Motherless Brooklyn
Reader’s Guide

This Reader’s Guide has been developed to lead you through the experience of reading Motherless Brooklyn as well as to assist you as you prepare for your First-Year Reading Experience discussion session on Monday, August 20th.

1. Does the title of the book imply that the four orphans who make up the Minna Men are the only ones who are "motherless"? Can you identify any ways in which Brooklyn itself is "motherless"?

2. Jonathan Lethem’s choice of narrator, an orphan living with Tourette’s Syndrome, results in a very unique writing style. How does Lionel’s Tourette’s affect or color the narrative structure?

3. When Frank recruits Tony, Lionel, Gil, and Danny to be his Minna Men, he becomes an obvious father figure, a role he both embraces and rejects. How does each of the orphans view Frank and how does this relate to their respective roles in Frank’s "detective agency"?

4. Rivaled only by Lionel’s initiation as a Minna Man, Frank’s death marks an unprecedented transition in his life. What challenges does this event create for Lionel, and how does he respond?

5. Throughout the book, how is the theme of masculinity portrayed? What impact does this have on Lionel’s view of self and others? Does this change? If so, how?

6. Consider all of Lionel’s friendships, including the more casual ones he has made along his usual routes through Brooklyn (e.g., the sandwich shop). What does he get from friendship, the good and bad of it?

7. Frank mentions that Lionel’s intelligence is masked by his Tourette’s. How does this affect his role as one of the Minna Men? How does this play out after Frank is murdered?
8. Only two female characters are fully developed in Motherless Brooklyn, why do you think this is? How do Kimmery and Julia react to Lionel's Tourette's? What do these respective actions indicate about the view of women in the book?

9. Lionel says, "it was the Minna Men who brought me the language, Minna and Court Street that let me speak". What roles do Danny, Gil, and Tony play in helping Lionel accept his Tourette's Syndrome? How do they differ in the way they handle Lionel?

10. How important is loyalty in the story? Is Lionel seeking loyalty, trying to understand it, or rejecting it?

11. Lionel, Danny, Tony, and Gil have spent their entire lives within the confines of New York City. How does this limited perspective effect their actions, ambitions, speech, etc.?

12. "Wheels within wheels" is a recurring theme in the book. What significance does this have for Lionel as he struggles to find meaning in the mystery which permeates the novel?

Visit www.sc.edu/fyre for more information about the event and additional resources related to Motherless Brooklyn.