pleasure. This playfulness may also help the author to convey her or his message. What messages did you get from the book? Did the author’s playing with the detective format underline or emphasize any of these points?

Interested student/s can go on to read other variations on the detective template.

<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/mystery.htm> defines “a good mystery” and links to numerous useful sites for mysteries for young adults.

Sherlock Holmes is familiar name, and students might like to meet him in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s novels.

Dorothy L. Sayers transformed the mystery genre, weaving emotions with ideas and striking a blow for early feminism by inventing Harriet Vane, although she condescends to her working class characters. *Gaudy Night* is a great introduction to Sayers, Vane, and the atmosphere in the first all-women colleges at Oxford.

Archetypal hardboiled American detective features in the work of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Ross Macdonald.

African American mystery writers include Chester Himes, Walter Mosley, and Donald Goins.

Agatha Christie’s work can be enjoyed in novel or film form.

Alexander McCall Smith introduces readers to the southern African country of Botswana in his amusing and easy-to-read series beginning with *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*.

Umberto Eco explores history and ethics in his medieval mystery, *The Name of the Rose*. This is a big book, recommended for advanced readers only.

Invite friends, colleagues, and student/s to list mystery writers they have enjoyed, particularly those who invite critical thinking by twisting the form in new ways.

Lesson Plan “Tell Your Story Walking”

BOOK GROUP • ADULT LITERACY LEVEL • BY LYNNE PRICE

LEVEL ►

This session was designed for adult literacy learners, and used by Project Read in the San Francisco Public Library. It can be used or adapted for high school and college groups.

PARTICIPANTS ►

Members are pairs of learners and tutors, and the book group generally numbers between 15 and 25 people. Every month, tutors and learners meet in one of the public library’s reading rooms to discuss that month’s selected book. *Motherless Brooklyn* was a popular choice and provoked a lot of discussion, particularly about the group of outsiders it depicts.

LENGTH ►

Participants have a month to read the book and/or listen to the tape. The book group meets for one and three-quarter hours.

MATERIALS ►

Copies of the book and the corresponding, unabridged book-on-tape
 Questions to guide reading (example below)
 Name labels, felt-tip pens, registration sheet
 Information sheet about Tourette’s Syndrome, compiled from the internet
 CD player and SIBL *Chapter One* CD
 Copies of the lyrics of “Tell Your Story Walking”
 Book review sheet (example below)

OBJECTIVES ►

By participating in the book club, adult learners are able to:

- become part of the reading community
- strengthen reading, writing, thinking, and comprehension skills
- build confidence
- support other adult learners.

ACTIVITIES ►

PREPARATION ► At the end of a book group meeting, hand out the materials for the coming month. Each participant gets a copy of the book, the information and question sheets, and—if they want one—the book-on-tape. Introduce the book by discussing detective stories, on TV and film as well as in print.

READING GUIDE ►

In our selection this month, not only do we read a detective “whodunit” novel, but we also meet a character with a very real medical condition known as Tourette’s Syndrome. Lionel Essrog doesn’t just solve the mystery; he does so despite the difficulties of his condition. His loyalty to Frank Minna begins in childhood, and continues when Frank is mysteriously murdered. Lionel is on a mission to find out the truth! Take the information sheet on Tourette’s Syndrome; it might be helpful as you read the book.

Be sure to write down unknown words or ideas. You can discuss them with your tutor and others in the book group. As you read, think about:

The author – the person who wrote the book. What is the message s/he wants to share with you, the reader?

Setting – where and when the story takes place.

Location – where the characters live.

Characters – the people in the story.

Narrator – the one who tells the story.

Theme – the subject or topic of the book.

Plot – the series of events in a book, what happens.

Who are the main characters? Describe each one briefly.

The book title is taken from a passage in the book (p. 71).

Considering the setting, what do you think it refers to or means?

Of the four ‘orphans’—Tony, Danny, Lionel, and Gilbert— which one do you think Frank Minna believed in most? Why?

Lionel found the music of a specific musician comforting.

Who was the musician and why did the music comfort Lionel?

What did “the Clients” want from Lionel, and how was he able to end their relationship?

SESSION ►

Group members sign the registration sheet and write their names on labels.

If there is a new member (almost always the case),

everyone introduces themselves briefly, around the circle.

Hand out copies of the song lyrics for “Tell Your Story Walking” so that members can read along as they listen to the CD.

The group listens to the song on the CD, and then discusses it.

Do they like the song? In what ways is it true to the book?

Participants call out new words that they met in the book, which the facilitator writes on the flip chart.

Everyone discusses the book. The list of questions is a useful reference but does not limit the conversation.

If members listened to the audio cassette, they compare it with the book.

At the end of the session, each member reviews the book on the sheet provided, while the facilitator hands out next month’s book, tape, and question sheet.

BOOK REVIEW ►

Reader: Pretend you are a book critic—would you encourage others to read this book? Was it well written or not? An engaging and well-thought out story? Take a few moments to write down your overall thoughts about this book.

FOLLOW-UP ►

For learners and tutors who attend the book group as pairs, the book and song offer a wide range of follow-up activities. See the briefs for this song, and also the model for exploring song lyrics as poems.

ASSESSMENT ►

The ‘Book Reviews’ provide individual tutors or the tutor coordinator with a writing sample for assessment outside of the book club session. The fact that all participants fill out a review takes pressure off the learners. Assess

factors such as:

Did writing seem difficult for the learner?

Is s/he using complete sentences?

Does s/he print or use cursive?

Does s/he punctuate correctly?

Does s/he use traditional grammar?

Does s/he use of upper and lowercase correctly?

Does s/he capitalize correctly?

Were most words spelled correctly? If not, were they recognizable?

Is sequencing evident?

From each learner's book review, you learn about her/his thought process and the types of errors s/he is making (drop endings, add endings, vowel confusion, and so on).