



A TREE HOUSE IN QUEENS

AROUND
TOWN



It is a work that defines a geographical place in time and animates the essence of childhood as few novels ever have. Cited by the New York Public Library as one of the “Books of the Century,” *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, written by Betty Smith, captures the contradictions, triumphs and ironies of early twentieth century life in Brooklyn through the eyes of 12-year-old protagonist, Francie Nolan.

A shy, introverted girl with a dreamy, almost mystical self-perception, Francie’s entry into adolescence is played out against a family backdrop consisting of a hard-working, no-nonsense mother, a charming but alcoholic father who works as a sometimes waiter, and a younger brother who embraces the scrappiness of a tenement life teeming with a multi-ethnic street culture. Penned in 1943 at the height of World War II, the book was an immediate bestseller; over 300,000 copies were sold within the first six weeks of publication. In 1945, Smith’s novel was again at the cultural forefront when it was adapted into an award-winning motion picture by Twentieth Century Fox. Veteran character actor James Dunn won an Oscar as Best Supporting Actor for his mesmerizing portrayal of Francie’s hard-drinking and angst-ridden father, Johnny Nolan.

The twists and turns in the life of author Betty Smith closely mirrored that of her fictional heroine, Francie. Born to immigrant German parents in 1896, she grew up in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. Smith never graduated from high school, yet attended the University of Michigan, where she honed her skills in the fields of journalism, literature and drama. Her natural talent as a writer led her to become the recipient of the University’s prestigious Hopwood Award. She was also awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship in Drama and a Dramatists’ Guild-Fellowship in playwriting. During the course of her life, Smith penned 4 novels and over 70 plays. Among her other works are *Tomorrow Will Be a Better Day* (1947), *Maggie-Now* (1958) and *Joy in the Morning* (1963). Yet in spite of her prolific outpouring of numerous literary works, she will always be remembered for, and associated with, her magnum opus and first novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Married and divorced three times in an era when divorce was rarely discussed in polite society, Betty Smith was a perennial outsider who cared little for the social mores of her own time. A resident of Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Chapel Hill, North Carolina, her New York City attitude, working class background and Brooklyn accent made her distinctly sui generis in an

age of pre-feminist conformity. Today, 36 years after her death, and perhaps as a reflection of Francie Nolan’s insightful ironies, it is almost a cosmic joke to realize that Betty Smith wrote her paean to Brooklyn in the borough of Queens.

“I bought the house almost as a joke,” states Rick Leonardi, the present-day owner of Smith’s former home. A onetime New York City firefighter, Rick spent over two years removing what he describes as “a hundred years of old paint.” Standing three stories tall and made up of sixteen rooms, the house is painted in an antique shade of Federalist blue. It is an imposing edifice in the Woodhaven section of Queens. Originally built in 1905, Leonardi purchased the house ten years ago for the modest sum of \$168,000. “When I first saw the place,” he says, “I didn’t even know that Betty Smith lived here at one time, let alone that she wrote her famous novel in these rooms.” Designed in an architectural style that melds Queen Anne and Victorian motifs, the house today stills reflects the eclectic and at times contradictory nature of its famous resident. In front of the house Oriental deities stand in harmony next to Christian icons of the Virgin Mary. Inside, the large and comfortable rooms are well furnished in period pieces that are reminiscent of the late thirties and early forties. One of the most interesting artifacts in the house is a 1943 hardcover edition of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. The book’s original dust jacket urges readers to buy war bonds. Hand-cut silk screens adorn the ceilings, giving the entire structure a warm and inviting look. Electric and highly-polished gas-light(s) fixtures provide illumination throughout the house. Tiger oak paneling lines the walls, while hardwood accentuates the floor. Describing the structure as a “work in progress,” Leonardi continues to make improvements and upgrades. While the building does not have Federal Preservation status at this time, it is recognized as a Queens landmark. The Woodhaven Historical Society installed plaques on the house in 1998 to let passersby know that one of America’s most beloved authors once called this handsome edifice her home.

“The restoration work is a daily job,” states Leonardi. “Now that I’ve got the inside pretty much the way I want it, I’m working on the outside.” In the backyard he is patiently creating a below ground pond currently stocked with Koi fish. Resembling goldfish on steroids due to their large size, this Asian variety of carps exhibit the friendliness of dogs as they rise to the water’s surface in order to be petted by visitors.

The historical significance of the house is not lost on community residents. In March of this year, students from PS 132 joined Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepé and Betty Smith’s daughter, Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, in a tree planting ceremony in front of the Leonard Branch Public Library, located directly across the street from the Smith house. The participating

“There’s a tree that grows in Brooklyn. Some people call it the Tree of Heaven. It grows lushly and survives without sun, water and seemingly without earth.”

- Betty Smith, 1943

students presented Ms. Smith’s daughter with artwork they created to honor her famous mother. The library was often used by Smith during the time of her residency in the neighborhood. While the tree planting ceremony was primarily designed to honor Betty Smith, it was also part of Mayor Bloomberg’s Million Trees NYC Initiative beautification program.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is an enduring classic that transcends the time and place in which it is set. Human experience, potential and longing, as embodied in the rugged survival of a tree that a 12-year-old girl loved, will continue to animate the texture and nuances of living for generations to come. Written in Queens as a love letter to Brooklyn, the novel transcends the boundaries of concrete particulars associated with coming-of-age stories and imparts a universal message of hope to all who read it. The house in which Betty Smith wrote this remarkable work is a treasure that stands as a memorial to the past, and serves as an enduring message of fierce optimism for the future. ■