

MOTHER TONGUE

Naima Brown

a novel

'full of suspense
and bubbling
with tension'
JESSIE STEPHENS



Reading group notes

Blurb

What if being true to yourself means hurting everyone around you?

Brynn is a claustrophobic suburban mother on the brink . . .

Eric, her husband, is transforming in dark and dangerous ways . . .

Their daughter, Jenny, can't fathom the storm barreling towards her . . .

When Brynn awakes from a coma speaking fluent French, she seizes the opportunity to start a new life in Paris, a seismic personal transformation that leaves a slew of shattered lives in its wake.

Darkly funny and profoundly insightful, *Mother Tongue* challenges our expectations of motherhood and our beliefs about women's lives. It is at once an exhilarating tale of escape and a warning about the cost of renewal.

Praise for *Mother Tongue*

'Darkly funny, surprising and ridiculously fresh, *Mother Tongue* is a searing portrait of the ways motherhood transforms us but also doesn't. It is a daring exploration of identity, full of suspense and bubbling with tension. Brown takes us to places most novels don't have the guts to.'

JESSIE STEPHENS,
author of *Something Bad is Going to Happen*

'A mother's love is supposed to be immutable. What happens when you lose your language, maybe your mind? This is a story with guts that will charm and alarm in equal measure. Naima Brown is one of our most interesting storytellers and *Mother Tongue* should go straight to the top of your to-be-read pile.'

HAYLEY SCRIVENOR,
author of *Dirt Town* and *Girl Falling*

'*Mother Tongue* is the perfect blend of page-turning drama and sharp feminist wit. Naima Brown brilliantly exposes the double standards placed on mothers, all while keeping you fully entertained from start to finish.'

DEE SALMIN,
host of triple j The Hook Up

About Naima Brown



Credit Ingrid Pullen Photography

Naima Brown was born and raised in Northern California and now resides in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales with her husband and her dog. She holds degrees in Middle Eastern Studies, Anthropology and Religious Studies. As a producer of news, current affairs and documentary, she has lived and worked in Yemen and Afghanistan. Her brief stint in reality TV inspired her first novel, *The Shot*. *Mother Tongue* is her second novel.

@naima_brown_official

A Reader's Introduction to *Mother Tongue*

**** Please note, this summary contains spoilers ****

Brynn Mitchell, nee Plover, is an American housewife in her mid-twenties supposedly living the dream – house in the suburbs of a small town called Elderpool, good-looking husband who is the regional manager of a national chain store, best friend Lisa close at hand, and a sweet, clever little daughter, Jennifer. But one day she slips on icy steps and sustains a head injury – and wakes from a coma speaking and thinking in French.

This rare but known condition is temporary, the doctors reassure Brynn and her family. But as time passes and the French continues, her family become impatient while Brynn starts to change. Not only does she like the French, Brynn likes the person the French has helped her become. However, Brynn's relationship with her husband Eric deteriorates and she can't seem to care anymore about the things that used to matter to her.

Brynn desperately loves her daughter but she knows she is losing herself in the restrictive and limiting life she now feels she was living. She wants and needs more from life so she decides to leave for Paris, with the intention of coming back for Jenny when she has found who she is within this new 'second soul' the head injury has brought her.

Twelve years pass.

In Elderpool, Jenny is now seventeen and living with Eric and Lisa, who has moved in to the family home to help raise her – and to be near Eric, who she has long admired. Eric has found solace in far right-wing groups, mostly online, as well as an affair with a work colleague, and has developed an obsession with a volute (a wooden scroll-like ornament from stairs or columns) which he takes with him everywhere. Lisa's life has been subsumed by Eric and Jenny's, and her dissatisfaction is growing. In Paris, Brynn is living the life of her dreams, working as the face of a major cosmetics label, married to a renowned photographer named Tariq and pregnant with their daughter Sabine. It is her second pregnancy that brings thoughts of her first daughter to her mind.

While Brynn tried to keep in touch with Jenny early on, it was painful for both of them and Eric did all he could to stymie her attempts to communicate. Eventually Brynn gave up, and has not spoken to Jenny in years. Having found the Instagram account Jenny was allowed to open when she turned sixteen, Brynn tries to connect with her daughter to tell her about the impending arrival of her sister. However, Jenny takes the news badly. At the same time, Jenny uncovers some of her father's secrets, including that he has been having an affair and that he owns a secret cabin in the woods, replete with an illegal bunker. In her hurt and rage, she and her friends steal Eric's car and flee to the cabin.

There, Jenny and her friends throw an epic party and embrace their freedom from the adults in their lives. Meanwhile, when she hears Jenny is missing, guilt eats at Brynn and she flies from Paris to help look for her. Concerned, Tariq follows her, and they convene at Eric's house along with Lisa, Lisa's twin brother Porter, and Eric's girlfriend Cheryl. Eventually, tipped off by security camera footage, the adults realise where Jenny and her friends have gone and head to the cabin.

When they arrive, Jenny is standing by a bonfire, holding Eric's beloved volute aloft. Brynn and Eric both try to talk to Jenny, but nothing they can say or do now will change the past. Jenny throws the volute in the fire. Eric tries to get at it, badly burning himself in the process. Then,

two of Cheryl's right-wing friends arrive and begin shooting guns into the sky. The party breaks up in chaotic fashion, and Cheryl and her friends flee to avoid the police. Overwhelmed by events, Jenny runs into the nearby lake, and it is Tariq who goes after her when Brynn can't, and pulls her out. Meanwhile Brynn has gone into labour. Porter calls for three ambulances, and Tariq starts CPR on an unresponsive Jenny.

All three survive the events of that evening, and Sabine is born safely, although Eric, Cheryl and her henchmen face long jail terms for a string of offences to do with the illegal cabin and firearms within. Brynn intends to return to Paris with Tariq. Jenny decides she wants to live with Lisa – the woman who mothered her – who, with help from her brother and his lawyer wife, is in the process of claiming payment from Eric for the years of unpaid labour she provided to him and Jenny.

On the flight home to Paris, there is a spell of intense turbulence and Brynn sustains a second head injury. When she comes to, she is speaking in German. Over the following weeks, Tariq watches in dismay as history repeats itself – leaving Sabine with him, Brynn departs for Berlin to embrace this new 'soul'.

Five years later, Brynn has still not returned. But the sisters Jenny and Sabine have forged a strong bond, and Jenny has been welcomed into her new blended family.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the book is titled *Mother Tongue*? What is the double entendre here?
2. Look at the two quotations that form the epigraph for *Mother Tongue* on page vii. What do they tell you about the book to follow?
3. A scene from Eric's upbringing during which he loses a wrestling championship is described. On the way home, his dad tells him he should have won and was cheated out of the title by 'those people' (page 57). Eric tells us he never felt safe again. How does this play out in Eric's story? Discuss the impacts of our parents' views on us and how they can affect us in adulthood.
4. *That must have been hard, Jenny thought, to be best friends with her mother. To be forever in the shadow of a small, human sun.* (Page 262)
Brynn and Lisa's friendship has an element of competition and comparison from the start. Why do you think this is sometimes a feature of friendship? Do you think it is more prevalent in female or male friendships? What social factors might contribute to this? How do you think it affects Lisa and Brynn's lives?
5. *Brynn's brain had been recording, keeping [the French] for a rainy day. 'Is this my rainy day?' Brynn asked him. 'My dear,' Dr. Reyes said, 'it is a magnificent downpour. I highly recommend you splash in the puddles!'* (Page 79)
If an event such as the one that befalls Brynn happened to you, which language would you like to speak, and what would you do with that ability?
6. *Eric was vexed by the attention Brynn was getting, by the interest the local news continued to show in her, the deference people exuded when they passed her in the street. It made him feel sidelined, emasculated. It made him feel like he was the wife.* (Page 88)
If Eric had approached Brynn's condition differently, do you think the outcome would also have been different? What other factors come into play? Why do you think Brynn's situation was so hard for him to deal with?
7. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that Dr. Reyes mentions states that people experience the world based on the structure of their language. It proposes that differences in language affect thought, perception and behaviour, so speakers of different languages think and act differently. (Page 90) What do you think it is about the French language or cultural exposure Brynn has had to it that influence her after she wakes up?
8. The transition to French also markedly changes Brynn's parenting style. What do you think it is about the French, and/or Brynn's situation, that does this?
9. Brynn watches a documentary called *Nature's Worst Mothers*. *She wondered if perhaps anyone had made a documentary called Nature's Worst Fathers – she looked it up on her phone: they had not.* (Page 125)
What is Brynn's point here? Discuss the ways in which and reasons why society judges mothers and fathers differently.
10. After meeting and marrying Eric, Brynn buried many of the elements of her adolescent personality that she considered unseemly or shameful, especially the events that prompted the invention of *The Song*. Why? Do you think this had any bearing on what happened to her after the accident?

11. The right-wing pastor Frank Zwick talks to Eric about the idea of 'a good woman', and the 'dangers' of feminism. How does this attitude influence the way Eric thinks about Brynn (and women in general) and about what has happened to her since the head injury?
12. Why does Jenny find it so hard to define the Spirit of Our Times? What do you think is the Spirit of Our Times?
13. How is Lisa's maternal love for Jenny different from or similar to Brynn's? How do you think Lisa's feelings for Eric affect her relationship with Jenny? Did your feelings towards Lisa change through the book?
14. Eric tends more and more toward extremism through the book. How does this come about? Could things have been different, do you think? How do you think Eric's extremism and the way Brynn escapes from it is an allegory for the times we live in now?
15. Lisa is described in her frozen moments as 'a woman on pause' (page 178). Is this true in more ways than one? Discuss.
16. At the end of Part 3, Lisa tells Eric she will not move out, that she has earned the right to stay. What events have led to Lisa taking a stand against Eric? Do you agree with her decision?
17. *And suddenly, like defibrillator pads shooting life-saving voltage through his chest, like a spotlight shining in his eyes, like the punch in the face he knew he deserved, he realized that his life had not been shitty or rotten at all. There was no enemy at the gates. No other was trying to claim what was his. Nobody was stealing his win or pinning him down. Nobody had come to take anything away from him. He'd lost it all on his own. (Page 307)*
This realisation comes too late for Eric – but do you think there was a point where he could have redeemed himself, and taken another path? What were the factors involved in his inability to have genuine, complex relationships with the people in his life, do you think?
18. Different cultures around the world view women in society in very different ways. What are the similarities and differences in the way the cultures you're familiar with view woman in society? Does language play a part in these differences, do you think? Consider Tariq's mother and sister, Noor and Assia. Do stereotypes play any part in your views about them, do you think?
19. Discuss Eric's Objectophilia. What do you think the confederate history of his volute represents?
20. Compare the journeys of Brynn, Lisa and Jenny. Do they mirror one another? How are they the same? How are they different?
21. At the book's conclusion, we hear that Jenny has gone to the university of her dreams and is forging a bright future with her new blended family. What do you think it is about Jenny and her childhood that allows her to rise above the difficulties she's faced, in the end?
22. In the book's epilogue, Brynn leaves her family again to find herself in Germany. Did you expect her to leave again? Why or why not? What do you think this ending says about the expectations set upon mothers?