A Northern Light Study Guide

A Northern Light by Jennifer Donnelly

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Jennifer Donnelly grew up on the outskirts of the Adirondacks hearing tales and ballads of the 1906 murder of Grace Brown, a pregnant nineteen-year-old drowned by her lover in Big Moose Lake. Donnelly's great-grandmother had been working at a hotel on the lake when the murder took place. Her firsthand account, reinforced by Donnelly's reading of Theodore Dreiser's novel concerning the same murder, stirred Donnelly's curiosity. Dreiser's novel, *An American Tragedy*, renders the couple's plight as a dark outcome of the American dream gone awry. What captured Donnelly's imagination, however, was Grace herself and how she could have been any nineteen-year-old girl. Upon reading the transcripts of Chester Gillette's trial and hearing Grace's voice through the letters used as evidence, the presence of the young woman haunted Donnelly. She felt a genuine grief which was alleviated through writing Grace's story and giving it fresh meaning. Out of that need was born the character of Mattie Gokey, the sixteen-year-old hotel employee who witnesses Grace's body being pulled from the lake the evening after Grace asks her to burn her love letters. In piecing together the story of Grace's life and death through the letters, Mattie comes to understand and solve many of the problems standing in the way of her own happiness and independence. *A Northern Light*, published in 2003, transcends genre boundaries and was praised by Courtney Williamson of the *Christian Science Monitor* for "unflinching honesty in its portrayal of loss, poverty, racism, and pregnancy." It was an overnight success in both the United States and Great Britain (where it was published under the title *A Gathering Light*). It has since earned several major awards in young adult fiction, including the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and the Carnegie Medal.

Author Biography

Jennifer Donnelly was born in 1963 in Port Chester, New York. She spent some of her childhood in Lewis County, New York, just about an hour from Big Moose Lake, the setting of her novel, *A Northern Light*. Her paternal grandfather immigrated to upstate New York during the Irish potato famine and struggled to support his family by farming. Because of the harsh land and the short growing season, the family was poor, very much as Donnelly imagines the Gokey family in *A Northern Light*. In these trying circumstances, the family's chief means of entertainment was storytelling. Donnelly recalls her great-grandfather reading voraciously on his deathbed because he had never had time to read while working the land. Her mother, orphaned during World War II, often told stories and read books to her daughter. In an interview with *Update* magazine, Donnelly attributes her love of stories to her upbringing: "Hearing the older generation sit and talk, you absorb how to do pacing and suspense, and structure, how to hold your listeners rapt, how to deliver a good punch line."

Although she did not grow up believing she would be a writer, Donnelly's adolescent years were full of literary inspiration. In her late teens, she lived in London and spent every available minute in the East End, absorbing the city that would shape her first novel, *Tea Rose*. In 1986, she graduated from the University of Rochester with degrees in English and European history. Donnelly began writing in her twenties and worked on her first novel for ten years. In the spring of 2001, after a long search for a publisher, the author finally published three of her works in quick succession: a children's picture book, *Humble Pie*, (2002); her adult novel, *Tea Rose* (2003); and *A Northern Light* (2003), a young adult novel that became an overnight sensation.

As of 2005, Donnelly lives in Brooklyn, New York, with her husband, daughter, and two greyhounds.

Plot Summary

Introduction

A Northern Light opens with a crisis. A young guest of the Glenmore Hotel is pulled from Big Moose Lake in the Adirondacks after going boating with her lover. The young narrator, Mattie Gokey, a waitress in the hotel, is astonished to discover that the dead woman is Grace Brown, who earlier in the day had given Mattie a bundle of letters to burn. In the bustle of her daily duties, Mattie has forgotten about the letters in her apron pocket. Now she is struck by a mysterious complicity with the dead woman and an uncanny certainty that her own life will be forever changed because of the events that are unfolding.

The narrative moves back and forth between two timelines, one tracking Mattie's efforts to understand the circumstances behind Grace Brown's death through reading her letters, and one tracing the events in Mattie's life which led to her employment at the Glenmore Hotel. She is trying to find the financial means to attend Barnard College in New York City, where she will break free of her expected role as eldest daughter to a widowed father and fulfill her ambition as a writer. Each chapter is headed by a word-of-the-day that the young writer savors in an effort to deepen both her vocabulary and her understanding of the world.

Chapter 1

Mattie introduces the reader to a day in the life of the Gokey family, and chaos reigns as she and her three younger sisters try to run the household. The central tensions of the novel are touched upon: Mamma's death from cancer seven months before, followed by the inexplicable disappearance of Mattie's older brother Lawton; Mattie's longing to go to Barnard College, where she has been offered a scholarship, challenged by a promise made to her dying mother; Mattie's desire to join her friends working at the Glenmore Hotel, countered by her father's disapproval and general denial of her need for further education; and the plight of Emmie Hubbard, a widow with seven children who seems to have gone crazy and can no longer adequately care for her home or children.

Chapters 2-6

Mattie has two best friends, Weaver Smith and Minnie Compeau. Minnie left school at the expected age of fourteen and is married and pregnant when the narrative begins. Weaver is her school companion and word-dueling partner. The first freeborn son in his family, Weaver is headed to college in New York City. Mattie is also experiencing the first flush of romance as she is pursued by the handsome Royal Loomis, a man she can hardly believe is interested in her. Mattie's tendency to romanticize young love is evident when she flashes forward to the death of Grace Brown and envisions the young woman as the victim of a kind of Romeo-and-Juliet tragedy—the two lovers dead at the bottom

of Big Moose Lake. When Mr. Eckler's floating grocery store/lending library arrives in Eagle Bay, he alerts Mattie to the availability of a new book, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. Mattie discovers a beautiful composition book for sale and impulsively spends most of the money she has earned picking fiddlehead ferns on the extravagant purchase, even though she knows her father will punish her for doing so. She speculates that characters in books cannot change their fates, but wonders if real people may be able to.

Chapters 7-10

Pa discovers that Mattie has spent the money she owes him on the expensive composition book. Without Lawton around for heavy chores, the farm is not producing as it once did and money is tight. Pa hits Mattie to punish her for wasting family resources. Mattie gets an acceptance letter from Barnard College, but wonders how she will pay for it. While housecleaning for her wealthy Aunt Josie, Mattie gathers the courage to ask her for the financial help she needs to get to college. Aunt Josie tells her she is as selfish as her brother for wanting to abandon her family; she need only read the Bible to understand God's intentions for her. Mattie also shares her plans to go to college with Royal, who claims he does not understand why she would want to do such a thing. He kisses her, and her identity and needs become even more conflicted. Weaver struggles with his identity when a white man assumes he is a porter at the rail station just because he is black. Minnie gives birth to a boy and girl, and Mattie helps with the delivery. At the Glenmore, Mattie draws parallels between her promise to burn Grace Brown's letters and the promise she made to her dying mother to stay at home to raise her sisters. She wonders how binding such promises should be.

Chapters 11-13

Pa's brother Uncle Fifty shows up with a bundle of cash from a lumberjacking expedition. Weaver and Mattie take their exit exams to graduate from high school and Uncle Fifty is the first person besides Miss Wilcox, their teacher, to show enthusiasm for Mattie's plans to go to Barnard. He promises to give her the thirty dollars she needs to make the trip and get settled. He gives her a fountain pen and buys the other Gokey children lavish gifts. Miss Wilcox approaches Mattie's father about her successful exams and the importance of sending her to college. Pa blames Miss Wilcox for Mattie's inappropriate ambition, and tells Mattie that if she leaves the family to go to Barnard she will never be welcome back in his home. Mr. Eckler announces that Uncle Fifty has skipped town. Mattie realizes that her Pa is the only person in her life she can trust, and she is ashamed for wanting to leave him. Reading Grace Brown's letters, Mattie realizes Grace's beau Carl Graham—who took Grace out boating and has not been seen since—is really a man named Chester Gillette. She conveys this knowledge to the hotel manager, Mr. Morrison. A wire from Albany confirms that no such man as Carl Graham exists.

Chapters 14-16

Aunt Josie intercepts a letter from the postmistress that the tax collector, Arn Satterlee, has written to Emmie Hubbard. Mattie overhears her aunt gossiping about Emmie's failure to pay back taxes and the imminent auction of her land. Mattie goes boating with Royal and realizes they are officially dating. She loves being in his arms. Others have caught onto their courtship and tease and envy Mattie. She is proud to be seen as Royal's girlfriend. Miss Wilcox invites Mattie to her home and offers her books, including one by a feminist poet named Emily Baxter, whom Mattie has heard is indecent. Mattie discovers the poems merely celebrate a woman's independence; she does not understand why they are so controversial. As she continues to read Grace Brown's letters, she realizes Grace was pregnant.

Chapters 17-19

Mattie is now working for Miss Wilcox on Saturdays, organizing her books. She arrives one day to discover her teacher in a heated argument with a man. Miss Wilcox confesses the man is her husband, Teddy, whom she has left and who is trying to coerce her into returning to him. She also admits she is the scandalous poet Mattie has been reading—Emily Baxter. Mattie longs to tell someone about Miss Wilcox's true identity but remains loyal to her teacher. Royal makes sexual advances toward Mattie and promises her that his intentions are honorable, that he will marry her and he wants to buy her a ring. Mattie is concerned because Royal has never told her that he loves her; still, the pull toward marriage is strong. Mattie learns from Tommy Hubbard that his mother Emmie is upset because Arn Satterlee has set the date to auction her home. When Mattie goes to Emmie's house to console her, she discovers Emmie being sexually violated by Royal's father, Frank Loomis. She speculates that three of Emmie's children must have been fathered by Frank Loomis. Reading Grace Brown's letters, Mattie realizes Chester Gillette must have brought Grace to the Glenmore with the intention of murdering her.

Chapters 20-22

When Pleasant the mule dies, Mattie finally gets her father's permission to work at the Glenmore Hotel in order to earn money for a new mule. Mattie is trained as a waitress and becomes acquainted with the hotel's employees and guests. Mr. Maxwell, a guest at the hotel who sits at table six in the dining room, exposes himself to Mattie and later leaves her a dollar tip. She is too embarrassed to talk about what has happened, but the other waitresses have likewise been harassed by him. Henry, a German under chef, leaves jars of milk on the stove and they explode. It comes to light that Henry has lied about his identity and that he was never a chef in a fine European restaurant. He is demoted to menial labor. Weaver is beaten up by three trappers after he stands up to them for calling him a nigger. The world beyond home seems dangerous to Mattie and she decides her place is in Royal Loomis's arms.

Chapters 23-26

Reading Emily Dickinson, Mattie realizes all of the authors she admires are spinsters and wonders if marriage is incompatible with being a writer. She begins to mistrust her need for Royal Loomis and is further challenged by a visit to Minnie, who is struggling with her infant twins. Minnie's inability to cope is evident in the squalor of her home, and she is depressed and defensive, claiming to hate her own babies. When the trappers who beat Weaver are caught and brought to justice, Weaver's self-esteem is restored, and Mattie imagines the lawyer he will someday become. Mattie's entire family becomes violently ill with grippe and she must leave the hotel for a week to care for them. The cows are also ill from neglect and two die of infections. Royal and his mother come to Mattie's assistance and she feels so obligated to them that marriage again looms as her salvation. She accepts Royal's proposal and the ring he has chosen. She later compares her love for Royal to Grace Brown's misguided love for Chester Gillette.

Chapters 27-30

Miss Wilcox/Emily Baxter sends Mattie a copy of her new book, *Threnody*, and a note with a five dollar bill inside. Her husband has followed through with his threat to expose her identity and she has lost her job at the school. She plans to flee to Paris before he arrives to take her back home. Mattie and Weaver borrow a horse so that Mattie can see her teacher before she leaves. She tells Miss Wilcox that she is not going to Barnard but intends to marry Royal instead, and Miss Wilcox is visibly disappointed. Weaver tells Mattie she may as well marry a horse. At the Fourth of July picnic, Mattie observes wives hanging on the arms of their husbands and witnesses an argument between Royal and his old girlfriend Martha Miller. Martha confronts Mattie with her belief that Royal is marrying Mattie because he wants her father's property, adjacent to the Loomis property. Mattie also learns that Royal was the one to inform Arn Satterlee of Emmie Hubbard's failure to pay back taxes, because he wants Emmie's property for himself. Mattie begins to acknowledge that Royal does not really love her—he has never said the actual words. Weaver confronts Mattie about her need to face the truth concerning her situation with Royal. Mattie has nightmares about Grace Brown.

Chapters 31-33

Mattie and her friends at the Glenmore plot revenge on Mr. Maxwell for his sexual harassment of them. One of the girls lures him to the lake, and the others trip him with a rope so that he falls into a pile of dog excrement, after which the humiliated Mr. Maxwell retreats into his room. Pa brings news that Weaver's mother's house has burned down. The trappers who beat up Weaver got out of jail and set the fire, and also broke Mrs. Smith's arm and stole Weaver's college money. Emmie Hubbard invites Mrs. Smith to stay with her so she can nurture her friend back to health. Weaver declares his intention to forgo college so he can help his mother rebuild her life. Mattie mourns the death of the lawyer Weaver could have become, and begins to see the death of potential as a literal kind of death, such as what Grace Brown has suffered. Reading Grace Brown's

last letter, Mattie realizes she cannot erase Grace Brown's voice from history. Her responsibility to the truth and to justice exceed her responsibility to Grace Brown and the promise to burn the letters.

Chapters 34-35

Emmie Hubbard is a changed woman now that she has found a companion in Mrs. Smith. The arrangement is good for both women and hints at the possibility of a new kind of happy ending that is not a lie or contrivance. Other happy endings result from the two women helping each other. Tommy Hubbard can now help Mattie's Pa with the farm and Weaver can go to Columbia University assured that his mother will be taken care of. Mattie has earned enough money working for both Miss Wilcox and the hotel to cover her travel expenses to New York and help others secure their futures. Before she departs for New York, Mattie leaves Grace Brown's letters on Mr. Morrison's desk, along with three letters of her own: one with money for Pa to pay for the new mule, one to Weaver's mother with money for Emmie Hubbard's back taxes, and one to Royal Loomis with the engagement ring inside. She bids farewell to the corpse of Grace Brown and gives Weaver the money he needs to get to New York, encouraging him to leave immediately while their mutual resolve is strong. She boards the train for her future in New York City.

Characters

Aunt Josie Aber

Aunt Josie, Mattie's mother's sister, is married to a sawmill owner, Uncle Vernon, and is therefore wealthy enough to help Mattie with her travel expenses to Barnard. The aunt, however, is a house-proud and frivolous gossip, who spends her money on expensive figurines and discourages Mattie from reading any book other than the Bible. When Mattie asks her aunt for financial help, Josie belittles her for being "on a high horse."

Emily Baxter

See Miss Emily Wilcox

Belinda Becker

Belinda is the fianceé of Dan Loomis, Royal Loomis's older brother. She represents for Mattie the qualities that good wives are supposed to have: a certain giggly, glib social grace, and not much intelligence.

Grace Brown

The character of Grace Brown is based on an actual woman of the same name who was murdered by Chester Gillette in 1906 on Big Moose Lake in the Adirondacks. The author weaves into her fictional narrative excerpts from actual letters Grace wrote to Chester upon learning that she was pregnant with his child. The circumstances of Grace Brown's death are accurately portrayed in the novel and serve as a cautionary tale for the fictional Mattie Gokey, who is on the brink of her first romantic relationship. Grace entrusts her letters to Mattie the morning before her disappearance and death, asking her to burn them.

Minnie Compeau

Minnie is Mattie's best girlfriend who is already married and pregnant when the novel opens. When Mattie assists in the birth of Minnie's twins, and later watches her friend struggle with nursing and housekeeping, she recognizes that literature lies about the realities of childbirth and motherhood. Mattie is challenged on many levels by her friend's ordeal. Foremost is her recognition of how difficult, if not impossible, combining motherhood with a career as a writer will be; secondly, she sees that it is crucial for writers to tell even harsh truths about the daily realities they confront. Through Minnie, Mattie realizes that marriage to Royal may not provide the happiness she seeks.

Cook

Cook is what everyone who works at the Glenmore Hotel calls Mrs. Hennessey. She is chief cook and supervises Mattie and her fellow employees who work in the dining room. A warm, maternal figure, Cook voices her concern over the girls' flippant ways with men and directs them to heed the fate of Grace Brown as they negotiate their romantic relationships.

Charlie Eckler

Mr. Eckler is the captain of the pickle boat that serves the community as floating grocery store and lending library. He provides Mattie with novels and fresh composition books for her writing.

Uncle Fifty

Uncle Fifty is Pa's younger, reckless brother and Mattie's uncle, who shows up drunk and passes out face down in the manure pile after an absence of several years. He encourages Mattie in her pursuit of college, giving her generous gifts and promising monetary help in getting to Barnard College. He is, however, an irresponsible man on the run because of some undisclosed crime. He skips town before he can deliver on his promise to Mattie.

Francois Pierre Gauthier

See Uncle Fifty

Chester Gillette

The character of Chester Gillette is based on the historical figure who killed Grace Brown. Chester was the poor nephew of the well-to-do owner of the Gillette Skirt Company in Cortland, New York, where Grace Brown was employed as a pattern cutter. Grace was one of many women whom the handsome young man courted, and her pregnancy was a dire inconvenience to both his social climbing and his need to make a financially prosperous future. Grace petitioned and threatened him with letters, hoping that her lover would take heart and save her from a life of disgrace as an unwed mother. Under the alias of Carl Graham, he lured Grace to the Glenmore Hotel, took her out in a rowboat and drowned her. He was convicted of murder in the first degree and executed in Auburn Prison on March 30, 1908.

Abby Gokey

Abby is Mattie's 14-year-old sister, the peacemaker in the Gokey family. Quiet and hardworking, she encourages Mattie to pursue her dream of going to college.

Beth Gokey

Beth is Mattie's five-year-old sister, the youngest of the Gokey siblings.

Ellen Gokey

See Mamma

Lawton Gokey

Lawton is Mattie's older brother who abandons the family soon after their mother's death. Lawton's disappearance is a compelling mystery for Mattie, as well as a hardship that makes it more difficult for her to consider leaving her widowed father alone to tend the farm. In the course of the novel, she comes to understand why her brother renounced the difficulties of farm life. This understanding helps Mattie arrive at her own decision to leave.

Lou Gokey

Lou is Mattie's 11-year-old tomboy sister. Mattie worries Lou will get into trouble or run away like Lawton. Lou is very close to Pa until he becomes distant and withdrawn after Mamma's death.

Lousia Gokey

See Lou Gokey

Mathilda Gokey

See Mattie Gokey

Mattie Gokey

Mattie is the sixteen-year-old narrator and principal character of *A Northern Light*. Academically talented and ambitious, she finds herself at a crossroads when she is offered the opportunity to marry the handsome and industrious Royal Loomis. Mattie

must choose between the apparent safety of a conventional marriage and the self-fulfillment that she believes attending college and becoming a writer will bring. The death of Grace Brown and Mattie's intimate involvement with Grace through her letters inspire Mattie to live out the potential that the dead woman was denied. She discovers a means toward self-fulfillment and a way to care for the families she must leave behind.

Carl Graham

Carl Graham is the false identity that Chester Gillette assumes when he checks into the Glenmore Hotel to murder Grace Brown. *See* Chester Gillette

Hamlet

Hamlet is the Great Dane Mattie is hired to feed and walk everyday at the Glenmore Hotel. The dog becomes instrumental in her and her friends' plan to discourage Mr. Maxwell's sexual harassment of the Glenmore waitresses.

Mrs. Hennessey

See Cook

Henry

Henry, or Heinrich, is the under chef in the kitchen at the Glenmore Hotel.

Emmie Hubbard

Emmie Hubbard is a mother of seven children who, because she cannot pay back taxes on the house she lives in, is at risk of losing her home in a public auction. She is thought by many to be crazy. Mattie discovers that Emmie is a victim of sexual abuse by her future father-in-law, Frank Loomis, and that Royal, Mattie's own future husband, has petitioned for the lien on Emmie's home so that he might buy her property at little cost. Royal's lack of compassion for Emmie Hubbard's struggle is a factor in Mattie's decision not to marry him. Mattie raises money to pay Emmie's back taxes for her, thereby saving Emmie's household. Emmie can then provide a home for Weaver Smith's mother after their family shack burns down, enabling Emmie and Mrs. Smith to live in an atmosphere of mutual support and safety while freeing Weaver to leave home for college.

Tommy Hubbard

Tommy is Emmie Hubbard's eldest son and a regular guest at the Gokey dinner table. He is ultimately hired to help Pa with the farm, making it easier for Mattie to leave the family.

Frank Loomis

Frank Loomis is Royal's father. He owns ninety acres of property adjacent to the Gokey farm. Mattie stumbles upon him violating Emmie Hubbard in her kitchen, and realizes he is the father of three of her seven children. The startling encounter deepens her recognition that no one is precisely who he or she seems to be.

Royal Loomis

Royal Loomis is Mattie's handsome but dull-witted suitor. He has no understanding of Mattie's desire to go to college, nor can he understand the value of reading. He cannot appreciate Mattie for herself, but only for what he hopes she will become as a wife, and what she will provide as a dowry—her father's property. As the second son in his father's household, he is not entitled to his father's property and believes he must find a wife of means. He has snubbed the Reverend Miller's daughter Martha for Mattie, but he is still emotionally tied to his former love. His greed is also behind his alerting Arn Satterlee about Emmie Hubbard's inability to pay back taxes on her property, with hopes that he will be able to buy the land at public auction and ensure a solid foundation for his future.

Mamma

Ellen Gokey, Mattie's mother, dies seven months before the story begins, exacting a promise from Mattie that she will stay on the farm to help her father and raise her younger sisters. Mamma haunts the story. The memory of Mamma's competence reinforces Mattie's recognition of her lack of skill in domestic matters. She must also figure out the extent to which her promise to her mother is binding. Mamma was the one member of the family to encourage Mattie's writing and reading, though the books she passed on to Mattie were traditional Victorian fare that reinforced domestic values. Through the promise Mattie makes to Grace Brown soon before her death—to burn her letters—Mattie learns even a deathbed promise can be circumstantial.

Mr. Maxwell

Mr. Maxwell is a pervert who sits alone at table six in the Glenmore Hotel dining room, exposing himself to young waitresses and tricking them into leaning over so he can peer

at their breasts. The women seek revenge by luring him into a trap that causes him to fall into dog feces.

Martha Miller

Martha Miller is the daughter of the local Reverend, a man known to live beyond his financial resources. She was Royal Loomis's girlfriend before his attentions shifted to Mattie. The couple was, in all likelihood, a more compatible match than Royal and Mattie are, but her lack of a dowry deterred Royal from seeking marriage with her.

Pa

Michael Gokey, Mattie's father, is a bereaved widower, surly and distant after the death of his wife and subsequent flight of his only son, Lawton. He manages his farm with great difficulty and his profits are waning. He is especially needful of his eldest daughter and burdens her with responsibility for the family. His conventional views of a woman's place and his disregard for Mattie's talents and ambitions are obstacles to her achieving her dreams.

Miss Parrish

Miss Parrish is Miss Wilcox's predecessor at the Inlet Common School. She represents the Victorian view that literature should uplift the heart and turn the mind toward cheerful and inspiring topics. She discourages Mattie's writing, claiming that her stories are morbid and dispiriting.

Arn Satterlee

Arn Satterlee is the tax collector who sends Emmie Hubbard two letters warning that her house will be sold at public auction if she does not pay her back taxes.

Aleeta Smith

Aleeta Smith is Weaver Smith's mother, who takes great pride in her academically talented and ambitious son. She has worked hard as a laundress and cook for employees of the railroad in order to save money to send Weaver to college. When three trappers burn down her house, break her arm, and rob her of her savings, she moves into Emmie Hubbard's home and the two women create a happy home for themselves and Emmie's seven children.

Weaver Smith

Weaver Smith is Mattie Gokey's best friend and school companion. A bright, resourceful and ambitious young man, Weaver has been offered a scholarship to Columbia University, where he plans to study law. The first freeborn child in a family of former slaves, Weaver has the support of his hardworking mother; but racism, a fire that destroys his mother's home, and the theft of his college funds threaten to prevent him from living his dream. Mattie and Weaver's friendship enable them both to tap into the depths of their potential and find paths toward fulfillment.

Emily Wilcox

Miss Wilcox is the teacher at the Inlet Common School. She has recognized Mattie's gifts as a writer and the academic talents of both Mattie and Weaver. She is the driving force behind their staying in school long enough to earn high school diplomas and scholarships to Barnard College and Columbia University. A modern woman of some means, Miss Wilcox drives around in a fancy car smoking cigarettes, her red hair flaming in the breeze. Over the course of the novel, she reveals herself to be a renegade wife and a poet with a scandalous reputation, disparaged in magazines for her indecency. She is forced to flee to Paris when she loses her job, after her husband exposes her identity to the school in an effort to drive her back to dependency upon him.

Themes

Coming of Age

Coming-of-age novels map the turning points in an individual's transition from child to adult, and are often characterized by specific rites of passage enacted universally by children of a certain age within a given culture. At the turn of the century, for a woman of Mattie Gokey's class and region, the rite was most often courtship and marriage. In rural America, where households full of children were valued for the labor they could provide the farm, it was not unusual for a woman to marry and bear children at fourteen or fifteen years old, like Mattie's friend Minnie Compeau. Mattie's flirtation with Royal Loomis, the pull of her emerging sexuality, and the social expectation that her life will progress in a pattern similar to Minnie's and Belinda's make up the foundation of Mattie's emotional struggle. It is not surprising that Mattie suffers such deep ambivalence after she is offered a scholarship to Barnard. She longs to go to college, be a writer, and live a life of the mind. The scholarship is a dream come true. At the same time, her emerging womanhood calls for definition and reliable markers that will help her make sense of her emotional conflicts. The conventional literature for women is of no help. She cannot find her story in the stories society believes are suitable for women. Miss Wilcox and Weaver Smith certainly support and encourage Mattie, but they are also struggling to find their ways. Mattie must therefore develop a heightened consciousness and savvy that will help her navigate her passage to adulthood alone.

Duty and Responsibility

Much of women's behavior has traditionally been based on the powerful dictates of duty and responsibility toward father, husband, children and home. In the farming culture of upstate New York, the effort to yield a harvest from harsh land during a short growing season contributed to a heightened sense that one's very survival was dependent on meeting daily responsibilities. One need only imagine the Gokey farm when Mattie returns to it from the Glenmore Hotel after her father and sisters fall sick to grasp how crucial it was for people of that time and place to stay on top of daily chores. After only two days of neglecting the milking, the cows get sick from infection and the Gokeys lose two of them, as well as substantial income from milk and future calves. Mattie's older brother has already abandoned the family, and the lack of a young man on the property to help clear land and otherwise manage the daily work is truly a hardship. The daily progress of life seems crucially dependent on individuals accepting their lots in life and giving their utmost to the immediate needs of the family. With this awareness, reinforced by the promise she has made to her dying mother, Mattie is hindered in believing she has any right whatsoever to live an independent life and follow a dream. Her sense of calling and responsibility to a higher good must be powerful indeed to propel her past this impasse.

Appearance Versus Reality

"Things are never as they seem," Mattie Gokey acknowledges at the crucial moment she learns she will indeed get her father's permission to work at the Glenmore Hotel. The insight comes after a long series of rude awakenings. She has recently learned that her beloved teacher, Miss Wilcox, is actually a renegade wife hiding behind an incognito identity. She is actually the scandalous poet Emily Baxter, a supposedly indecent woman. Mattie has also walked in on her boyfriend's father having sex with a woman thought to be crazy. Mattie had always believed Frank Loomis visited the woman to be kind and helpful; now she recognizes he must have fathered three of her children. In the course of the novel, many of the characters will reveal that they are not at all who or what they had once appeared to be to the naive, self-preoccupied young Mattie. Through Mattie's efforts to get below the surface of understanding the death of Grace Brown, she begins to penetrate the hidden lives of those around her and to understand the rich stories each individual is living. She further recognizes that because things are not as they seem, the possibilities of life are even richer than she had once imagined.

Marriage and Courtship

In trying to understand how to behave in her courtship with Royal, Mattie turns to her aunt's copies of *Peterson Magazine* and finds the traditional illustration of what it means to be married: a man should be the center of a woman's universe, he should be her purpose, and her every thought should revolve around him. In the course of Mattie's courtship with Royal, however, she finds herself chafing against her need to be recognized and understood as a separate person. She loves books but Royal does not understand her love of books, and therefore does not understand her. She is hopeful when he delivers a package to her for her birthday that must be a book, but the gift proves to be a cookbook; further training for how to be a good wife. Mattie's conflict between her needs and the expectations of marriage permeate the story as she examines the marriages in her immediate community and reminisces on her dead mother's difficult life with her father. The problem of marrying for love (as Grace Brown longed to do) versus marrying for social convenience or advantage (as Royal aspires to do) seems less perplexing to her than the mystery of why women marry at all if, in either scenario, they will inevitably wind up losing themselves. She recognizes none of the women she hopes to emulate or the writers she admires within the structure of marriage. She has never known any woman capable of being both a wife and a writer; or a wife and a happy woman. Such insights are crucial factors in her finding the resolve to strike out for New York.

Style

Voice

In her author's note, Jennifer Donnelly states that the impetus for her novel was the voice of Grace Brown as it reached her through her letters—the same voice that at Chester Gillette's murder trial moved people to tears. Donnelly used the transcripts from the trial in her research and included Grace's actual letters in her narrative, thereby bringing Grace's voice to the readers of the novel. When Miss Wilcox tells the young Mattie that voice is not just the sound which comes from one's throat but feelings which come from one's words, she touches on a quality essential to the impact of the novel. The voice of Mattie Gokey is direct, intimate, and searching, a counterpoint to the often desperately beseeching and plaintive voice of Grace Brown. In addition to the powerful voices of the two women whose stories are central to the novel, there are the voices of the many characters who populate Mattie's world. Donnelly gives even minor characters full embodiment and memorable presence through the skillful use of dialogue.

Double Narrative

Critics have marveled at the grace with which Donnelly integrates the two narrative timelines in the novel, oscillating gracefully between Mattie's all-night vigil with the corpse of Grace Brown and the period leading up to her gaining permission from her father to work at the Glenmore Hotel. Ultimately, the two narratives merge at precisely the moment Mattie when delivers Grace's letters to the world and claims her own life. Furthermore, the chapters are structured around the obscure vocabulary words that Mattie explores in an effort to understand their meanings. Each word serves as a pivotal concept, linking images and content from past and present to give unity to chapters that often jump around in time.

Cross-genre

Donnelly's novel transcends most genre boundaries. It is historical fiction, coming-of-age story, romance, thriller, mystery, and journalistic account of an actual crime. The book does not fit cleanly into audience categories. Though Donnelly targeted adolescent girls as her audience, the universal themes have made the story popular for both young adult and adult readers. In Great Britain, where no such category as young adult fiction exists, the novel is considered crossover fiction.

Historical Context

Racial Oppression

Weaver Smith is identified as the first freeborn son in a family of former slaves from Mississippi. His mother is keenly determined to help her son get an education so he can succeed in the white man's world, but as Weaver tells Mattie, "Freedom promises more than it delivers." His ambition to become a lawyer is challenged by a culture that still sees him as a nigger or a porter on a train, and by the rage that threatens to destroy him. At the turn of the twenty-first century, resolving the power struggle and healing the rage rooted in generations of victimization are prime issues in racial peacemaking initiatives. Affirmative action and other programs to help empower the marginalized in the United States are also controversial strategies for rectifying social imbalance. Donnelly's novel brings social issues concerning race down to an intimate scale through her handling of the characters of Weaver and Mrs. Smith

Women's Issues

Through the poet Emily Baxter, Donnelly offers a glimpse into some key themes of early and contemporary feminism: the choice of celibacy over marriage, the choice of same sex households, the feminization of God, and a woman's general right to define and create her own culture. The novel also examines universal problems of womanhood that have not changed much in the past century, most notably, the sexual double standard and a woman's conflict between the need for self-fulfillment and the compelling biological need to reproduce and nurture offspring. The voice of Grace Brown that reaches across a century to contemporary readers is far from quaint and old-fashioned. Grace and Mattie both speak to the timeless issue of a woman's struggle for integrity.

The Nontraditional Family

Debate persists in American culture as to what constitutes a family. Conservatives contend that the traditional family is in crisis because moral values have been undermined. They argue that the way to save society is to save its basic unit through a religious agenda and through social programs and tax laws that will reinforce the bonds of conventional family life. Liberals argue that the breakdown in the family is a result of cultural forces much larger than the intent of individuals, and that healing human relationships in general is key to building a healthier society. They assert that families can be found and created anywhere love nourishes human bonds. Donnelly subtly evokes a vision of the latter possibility through the unconventional living arrangements that begin to crop up where need and human caring meet without prejudice, most notably in the home of Emmie Hubbard and Aleeta Smith.

Critical Overview

After ten years of struggle, waking up at four or five in the morning to write before heading to her day job, Jennifer Donnelly finally found success in 2001. Three books, each targeting entirely different audiences, were accepted for publication within months of each other. The first was a picture book for young children entitled *Humble Pie*. Soon after, Donnelly's historical romance novel *Tea Rose*, which had been making the rounds for years, sold as well. If that were not accomplishment enough for a writer accustomed to rejections, her third success was most decidedly the charm. After reading only thirty pages and an outline at an auction, Harcourt Brace outbid three other presses for *A Northern Light*. Editors at Harcourt compared the book to beloved novels *Drowning Ruth* and *Little Women*.

Early reviews of the novel were unanimously enthusiastic. Courtney Williamson of the *Christian Science Monitor* deemed the novel the "quintessential coming of age story … unflinching in its portrayal of loss, poverty, racism, and pregnancy." Sandy MacDonald of the *New York Times* emphasized the "distinctive characters who ring rich and true," as well as the author's capacity to ground the story "in often horrific realities of rural life a century ago." Others extol the originality of voice, the multi-layered narrative structure, and the novel's transcendence of genre. Virtually all reviewers found the first person narrator, Mattie, the most appealing factor of all. Mattie strives to see clearly and act well, Dierdre Baker of the *Toronto Star* pointed out, citing also her earthly vigor, honesty, and humor as qualities that endear her to readers (quoted on Jennifer Donnelly's website). We share her desires, if not her unique challenges, on every page, writes Williamson.

British audiences were as enthralled as their American counterparts with the novel. Within weeks of the initial sale to Harcourt Brace, Donnelly's agent took the novel's outline to London, where it was purchased by Bloomsbury Press and published under the title *A Gathering Light*. According to the Review page of Jennifer Donnelly's website, the *Times* (London) regarded the book as one of the year's best young adult novels. *Bloomsbury Magazine* notes that Dinah Hall of the *Sunday Telegraph* credited Donnelly with capturing period and place with almost supernatural skill.

By the fall of 2003, the novel was shortlisted for nearly every book award in the young adult category. It won Best Book of the Year from the *School Library Journal* and *Publisher's Weekly* annual selections. *Booklist, Book Sense*, the *Junior Library*, and countless other judges of young adult fiction included it among their annual ten best. The fervor had not waned in 2004, when the novel was honored with a Michael J. Prinz award, Borders Original Voices Award, and the *L.A. Times* Book Prize. Finally, it was awarded the 2003 Carnegie Medal, the most prestigious British award for children's literature.

Beil notes in her interview with Donnelly that, though the author claims to have written *A Northern Light* for girls Mattie's age to empower them to make their own choices, the novel has been considered a crossover success, appealing to adults as well as to the

audience for which it was intended. Rights to the novel have been sold in Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and Serbia.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Cynthia Clough has a Ph.D. in English, specializing in the novel, from Florida State University. In this essay, Clough explores Mattie Gokey's need—and her hesitance—to find the unique story and narrative of her own life.

Early in *A Northern Light*, Mattie Gokey expresses pity for characters in novels who cannot break out of their stories and change their fates. She fears that the same can also happen to people in life, and that she herself is stuck in a relentless story that no amount of ambition, hope, or courage can help her escape. Her mother will haunt her all her life if she breaks the promise she made at her mother's deathbed to help raise her sisters. Pa needs her to run the house; the farm is losing profits since older brother Lawton ran away; who else can tend the cooking, the laundering, and other chores? And if her binding commitments to home and family will not prevent her from accepting a scholarship to Barnard College, maybe the flush of first love will be the force that will carry her straight to marriage with Royal Loomis, who is ready to settle down and start a farm of his own. Several of Mattie's friends have already succumbed to marriage. It's her turn; and it's her time, although she never had imagined that such a handsome and capable man would ask for her hand.

What makes the novel such a compelling read is how convincingly Jennifer Donnelly renders the conflicts in Mattie's emotional life as she navigates her way toward her decision to go to college. The reader may see it as the only viable choice for the young woman; we may root for her to cast off her shackles and board the train for the big city, but still the pull of the alternative remains disturbingly real. According to an article in *The Bookseller*, the author expressed that her intention was to sustain the plausibility of both choices as viable for Mattie; as a modern woman writing from another era, she had felt some regret that her career had forced her to postpone marriage and family for so long. The novel is so universally appealing because of the timelessness of the central dilemma. But the tension is not merely a matter of choosing between this and that alternative in life. It speaks to the difficulty people have in breaking out of the cultural narratives imposed on their lives, the myths and stories that define their identities and map out for them the rites of progress. For Mattie, the narratives that are both shaping and impeding her progress come from several sources, including her literary inheritance, her mother's history, the alternative choices Miss Wilcox is urging her to explore, and the story of Grace Brown, which ultimately has the power to liberate her.

Mattie's foundations as a reader come from the books her mother and aunt had to offer, namely the Waverly novels and *Peterson's Magazines* that still fill the shelves of the Gokey household. Mattie's mother was an avid reader, and was in fact described as eloping with Pa carrying a carpetbag filled with books rather than clothes (the same carpetbag, by the way, that Mattie will take when she strikes out for New York). The books that her mother brought to the marriage were the conventional Victorian narratives offering larger-than-life examples of how a woman should live and behave in order to sustain the Victorian ideal. During the era of the *Bildungsroman* (novel of self development), women did turn to literature to learn how to live, to find example and

instruction. The heroic biography was prevalent—lives polished to a shining ideal—and periodicals were saturated with edifying articles on morals and manners. When Mattie consults Aunt Josie's *Peterson's Magazine* for instruction on how to behave around Royal, she, like her mother before her, is capitulating to the era's prevailing notion that an individual comes to full selfhood only through emulating the ideal, and the ideal is imparted through example and instruction.

Mattie's mother elopes with a carpetbag full of books because she knows she will need them to become an adequate, perhaps exemplary, wife and mother. Mattie, however, considers her rather heroic and ambitious, and assumes her mother read for the same reasons she herself does. To some extent Mamma does share Mattie's native love of language and was responsible for cultivating it in her daughter, she encourages Mattie and is entirely supportive of her earning a high school diploma. Still, it is clear that Mamma is less concerned with Mattie fulfilling her gifts and ambitions than she is anxious to offer her instruction and perhaps the companionship of books that will help her survive her destiny as a farm wife. Mamma must recognize the wild, rebellious side of Mattie as something she, too, once possessed and learned to harness through proper guidance. She would not have felt so compelled to exact the deathbed promise from Mattie had she not sensed the strength of Mattie's desire to break away and deemed it inappropriate. Mamma knew that staying would be a struggle for Mattie, a struggle that would require the help of edifying literature.

Miss Parrish, Mattie's first teacher at the Inlet Common School, is likewise an arbiter of the Victorian ideal. She tries to instill in Mattie her belief that the proper function of literature is to uplift the spirit and be "cheerful and inspiring"; she also tells Mattie that her stories are morbid and dispiriting. Mattie is influenced enough by Miss Parrish's beliefs to toss her composition book in the woods. Through the intervention of Miss Wilcox, however, she gains strength of mind to rail dramatically against the Victorian aesthetic, claiming that she will never write a story with a happy ending, because real life has no happy endings.

The darker, ostensibly more honest, literature that reaches her through Miss Wilcox and even Charlie Eckler may validate Mattie's rebellion against Victorian sentimentality, thereby pointing the way to fresh possibilities for her writing. At the same time, these books are hardly alternative guide books for navigating the terrain of adolescent longing and intellectual ambition. The novels that Miss Wilcox claims are more dangerous than guns stem from an 1890s movement known as naturalism. Naturalism sprang up when innovations in science made the universe seem suddenly godless and mechanistic. Naturalists believed that if there were a god, he would at best be a prime mover who had set the universe in motion and then abandoned it. He certainly did not have an intimate or moral interest in what happened in an individual human life. God had wound up the mechanistic clock of the universe and then left it to wind down in entropy, a slow downhill slide into nothing. There were certainly no happy endings for the naturalists.

For the naturalist, the self was a dark unknown. In 1859, Darwin had made his voyage on *HMS Beagle* and had written *The Origin of Species* claiming that man was kin to the apes. By the 1880s, Freud's theories of the unconscious were also becoming well

known. Freud claimed that much of human psychological life was determined by unconscious motivations deriving from an inner entity called the Id, which was comprised of all the socially unacceptable impulses the Superego had stuffed down deep inside the mind. For Victorians, so much had been considered unacceptable that popular imagination made a veritable monster of the newly charted unconscious—an animal monster, part product of Darwin, part product of Freud. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) best illustrates the popular conception of the "other" that dwelt within us and determined behavior—the scientist and his evil, animalistic twin. Dualism and the notion that man's behavior was determined by forces greater than he was became the foundation of much of turn-of-the-century literature.

Miss Wilcox offers Mattie novels by Thomas Hardy and Emile Zola, two powerful voices of the naturalist movement. Mattie may be tired of happy endings and contrived examples, and she is certainly grateful to her new teacher for offering her a view of literature contrary to the inhibiting views of Miss Parrish. But as Mattie's story progresses, it becomes clear that the naturalist point of view does not mesh with her vision of reality either. Such a dark, deterministic view certainly cannot help Mattie learn to trust the impulses within herself.

A case in point is the novel Mr. Eckler offers Mattie when she boards his floating grocery/lending library. Mattie has just come from fiddlehead picking with Weaver and Minnie, and is dismayed over what a lethargic lump her friend Minnie has become in her pregnancy. Mr. Eckler greets her with news of a new book in the library that he has set aside for her: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, the story of Lily Bart, naturalism's most tragic spendthrift who rejects suitor after suitor despite an inability to support herself and winds up overdosing on sleeping pills. Mattie is flattered that Mr. Eckler acknowledges her as the reader and writer that she is, which in turn inspires her to buy an expensive composition book. Mattie takes the sixty cents she has earned picking fiddleheads and spends forty-five of them on the fancy composition book. She knows she should not spend the money that her father needs to run the household. The Wharton book she holds in her other hand offers a caveat: take heed the spendthrift Lily Bart. Women who turn down opportunities for marriage wind up incapable of supporting themselves. They are doomed and we, too, may be doomed.

The books Miss Wilcox offers Mattie point the finger of doom in another direction, toward women who are victims of their sexuality. For women of the Victorian era, the dark other within was most often the sexual side of her nature. There were legitimate reasons for women to fear their sexuality. Pregnancy for an unwed woman carried irreversible consequences that led to her social and economic downfall more often than not. There was no place in Victorian society for a "fallen woman." No man would marry her and no employer would hire her. Many novels of the era touched on the social injustice of women ruined by men who seduced and abandoned them. Mattie mentions several such stories she has read, among them Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, which Miss Wilcox offers as an example of the new writing.

In the character of Tess, Mattie certainly finds a cautionary tale that pertains to her own situation with Royal, whose social ambitions and lusty advances mirror Alec's in the novel. Tess's story also foreshadows Grace Brown's story, as does the Zola novel Miss Wilcox hands her, *Theáreàse Raquin*, which concerns a lover's triangle wherein Theáreàse conspires with her lover to drown her husband in a lake.

Miss Wilcox delivers instructing tales to Mattie warning her not to trust her sexuality. Miss Wilcox is indeed Mattie's champion. She has fought for Mattie by convincing her mother that she must get a high school diploma, and she has tried to convince her father to allow her to go to Barnard. Miss Wilcox genuinely believes in Mattie's gifts. As a mentor she is certainly Mattie's means to a viable future. At the same time she is in and of herself a mixed message, a fugitive hiding beneath a false identity and a poet regarded as an indecent threat to womanhood. One can certainly understand why Mattie, identifying with Miss Wilcox and her love of books, and even with the poems she discovers and finds hardly indecent, would be reluctant to entrust herself to the world Miss Wilcox urges her to discover.

Mattie sorts through the many stories that have been imposed on her experience while she holds her vigil over the corpse of Grace Brown, reading her letters. When Grace is first pulled from the lake, before Mattie has confirmed the identity of Chester Gillette, she imagines a Romeo-and-Juliet tragedy for the young couple. The couple was eloping; their parents disapproved of their marriage; they both drowned and were eternally joined at the bottom of the lake. Later she embellishes the story, burying the lovers side by side in a graveyard, giving it the kind of happy ending she has promised Miss Wilcox she will never write, "the kind that stitches things up nicely and leaves no ends dangling and makes me feel placid instead of all stirred up." She acknowledges that in order to come up with such a story, she must overlook certain aspects of things that have happened, such as the tearstained face of Grace Brown as she handed Mattie her letters. The corpse of Grace Brown lies in the parlor of the Glenmore Hotel, too palpable, too real to deny. Eventually Mattie does admit one dark piece of evidence after another until she figures out the truth about what happened to the young girl, but she is not content to leave her stuck in a story of bleak determinism. Her impulse is to make Grace's life count by preserving her voice for history and living to the fullest the life that Grace Brown has been denied.

Through facing the death of Grace Brown and the hard truths of Grace's life, Mattie is able to change her own fate, and live and write a story authentically her own. Ironically, the story does have a happy ending, but it is entirely original and uncontrived. She does not succumb to the rake Royal, but neither does she shuffle out of her circumstances leaving behind those for whom she feels responsible. In saving herself she is able to save others in her community as well. Freed from the conventional narratives of how things ought to be, she is able to see fresh possibilities everywhere. She envisions a new social order in which women can establish households with other women, black men can go to Columbia University, and racism does not beat a soul down. In her friendship with Weaver, there is a suggestion of the possibility of healthy male/female relationships based on common interests, shared enterprises, and mutual respect and support. Mattie sees the lawyer in Weaver and the sane person in crazy Emmie, and

she sees how to make thirty dollars spread thin enough to help all those in need. Pa's mule is paid for and Tommy Hubbard comes to help him with the farm, she pays off Emmie Hubbard's back taxes so she and Mrs. Smith can have a home, and she also offers Weaver the train fare he needs to get to Columbia. She "stitches things up nicely and leaves no ends dangling," but each happy ending she helps to create is freshly coined and transcendent.

Source: Cynthia Clough, Critical Essay on *A Northern Light*, in *Literary Newsmakers for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Donnelly explains to Update *how a century-old murder led her to write the Carnegie Medal-winning novel*, A Northern Light." *Note that* A Northern Light *was published under the name* A Gathering Light *in Great Britain*.

In *A Gathering Light*, which has won this year's Carnegie Medal, Jennifer Donnelly tells the story of a young girl, Mattie Gokey, who has to choose between her family, struggling to help her widowed father make a backbreaking living farming in the foothills of the Adirondack mountains, and her own dreams of studying literature in New York.

Interwoven is the true story of a young, pregnant woman, Grace Brown, murdered in mysterious circumstances in 1906. The case achieved notoriety at the time. Grace's lover was arrested and tried for the murder on the strength of her letters recovered subsequently.

The story was re-told fictionally in Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and made into a film twice, first in the 1930s, then again in 1951 as *A Place in the Sun* starring Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift.

The murder was local history for Donnelly, whose own grandmother had worked in a hotel on Big Moose Lake where the body was recovered. Her family reminisced about it. And it haunted Donnelly herself—'Grace wouldn't leave me alone.' She read Dreiser, and a factual account of the murder. But the letters themselves were what really clinched the matter: 'Her voice, her words. It tore me apart. I started grieving for her, even though she lived 100 years ago.'

What Donnelly could not stand was that Grace had been murdered at 19 for being pregnant, for not fitting in. Her letters were so vivid and evocative of their time that she decided she had to work out her own emotions 'by writing, telling the story in a new way, fictionalised, from my point of view'. In a piece for the *Guardian*, she describes her anger: 'During a summer that saw the headlines in America full of violence against girls and women, things didn't seem to have changed much.' The power of the story—and the power in the telling—is not an accident in Donnelly's family. Her father's ancestors were Irish immigrants who escaped the famine in 1848. They were very poor farmers, who settled in upstate New York to eke out a living, farming in what is still 'a brutal place'. Summers were short and, once over, 'it was a matter of life and death to get through the winter. You had to be smart, self-reliant, strong, to weather the remoteness and the loneliness'. The landscape—of 'staggering beauty'—has produced 'a strong silent people, independent, proud. And used to do doing what they want, non-conformists'.

Critical Essay #3

Storytelling was a tradition after meals. It was the only entertainment they could afford and, during the long winters, it helped to overcome the isolation. The whole family, she says, 'are born storytellers'. Her mother (in fact a German, orphaned during the war, who emigrated to the US) told her own stories too, and read to her. And the whole family read—there was a culture of reading when she grew up. 'I didn't think about it at the time, but I suppose that part time I was picking up the value of stories, the importance of early tradition.' And not only that. 'Hearing the older generation sit and talk, you absorb how to do pacing and suspense, and structure; how to hold your listeners rapt, how to deliver a good punch line.'

The ability to listen and hear the words talk was another thing, reflected in the dialogue, the word-games (and some dialect) of *A Gathering Light*. And in one of the book's central messages—the power of words to overcome adversity, to make people feel.

Donnelly has always been fascinated by language. She lived in London in the early 1980s and 'spent every spare moment' in the East End of London. 'I used to go to Brick Lane early on Sunday. Costermongers would sing their wares. Wide boys would hand jewelry back and forth and pull out wodges of cash. There were cockles and pickled whelks, and jellied eels. It was as close to the London of Hogarth and Dickens as I would ever get. The sellers made theatre out of words, out of their patter.' She thinks that Cockneys have a lot in common with northern New Yorkers: 'One is an urban culture, one rural, but they were both cultures of the poor. If they like you, they tease you. It is wrong to be openly affectionate. Maybe it isn't good to be too open. To survive, to be successful, you had to be tough.'

A Gathering Light has become a successful 'cross-over' novel, particularly since being chosen by the *Richard & Judy* show as one of their 'Summer Reads'. But it was originally written with young girls, not adults, in mind. Donnelly wanted to show them that they have choices in life, but that choosing is never easy. She wanted to reach them before they made choices that set the course for their lives. 'Mattie adores her sisters and loves her father. She sees the attraction of family. Royal [who becomes her beau, and wants to marry her] is a good-looking, capable guy. He has a passion for farming and the land. People like him are valued still.'

Much of the novel is about the tug of war in Mattie's heart between her feelings of loyalty to family and place, and her longing to study and to read and be a writer (which her family cannot understand). She wants to go to college, to be like the literature teacher at school, who encourages and inspires her. (The teacher, Miss Wilcox, is based on Emily Dickinson and one of Donnelly's high-school English teachers.) Mattie is encouraged, too, by her black school-friend Weaver, himself determined to overcome poverty and racial discrimination by getting a good education and becoming a lawyer.

It is Mattie's work in a local hotel (To earn money to be able to pay to go to college? Or support her father and the family? Or save to get married?) that brings her into contact with Grace Brown and her letters, and a story that she cannot ignore.

As Mattie learns more, she gradually finds the courage and strength to make her own choices. But there is no wish—or attempt—by Donnelly to preach. 'I didn't want to say that Mattie's choice is the best or only choice.' Mattie is pulled in two directions, as was Donnelly herself, until recently too much influenced by earlier feminist voices to find time in her life for as many children as she now wishes she could have—a source of regret.

Critical Essay #4

The power of *A Gathering Light* comes from its dilemmas, which are universal: the desperate wish to break free from the hard labour and grinding poverty of their life on the land; the conflict between loyalty to family and what one knows, and the attractions of dreams and aspirations. It is why the book appeals to adults too, though one could add that Donnelly's sensitivity to social injustice gives urgency to the narrative, without ever leading to stereotyping, or making her didactic. After all of this, it comes perhaps as a surprise that Donnelly herself 'had a fortunate childhood, parents who pushed me hard to do my best.' Never any real deprivation, then. Even when she fell in with a much wealthier bunch of friends, her father merely advised her, if she wanted what they had, to 'Work. Get an education. Make something of yourself.'

And that she did, getting up at 4:30 in the morning or 5, to write for a couple of hours before going out to earn a wage. Her writing was 'years and years in the making' before she found a publisher, or achieved recognition. She went through years of depression and despair to get there, even though she had been telling stories since childhood and 'inflicting them' on her family. Even after 10 years when she had finished *The Tea Rose*, her first novel, it took a while to find a publisher. But her agent is 'as stubborn and persistent as I am'.

Critical Essay #5

Perhaps some of the drive comes from a sense of privilege at what she has—and her great-grandparents had not. Her great-grandfather would have loved an opportunity of education. 'He was taken out of school at 12 to drive mules and make money for the family. He died young and was bed-ridden before he passed away. All he wanted to do before he died was read. His children had to keep bringing him books. What would his life have been if he had had a few of the opportunities I had?' When she was researching for the book, she once asked her grandmother (an inspiration for the character of Mattie) if she had minded not having had time to read or study. To which she retorted that there was not time—there was so much work to be done, just to put food on the table. 'To live you had to grow your own food. Your survival depended on your ability to farm.'

Colin Brabazon, Chair of the Carnegie judges, praised 'the striking luminosity' of *A Gathering Light*'s prose, 'its tangible sense of place and the integrity of its vision'. Perhaps it was inspired, too, by some of the imagery of Donnelly's Irish Catholic upbringing. She thinks that the obligatory attendance at church ('it was an accepted part of your life') gave her a good basis for storytelling. 'I sat and listened to the Gospel. I wanted Judas to have a change of heart. It was amazing stuff—about loyalty, and betrayal, and faith. The stories gave you a lot of things to think about at 7 or 8 years old, sitting in church, bored out of your skull!' The sense of wonder, of the miraculous, a heightened feeling of excitement and expectation, has stayed with her, though she does not describe herself as religious.

Donnelly is pleased—and surprised—about the interest the novel has aroused across the generations (and the gender divide thanks to Weaver). She thinks that 'literature' is very much adult-oriented. 'Teenagers tend to look to adult characters and situations, but it means a tremendous amount to them if adults repay the favour, by occasionally venturing back.' She thinks this sends a very powerful message—'that we value their stories and their concerns. It means the world to a kid to have someone take an interest in what he or she is interested in.'

Nonetheless, it is probably the sense of conviction conveyed by the writing, the universal dilemmas and the power of the story-telling in this book that appeal to adults as well as young people. It is ironic and apt that it was oral tradition that attracted Donnelly to prose, and the power of shared stories that is driving readers back to narrative fiction—perhaps one of the most striking features about the current 'crossover' phenomenon.

Though the characters in the novel came to her 'out of the mist', it is real voices that inspire Donnelly. She loves the historical research. 'I went to the library of the Adirondack Museum. I'd sit down and tell the librarian what I was after, and he would go back and forth, bringing collections of this and that—diaries, menus from the great camps, old newspapers, a lock of Grace Brown's hair—a writer's treasure trove.' This took her on paths she never knew existed. 'He'd say: "Do you know about this?" or "Try

that." I am sure many, many authors owe huge debts to librarians and archivists for their work. I know I do!'.

Source: Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, "Haunted by Grace," in *Update*, September 2004, p. 1.

Adaptations

- *A Northern Light* was released in an unabridged version on audiocassette by Listening Library in March 2003. It is narrated by Hope Davis.
- Josef Von Sternberg's 1931 film *An American Tragedy* is an adaptation of Theodore Dreiser's novel about the murder of Grace Brown. It stars Phillips Holmes and Sylvia Sydney.
- Softening the naturalistic aspects of the earlier film based on Dreiser's novel, George Steven's *A Place in the Sun* (1951) won six Academy Awards for its stunning characterizations of Grace Brown (Shelley Winters) and Chester Gillette (Montgomery Cliff). The film also features Elizabeth Taylor as the woman Chester chose over Grace.
- "The Ballad of Grace Brown and Chester Gillette" is a folk ballad based on the murder. The lyrics for the ballad can be found in Harold W. Thompson's *Body, Boots and Britches*, published by Syracuse University Press, 1939, 1967.

Topics for Further Study

- Pregnancy among unmarried women is not as stigmatized in contemporary culture as it was in the early twentieth century, when Grace Brown found herself so desperately alone. However, teenage pregnancy and teen sexuality are still complicated and controversial social issues. In a group, discuss how the emotional issues surrounding teen pregnancy have or have not changed in the past century. Consider additionally attitudes toward sexuality, birth control, abortion, and abstinence initiatives.
- As a voracious reader, Mattie is heavily influenced by the books she reads, and none makes a bigger impact on her than Emily Baxter's poetry book, *Threnody*. In a two-page essay, write about a book that has had a big impact on your life. What about the book that inspired you, and what did it inspire you to do? Use specific examples from the book and from your life.
- Word duels are a creative aspect of Mattie's relationship with Weaver. Make a list of the challenging vocabulary words that head each chapter in the novel, and see how many synonyms you can find for each word. Challenge a partner to a duel with synonyms from your list until you exhaust the possibilities. Also, try using each word from your list in a sentence.
- Mattie is saddened by the recognition that characters in novels cannot change their fates. Is there a character in *A Northern Light* whose fate you would like to change? Choose a character other than Mattie, and rewrite the script of what happens to him or her in a two-page essay. Discuss how the change might have impacted Mattie's life and the general outcome of the novel.

What Do I Read Next?

- Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1869) features four sisters in New England after the Civil War. The protagonist, Jo March, is a strong, independent person who refuses to give up her dream of becoming a writer just because she is a woman pursuing a traditionally male profession.
- *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), by L. M. Montgomery, is a novel about an orphan who goes to live on a farm and gets into mischief because of her wild imagination. This is the first novel in a series of eight that follow Anne as she grows into an independent young woman.
- The novel *Little House on the Prairie* (1935) is part of a series by Laura Ingalls Wilder, who wrote about her childhood experiences as a pioneer in the Midwest in the mid-1800s. Laura is smart and observant, and like Mattie in *A Northern Light*, dreams of someday becoming a writer.
- The novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), by Zora Neale Hurston, follows Janie Crawford's physical and spiritual journey from rural Florida to the all-black town Eatonville, Florida to a place called the Florida "muck," and finally, back to Eatonville. Through her three marriages, Janie faces trials that many African American women faced in the early twentieth century, but she remains a self-respecting, strong-willed female protagonist.

Further Study

Alkalay-Gut, Karen, *Alone in the Dawn: The Life of Adelaide Crapsey*, University of Georgia Press, 1988.

Donnelly invokes the presence of Adelaide Crapsey in her epigraph, and the poet is clearly the model for Emily Baxter Wilcox. A 1901 graduate of Vassar College from Rochester, New York, Crapsey studied Classics at the American Academy in Rome, taught in New England prep schools, and died fairly young of tuberculosis. She is best known for formal verse, especially the cinquain, a five line syllabic poem similar to haiku, which she devised to suit her poetic temperament.

Brandon, Craig, *Murder in the Adirondacks: "An American Tragedy" Revisited*, North Country Books, 1986.

Brandon is a journalist who thoroughly researched the Gillette-Brown murder, investigating especially the family backgrounds of Grace and Chester. The book is a compelling read and an insightful resource for factual information about the case, the couple, and the environment in which the events took place.

Dreiser, Theodore, *An American Tragedy*, Signet Classics Reissue edition, 2000.

Dreiser saw the Gillette-Brown murder of 1906 as a direct consequence of the American dream gone wrong. His novel, which inspired Jennifer Donnelly to explore the murder through Mattie's eyes, focuses more on the psychology of Chester Gillette (through the character Clyde Griffiths) and the social forces that drove him to commit the murder.

Myer, Ruth, *A Farm Girl in the Great Depression*, Busca, 1998.

Donnelly drew on this first-hand account by a woman who grew up on an Upstate New York farm during the depression for the character of Mattie Gokey.

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"Murder on Big Moose Lake," in *The Bookseller*, January 24, 2003, p. 30.

Reviews of *A Northern Light*, in *Jennifer Donnelly Reviews*, www.jenniferdonnelly.com/jd_reviews (September 20, 2005).

Stiles, Kristina, "The History of Grace Brown," at www.ovcs.org/district/brown.htm (May 15, 2005).

Williamson, Courtney, Review of *A Northern Light," Christian Science Monitor*, www.csmonitorservices.com (July 31, 2001).

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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