



# *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*

by Betty Smith

## **Plot Summary**

Though it is often categorized as a coming-of-age novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is much more than that. Its richly-plotted narrative of three generations in a poor but proud American family offers a detailed and unsentimental portrait of urban life at the beginning of the century. The story begins in 1912, in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, where eleven-year-old Francie Nolan and her younger brother, Neeley, are spending a blissful Saturday collecting rags, paper, metal, rubber, and other scrap to sell to the junk man for a few pennies. Half of any money they get goes into the tin can bank that is nailed to the floor in the back corner of a closet in their tenement flat. This bank, a shared resource among everyone in the family, is returned to time and again throughout the novel, and becomes a recurring symbol of the Nolan's self-reliance, struggles, and dreams.

Those dreams sustain every member of the extended Nolan family, not just the children. Their mother Katie scrubs floors and works as a janitor to provide the family with free lodging. She is the primary breadwinner because her husband Johnny, a singing waiter, is often drunk and out of work. Yet there is no dissension in the Nolan household. Katie married a charming dreamer and she accepts her fate, but she vows that things will be better for her children. Her dream is that they will go to college and that Neeley will become a doctor. Intelligent and bookish, Francie seems destined to fulfill this ambition - Neeley less so.

In spite of (or perhaps because of) her own pragmatic nature, Francie feels a stronger affinity with her ne'er-do-well father than with her self-sacrificing mother. In her young eyes, Johnny can make wishes come true, as when he finagles her a place in a better public school outside their neighborhood. When Johnny dies an alcohol-related death, leaving behind the two school-aged children and another on the way, Francie cannot quite believe that life can carry on as before. Somehow it does, although the family's small enough dreams need to be further curtailed. Through Katie's determination, Francie and Neeley are able to graduate from the eighth grade, but thoughts of high school give way to the reality of going to work. Their jobs, which take them for the first time across the bridge into Manhattan, introduce them to a broader view of life, beyond the parochial boundaries of Williamsburg. Here Francie feels the pain of her first love affair. And with determination equal to her mother's, she finds a way to complete her education. As she heads off to college at the end of the book, Francie leaves behind the old neighborhood, but carries away in her heart the beloved Brooklyn of her childhood.

## Discussion Topics

1. In a particularly revealing chapter of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Francie's teacher dismisses her essays about everyday life among the poor as "sordid," and, indeed, many of the novel's characters seem to harbor a sense of shame about their poverty. But they also display a remarkable self-reliance (Katie, for example, says she would kill herself and her children before accepting charity). How and why have our society's perceptions of poverty changed - for better or worse - during the last one hundred years?
2. Some critics have argued that many of the characters in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* can be dismissed as stereotypes, exhibiting quaint characteristics or representing pat qualities of either nobility or degeneracy. Is this a fair criticism? Which characters are the most convincing? The least?
3. Francie observes more than once that women seem to hate other women ("they stuck together for only one thing: to trample on some other woman"), while men, even if they hate each other, stick together against the world. Is this an accurate appraisal of the way things are in the novel?
4. The women in the Nolan/Rommely clan exhibit most of the strength and, whenever humanly possible, control the family's destiny. In what ways does Francie continue this legacy?
5. What might Francie's obsession with order - from systematically reading the books in the library from A through Z, to trying every flavor ice cream soda - in turn say about her circumstances and her dreams?
6. Although it is written in the third person, there can be little argument that the narrative is largely from Francie's point of view. How would the book differ if it was told from Neeley's perspective?
7. How can modern readers reconcile the frequent anti-Semitism and anti-immigrant sentiments that characters espouse throughout the novel?
8. Could it be argued that the main character of the book is not Francie but, in fact, Brooklyn itself?

## About the Author

Betty Smith was born on December 15, 1896. The daughter of German immigrants, she grew up poor in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. After stints writing features for newspapers, reading plays for the Federal Theater Project, and acting in summer stock, Smith moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina under the auspices of the W.P.A. While there in 1943, she published *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, her first novel. Smith's other novels include *Tomorrow Will be Better* (1947), *Maggie-Now* (1958) and *Joy in the Morning* (1963). She also had a long career as a dramatist, writing one-act and full-length plays for which she received both the Rockefeller Fellowship and the Dramatist Guild Fellowship. She died in 1972.

<http://www.harpercollins.com/author/authorExtra.aspx?isbn13=9780060001940&displayType=readingGuide>

# *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*

## **1943 Publication of *A Tree Grows In Brooklyn*: Betty Smith and Harper & Brothers**

*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is an American classic. When it first appeared in 1943 it was an immediate bestseller and has since become an icon of our cultural consciousness, a symbol of the American Dream. Even now echoes of the title are heard in newspaper headlines across the country; many people remember the story of Francie, who grew, like the tree, in the tenements of Williamsburg. Nevertheless, so little is known about the author that she is included in an anthology of Irish American writers even though she is of German descent. Betty Smith was an anomaly: as a member of the working-class and a woman, she became a major figure in the literary life of the 1940s.

When *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* was published, it was a social phenomena: it was widely publicized as one of the best novels of 1943, it was read by thousands, and it became the staple of religious and social club discussions. Smith herself became a celebrity and all her activities were relayed throughout the press. The reason that it was such an astounding success was, in part, because it was the first American novel about the lives of ordinary working-class people that was written in a style that ordinary working-class people could understand. And yet this very style has kept *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and Smith's other novels out of the canon of American literature. Although it has acquired the reputation of being a romance, or a teen novel, it is neither. This chapter will explore the generic evolution of style in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

Published literature occurs at an intersection between a private world and a public one. When Smith started writing *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* she was sitting by herself, smoking, and meditating on the world that she lived in for her first twenty-three years, a world distant from the heat and magnolias that surrounded her. She was in a dialogue with herself about her past. She was also writing with her dramatic assumption, developed over the years, that there was an audience at the foot of the stage, sitting in the dark, waiting for her words. And at this point she imagined an approving audience, since her plays had won awards and were highly praised in the newspapers.

### **American Literary Marketplace and 'Failed Masterpieces'**

After the novel was accepted for publication, however, it entered the public sphere. In *American Authors and the Literary Marketplace since 1900*, James West writes "One of the major problems for scholars who work with twentieth-century American writing . . . is to come to terms with the alterations wrought on modern American literature by editors in trade houses" (72). Publishing in the United States was, since its inception, fueled mainly by a market economy rather than private patronage. This resulted in what Amy Kaplan, in *The Social Construction of American Realism* calls the "failed masterpiece":

Stylistic inconsistencies and problematic endings were usually treated as internal formal flaws rather than as narrative articulations of ideological problems. The period from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to *Sister Carrie* is rich in examples of that peculiarly American category, the failed masterpiece (Kaplan 5).

In a smaller, more homogenous society, it may be possible to come up with some static set of boundaries called "genre," but in the fluid, interactive mass culture of the United States, with all of its competing nationalities, classes, dialect, and economies, with its ethic of opportunity and change, nothing stays stable long. Therefore, if you are going to judge things according to how well they conform to a static model, rather than a fluid one, American literature will always be a literature of "failed masterpieces." Betty Smith's novel but when it had to go to press, it underwent a final re-formation. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is almost a perfect book; it began with the linguistic simplicity she had developed in her writing for the Federal Theatre Project, but it is marred by a sudden shift towards the end that turns what would have been a tour de force into a slow winding-down of events and "nostalgic leavetakings" 1.

## **Post-Depression Socialism and the Federal Theater Project as Influences**

It is difficult to estimate to what extent authors work with an idea of form in their minds. Writing takes place in dialogue with a writing community, and when Smith began writing *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, she was influenced by several things. One was her work on the Federal Theater Project. Perhaps she was remembering the words of Hallie Flanagan regarding the Living Newspaper: "Authenticity should be the guiding principle . . . Assemble a wide, firm foundation of factual material" 2, when she walked her reader through the Williamsburg neighborhood in which she lived, taking them into every store and describing the contents of the shelves 3. Certainly she was encouraged to use the material from her past by the teachings of Proff Koch: his main focus was to encourage dramatists to use "the legends, superstitions, customs, environmental differences, and the vernacular of the common people" (Spearman 16). The acceptance of socialist ideas in the post-depression decade allowed the emergence of material that had previously been taboo.

## **Literary Influences on *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn***

Thomas Wolfe was an influence on Smith's writing as well. Like Smith, he had been trained by Koch with the Carolina Playmakers--and he was writing stories and novels from the same vein that Smith wanted to tap. She often said that she was originally challenged to tell her story when she read his short story "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn" and felt that he got it all wrong: "I realized that he had caught the lost feeling of Brooklyn, but his stories weren't authentic. This challenged me to write what I know about Brooklyn, to show it as it really is" 4. The first notes regarding *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* were scribbled in *Of Time and the River*. On the front fly-leaf there are some emotional and philosophical meandering not unlike Wolfe's own, and on the back cover there is an outline which roughly conforms to the plot of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

Although she continually refers to Wolfe as her major influence, Smith was inspired more by his method than his style: whereas Wolfe's sentences can run for several pages, recalling every nuance of a memory or thought, Smith's style is short sentences with simple diction, and creates a rhythm through repetition. Smith was probably partially captivated by Wolfe's unashamed self-absorption, since she was quite capable of this herself. As her later friends remember: "Everything revolved around Betty" 5.

John Steinbeck, James T. Farrell, and Henry Roth. She wrote plainly, but without the condescension of some popular depression writers, such as Erskine Caldwell. Smith's style directed to the uneducated reader: it was simple, it included dialect, and it used repetition as a stylistic device, what Arthur Miller in *Timebends* calls "the thrilling lyricism of the thirties" (Athas 26). She read and respected Farrell, who also wrote about the life of the urban lower classes, but she soon outstripped him in readership since she had the gift of including humor in the vision of the struggling classes. The style that she eventually developed was her own. "She worked hard to make her language simple and easy. It wasn't an accident of style, but one she worked at consciously" 6. Little did she know this style, based on the grim realities of the times and influenced by Russian writers as well, would serve to keep her out of the canon, classified as "high-school literature" 7.

Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, published in 1934, indubitably influenced Smith's confidence in her subject matter as well. Nancy Smith Pfeiffer recalls that when it was published in 1934, it was "the cutting edge with experimentation with style," and says that *Call It Sleep* gave Smith "permission" to write down her memoirs 8. The subjects of Smith and Roth are nearly identical--the brutality of childhood and youth, one "Irish" and female, the other Jewish and male, in the immigrant tenements of New York--and the same somber tone pervades both novels. But again, Smith's style is nearly opposite to Roth's. Roth's novel was a literary experiment with transcription of actual language change and stream-of-consciousness that did not always take the reader into account, or, rather, assumed a patient and literate reader. Smith made reading as easy as possible for her reader. Later she would tell the press that the writers from whom she had learned most were Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson and Thomas Wolfe 9.

Smith was able, over the years, to develop her own style, but she often relied on others for form. Her plays and novels remained fluid until publication (some of the plays underwent transformations after publication as well) and Smith was always open to considering the ideas of others in the process. As a playwright, working with George Pierce Baker at Yale and Koch and Green in North Carolina, she learned to use collaboration as an element of her writing, and this largely affected her form.

## **Submissions and Rejections: Introduction to Harper & Brothers**

These are some of the threads of the American literary dialogue that Smith brought with her to the kitchen table with her yellow foolscap to type out her life, ten pages a morning for several years. It was a singular and personal meditation, but Smith had no intention of leaving those pages in a box somewhere. She continually submitted batches of them to publishers: in Decem-

ber of 1940 she sent fifty pages of "They Lived in Brooklyn" to Houghton Mifflin and a section to Random house; in 1941 she submitted sections to Scribner's, Greenburg Publishers, Ives Washburn and Little Brown & Co.; in 1942 she submitted it to Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer. And she was repeatedly rejected. Finally, in May of 1942, she submitted it to the Harper & Brothers 125th Anniversary Nonfiction Contest, carefully referring to it as a "manuscript" rather than a "novel."

Smith's hopes that she would have a chance in the Harper & Brothers contest must not have been great, because a week later she wrote asking to have her "novel" sent back so that she could work on it some more. This must have prompted the publishers to look at it because there is a handwritten note on her letter in the Harper files: "Since it is a novel it is not a candidate for the contest. Too literate to dismiss quickly. Write & say it is being read as a regular entrant - put in weeded pile." The note is signed EFL--EFL is Elizabeth Lawrence who eventually became Smith's editor and confidante. Lawrence's secretary wrote Smith a noncommittal letter that her novel was being considered "in the regular way," and that they would notify her "in a week or so" 10. A month later, in an agony of expectation, Smith wrote back asking their decision. Lawrence had passed her findings along to the senior editor Eugene F. Saxton, and he wrote to Smith that her book has been held up because it had "aroused a great deal of interest," and also asked whether any of the characters in the book represented real people 11.

## **Eugene Saxton and Elizabeth Lawrence**

Smith had been waiting too long for her big break to let this opportunity take its own course. She immediately wrote back a long letter, giving an account of her background, her writing, her projects, and the revisions she planned on making, ending it by saying she was coming to New York in a week so that they could discuss it in person 12. There she met Elizabeth Lawrence, and the meeting went well 13. When Smith returned to Chapel Hill, she received a phone call, via her upstairs neighbors, that her novel had been accepted for publication. In July Smith travelled to New York again, this time meeting with Eugene F. Saxton as well as with Lawrence. After the meeting, Saxton sent her a contract, but she returned it unsigned: it was a 50/50 split, and Smith was worried about the film rights, of which the Leland Heyward agency expected a share. Her impatience finally got the better of her and she wrote a letter giving Harper & Brothers fifty percent of everything. Later she would regret this hasty move.

At the time, however, Smith was dependant upon the support of her publisher: "Young authors are particularly vulnerable to high-handed editors because they are eager to be published and will make almost any compromise to see their work in print" (West 69). In *Irving to Irving: Author-Publisher Relations 1800-1974*, Charles Madison writes about the publisher-author relation:

To state a truism, the writer works in isolation. The novelist weaves out of his own inner emotions and experience; the poet expresses his inmost thoughts and perceptions in heightened imagery; both, for all

their surging egos, tend to be assailed by self-doubt which they feel must be stilled before they can present their writing to the world. Friends and relatives, no matter how devoted and helpful, cannot still these doubts; only their publishers and editors, who have to be objective and are financially concerned, can persuasively assure them of the acceptability of their work or offer certain guidance toward that end. In the process a relationship develops consisting of mutual trust and, often, intimate friendship. (ix).

Smith was overjoyed that her book was going to be published, and grateful to both Saxton and Lawrence. Her letters to them immediately took on a personal and relaxed tone. The support and friendship that she received through the firm over the years may well have been worth 50% of her first novel.

Eugene Saxton was a senior editor at Harper & Brothers. In *Up & Down & Around: A Publisher Recollects the Time of His Life*, Cass Canfield describes him:

Gene Saxton was one of the best editors of his day. His approach to his job was deliberate; he would read a manuscript and leave it lying on his desk for weeks. Why, I'd ask him, hadn't he made a decision on it? He would reply: "I want to see whether the book sinks in, whether I remember it. Often, on first reading, I may like a manuscript quite well, but if it doesn't make a lasting impression, I turn it down." (90)

Canfield credits Saxton with bringing in most of the big writers in the firm. It is a chance of history that World War II made men scarce, so that when Saxton became ill, there was no man to replace him. Even though Harper & Brothers, like other publishing firms, did not hire women as editors, the war created unusual opportunities for women.

## Women in Publishing

Elizabeth Lawrence began as a reader, but became one of the first female editors 14. Lawrence recalled that "The position of temporary copy editor at Harpers was to be for one month. At the end of one month I was asked to stay another month. Then after several months they just forgot to ask" 15. According to both Cass Canfield in his memoirs and Eugene Exman in *The House of Harper*, Lawrence was the editor who discovered Betty Smith. Lawrence was tactful, thorough, and an extremely successful editor. Cass Canfield credits her with being able to empathize with her readers (204). He referred to her editing projects as the "Lawrence Mysteries," since she seemed to have a magical knack for choosing novels that would become best-sellers 16. Lawrence was among the most beloved editors in Harper & Brothers' history 17. For continuation, see [Publication, Part II](#).

## Endnotes

1. Elizabeth Lawrence, letter to Betty Smith, 12 Jan. 1943.
2. Undated mimeographed handout written by Hallie Flanagan in the Betty Smith Papers.
3. One fan wrote to say that he knew exactly which stores she was talking about, and others wrote recalling other details from A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.
4. Raleigh News May 9, 1943.
5. Drs. Fullilove and Lesage, personal interview, 18 May 1992.
6. Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, notes on draft, 25 April 1994.
7. Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview, 10/11 May 1991, notes that Smith was put on many high-school reading lists due to the accessibility of her writing.
8. Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, interview, May 10-11, 1991.
9. John K. Hutchens, New York Herald Tribune 11 Aug. 1963.
10. TH.G., secretary to Elizabeth Lawrence, letter to Betty Smith, 18 May 1942.
11. Eugene F. Saxton, letter to Betty Smith, 24 June 1942.
12. Betty Smith, letter Eugene F. Saxton, 27 June 1942.
13. Elizabeth Lawrence, letter to Betty Smith, 7 July 1942.
14. The only other woman made an editor at this time was Joan Kahn. Genevive Young, telephone conversation, 18 Sept. 1992.
15. Elizabeth Lawrence, letter written by Mary Jo Reiter to author, Dec. 1992.
16. Reiter, Mary Jo. Letter, Dec. 1992.
17. In my research, everyone that remembered her loved and respected her. Cass Canfield dedicated his memoirs to her.

[Publication, Part II](#) | [Publication, Part III](#)

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