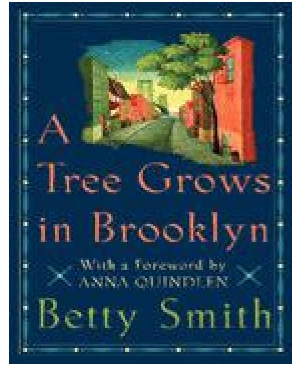
LARGE PRINT EDITION

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

With a Foreword by ANNA QUINDLEN

Betty Smith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Contents

E-book Extra
Self-Reliance: A Reading Group Guide

P.S. Extra
Insights, Interviews & More…

Foreword
As much as any other beloved book in the canon…

BOOK ONE

1 Serene was a word you could put to Brooklyn, New…

2 The library was a little old shabby place. Francie thought…

3 Papa came home at five o'clock. By that time, the…

4 After she had seen Papa off, Francie went up to…

5 Mama came home at six with Aunt Sissy. Francie was…

6 Neeley came home and he and Francie were sent out…

BOOK TWO

7 It was in another Brooklyn summer but twelve years earlier,…

8 The Rommelys ran to women of strong personalities. The Nolans…

9 Johnny and Katie were married and went to live on…

10 Francie wasn't much of a baby. She was skinny and…

11 Johnny celebrated his voting birthday by getting drunk for three…

12 Katie was ashamed to stay in the neighborhood after Johnny’s…

13 Lorimer Street was more refined than Bogart Street. It was…

14 Life was pleasant in Lorimer Street and the Nolans would…

BOOK THREE

15 Four rooms made up the new flat. They led one…

16 The neighborhood stores are an important part of a city…

17 Piano lessons! Magic words! As soon as the nolans were…

18 School days were eagerly anticipated by Francie. She wanted all…

19 Francie expected great things from school. Since vaccination taught her…

20 Katie’s campaign against vermin and disease started the day her…

21 Francie liked school in spite of all the meanness, cruelty,…

22 Oh, magic hour when a child first knows it can…

23 School days went along. Some were made up of meanness,…

24 Francie counted the year’s passing not by the days or…

25 Johnny was one for taking notions. He’d take a notion…

26 Most children brought up in Brooklyn before the First World…

27 Christmas was a charmed time in Brooklyn. It was in…

28 The future was a near thing to Katie. She had…

29 In the summer of that same year, Johnny got the…

30 “Today, I am a woman,” wrote Francie in her diary…

31 Two very important things happened in the year that Francie…

32 Francie had started a diary on her thirteenth birthday with…

33 Yes, there was a great curiosity about sex among the…

34 When Francie heard Aunt Sissy tell Mama that she was…

35 Once more it was in the week before Christmas. Francie…

36 Johnny died three days later.

37 Katie stayed in bed the day after the funeral and…

38 Just before Christmas vacation ended, Francie told Mama that she…

39 Francie and Neeley were confirmed in may. Francie was almost…

40 Two days, Francie came home for lunch and did not…

41 Laurie was a good baby. She slept contentedly most of…

42 Francie hardly had time to get used to Laurie when…

BOOK FOUR

43 “You got the idea now,” said the forelady to Francie.…

44 Francie had been working two weeks when the layoff came.

45 Christmas again. But this year there was money for presents…

46 “In ten more minutes,” announced Francie, “it will be 1917.”

47 For the little while of the Christmas holidays, it had…

48 A Newspaper lay on Francie’s desk. It was an “extra”…

49 Francie came away from her first chemistry lecture in a…

50 Sissy expected her baby late in November. Katie and Evy…

51 When it got too cold to go walking, Francie enrolled…

52 One sunny day in the spring when Francie was sixteen,…

53 She wrote that night as she had promised—a long…

54 It was the first time Francie had seen McShane without…

BOOK FIVE

55 Francie jumped as someone tapped her on the shoulder. Then…

56 Saturday! The last Saturday in their old home. The next…

About the Author

Books by Betty Smith

Credits

Cover

Copyright

About the Publisher

Foreword

As much as any other beloved book in the canon, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* illustrates the limitations of plot description. In its nearly five hundred pages, nothing much happens. Of course that's not really accurate: Everything that can happen in life happens, from birth and death to marriage and bigamy. But those things happen in the slow, sure, meandering way that they happen in the slow, sure, meandering river of real existence, not as the clanking "and then" that lends itself easily to event synopsis.

If, afterwards, someone asked, "What is the book about?"—surely one of the most irritating and reductionist questions in the world for reader and writer alike—you would not say, well, it's about the pedophile who grabs a little girl in the hall, or about the time a man went on a bender and lost his job, or about a woman who works as the janitor in a series of tenement buildings. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is not the sort of book that can be reduced to its plot line. The best anyone can say is that it is a story about what it means to be human.

When it first appeared, in 1943, it was called, by those critics who liked it, an honest book, and that is accurate as far as it goes. But it is more than that: It is deeply, indelibly true. Honesty is casting bright light on your own experience; truth is casting it on the experiences of all, which is why, six decades after it was published and became an instant bestseller, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* continues to be read by people from all countries and all circumstances. Early on in its explosive success it was described as a book about city life, a story about grinding poverty, a tale of the struggles of immigrants in America. But all those things are setting, really, and the themes are farther-reaching: the fabric of family, the limits of love, the loss of innocence, and the birth of knowledge.

All of this takes place in the life of Francie Nolan, who is eleven years old when her story opens in the summer of 1912, in a third-floor walk-up apartment in the shadow of the hardy urban ailanthus tree, the "only tree that grew out of cement," a tree "that liked poor people." The scene is set immediately in the first few pages, of a hectic, vivid, hard-scrabble neighborhood where the children sell junk for pennies, spending half on petty indulgences and bringing half home to parents who can barely make

the rent or pay for bread, even the stale next-day sort sold at the local wholesaler.

Francie's mother is small and pretty but steely and tough; her father is warm and charming but feckless and, above all, a prisoner of his need for drink. And all of this would lapse into stereotype were Smith's people and situations not seen by the girl in ways that are so undeniably true, simply told but full of the small details and moments that remind us of our own lives: the bank made from an old can Francie's mother nails inside the closet to save money to buy a bit of land, the starched shirfront her father wears beneath his old tuxedo as he works as a singing waiter, the librarian who never looks up as she stamps the child's books, the teacher who insists she write only about the beautiful and serene and never about what she really sees around her.

It is not a showy book from a literary point of view. Its pages are not larded with metaphor or simile or the sound of the writer's voice in love with its own music. Its glory is in the clear-eyed descriptions of its scenes and people. When the Nolans move, their emptied apartment has "that look of a nearsighted man with his glasses off." When the children watch their father drink, they "pondered how a nightcap could also be an eye opener." When Francie writes the sort of grand essay her teacher expects, she rereads her own words and concludes: "They sounded like words that came in a can; the freshness was cooked out of them."

There is little need for embellishment in these stories; their strength is in the simple universal emotion they evoke. Francie must go and be immunized at a public clinic to be allowed to attend school; added to her fear of the needle is the ignominy of listening to the doctor and nurse discuss how dirty she is. Across the broad divide of class that separates her from the well-to-do doctor and the nurse who has risen out of the same environment but turned her back on it, Francie finally says when her arm has been bandaged, "My brother is next. His arm is just as dirty as mine so don't be surprised. And you don't have to tell him. You told me."

"I had no idea she'd understand what I'm saying," the doctor says afterwards, surprised.

This is one of those children who understands almost everything around her. The description of her passage into adolescence, when she suddenly sees the world as dingy and flawed, her parents as human and not omnipotent, the theater melodramas she had formerly loved as creaky

chestnuts, is among the great descriptions in fiction of the turn of the kaleidoscope occasioned by growing older and growing up. Finally she questions the game her mother has created when food runs low, the game in which she and her brother pretend they are explorers at the North Pole trapped by a blizzard in a cave. “When explorers get hungry and suffer like that, it’s for a reason,” Francie says. “But what big thing comes out of us being hungry like that?” Katie Nolan replies sadly, “You found the catch in it.”

Readers have met this sort of girl before in the pages of memorable fiction, the perceptive child who reads indefatigably, writes obsessively, dreams of a future different than what the past and present would portend. Jo March of *Little Women* is one, the eponymous *Anne of Green Gables* another, Betsy Ray of the beloved Betsy-Tacy books a third. But Francie Nolan and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* reveal the inherent weakness in those stories, a lack of realism that has made them enduring novels for girls while this has as often been a book for adults.

In Francie’s beloved Brooklyn, a rapist stalks the hallways, young women give birth out of wedlock and are reviled and even attacked, the nice old man in the junk store is not someone a child should risk being alone with. The March girls of *Little Women* are poor, but their poverty is styled a kind of noble blessing; Betsy Ray is bound and determined to be a writer and this is portrayed as an inevitability. But the poverty of Francie’s family is degrading and soul destroying, and the possibility of really becoming a writer a considerable dream, given the need to leave school and work in factories and offices to provide food and rent money. When Francie goes to the theater, she is disdainful of the plot twist in which the hero appears at the last moment to pay the mortgage and save the day. “What if he’d been held up and couldn’t make it?” she asks herself, and answers the question the only way she knows how: “You betcha they’d live, thought Francie grimly. It takes a lot of doing to die.”

So why is this not a grim book, with Francie’s beloved father crying through delirium tremens and her teacher giving her “C”s in English when she dares to write about that real-life horror instead of gerrymandered tales of apple orchards and high tea? Part of it is certainly because we know Francie has finally triumphed. A wise contemplative voice oversees the action of the novel from time to time, and it is both the voice of the author, Betty Smith, and the unmistakable voice of a Francie grown to equanimity