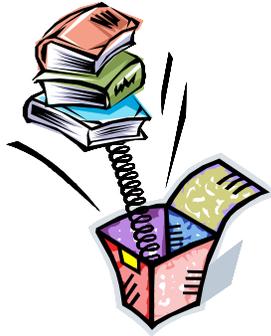


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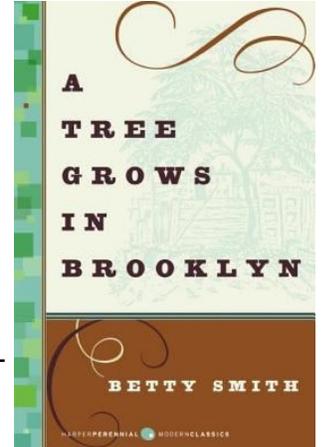


Book Club in a Box

A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

About the Book

The beloved American classic about a young girl's coming-of-age at the turn of the century, Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is a poignant and moving tale filled with compassion and cruelty, laughter and heartache, crowded with life and people and incident. The story of young, sensitive, and idealistic Francie Nolan and her bittersweet formative years in the slums of Williamsburg has enchanted and inspired millions of readers for more than sixty years. By turns overwhelming, sublime, heart-breaking, and uplifting, the daily experiences of the unforgettable Nolans are raw with honesty and tenderly threaded with family connectedness -- in a work of literary art that brilliantly captures a unique time and place as well as incredibly rich moments of universal experience.



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About the Author



Betty Smith was born on December 15, 1896 Brooklyn, New York to German immigrants, she grew up poor in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and attended Girl's High School. These experiences served as the framework to her first novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943).

After marrying George H. E. Smith, a fellow Brooklynite, she moved with him to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he pursued a law degree at the University of Michigan. At this time, she gave birth to two girls and waited until they were in school so she could complete her higher education. Although Smith had not finished high school, the university allowed her to enroll in classes. There she honed her skills in journalism, literature, writing, and drama, winning a prestig-

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ious Avery Hopwood Award. She was a student in the classes of Professor Kenneth Thorpe Rowe.

In 1938 she divorced her husband and moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina. There she married Joseph Jones in 1943, the same year in which *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* was published. She teamed with George Abbott to write the book for the 1951 musical adaptation of the same name. Throughout her life, Smith worked as a dramatist, receiving many awards and fellowships including the Rockefeller Fellowship and the Dramatists Guild Fellowship for her work in drama. Her other novels include *Tomorrow Will Be Better* (1947), *Maggie-Now* (1958) and *Joy in the Morning* (1963).

On January 17, 1972, she died from pneumonia in Shelton, Connecticut, at the age of 75.

Critical Acclaim

New York Public Library

One of the books of the century.

New York Times

A profoundly moving novel, and an honest and true one. It cuts right to the heart of life...If you miss *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* you will deny yourself a rich experience...It is a poignant and deeply understanding story of childhood and family relationships. The Nolans lived in the Williamsburg slums of Brooklyn from 1902 until 1919...Their daughter Francie and their son Neely knew more than their fair share of the privations and sufferings that are the lot of a great city's poor. Primarily this is Francie's book. She is a superb feat of characterization, an imaginative, alert, resourceful child. And Francie's growing up and beginnings of wisdom are the substance of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

Robert Cornfield

...Smith has a treasure lode and...in this one book she gives all of it away....The civilization of Smith's Williamsburg exists in very few living memories....when even these isolated signposts are gone, the spirit of the book, the lives and struggles it celebrates, will be with us, reminding us of who we were and who we still are. -- *The New York Times Book Review*

The New York Times

A profoundly moving novel, and an honest and true one. It cuts right to the heart of life...If you miss *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* you will deny yourself a rich experience...It is a poignant and deeply understanding story of childhood and family relationships. The Nolans lived in the Williamsburg slums of Brooklyn from 1902 until 1919...Their daughter Francie and their son Neely knew more than their fair share of the privations and sufferings that are the lot of a great city's poor. Primarily this is Francie's book. She is a superb feat of characterization, an imaginative, alert, resourceful child. And Francie's growing up and beginnings of wisdom are the substance of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

Further Reading

If you liked *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, you might like:

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak

Mama's Bank Account by Kathryn Forbes

A Member of the Wedding by Carson McCullers

Tallgrass by Sandra Dallas

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

Women of Silk by Gail Tsukiyama

Discussion Questions

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?