

Magic, realism mix in novel of 1970s Brooklyn

By Jake O'Connell
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

"The Fortress of Solitude." By Jonathan Lethem. Doubleday. 511 Pages. \$26.

In his novel "The Fortress of Solitude," Jonathan Lethem tells the story of two boys, one white, one black, both raised by single fathers in 1970s Brooklyn, N.Y., and both of whom become endowed with super powers. Dylan, the white one, is the son of freethinking parents who named him after Bob Dylan. His father is an avant-garde artist who earns a living designing covers of science-fiction books.

Dylan's enigmatic mother reminds him: "If someone asks you say you live in Gowanus. ... Boerum Hill is

pretentious bull—." She leaves early in Dylan's life, and he hears from her only occasionally through postcards she writes in code.

Mingus, named for jazz giant Charles Mingus, is the son of a black father and a white mother. Junior, as the father is known, enjoys mild success as an R&B singer before growing weary of shady record companies and succumbing to cocaine addiction.

Like Dylan's family, Junior and Mingus moved to Gowanus before it became gentrified into Boerum Hill.

Dylan adopts the charismatic Mingus as his idol and protector, and their friendship gives him a measure of street credibility in the neighborhood. By mimicking

Mingus, Dylan quickly learns that "the key to mostly anything is pretending your first time isn't."

A friendship develops based on their mutual passion for comic books and music. The recurring theme of superhuman powers is introduced through the comics, climaxing later as Dylan accepts a ring bestowing powers that change over time.

Lethem's unearthing of popular culture through the eyes of Dylan is staggering. He takes the reader through the multiple facets of the art world, the music business, graffiti subculture, comic book collecting, the birth of hip hop, the rumblings of punk rock, the emergence of the crack epidemic, music

critique, prison life, and the era's reactions to historical events.

Later, the magic ring that enables Dylan to become invisible has a similar effect on the reader, who feels like a transparent figure witnessing these salient events.

The story is fraught with vivacious characters: Robert Woolfolk, the bully from the housing projects who flashes "a smile like a torn photograph" and is beaten up by Dylan's mom for stealing his bike; the alcoholic superhero Aaron Doily, who gives up on the ring's power; Junior's pious but seedy father, who comes to live with him and Mingus after serving time in prison; and Dylan's black girlfriend, who gives a scathing and hilarious

assessment of Dylan's psyche through his CD collection.

The writing is crisp, insightful and effortlessly readable, and the language complex but direct. Lethem, himself a Brooklynite, is also a maestro of metaphor: "school paint that dried like scabs;" the Puerto Ricans on the corner "watching the children like television;" and "T-shirts in a messy room 'balled like used tissues.'"

The book is as much about identity — racial, territorial and of self — as it is about the suffering that chases progress.

Dylan's whiteness and past affect him constantly and to the point where he can't listen to "Play That Funky Music (White Boy)" on an

oldies radio station without recalling the inherent implications of his childhood in a mostly black neighborhood. No matter where Dylan goes, Dean Street is always watching, always with him. The powers of a magic ring are no match for a battered youth, or even for adulthood.

"The Fortress of Solitude" is about the scars of abandonment, the horrors of addiction, the yearning "to matter," the remedial powers of music, and the guilt of not maintaining relationships — or worse, the way we grow apart.

Most of all, though, it's about fortresses we build to shield ourselves from the passage of time and the things we need to remember to forget.

Fitness, safety on pediatricians' list of resolution for American kids



By Lindsey Tanner
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHICAGO — With New Year's resolutions on people's minds, the American Academy of Pediatrics is offering a special list of health-related promises for the nation's youngsters.

But even the academy president acknowledges that kids, like adults, might have trouble following through.

For tiny tots, the academy recommends they promise to clean up their toys, brush their teeth twice a day, and wash their hands before eating and after using the bathroom. They also should remember not to tease dogs.

School-age children should resolve to drink lots of milk, limit soft drinks and engage in sports or some other energetic activity at least three times weekly, the academy says.

The nine resolutions for teens include eating at least one fruit and vegetable daily and limiting video games and television to two hours a day.

The list got mixed reviews from a sampling of Chicago youngsters.

Putting away toys "is a good idea because you don't want to step on something sharp" and hand-washing is important "because you don't want to spread germs," agreed 4-year-old Cole Robbins.

But when asked if he would commit to the resolutions himself, Cole changed the subject.

Eight-year-old Abigail Abolt said the resolutions didn't sound too drastic — provided they allow her to watch the popular animated TV show "Arthur" every day. She also added one resolution: "to get Liam, a boy in my class, to stop kissing me."

It's the second year the academy, based in suburban Elk Grove Village, has recommended resolutions aimed at giving kids some responsibility for improving their health, fitness and safety, including having teens resolve to avoid peer pressure to use drugs and alcohol.

Many of the resolutions focus on avoiding junk food and a sedentary lifestyle that could lead to obesity, which has reached epidemic proportions nationwide and affects an estimated 15 percent of youngsters aged 6 to 19.

If the resolutions get children to adopt behaviors that will help them maintain a healthy weight, "then we've

done quite a good thing," said academy president Dr. Carden Johnston.

He acknowledged that some kids might roll their eyes at the list and some "will make a lot of resolutions that don't last very long."

Eighth-grader Chris Kellas, 13, said he has resolutions of his own: "trying

not to fight with my sister and trying to keep up my grades."

But he said he won't follow the academy's advice to swear off violent video games.

"I don't think I could do it," he said.

On the Net:
American Academy of Pediatrics: <http://www.aap.org>

Kids advocate for other children and themselves

Every child wants a home," says 12-year-old Cronetta. "So help the children in the world because everybody needs a parent."

Cronetta and her brother Robert, age 10 are spokespeople for children in foster care who are waiting for adoptive families in Mecklenburg neighborhoods. They know what it feels like to be waiting — they are waiting for parents to adopt them.

"Cronetta is insightful, engaging, and outgoing — she has a strong sense



Cronetta and Robert are two of many children waiting to be adopted in Mecklenburg County.

of responsibility, appreciates guidance, and has a positive outlook on life," says long-time friend Evelyn Dillard. "Robert has an engaging

smile, pleasant personality and has a special interest in music." Both Cronetta and Robert sing

in the church choir together.

"I love my brother, he's always been part of my life," states Cronetta. "I want to be adopted into the same family with Robert."

If you are interested in finding out more about Cronetta and Robert or other children awaiting adoption, call Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services at 704-336-KIDS (5437).



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PUBLIC MEETING

The Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS) will hold a public meeting to receive comments on proposed changes to bus service in the West Boulevard area.

A meeting is planned for:

January 5, 2004
6:30 pm - 8:00 pm

West Boulevard Public Library
Community Room
2157 West Boulevard
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For more information or for transit service to this meeting, call 704-336-RIDE or 866-779-CATS or visit us online at www.ridetransit.org.



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