

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn Short Guide

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith

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Overview

Americans during World War II found *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* inspiring. Set in a pre-war Brooklyn neighborhood populated largely by immigrants, the book held a nostalgic appeal for its first readers, reminding many of a battle over poverty already won. Others, especially the novel's first reviewers, savored *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* as a respite from the often gloomy novels of other naturalistic writers such as Theodore Dreiser and James T. Farrell. Readers today might see the novel as a precursor of more recent young adult novels about sensitive young protagonists who face the conflicts and the delights of growing up. The book renders a vivid portrait of early twentieth-century life in Brooklyn: Francie cannot afford expensive pleasures but derives joy nonetheless from visiting the junk dealer, reading in the library, shopping for ground beef and soup bones, and walking more than forty blocks to school. Like Daniel Defoe's classic novel *Robinson Crusoe*, Smith's book offers a guide to survival skills, but in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* the skills are targeted for the streets of Brooklyn rather than the wilds of a tropical island.

About the Author

Elisabeth (Betty) Smith was born in Brooklyn, New York, on December 15, 1896, to a family of German immigrants. Smith's father, John Wehner, died when she was still a child, and her mother, Catherine Hummel Wehner, later married an Irish immigrant, Michael Keogh. Smith's early life was shaped by poverty, and the immigrant experience she describes in many of her works has strong roots in her own life.

She left school after the eighth grade to help support her family, working in factories, offices, and department stores.

Smith loved stories and derived her greatest pleasure from reading books or acting in plays at the Williamsburg YMCA.

In 1924 she married George Smith and with him later moved to Michigan, where she studied literature and he studied law at the University of Michigan. Upon completion of her husband's law degree, Smith moved with him and their two daughters first to New Haven, Connecticut, where Smith studied at the Yale School of Drama, and later to Detroit, where she worked as a columnist for the Detroit Free Press.

After the marriage ended in divorce in 1938, Smith moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where she studied drama rooted in folk culture. Smith was inspired to write *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*—a fictionalized reminiscence of her early years in Brooklyn—by her examination of this regional type of drama and her exposure to the autobiographical novels of North Carolina native Thomas Wolfe. Published in 1943, the novel was an instant best seller that eventually was translated into twenty languages and sold more than six million copies.

The book's great popularity transformed Smith into an instant celebrity, wealthy enough to live off her writing.

She continued to write plays but is best known for her four novels, three of which deal with her Brooklyn childhood and adolescence. In 1943 Smith married Joseph Jones, a newspaperman, but in 1951 this marriage, too, ended in divorce. The late 1940s and early 1950s were a difficult time for Smith; in addition to suffering the breakup of her second marriage, she incurred injuries in an automobile accident in 1952. Her two novels written during this time, *Tomorrow Will Be Better* and *Maggie Now*, are less optimistic than *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

A third marriage, to Robert Finch, seems to have been happy but ended with his death in 1959. Smith's final years were active ones; she acted, taught college, and produced numerous plays, another novel, and two volumes of autobiographical writings before her death on January 17, 1972. Unlike the work of the many naturalistic writers she admired, Smith's writing is seldom pessimistic. She recognized the reality of grinding poverty, but her heroines are able to break free of the trap of poverty and limited education just as their author did.

Characters

Francie Nolan is the protagonist of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Her parents endow her with two traits that enable her to conquer adversity: From her second-generation German mother, Katie, Francie inherits the strength, determination and indomitable sense of respectability that guide her into a future that holds promise; from her weak Irish father, Johnny, she inherits the ability to see and hear beauty in an ugly world. The foreground of the novel is full of strong female characters: Katie; Katie's solid, immigrant German mother; Katie's sisters; and Francie herself, whose strength increases as she learns to solve the problems of her young existence. It is she who convinces her father to connive to have her transferred to another, better neighborhood school. Although Francie is a good, obedient girl, her apparent passivity masks a will that eventually prevails over her domineering mother's. There is no real conflict, however, between mother and daughter. The values of hard work, education, cleanliness and decency are established as normative and Francie embraces them.

Most of the male characters are weak and tend to inhabit the novel's background as biological, social and economic entities, but with no real importance. The women do not despise the men; rather, they accept their flawed husbands, brothers and fathers as necessities and move on with their lives.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is Francie Nolan's quest for identity,ment of the central themerepressibility of life.

Setting

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is set in Brooklyn's immigrant neighborhoods.

The novel opens in the summer of 1912 with eleven-year-old Francie Nolan sitting on the fire escape and looking at a Tree of Heaven in her backyard; it then moves back in time twelve years to the courtship of Francie's parents. The novel proceeds chronologically from this point onward, tracing the lives of Francie; her brother, Neeley; and their parents, friends, and relatives. The sights, smells, and sounds of Brooklyn street life permeate the novel, influencing Francie's moods and helping form her character during the nearly seventeen years covered in the story.



Social Concerns

Although Smith denied an intent of the fact that she wrote a novel of social significance, there are societal themes in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. The grinding desolation of urban poverty is closest to the surface and it is this, in all its naturalistic detail, that Smith concentrates on.

However, she washes over the images of squalor with sentimentality, as in the figure of the tree: "It grew in boarded up lots and out of neglected rubbish heaps and it was the only tree that grew out of cement. It grew lushly but only in the tenement districts."

Although mean and poor, Smith's Brooklyn teems with life, overflows with the irrepressible good nature of its main characters who refuse to be daunted by the squalor that always threatens to destroy them. Francie Nolan, the protagonist, resists the inadequacy of her life, insists on reading every book in the local library despite the fact that the librarian never once, over a period of six years, looks at her when Francie checks out a book. The Nolans fight against poverty by stuffing every grubby cent they can spare into a tin can nailed into the floor in a dark corner of their bedroom closet to insure future solvency. They also fight against their own hard circumstances, mainly that the father, Johnny Nolan, is a hopeless drunk who dies of alcoholism halfway through the novel, leaving his pregnant wife, Katie, Francie, and her younger brother, Neely, to carry on the battle from which he had withdrawn into alcohol.

All around them are the tenement people, crude, careful, getting by on nickels and dimes, brawling, singing, pawning their overcoats until they can collect their next pay envelopes.

Another social concern is the integrity of the family unit, which closes ranks against outsiders, protecting and supporting its members without judging them. Even though Johnny Nolan is a drunk who must weave through his taunting neighbors to get home to his tenement flat, when he arrives there he is treated as the head of a family must be treated, with love, kindness and respect. Johnny is Francie's adored father who, with his physical beauty and innate Irish charm, has a special place, a haven, to come to every day.

Katie, who cleans three other tenements to keep the family in rent and food money, is still jealous of the woman Johnny rejected for her when that woman shows up at his funeral.

Johnny's alcoholism is viewed as a result of unfortunate circumstances, not something to censure him for.

What firmly anchors *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* in popular fiction, however, is that its social significance is merely the background against which Francie's life unfolds. Smith was a playwright first and there is a real sense that the details of the poverty of tenement life in Brooklyn are placed carefully, like a set of props around a stage on

which a girl cheerfully recites her part in an essentially comic play. Everything comes up, if not roses, at least ailanthus trees.



Social Sensitivity

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn remains popular because of its optimism, its feminism, and its philosophical ties to more recent novels for young readers.

Women are the strong characters in this novel. Even Ben Blake, who helps Francie in her studies, is flawed, although he is a tower of strength in comparison to the novel's husbands and boyfriends.

Women in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* succeed not only in traditional feminine roles, but in stereotypically masculine roles as well.

In comparison to most present-day realistic books for young adults, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is relatively tame in its depiction of the difficulties and dangers of urban life. Perhaps the most disturbing episode occurs midway through the book when Francie is accosted by a murderer who has been terrorizing the neighborhood. The marauder exposes himself to Francie and attempts to drag her away. Katie shoots and seriously wounds the man, and although Francie seems to escape the incident with no psychological scars, her brush with sexual molestation and possibly with death may upset young readers.

Although she portrays the Nolans as a Catholic family, Smith does not make the subject of religion a focus of her novel. Smith's intent is to portray the insularity of various ethnic groups within the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, but some readers may be offended by the attitude toward other religious faiths displayed by some members of the Nolan family. The characters do not demonstrate outright prejudice towards Jews, but their offhand references to "Jew women" and "Jewtown" suggest a divide between cultures not easily surmounted. Overall, however, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is a deeply affirmative book that suggests that hard work and strong family bonds can effectively counter the hardships of poverty.

Techniques

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is loosely constructed, anecdotal, digressive and episodic rather than carefully plotted.

There is occasional foreshadowing, as in the saga of Francie's promiscuous Aunt Sissy's attempts to have a baby.

Sissy finally succeeds after bearing nine stillborn infants and adopting one who turns out, it is hinted, to be her third husband's illegitimate child. But Smith is not interested in subtlety and most of her attempts at plotting are heavy-handed and obvious. Francie's development provides the book with its central structure and around this are stacked other related stories about the Nolan family and their neighbors.

Almost all of this is told with energy and good humor. Smith writes in the plain style of the vernacular of Brooklyn with its slang and ungrammatical constructions. Even the omniscient narrator speaks in a simple, slangy way, injecting exclamatory statements to emphasize dramatic events and emotional responses. Much of the book is dialogue and although there is a sameness about the characters' speeches, there are enough action and signaling devices to keep the characters distinct. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is the work of an amateur, in both senses of the word, and its lack of literary refinement, its simplicity and forwardmarching, predictable story line make it both charming and ephemeral.

Themes

The central theme of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is the great story of life triumphant against adversity, which probably accounts for its spectacular popularity. Francie Nolan is the protagonist in a bildungsroman. Francie's life grows as the symbolic tree grows, pushing through the cracks and rubble that oppress tenement life. She is eleven when the novel opens and seventeen at its close and she spends the intervening six years discovering who she is, that she is different from the other slum children and destined for a better life than they are. Since this is the coming-of-age of a girl rather than a boy in a novel about "serenity" nothing really bad is allowed to happen. For example, as Francie passes through puberty the shadow of sexual threat appears but is dispatched cleanly: Katie Nolan shoots the child molester who corners Francie in the dark, narrow tenement hallway, a deliriously satisfactory fictional device.

Using the conventional method of having Francie keep a diary, Smith shows the child inventing a role for herself in the world as a writer. On her voyage to self-discovery, Francie passes through occasional rough seas, but her exuberance never flags and the good ship *Life* carries her safely into port.

As a subsidiary theme, there is a somewhat hesitant representation of a Freudian family romance threaded through the story of the Nolans. Francie knows well that Katie loves Neely better than she loves Francie; and Francie adores her father who reciprocates in a hazy alcoholic way. To compound Francie's confusion, Neely inherits his father's handsome face and light-footed Irish grace (but not his tendency to drink) while Francie remains plain — not unattractive, but plain. This is not quite a version of Cinderella, nor do the Freudian/sexuality themes predominate. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* celebrates, in a sentimental way, the possibility of a good life developing in a mean environment, but the environment itself, Smith's Brooklyn, is, as Francie says, ". . . a magic city and it isn't real."

Adaptations

Betty Smith and George Abbot wrote a musical comedy version of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* which played on Broadway in 1944. It was produced by Elia Kazan who then directed the movie version, Kazan's first feature film, released in 1945. The movie starred James Dunn as Johnny Nolan and Peggy Ann Garner as Francie. Reviewing it in *The Nation*, James Agee (with the caveat that he had not read the book) praised the movie for its attention to the details of poverty in the big city while damning it for not taking poverty seriously enough and for playing safe with the Freudian mother/son/father-daughter theme. However, Agee recommended that the movie not be dismissed by intelligent people who automatically dismiss best sellers. *Joy in the Morning* was made into a feature film starring Richard Chamberlain and Yvette Mimieux.

Topics for Discussion

1. What is the meaning of the novel's title? How does the tree function as a symbol throughout the novel?
2. Who seems stronger in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, the male or female characters? Cite examples from the book.
3. What connection could be made between Francie's early writing—including the stories that her teacher rejects—and Smith's work in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*?
4. Neither Lee Rhynor nor Ben Blake seems to be the type of man that Francie wants. What kind of man does she want?
5. Many girls and women are traumatized for years by a rape attempt.

Who or what helps Francie recover from an attempted assault?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Betty Smith has said that she began writing *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* after she read Thomas Wolfe's *Of Time and the River*. Read this, Wolfe's second novel, and compare it to *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

2. Look up a definition of naturalism in a good dictionary of literary terms.

How is naturalism defined? Is *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* naturalistic? Why or why not?

3. What are Johnny Nolan's strengths and weaknesses as a father? What do you like about him, and what do you dislike about him? Is he a good father?

4. Francie loves yet resents her mother, Katie, because Katie seems to love Neeley more. Is Neeley Katie's favorite child? Is Francie's response to her mother's wish for Francie to work and Neeley to go to high school justified?

What enables Francie to become independent of her mother?

5. Katie's reasons for marrying Johnny Nolan differ greatly from her reasons for marrying Michael McShane.

Assuming that Katie loved both men, what is the difference in that love?

Literary Precedents

Because of its conventional coming-of-age theme, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* fits the bildungsroman genre, but it is a sentimental, simplistic example of the type. Its lack of serious literary achievement precludes it from formal critical commentary. Smith uses both realistic and naturalistic techniques, concentrating on sometimes exhaustive physical description of the economic poverty of her characters' lives, but she undercuts the effects of poverty by denying its importance and its repressive potential. Therefore, while it is tempting to cite Crane, Dreiser, or Howells as Smith's literary influences, and to suggest that Francie's mean environment has a deadening effect on her development, the novel's basically optimistic drive raises it from the lower depths and propels Francie merrily through the streets of Williamsburg.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is a woman's novel, and therefore it might be compared to the comic novels of Barbara Pym, whose *Excellent Women* (1952), for instance, also relies on the realistic description of reduced circumstances to depict the life of its heroine, Mildred Lathbury. But in *Excellent Women* the bleak, paralyzing details of middleclass life in postwar London function as a metaphor of the heroine's class status. The reader can feel the teacups and jumble sales constricting Mildred while simultaneously and properly confining her to her gentlewoman's place in a rigorously ordered social structure. Smith never develops the layered density of metaphor with her intentionally pathetic details. The reader knows, from the first paragraph, that Francie is destined for a happy future regardless of the pathos of her present circumstances.

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Gelfant, Blanche Housman. *The American City Novel Norman*: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954. Contains a brief description of the urban experience as depicted in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

Prescott, Orville. *In My Opinion*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952. Contains an analysis of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Prescott was probably the most enthusiastic and powerful of the critics examining the novel when it first came out. As many readers have done, Prescott focuses on Francie, the heroine, whose spirit and struggles he admires.

Trilling, Diana. "Fiction in Review: *A Tree Grows In Brooklyn*." *Nation* 157 (September 4, 1943): 274. Trilling's is an extremely negative view of Smith's novel. Her criticism of Smith on naturalistic grounds is enlightening, however.

Ziegfeld, Richard, ed. *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook*, 1982.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1983. Harriet L. King's perceptive essay on Smith is the best overall treatment of the author's life and work.



Related Titles

Smith continued her story of the girl who grew up in Brooklyn in her succeeding three novels, *Tomorrow Will Be Better* (1948), *Maggie-Now* (1958), and *Joy in the Morning* (1963). In each, the central character is a young woman who, recognizing that she is different from the other tenement girls, knows she must control her life so that she succeeds in fulfilling the promise of that difference.

Tomorrow Will Be Better, although not a spectacular best seller like *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, nevertheless received fairly good reviews but dropped out of sight, perhaps because its heroine, Margy Shannon, temporarily fails in her quest for happiness. Margy chooses marriage as the only way to improve her life, but the marriage comes apart after she gives birth to a stillborn child and then realizes that her husband, while not quite homosexual, is at least sexually repressed. The homosexual theme had, as yet, not found a place in popular fiction that was designed to appeal to women at a time when they were occupied in building lives around the men who had just returned from fighting World War II.

Maggie-Now, the eponymous novel Smith published in 1958, constructs a heroine who attains a place for herself through marriage with the mysterious Mr. Bassett. *Maggie-Now's* struggle is not only against lower-middle-class poverty, but against the men who impinge on her life: her cantankerous, possessive father; her irresponsible brother; and Claude Bassett, who disappears from March to November during every year of their marriage until he dies. Maggie's strength, kindness, and fundamentally Christian ability to forgive allow her to maintain her sense of individuality and to build a rewarding life despite her problems.

Joy in the Morning, apparently the most autobiographical of Smith's four novels, takes the girl who grew up in Brooklyn to a college in the Midwest where she marries the Brooklyn boy who is enrolled there in law school.

The novel describes the traditional difficulties of adjustment, money, pregnancy and childbirth that occur in the first year of their marriage. The girl, Annie, is the center of the book which is a continuation of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Annie is a thinly disguised Francie Nolan, transported to a world very different from Williamsburg, who nevertheless takes with her Francie's good-spirited ability to control and build a life. *Joy in the Morning* resembles the earlier book also in that it is an example of a similar genre, the *kunstlerroman*; it traces Annie's development as a serious writer, from her first scribbles of dramatic dialogue to her recognition by the members of the English Department of the college, who criticize and praise her work.



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