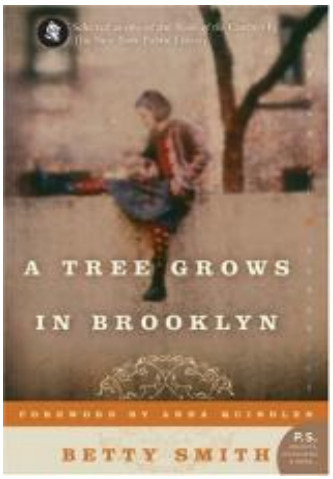
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

by Betty Smith



About the Book

Through 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 Guide

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?

Author Bio

Betty Smith was born Elisabeth Wehner on December 15, 1896, the same date as, although five years earlier than, her fictional heroine Francie Nolan. The daughter of German immigrants, she grew up poor in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, the very world she re-creates with such meticulous detail in A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN.

After marrying fellow Brooklynite George H.E. Smith, she moved with him to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he was a

law student at the University of Michigan. The young bride soon had two daughters, Nancy and Mary, and was forced to wait until the girls had entered grade school before endeavoring to complete her own formal education. Although she had not finished high school, the largely autodidactic Smith was permitted to take classes at the university, and she concentrated her studies there in journalism, drama, writing and literature. She capped her education by winning the Avery Hopkins Award for work in drama, and did a three-year course in playwriting at the Yale Drama School.

After stints writing features for a Detroit newspaper, reading plays for the Federal Theatre Project, and acting in summer stock, Smith landed in Chapel Hill, North Carolina under the auspices of the W.P.A. She and her first husband divorced in 1938. In 1943, she married Joe Jones, a writer, journalist, and associate editor of the *Chapel Hill Weekly*, while he was serving as a private in the wartime army. That same year, A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN, her first novel, was published.

The prestige of writing a best-selling, critically lauded book brought assignments from the *New York Times Magazine*, for which she wrote both light-hearted and serious commentary. In a December 1943 piece called "Why Brooklyn is that Way," Smith donned the mantle of her childhood borough's unofficial champion. Her perceptions at once encapsulate one of the core themes of her novel and answer some of her more urbane critics. "Brooklyn is the small town -- but on a gigantic scale -- that the New Yorker ran away from," she wrote. "In jeering at Brooklyn's mores and ideology, your New Yorker may be trying to exorcise his own small-town background."

Although most remembered for the phenomenal success of that first book, Smith wrote other novels, including 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 Dramatists Guild Fellowship. She died in 1972.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

by Betty Smith

Publication Date: January 18, 2005
Genres: Young Adult 12+
Paperback: 528 pages
Publisher: Harper Perennial Modern Classics
ISBN-10: 0060736267
ISBN-13: 9780060736262