Exemplum

Jonathan Lethem, *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999)

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"*I've got Tourette's*," reports Lionel Essrog, the protagonist of Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* three sentences into the novel. As the narrative unfolds, this disclosure will be both useful and insufficient. It is the nature of disability disclosure to be at once enabling—in that it gives meaning to behaviors or physical appearance that may otherwise be illegible to others and it is often a prerequisite for receiving medical care, accommodations, or services—and inadequate—in that such deceptively simple diagnostics can easily overshadow complexities of personhood that cannot be reduced to disability. *Motherless Brooklyn* elaborates on Lionel's diagnosis, explaining its emergence and symptoms, while also complicating the idea that this knowledge tells us anything stable or comprehensive about his character. Early critics of the novel immediately seized on the fact of Lionel's diagnosis, but none considered Tourette's as a disability or read Lethem's work through the lens of disability studies. To do so is to see that *Motherless Brooklyn* is deeply interested in the social dynamics of disability, the etiquette of outing and disclosure, the stigma of behavioral disability, the environments that produce or suppress disability, and the way disability reframes familiar values and assumptions.

Despite the increasing number of disabled characters in contemporary literature, it is still relatively uncommon to find protagonists with disabilities. In the American novel (as in life itself), people with disabilities have historically been described by others. While a disability-sensitive reading does not require a protagonist who is disabled, the disabled narrator presents the reader with an opportunity to see the world through his eyes, to understand what it is like to live in his body, and to witness the ways that disability informs the shape and substance of the story he has to tell. Most non-disabled people can imagine what it would be like to be in the presence of someone with Tourette's syndrome; few can imagine what it would be like to *have* the condition. In *Motherless Brooklyn*, Lionel describes the experience of Tourette's from within, explaining what it feels like to be possessed by the irrepressible urge to produce the verbal and physical tics associated with his disability.

More important than the revelation of his own feelings is what his condition reveals about other people. When Erving Goffman wrote his influential account of stigma in the 1960s, he was less interested in the marked body than in the social dynamics between those who pass as normal and those who are deemed to be deviant or abnormal. Lionel reveals himself to be a keen social observer in the style of Goffman when he explains, "Tourette's teaches you what people will ignore and forget. Teaches you to see the reality-knitting mechanism people employ to tuck away the intolerable, the incongruous, the disruptive—it teaches you this because you're the one lobbing the intolerable, incongruous, and disruptive their way" (43). Confronted by Lionel's unavoidable tics and verbal outbursts, strangers accuse him of being crazy or stupid; in doing so, they also mark the limits of their own tolerance for incongruity and disruption. His mentor Frank Minna affectionately calls him "freakshow," a nickname that suggests how Lionel's behavior turns him into a spectacle, becoming the defining feature of his identity and overpowering all other dimensions of self. At the same time, Minna and his "Minna men" are so used to Lionel's condition that they no longer notice it unless accompanied by strangers whose reactions have a defamiliarizing effect. This is in keeping with Goffman's observation that disability is not inherently arresting and thus, with familiarity, it becomes normalized.

Lionel is particularly aware of the negative responses his condition arouses in women. People with disabilities often complain of the way that impairment disqualifies them from being attractive or sexually appealing, according to ableist standards. Disability has the power to reverse or override gender, rendering the typical markings of masculinity and femininity irrelevant. Lionel's uncontainable tics and eruptions are the antithesis of a closed, controlled masculine ideal. When he asks Julia, his dead boss's wife, if she might be interested in him, she replies, "You're too strange, Lionel. Much too strange. I mean, take a look in the mirror" (105). Her words imply that Lionel's disqualification as an object of desire is immediately and visibly apparent. Lionel proves her wrong when he meets Kimmery, a woman disabled by her own social inhibitions, who initially seems unbothered by his tics. It is her anxieties, as much as it is Lionel's disability, that cause their brief relationship to fail. Although Lionel ends up alone, the novel does not uphold Julia's accusation that he is unattractive, or that being strange would necessarily make him undesirable. At the same time, it does give a sense of the isolation experienced by people with disabilities in a culture that equates desirability with ableist models of behavior and appearance. It is also important to see the absence of intimacy in Lionel's life as an effect of genre, since *Motherless Brooklyn* is modeled on the hard-boiled detective novel. In this sense, Lionel is typical, hewing closely to conventions whereby the detective invariably ends up alone and disillusioned by spoiled romance.

While Lionel's failed love life aligns him with his hard-boiled precursors, Tourette's syndrome marks him as different. When Lionel's colleague Tony mockingly calls him "Marlowe" (178), "Sam Spade" (183), and "Shitlock Holmes" (179), it is a reminder of the distance between Lionel's ticcing, twitching, verbally uncontrollable body and the

hard, reserved, tough masculinity of the classic gumshoe. At the same time, Lionel's condition serves as a reminder that not all detectives are able-bodied, and the detective genre has been interested in disability for a long time, particularly if the story of Oedipus can be counted as the first contribution to the genre. Other famously disabled detectives include Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and Adrian Monk, as well as the protagonists of numerous other literary series. There was even another novel about a detective with Tourette's—Daniel Hecht's *Skull Session*—published in 1998, just a year before the publication of *Motherless Brooklyn*. Often in these narratives, a disability that might usually be seen as a liability is an asset to the work of sleuthing. This is certainly true in Lionel's case, where the symptoms of Tourette's make him particularly good at stakeouts and wiretapping. People also tend to let down their guard and unwittingly reveal crucial information because they assume Lionel is stupid or crazy. The same attributes may get him off the hook in difficult situations. Nonetheless, Lethem's novel is notably less interested in solving the mystery (sedimented as it is with the complex motivations and knotted plotlines of any good noir) than in exploring how the investigation introduces Lionel into a range of unfamiliar social environments—including a Zen monastery, a Sushi restaurant on the Maine coastline, an empty New York apartment, and the original Papaya Czar—and exploring how his condition manifests in the scenarios that unfold there.

Lionel's simple diagnostic utterance, "I've got Tourette's" seems to ascribe to a medical model that understands disability in terms of deficit or incapacity of particular bodies. He reinforces this view of his disability when he declares, "I was a prisoner of my syndrome" or finds refuge in the manuals that name and define his condition. At other times, the novel adopts a more social model of disability, seeing it as a phenomenon that arises in the body's intersection with various social and physical environments. Lionel's syndrome does not exist in a vacuum. It is produced by his surroundings. Many of his tics can be traced back to particular environmental stimuli, such as other people's gestures, phrases, and sounds that get picked up and repurposed into endlessly perseverating symptoms. "It was Minna who brought me the language, Minna and Court Street that let me speak" (37), Lionel explains. Some contexts are more stimulating than others. Brute fear, sexual arousal, food, and certain kinds of music all exert a calming force that diminishes his symptoms, while highly stressful situations exacerbate them. Lionel experiences his syndrome differently in the familiar landscapes of urban Brooklyn than he does on the windy, deserted Maine coastline. When he takes Frank Minna to the hospital and finds himself surrounded by bodies in severe distress, his condition is only "distracting, and slightly reprehensible," such that soon it "was quickly and blithely incorporated into the atmosphere" (31). Thus the proclamation "I've got Tourette's" is not as static as it might initially seem. Instead it describes a composite of urges and behaviors that ebb and flow depending on environment and context.

If disability is produced by the body's interaction with the social environment, *Motherless Brooklyn* suggests that particular environments and activities are themselves Tourettic.

"New York is a Tourettic city, and this great communal scratching and counting and tearing is a definite symptom" (113), Lionel claims. So too, the subway. Lionel finds models in Daffy Duck, Don Martin, Art Carney, and Prince, all of whom exhibit symptoms coincident with Tourette's, he reports. Over the course of the narrative, Lionel describes conspiracies, insomnia, guilt, assertions, and generalizations all as manifestations of Tourette's syndrome. Even his quest to find the culprit is Tourettic. "I want to find Frank's killer," Lionel writes. "I'd already heard myself say this too many times, and meaning was leaking out of the phrase. It threatened to become a sort of moral tic: *findfrank'skiller*" (174). As the novel wears on, Tourette's thus appears to shift from being a condition unique to Lionel to a metaphor for anything and everything. With characteristic self-consciousness, Lionel notes this tendency: "Have you noticed yet that I relate everything to my Tourette's? Yup, you guessed it, it's a tic. Counting is a symptom, but counting symptoms is also a symptom, a tic *plus ultra*" (192). On the one hand, the transformation of Tourette's into a kind of universal symbol threatens to evacuate it of specificity, making light of the embodied experiences of those who live with the condition. On the other, it suggests how Lionel's disability gives form to his world and how he, as a disabled narrator, grants us a unique perspective on familiar situations, landscapes, and affective states.

In this sense, *Motherless Brooklyn* is not simply a novel with a disabled protagonist, but a novel that recognizes how disability gives form to the world. It does so not simply as a negative example against which the normal can be measured, but also as a means of experiencing differently. Tourette's gives this novel its shape. Like the detective novel itself, Tourette's cannot tolerate disruption; it seeks closure through the restoration of symmetry and order. And yet the Tourettic body *is* the disorder, leaving unrest and disorientation in its wake. In this sense, the detective with Tourette's can never tie up all the loose ends because there is always another tic. At the end of *Motherless Brooklyn* Lionel finds Frank's killer, but he reminds us that a concurrent crime, the murder of the mysterious Ullman, has not been resolved. So too, there is no "cure" for Lionel's disability, which manages to be both a figure for the novel's own compulsive, open-ended form and a condition that cannot be reduced to its metaphorical significance.

Disability studies helps us to see how literature maintains this delicate balance of the metaphorical and the literal, and, in doing so, helps us to see how disability itself can be at once figurative and embodied, symbolic and real. As such, it changes everything about how we perceive, read and make sense of the world.

Works Cited

Lethem, Jonathan (1999). *Motherless Brooklyn*. New York: Doubleday.