

Dylan Ebdus' Brooklyn blues

It's tough to be a nerd in Brooklyn. Just ask the quasi-hero of Jonathan Lethem's new novel, 'Fortress of Solitude.' But Dylan does have one recourse — he can fly

By **DAN MOREY**
Contributing writer

Nerds have always had a tough time growing up in Brooklyn.

What could be worse for a scrawny, well-read lad than those mean NYC streets, where boys traditionally begin to sport leather hats and brass knuckles around the age of 6?

If you live in Brooklyn, and you can't, at the very least, catch a spaldeen or smack a home run in a stickball game, you'd better stay in the house with your comic books and your mamma, because outside, on the block, you don't amount to much more than bully-bait, ripe for a beating and likely to lose your lunch money before you step off the stoop.

Just ask Dylan Ebdus, the quasi-hero of Jonathan Lethem's new novel "Fortress of Solitude." Dylan is introverted, unathletic and embarrassingly white, a sad sack of a kid struggling through adolescence in the mostly black and Puerto Rican neighborhood of Gowanus. He's trapped in a cruel social experiment, the victim of his mother's utopian vision of a racially harmonic Brooklyn. She actually *wants* him to be the only white kid at school. What else but pre-

pubescent misery can follow?

The year is 1976, and every radio Dylan passes mocks him with the No. 1 hit "Play That Funky Music (Whiteboy)" by Wild Cherry. He's "yoked" (put in a headlock) on a daily basis, and asked in menacing tones, "Yo, whiteboy, you got a dollar you could lend me?"

He's not far from Woody Allen's Virgil Starkwell — king of all Brooklyn nerds — in "Take the Money and Run," who, after having his glasses smashed innumerable times by local toughs, gives up, and volunteers to stomp the specs himself. Dylan can't run because they'd catch him, and he can't fight back because they'd pulverize him, so he resigns himself to his yoking and lives to be humiliated another day.

The effect of all this intimidation on young Dylan's self-esteem is, as you'd expect, fairly crushing. Add to it his mother's abrupt and permanent departure with a visiting hippie and his father's reclusive isolation in an upstairs studio (he's an artist, "brooding over nothing"), and it's no surprise that

Dylan grows into a solipsistic, self-pitying adult who moans "Abraham was the father I never had, and Rachel was the mother I never had, and Gowanus and Boerum Hill was the home I never had."

EVEN LETHEM'S PROSE IS DOLEFUL. Full of glum, embittered humor and depressive imagery, it plods along for most of the book at a slow, linear gait, echoing his character's subdued and submissive state of mind.

Which isn't to say there aren't magical moments. Literally. Though the story tends toward realism, there's a single, rather large, element of fantasy involved: Dylan and his friend Mingus Rude can fly. Yes, *fly*. They need only wear a mysterious ring (bestowed on them by an indigent alcoholic), and they take to the air, just like the superheroes in the comics they read.

In typical fashion, Dylan is too neurotic to take advantage of his newfound power. Freedom calls, but he's afraid to answer, managing only a few abortive test flights while Mingus soars from trees and rooftops — he's been yoked for so long, he can't begin to imagine a life of avian independence.

Poor Dylan. He's got female troubles, too. Women, starting with his mother, flit in and out of

his life, appearing in the form of cryptic postcards or brief summer flings, none able to fully penetrate his fortress of solitude.

Over the course of 35 years, the closest he gets to finding his Lois Lane is Abigale Ponders, a Berkeley (he's moved west) graduate student, 10 years his junior, who shows up in one chapter, clad tellingly in a Meat Puppets T-shirt. As a sex object she's fine, but Dylan, dwelling deep within the icy walls of his self-absorption, is oblivious to her emotional needs. One gets the distinct impression that he'd rather be alone with his CD collection, anyway.

Listening to music is Dylan's true passion, one he harnesses and tries to mold into a career as a freelance journalist. He's \$30,000 in debt, obsessed with his childhood, patently uncomfortable in any sort of adult skin, and scraping out a meager existence by writing rhapsodic liner notes for compilations of the R&B and soul and funk records that saturated his Brooklyn youth.

Despite this downward arc, the novel ends on a hopeful note. With the death of his principal childhood tormentor, and a visit to his mother's last known residence (she's long gone), Dylan finally seems ready to move on, to leave his childhood behind and forge a future with Abigale.

And really, after 500 pages, isn't it about time?

DAN MOREY is a freelance writer living in Erie.



"The Fortress of Solitude."

Jonathan Lethem. Doubleday, 528 pages, \$26 (\$18.20 online discount price)