

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

by  
**Betty Smith**

---

### Book Information

Betty Smith, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

Quiz Number: 548

HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2001

ISBN 0-06-000194-1; LCCN

493 Pages

Book Level: 5.8

Interest Level: UG

A young girl comes of age in the squalor and poverty of the Brooklyn slums.

**Topics:** Community Life, Neighborhood; Community Life, Poverty; Family Life, Growing Up; Family Life, Misc./Other; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks; U.S. States/Regions, New York

### Main Characters

Ben Francie's friend from summer college courses, who is amazingly self-possessed and focused about his life

Evy Katie's sister; another Rommely girl with a heart of gold who marries a weak man

Francie Nolan the main character; a thoughtful, intelligent, and sensitive girl who absorbs the hard knocks of a poor Brooklyn childhood and grows into a strong young woman

Johnny Nolan Francie's sweet and handsome father; a kind, but weak man who allows alcohol to destroy his ambition and his pride

Katie Nolan Francie's wise, but tough mother, who has chosen a hard life in order to have the man she loves

Lee a GI headed for active duty who fools Francie into a promise of marriage, and then devastates her by marrying his hometown sweetheart

Mary Rommely Katie's mother; an emotionally abused immigrant wife who retains her quiet dignity, religious devotion, and dreams for her family in the new world

Neeley Nolan Francie's handsome and lovable brother, who combines the sweetness of his father with the practicality of his mother

Sissy Katie's sister; a kind and thoughtful person who makes up for childhood hurts through numerous, indiscriminate affairs with men

### Vocabulary

**delirium tremens** a delirium resulting from withdrawal from alcohol, characterized by violent shaking, sweating, and hallucinations

**dickey** a man's detachable, or false, shirt front

**enigma** a mystery, or something hard to understand

**genuflect** to bend down in reverence or worship

**goyem** a Yiddish or Hebrew term for non-Jewish people

**Prohibition** the period from 1920 to 1933 during which manufacture and sale of alcohol was outlawed

**sordid** dirty, filthy, squalid, or depressingly wretched

**starveling** a person who is thin or weak from lack of food

### Synopsis

Francie is an eleven-year-old girl in the summer of 1912. She and Neeley are about to cash in the week's worth of junk they collect to earn a few pennies. Times are hard. Their mother works as a scrubwoman to support the family, while their father contributes all that he doesn't spend on booze. They live on stale bread and the once-a-week meat that's left on the bone at the butcher's. Still, as a family, they are happy. Katie, work worn as she is, loves her husband and children, and everyone loves Johnny.

The world outside the family is a difficult one for poor children in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Ethnic animosities run deep, school is a place of humiliation, and hunger is omnipresent. The struggles faced by the previous generations of both Katie and Johnny are depicted as the plot returns to earlier times in the lives of the family. When Katie

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

by

### Betty Smith

---

meets Johnny, she recognizes his weakness, but loves him so completely that she is willing to shoulder the burdens of a lifetime to marry him. Johnny's inability to handle responsibility comes to a head with the birth of Francie. From that point on, Katie is largely responsible for supporting the family, with Johnny contributing wages from his infrequent jobs as a singing waiter.

Francie grows up a lonely child, suffering indignities at the hands of shopkeepers, butchers, public-health doctors, elementary-school teachers, and neighborhood children. She finds solace in reading, and visits the library every Saturday afternoon. Visits from beloved aunts Sissy and Evy brighten the family's life, and Johnny's homecomings are often pleasant, but the struggle against hunger and humiliation continues. At one point, a man attacks Francie on the stairs of her tenement. Her comfort comes from Johnny, who wisely "etches away" the hurt from the attack with carbolic acid.

Tragedy strikes for the Nolans when Johnny's drinking catches up with him. He dies, leaving the family destitute and Katie pregnant with their third child. In desperation, the children take after-school jobs at McGarrity's saloon, and the family survives. After Francie graduates from elementary school, she lies about her age and works full time, first at a flower factory and then in a newspaper clipping bureau. Helped by her lonely afternoons reading on the fire escape, Francie excels at the work, and is finally offered a job at an incredible \$20 per week.

The job offer represents an agonizing conflict for Francie--take the job and help the family or get the high-school education she so desperately wants. In the end, Katie decides that Neeley must be the one to return to school, and Francie returns to work, this time as a teletype operator. During this time, she meets Lee, and within a week pledges her heart and has it abruptly broken. In the meantime, she attends summer classes and meets the amazingly self-possessed Ben Blake, who befriends and "falls in love" with her, in his own limited way.

As the time passes after Johnny's death, a

daughter, Annie Laurie, is born to Katie, and the kindly Sergeant McShane asks for her hand in marriage. He will adopt Laurie and arrange for Francie to go to college at last. As Francie prepares to leave for Michigan, she decides she wants to stay what she is--a Brooklyn girl. She looks out the window and notices a little girl reading on the fire escape. "Good-bye, Francie," she whispers.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

What was it about the old man in the bakery that made Francie experience a feeling of panic about her own situation?

*To Francie, the old man, with his dirty toenails and thread-bare pants, represented what could happen--what usually happened--to people living in the kind of desperate poverty the Nolan family faced. As she looked at the man's tired face, she likely envisioned herself as a desperate old woman, killing time at a task meant for children. As she imagined an accordion "closing...closing," she likely felt the panic of knowing she had to get out of the squalor of Brooklyn, but had no idea how to do it.*

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

by  
Betty Smith

---

### Literary Analysis

When Francie visited the library for the last time, she made a last-minute decision not to turn in the card. Instead, she saved it for inclusion in the manilla envelope that she has prepared to be opened in 1967. What do you think was the significance of the card to Francie?

*The card might be considered to represent both the best and the worst aspects of Francie's childhood. On one hand, the library, with its brown bowl of flowers and world of pleasureable reading, was a treasured respite for Francie for years. On the other hand, the cold, unfeeling librarian who ignored and snubbed her repeatedly was just another of the humiliations and hurts she endured throughout her youth. By including the library card in her "time capsule," Francie was predicting that it would help her remember the bittersweet realities of her childhood.*

### Inferential Comprehension

To Francie, there were two choices for people who grew up in poverty and raised themselves up by the bootstraps: try to forget where you came from, or keep compassion in your heart for those you leave behind. The vaccination nurse had chosen the forgetting way. Knowing what you do about Francie, can you predict which path she will choose? Why?

*At the end of the book, Francie prepares to go to college in Michigan, a place Ben says may help her lose her Brooklyn accent. Francie decides that a Brooklyn girl is what she is and what she wants to remain. It's clear she will not forget where she came from, and in fact, she expresses a wistful love and admiration for Brooklyn, the place where she grew strong in the face of adversity.*

### Constructing Meaning

In what way was Francie like the umbrella tree that grew only in the barren, trampled soils of current and future tenement buildings?

*The umbrella tree was described as something that struggled to live under the worst of conditions. As Katie said, "It's strong because its hard struggle to live is making it strong. My children will be strong that way." By the end of the story, this characterization certainly holds true for Francie, whose childhood had been marked by tragedy, hunger, violence, and humiliation. Despite it all, she has emerged as a self-possessed young woman, ready to go off into the world on her own.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Literary Features** The major theme of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is that a child can grow up to be a person of character and quality even under the worst conditions. Overcoming adversity is one of the great themes in literature, whether it involves surviving tragedies, accomplishing great feats, or overcoming incredible odds. To explore the use of this theme more closely, ask students to think of other books in which the protagonists overcome adversity. Try to identify the characteristics of the people that allow them to accomplish their goals. What outside factors assisted them? How do these factors compare to Francie's character and the strength she derived from a loving family?

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** During the period of this story, New York City politics was under the control of the Democratic political machine sometimes referred to as "Tammany Hall." The events described in the book give some indication of the pervasiveness of "Mattie Mahony" in the life of the average man. It may serve an instructional purpose to research the practices of this incredible political institution. How did Tammany Hall seek to control the opinions and voting behavior of the public? Which of these practices could be considered unethical or illegal? Lead a discussion on the class's findings.

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

by  
Betty Smith

---

**Responding to Literature** Toward the end of the book, Francie decided to set aside some items from her childhood in a manilla envelope marked "Frances Nolan, age 15 years, 4 months. April 6, 1917." She was attempting to fix every detail of her life and her time, and have it to savor when she was old. As a classroom project, assign students to assemble their own "My Times" envelope, to include the following items: a newspaper article depicting current events; the title of a favorite book, poem, song, movie, or TV show; a current photograph of themselves; and one object of special meaning at this moment in their lives. Ask students to mark the envelopes with their name and age, and a specific date when they'd like to open the envelope again. Ask for volunteers to share the contents of their envelopes with the class.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** Katie's tin-can bank, a tradition passed on to her from her mother, was a symbol of her wish for a better way of life. She used it to save every spare penny for a dream of buying land some day. As a topic for class discussion, ask students to recall a "dream"--an object, trip, piece of clothing--for which they had to save. Topics for discussion can include the following questions: How long did it take to meet your goal? If the dream was never fulfilled, what happened to prevent it? Do you think saving for an item makes it more meaningful to receive?