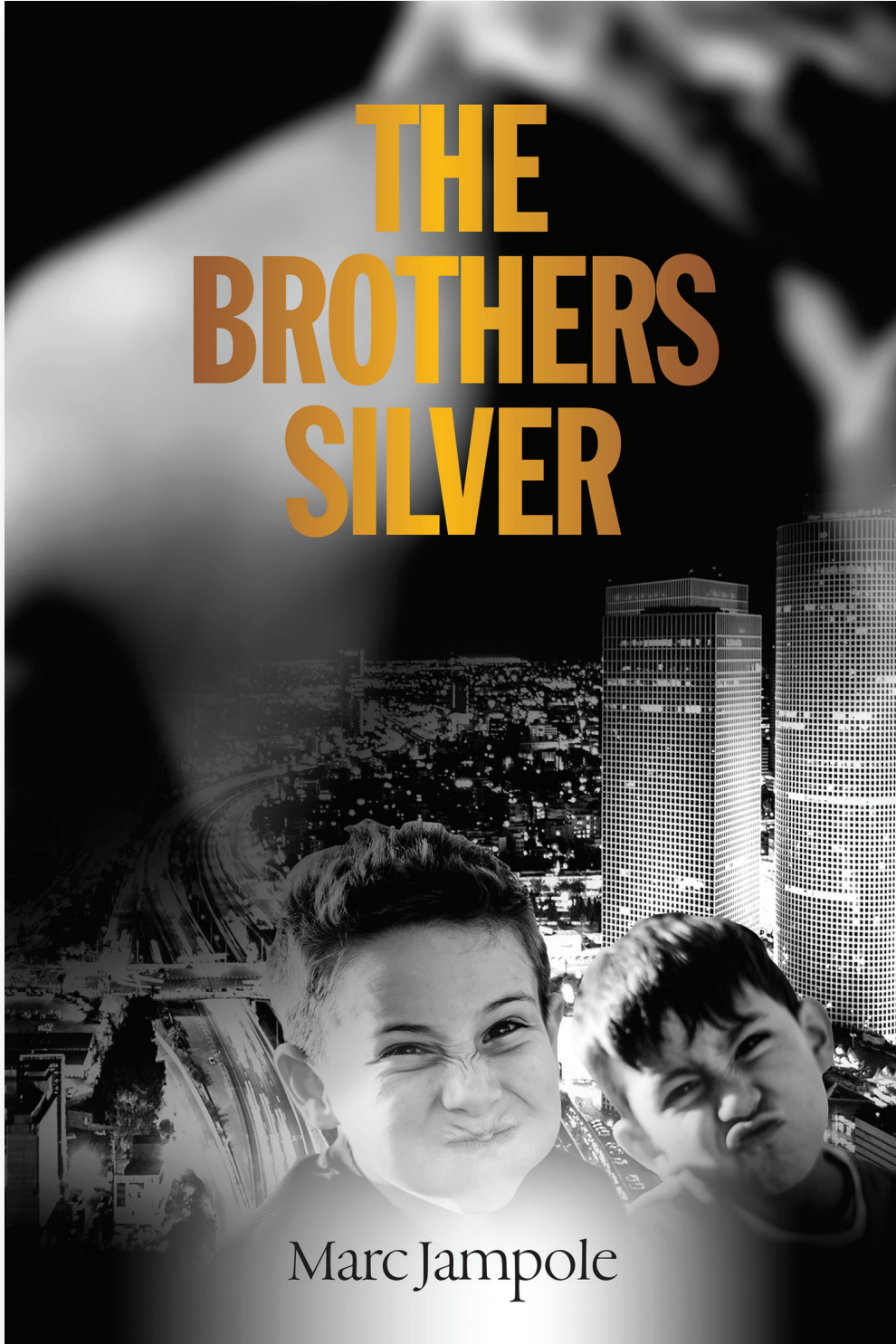


# STUDY GUIDE

*For Book Clubs and Classes*

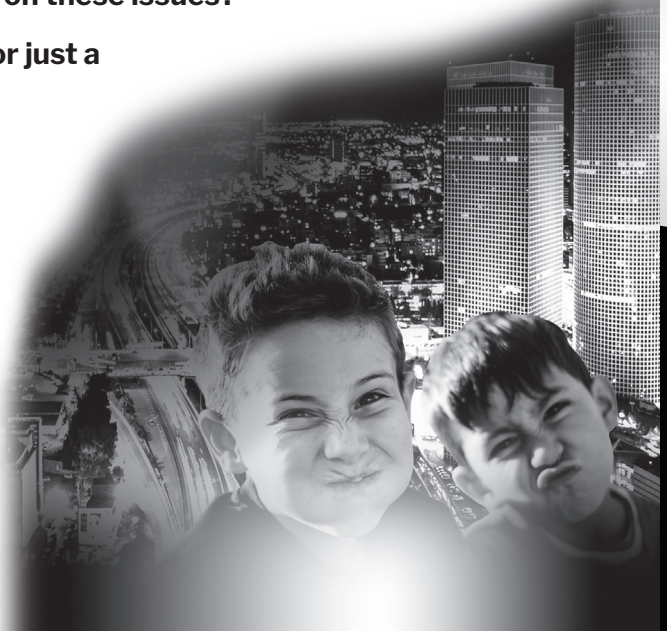
# THE BROTHERS SILVER

Marc Jampole



# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSIONS

1. How is the issue of the outsider explored throughout the novel?
2. Discuss the relationship of the two brothers. What is more of a driving force: Jules's jealousy or his desire to protect Leon?
3. Does presenting each chapter in a different point of view add richness to the novel or does it get in the way?
4. Does Jules fail to live up to his responsibilities to his family or does he do the best he can for them, as a child and as an adult?
5. Leon's lifestyle and beliefs provide a contrast to the concept of the "American Dream." How convincing a case does he make?
6. The first and last chapters unfold in the irregular rhymes and rhythms of modern poetry. Does the rhyming in these chapters make the novel more or less enjoyable?
7. Of what other novels does *The Brothers Silver* remind you?
8. There are several survivors of trauma in the novel besides Jules and Leon, some doing well and some a mess. Discuss how the theme of the survivor plays out in the novel.
9. How much should we blame Ed Silver for the emotional problems of his wife?
10. By the end of his trip in the last chapter, what has Jules learned about himself and his relationship to his family and the rest of the world?
11. Several male characters in the novel, such as Ed Silver, Ed's father and Del Gatesberg, express misogynistic ideas? Are any of the male characters feminists?
12. *The Brothers Silver* explores a number of social issues, such as civil and LGBTQ rights, the war economy, global warming, and suburban culture. Where does the author stand on these issues?
13. Is *The Brothers Silver* a Jewish novel or just a novel with Jewish characters?
14. The novel also contrasts American political and social beliefs in the 1970's and today. Does the author like what's happened over the past 40-50 years?
15. The novel makes many references to music, and especially pop music. In what ways does the novel use music to set the scene, create a mood, or illuminate what a character is feeling?



# A CONVERSATION WITH MARC JAMPOLE



## What is *The Brothers Silver* about?

*The Brothers Silver* captures the debilitating impact of childhood trauma: two brothers react differently to growing up in a household haunted by mental illness, violence, and emotional abuse. The younger one lives on the drug-addled edges of society. The older brother falls into a destructive relationship that parallels the insecurities and chaos of his childhood. Like many men, the brothers deny their PTSD. The younger brother avoids emotional involvement. The older brother suppresses his memories of childhood and cuts himself off from his family and everyone else he has ever known. He is in a sense reborn as someone missing a past, a solution that works for decades, that is, until death brings back the bad memories. Will the Silver brothers ever come to terms with their childhood trauma? You'll have to read the book to find out.

## How autobiographical is *The Brothers Silver*?

*The Brothers Silver* is a novel, which means it is fictional. Like many novels, however, it does have a lot of autobiographical elements—things that happened to my brother and me and characters based on real people. The first chapter is the most autobiographical. As the novel proceeds, it becomes less and less autobiographical, but even the first chapter contains many non-autobiographical elements in plot and character. Keep in mind that in most autobiographical and semi-autobiographical novels, the main character is or becomes a writer. Significantly, I have been a professional writer my entire adult life, yet no single character in *The Brothers Silver* is or becomes a writer.

## How does your own childhood figure into the novel?

Many of the terrible things that happen to the brothers Jules and Leon Silver in the early chapters of *The Brothers Silver* actually happened to my brother and me growing up. We did see my father beat my mother. We did walk into multiple suicide attempts by my mother. We did suffer food insecurity and opened an empty refrigerator more than once. We did ride the emotional roller coaster of my mother's extreme highs and lows for years. We did have to take ugly verbal abuse from both our parents. All that stuff that happens in the novel did happen in our lives.

## Talk about your struggle to write *The Brothers Silver*

My childhood trauma left me with a writer's block that lasted forty years. The block did not affect my ability to do commercial writing like journalism, news releases, ads and speeches, but obstructed me from my true love—poetry and fiction. Feelings of shame, guilt or unworthiness served as a dam that held back the flow of words. I could squeeze enough creativity through leaks in the dam to write poems, although I even stopped doing that for 10 awful years. I waited for inspiration or a sudden epiphany that would open up the dam. It never came. Over time I learned that I will always be crippled by my childhood trauma. Once I realized that the dam would always be there, I taught myself how to drill holes into the dam—first small, then larger and larger. My drill bits consist of little rules and techniques: Make sure you sit at the keyboard for a few hours every day, even if all you do is stare at the screen. Always have a number of projects going, so if you're blocked on one, you can work on another. Always end the day with something more to write the next day (a tip I picked up from Hemingway). Make artificial deadlines and enforce them. My most important rule when nothing else works: stare at the blank page and remind myself with my best tough-love demeanor that I'm emotionally crippled and always will be, but I can't let my malaise stop me from doing the writing that makes me happy.

## Why do you say childhood trauma never goes away?

Childhood trauma is not an illness that doctors can cure with an operation or pill. It's more like a disability or birth defect that the survivor has to learn to work around or work with. Whether the cause is food insecurity, sexual abuse, domestic violence, wartime victimization, homelessness, or physical neglect, the trauma is always with you. I'm not saying that the various therapies to help adults suffering post-traumatic stress disease (PTSD) from childhood are worthless. Quite the contrary. They've eased the suffering of a lot of people, including me. I've been helped by talk therapy, cognitive therapy and, for the past few years, a small daily dose of an anti-anxiety medication. All of it has helped. But none of it has made the trauma go away the way surgery, chemotherapy and radiation takes away cancer, or knee replacement surgery takes away pain. What talking to a shrink or popping a pill does is help you deal with the giant, ungainly elephant always in the room that is your trauma. It never makes the elephant disappear.

## What would be the “big meaning” in the novel?

If you think you're going ever to be free of your childhood trauma, or if you think you can sweep it under a thick rug of forgetfulness like the brothers in the novel do, you'll find that it always comes back to haunt you worse than before—panic attacks, feelings of worthlessness, bad dreams, broken relationships, and general unhappiness. But if you accept that you've been permanently scarred by your childhood, you have a chance to learn how not only to live with it, but to grow beyond it. I hope that's the message that readers of *The Brothers Silver* take away with them.

*Continued*

## A CONVERSATION WITH MARC JAMPOLE *Continued*

### Is *The Brothers Silver* a Jewish novel?

That's similar to asking whether *The Brothers Silver* is an autobiographical novel. And the answer is the same: there are many Jewish elements, but I'm not sure you could call it a Jewish novel. True enough, the Silver family is Jewish, and scenes of Jewish holiday and life cycle celebrations pop up throughout the book. More to the point, one of the brothers, Jules, views himself as the ultimate outsider and wanderer, two roles inherent in the depiction of Jews in literature. References to Jewish mythology run through the book, but so do references to Greek, Christian, Nordic, Hindu, and Buddhist thought. The accumulation of all those Jewish elements still leaves *The Brothers Silver* a far cry from Chaim Potok or Isaac Bashevis Singer. Maybe it's Jewish like Joseph Heller or Saul Bellow.

### How do you use Jewish elements in the novel?

I use Jewish elements in lots of different ways. On a plot level, Jewish traditions and celebrations shape a large part of the action, especially when the brothers Jules and Leon are children. On the symbolic level, Jewish myths and stories serve as symbols and references the same way that I use Christian, Greek and Roman, Hindu, Buddhist and other elements—often to illuminate character. For example, Ed Silver's version of the story of Potiphar's wife reveals much about his own character, but so does Jules in his self-description as Hephaestus the Greek god of fire. On a broader level of meaning, I explore two ideas that dominate Jewish thought through the ages, and could be termed as "Jewish" themes: the nature of knowledge and the role of the outsider.

### Why do you tell the story from many points of view?

I've always been attracted to novels that unfold from a variety of points of view. Even as a child, the main reason I loved Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* so much was because one of the chapters takes a break from narration by the boy Jim Hawkins so that Long John Silver can narrate a chapter of material that Jim would not have known about. And therein lies the essential reason to tell a story from many points of view. Each narrator only knows what she or he knows, creating all kinds of ironies for the reader, especially when more than one character describes the same events.

### How do you use unreliable narrators in the novel?

An unreliable narrator is a narrator whom the readers cannot completely trust. Sometimes the narrator doesn't know everything the readers do. Sometimes the narrator is a liar, or has personality flaws that distort his perception of reality. If well written, a child narrator is inherently unreliable, because she or he only sees and understands what a child sees and understands. The classic unreliable narrator is the mentally-retarded Benji in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. In one way or another, each of the narrators in *The Brothers Silver* is unreliable. They tell their side of events from their point of view using their own specific language, leaving it to the readers to figure out what the truth really is.

### Who are the major influences on your writing?

The biggest single influence on my fiction is James Joyce, although also important are Stendhal, Shi Nai'an, Arthur Schnitzler, Joseph Heller, and the many writers of picaresque and road novels, from Homer to Kerouac. My poetics have been influenced most by Wallace Stevens, Paul Celan, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and T.S. Eliot. John Coltrane has been a major influence on how I think about the way words flow on the page and the musicality behind all great poetry and prose. I have also learned a lot about the relationship of image and technique to symbol and meaning from studying the painter Wassily Kandinsky and the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, both their work and their theoretical writings. As far as my philosophy goes, of course Lucretius, Baruch Spinoza and Bertrand Russell loom large, but I consider myself a disciple of the contemporary moral philosopher Daniel N. Robinson and his seminal work, *Praise and Blame*.

### How did you develop your rhyming prose style?

Rhyming prose came about as a happy accident of literary experimentation. I wrote the first chapter as a stand-alone non-rhyming poem several years back. After setting it down for a few months, I decided to set it to irregular rhymes, which seemed to give it extra emotional power. I put it down again for a few months, then started playing with the poem. I decided to experiment and set it as a prose piece, and the lines suddenly seemed to soar—at least to me. This final experiment occurred when I was making the transition from writing only poetry to writing both poetry and fiction. Over time, I've learned to reverse the process: instead of starting with poetry and turning it into prose, I write the prose out and then look for clever and rhythmic rhymes. Much more efficient, especially now that I consciously understand the "rules" for creating a variety of prose rhythms.

### Why do you refer to pop music so much?

I use references to popular music throughout the novel, always in a tactical way: Sometimes references to song titles set the era of a chapter or event. A number of times I create a montage or collage of song titles or song lyrics as a way to show the passage of time on the road, or a way to get into a character's mind. These merging pieces of lyric will sometimes form a story of their own. I also use specific songs as part of broader montages of event details, as a way to break up the action or create parallel actions.

# THE MUSIC OF THE BROTHERS SILVER

## ETHEL SILVER'S SONGBOOK

1. *Carmen* by Georges Bizet
2. *Scheherazade* by Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov
3. *The Peer Gynt Suite* by Edvard Grieg
4. *The Hungarian Rhapsody #2* by Franz Liszt
5. *West Side Story* by Leonard Bernstein & Stephen Sondheim
6. *My Fair Lady* by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Lowe
7. "The Desert Song," "Softly, As In a Morning Sunrise," and "Stout-Hearted Men" by Sigmund Romberg
8. *The Music of Victor Herbert* by Mantovani & His Orchestra
9. *Straus Waltzes* by Mantovani & His Orchestra
10. "The Trolley Song" by Hugh Martin & Ralph Blaine as sung by Judy Garland
11. "You Always Hurt the One You Love" by Allan Roberts & Doris Fisher as sung by The Mills Brothers
12. "Swinging on a Star" by Jimmy Van Heusen and Johnny Burke as sung by Bing Crosby

## WHAT JULES AND LEON LISTEN TO AS KIDS

1. "A Change is Gonna Come" by Sam Cooke
2. "California Sun" by the Riviera
3. "Catch the Wind" by Donovan
4. "Do You Want to Know a Secret?" by The Beatles
5. "Dominique" by The Singing Nun
6. "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" by Bob Dylan
7. "Fun, Fun, Fun" by the Beachboys
8. "Go Now" by The Moody Blues
9. "Hats Off to Larry" by Del Shannon
10. "He's So Fine" by The Chiffons
11. "Hey Paula" by Paul and Paula
12. "I Get Around" by The Beachboys
13. "Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini" by Brian Hyland
14. "Misty" by Johnny Mathis
15. "No Particular Place to Go" by Chuck Berry
16. "Raindrops" by Dee Clark
17. "Runaway" by Del Shannon
18. "See the Funny Little Clown" by Bobby Goldsboro
19. "She's Not There" by The Zombies
20. "Stuck on You" by Elvis Presley
21. "Walk Right In" by The Rooftop Singers

## LEON'S BLUES

1. "Ain't Gwine Whistle Dixie (Anymo)" by Taj Mahal
2. "Crossroad" by Robert Johnson
3. "Fishin' Blues" by Taj Mahal
4. "Hellbound on My Trail" by Robert Johnson
5. "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" by Johann Sebastian Bach
6. "Kind-Hearted Woman Blues" by Robert Johnson
7. Gavotte from the *4th Lute Suite for Guitar* by Johann Sebastian Bach
8. "Sweet Home Chicago" by Robert Johnson

## JULES'S ROAD MUSIC

1. "Angel from Montgomery" by Bonnie Raitt
2. "Astral Weeks" by Van Morrison
3. "Blinded by the Light" by Manfred Mann's Earth Band
4. "Can't You See" by The Marshall Tucker Band
5. "Eyes of the World" by The Grateful Dead
6. "Fire and Rain" by James Taylor
7. "For What It's Worth" by Buffalo Springfield
8. "Green-eyed Lady" by Sugar Loaf
9. "Hello, It's Me" by Nazzy
10. "Hey, Hey, My, My (Into the Black)" by Neil Young
11. "Life's Been Good" by Joe Walsh
12. "Night Moves" by Bob Seger and The Silver Bullet Band
13. "On the Road to Find Out" by Cat Stevens
14. "Raindrops" by Dee Clark
15. "Rambling Man" by The Allman Brothers
16. "Riders of the Storm" by The Doors
17. "Runaround Sue" by Dion and the Belmonts
18. "Sailing" by Christopher Cross
19. "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay" by Otis Redding
20. "Spoonful" by Cream
21. "Stop in the Name of Love" by The Supremes
22. "Summer Breeze" by The Isley Brothers
23. "Susie Q" by Creedance Clearwater Revival
24. "Sweet Thing" by Van Morrison
25. "The Boys of Summer" by Don Henley
26. "The Weight" by The Band
27. "Touch Me" by The Doors
28. "Wish You Were Here" by Pink Floyd