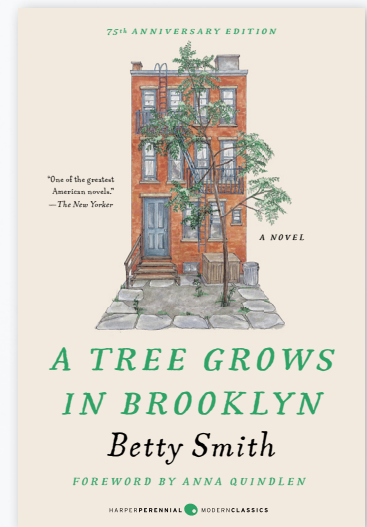


A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

by Betty Smith

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Reading Group Guide

Use these questions to guide your book club's discussion of
A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith.

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in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* can be dismissed as stereotypes, exhibiting quaint characteristics or representing outdated notions of both nobility or degeneracy.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—and in the society of the author's time? What about our own?
4. At the time depicted in the book, women had very little power in society. They could not even vote until 1920. Yet women played a crucial role. Discuss the kinds of informal power that women had. For instance, the women in the Nolan/Rommely clan exhibit most of the strength and often 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—tell us about her character? How do her circumstances shape 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 from another character's perspective? Choose one from the book and imagine how that person would see Francie and this world.

7. How can modern readers reconcile the frequent anti-Semitism and anti-immigrant sentiments that characters espouse throughout the novel? We are witnessing a resurgence of both. Why do so many fear and dislike immigrants?

8. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* was written in a time familiar to, yet very different from, our own. Talk about Francie's world. How has America changed in the time since the book was written? What accounts for that change and what factors contributed to it? Would a girl in Francie's circumstances today face similar hurdles and hardships?

9. While this is Francie's story, the city of Brooklyn itself is a major character. Describe Francie's Brooklyn. How does this place mold the people like Francie who called it home? How much do our circumstances contribute to our development from childhood to adulthood? Would you consider the novel to be a love letter to Brooklyn?

10. Would you say that Francie—intelligent, caring, diligent—embodies the qualities that will propel her beyond poverty or beyond her neighborhood? Isn't that what the American Dream is supposed to be? What about a girl born into a similar situation today? What hardships does she face? Do you believe in the American Dream or do you think it's a myth or that it's no longer viable today?

11. Talk about the book's title. What is its significance?

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