

DAILY NEWS  
**Boroughs**

## Genius boro

### 3 locals claim 500G grants in best-of-the-best awards

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Maybe there's something in Brooklyn's water. How else to explain the generous helping of "genius" grants racked up by Brooklynites this week?

With MacArthur Fellows \$500,000 awards given to Brooklyn's documentary filmmaker Edet Belzberg, sculptor Teresita Fernandez and acclaimed novelist Jonathan Lethem, only Chicago and Berkeley, Calif., had as many winners.

"There's no question Brooklyn is becoming a major part of the MacArthur fellowship," said MacArthur director Daniel Socolow. "It's where a lot of creative people are ending up."

Lethem, 41, was being heralded as a genius long before MacArthur came around. The author of six novels, including last year's "Fortress of Solitude," recalled a thriving art scene in Boerum Hill, where he grew up and still lives part-time.

"I was very lucky in a lot of ways back then because I grew up in a family of bohemians and it was always a very comfortable place," said Lethem, whose next novel, set in Los Angeles - the first not to use Brooklyn as a backdrop - will hit the shelves in early 2007.

"I had a lot of people to model myself on, a lot of talented writers and painters. It was a great place to be an artist," Lethem said.

Belzberg, 35, also found Brooklyn to be fertile ground for her creative life.

While her films are not about Brooklyn, Belzberg's film "Children Underground," a documentary about poverty-stricken children in Romania, came to her as she was living in a dusty basement apartment in Park Slope.

At the time, she was working a graveyard shift for an investment banking firm, where she prepared Powerpoint presentations for executives.

"I was a bit nomadic for a while, but I eventually came to Park Slope," said Belzberg, who said she'll use her grant money to pay for health insurance. "There's just something in the air here."

Miami-born Fernandez, 37, moved to Boerum Hill with her husband, Tom Downs, five years ago, and immediately began showing her artwork in Manhattan galleries. Although she initially moved to Manhattan, she left after nine months, finding her inspiration in the Borough of Kings.

"It really felt like home immediately," said Fernandez, who said she prefers pedestrian-friendly Brooklyn to the car culture of Florida.

This isn't the first time Brooklyn has racked up such a high number of geniuses, said Socolow. While writer Colson Whitehead took the prize in 2002, three others received it in 2000.

Lethem, who divides his time between Maine and Boerum Hill, said Brooklyn is "the natural place for people who are still drawn to New York, but need to be a little outside of the thick of things."

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