

## A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, by Betty Smith



### ***About the Book...***

This is the story of the Nolan family, including daughter Francie, and life in the Williamsburg slums of Brooklyn during the early part of the 20th century. 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.

Betty Smith's first novel became immediately popular when it was published in 1943. The book sold 300,000 copies in the first six weeks after it was published. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is now considered an essential part of American literature.



### ***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.

### ***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?
9. How is the book's historical time period significant to the story?
10. What role does song and singing play in the story?
11. What is Francie's relationship to reading and writing? Why is it important?
12. Find three instances in which the tree is discussed. Although the tree always represents hope and perseverance, its use in different points in the novel suggests it also has more specific significances. How is the symbol used differently each time? How does it still represent the same idea?