The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era (2024), **23,** 49–68
doi:10.1017/S1537781423000324

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn: Betty Smith's Bestselling Introduction to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era

Nancy C. Unger

Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA, USA
Email: nunger@scu.edu

Abstract

An analysis of Betty Smith's bestselling coming-of-age novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* reveals how popular literature can serve as an important introduction to signature issues of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Industrialization, urbanization, and immigration are highlighted in the novel—as well as attendant problems including poverty, machine politics, child labor, and prejudice and discrimination. Profound ignorance about sexuality and conception abound in a religious culture that made premarital sex and birth control sinful and shameful, with unhappy marriages and unwanted children the result. As poverty and deviant sexuality abound, eugenics is touted as a sensible solution. The novel helps to explain why there was no organized rebellion or revolution when the struggling poor found that the promise of upward mobility was elusive. Characters have differing definitions of the American Dream. Some seek respite in religion, leisure activities, or alcohol. Others find hope in a variety of reform measures, including public health and education, settlement houses, and unions. The novel ends as the technology that made the nation's industrialization and urbanization possible continues to produce new marvels that will transform the lives of the urban poor, bringing the Gilded Age and Progressive Era to a close.

Keywords: *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*; Betty Smith; American Dream; urban poverty; teaching

The article by Sarah Ruffing Robbins in this issue makes a compelling case for classroom use of Elaine Goodale Eastman's little-known novel *Yellow Star*. This article argues for the pedagogical value of another novel, one that remains well known and much beloved: Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Ironically, many of its fans today would likely draw a blank if asked to describe the signature issues of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, or to identify the period itself. But even a cursory review of the novel they treasure reveals a number of the era's key developments. Major historical themes it makes vivid include urbanization, industrialization, immigration, eugenics, women's suffrage, prohibition, machine politics, public education, urban leisure, public health, sexuality and reproduction, religion, social justice, self-help groups, and the viability of the American Dream.

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era (SHGAPE). This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is unaltered and is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained for commercial re-use or in order to create a derivative work.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

Undergraduates who are overwhelmed by the incredibly wide range of topics that encompass the period, and/or those who have a hard time understanding how all these myriad factors manifested in everyday life—or wonder why they should care—will find *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* an engaging and informative guide to the issues of the period as well as its value.

A Classic is Born

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith (1896–1972), published in 1943 by Harper and Brothers, is an unlikely classic. Diana Trilling began her review for *Library Journal* by stating, "I am a little bewildered by so much response to so conventional a little book," dismissing it as "heart-warming" rather than a "serious literary experience."[1] Some stubbornly continue to classify it as a "girls' book."[2] And, as Anna Quindlen notes in the foreword of the 2006 Harper Perennial Modern Classics paperback edition, "In its nearly five hundred pages, nothing much happens."[3] The story begins in the summer of 1912 when the main character is eleven and concludes in late 1918, a span of less than seven years. And yet this coming-of-age story, a thinly fictionalized memoir, has never gone out of print.

Betty Smith, who began her career as a playwright, worked for the Federal Theater Project (FTP), sponsored by the Works Progress Administration in the late 1930s. She was deeply immersed in the evolving "folk" drama movement that, according to national FTP Director Hallie Flanagan, would "satisfy the hunger of millions of Americans." Flanagan sent Smith and three other FTP writers to North Carolina, where they worked with theatrical manager and educator Frederick Henry Koch, director of the Carolina Playmakers. The chief concern of the folk dramatist, according to Koch, was to emphasize the common humanity in the "desperate struggle for existence," focusing on the local as a way of understanding the universal. Smith "applied the lessons learned from her work in the populist theater" to create *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.*[4] By the time of her death in 1972, it had sold more than six million copies (not including paperbacks, such as the enormously popular December 1943 Armed Services edition, specially sized to fit easily into cargo pockets and issued to troops free of charge), and had been translated into sixteen languages (Figure 1).[5] It was made into an Academy Award–winning film in 1945, marking Elia Kazan's debut as a feature film director. In 1951, Smith teamed up with George Abbott to write a musical based on the book, which premièred on Broadway and was revived in 1998 and again in 2003.[6] An adaptation for television aired in 1974. The book is a PBS Great American Read Top 100 Pick, and one of the New York Public Library's "Books of the Century." It is featured in the "Books That Shaped America" collection of the Library of Congress. In 1999, the *New York Times* called it "the Dickensian novel of New York we didn't know we had," and in 2018, it was termed a classic and hailed by *The New Yorker* as "one of the greatest American novels."[7] A full-length biography, *Betty Smith: Life of the Author of* A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, by Valerie Raleigh Yow, was published in 2008.

Some of the earliest reviews anticipated the book's reach and longevity. "There are so many distinct merits to this many-faceted book it is difficult to know which deserves the highest praise," raved Orville Prescott in the *New York Times.* Like many reviewers, Prescott commended the book for its sensitive portrayal of urban poverty. He praised Smith for producing not only "a poignant and deeply understanding story of childhood and family relations," but also a "grim and unsparing picture of the incredible economies of the desperately poor, of hunger and lacerated pride, of brutal surroundings in schools and streets that breed a precious maturing and worldliness among tenement children."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

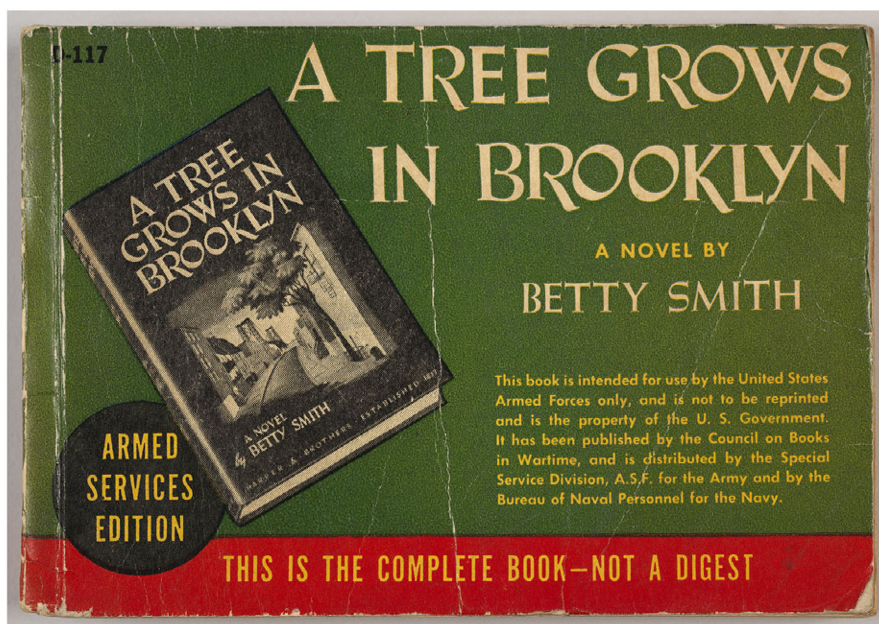

Figure 1. The Armed Services edition of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.* Courtesy of the North Carolina Collection in the Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Prescott was one of many reviewers to contrast Smith's novel with James T. Farrell's *Days of Anger*, published the same year. Farrell's novel was the fourth in his five volume "Danny O'Neill" series, based on his own coming of age in Gilded Age and Progressive Era Chicago. Prescott characterized Farrell's work as a "sour, sordid sociological report" written chiefly about degradation, while praising Smith for balancing the "unsavory" details of American slum life with "light and air … comedy and pathos, and an underlying rhythm pulsing to the surge and flow of humanity itself." "If you miss *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*," he warned, "you will deny yourself a rich experience," concluding that it is "a profoundly moving novel, and an honest and true one. It cuts right to the heart of life."[8]

Urbanization, Industrialization, and Immigration

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn showcases how the United States had been transformed from a primarily rural agrarian nation into an urban, industrial giant. Certainly, there had been urban centers even before the Civil War, but by the time the novel begins in 1912, high density areas like Brooklyn were so well established that millions of inner-city residents had known no other life. These Americans walked only on hard packed dirt or paved surfaces and had little to no exposure to agriculture, lawns, or gardens, let alone to the beauty and restorative power of untrammeled nature. The eponymous tree that grew in Brooklyn was the ailanthus, a type of invasive sumac that "grew in boarded up lots and out of neglected rubbish heaps … and cement."[9] Its appearance announced the decline of a prosperous neighborhood into a poor one. The tree is depicted as about the only greenery to thrive in Brooklyn's Williamsburg and Greenpoint neighborhoods. Newtown Creek, which flowed through the community, was so polluted as to be the source of the

brag-worthy "worst stink in the world."[10] At one point in the story, Johnny Nolan, determined to expose his children to the wonders of nature, takes them on a fishing trip, armed only with the knowledge he, born and raised in Brooklyn, has gleaned from songs and stories. The disastrous outing reveals how thoroughly urbanized this Gilded Age and Progressive Era population had been rendered, highlighting its near total separation from the world of nonhuman nature.

The period's signature urbanization goes hand in hand with its defining immigration and industrialization. Between 1900 and 1915, more than fifteen million immigrants arrived in the United States, a tally roughly equal to the number of immigrants who had arrived in the previous forty years combined.[11] The story's main character, Francie Nolan, was born in Brooklyn, the product of the marriage between Johnny Nolan, whose illiterate parents were driven from Ireland by the potato famine, and Katie Rommely, whose parents left Austria so that her father could avoid the draft. This lineage made Francie the only student in her classroom who was not the child of immigrants, and "in the Nolan neighborhood, if you could prove you'd been born in America, it was equivalent to a Mayflower standing."[12] Immigrants like Francie's grandparents, often with little to no formal education, had poured into New York. In 1910, three-fourths of that city's residents were either immigrants or first-generation Americans.[13] In New York and in cities across America, they and their children took on the unskilled jobs of the new industrial age.

Francie Nolan's neighbors, first- and second-generation immigrants, hold a variety of low-paying jobs to make ends meet. A few give piano, voice, and violin lessons for pennies. Others are working in food service or driving trucks, or cleaning schools, office buildings, and tenements. Many perform factory labor including the production of artificial flowers, braids, gloves, and rubber products. Such work is often seasonal, seldom dependable. Slack times result in layoffs. Johnny Nolan, who left school at age twelve when his father died, sporadically earns money as a singing waiter, but too often drinks up his wages, leaving his family primarily dependent on his wife's earnings. Katie Nolan also had left school after the sixth grade in order to work full time, and now supports her family as a scrub woman. Even before they took on factory jobs themselves, Francie and her brother Neely (short for Cornelius) competed with other children throughout the week to collect paper, rags, bottles, and scrap metal to sell to the junk dealer on Saturdays.

The Realities of Poverty

The urbanization, industrialization, and immigration that are cornerstones of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era set the stage for Smith's novel. It focuses not on the gilt of the period epitomized by the grand houses and lavish lifestyles of the period's wealthiest elite, but on the darkness that lurked just underneath that dazzling exterior. The Nolans' lives are played out merely blocks from the "high-toned boulevard" that was the "wide, tree-shaded [Bushwick] avenue," where houses were "rich and impressively built of large granite blocks with long stone stoops."[14] Although Francie Nolan is the protagonist, what scholar Kathleen Therrien calls "the day-to-day indignities of life in poverty" also play leading roles, yet Smith refrains from reducing the story to a "single, one dimensional definition of 'life in poverty.'"[15] The Nolans live in three different flats over the course of the novel. In their third apartment "there was no bathroom and the toilet was in the hall and shared by two families."[16] Francie and her brother share a tiny, windowless bedroom. The shafts that were supposed to supply light and air to interior tenement rooms are described as "a fearful repository" from the days that the windows could still open. By the Nolans' day, "You could

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

open an airshaft window, maybe, if you used a chisel and hammer," and the shafts, their windows sealed by dirt and debris, serve as homes for rats.[17]

These are not the genteel poor who occasionally are reduced to some minor belt tightening to get by. The Nolans lived primarily on "things made from stale bread, with condensed milk and coffee, onions, potatoes, and always the penny's worth of something bought at the last minute, added for fillip."[18] Food takes on great importance and its preparation is described in detail, although, Smith notes dryly, "they were so hungry … they could have digested nails had they been able to chew them."[19] Once a week in good times, the stale bread is augmented by chopped meat or the "end of the tongue," which was "mostly soft, small bones and gristle with only the memory of meat."[20] When even the cheapest foods are out of reach, the family's hunger is vividly portrayed.

The lack of health care available to the story's poor exacerbates their plight, and reflects the reality of the period.[21] At age seven, Francie "had never seen a doctor or nurse in all her small life."[22] Since hospitals were completely beyond financial reach, the poor entered them only as a last resort. As a result, "everyone knew you went there only to die."[23] Several characters in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* languish in their homes for years, draining their families' time and finances before finally dying of consumption, the term then used for tuberculosis. Sanitariums offered some relief for the wealthy sufferers (and their isolation offered some protection for their families and communities), but such facilities were not open to the poor.[24]

As would have been the case in real life, the Nolans' medical care is primarily based in folk wisdom. "No Rommely women had had a doctor at childbirth, ever." Instead, "you called in a midwife, a neighbor woman, or your mother … Babies were women's business."[25] The cost of such self-care was high. As Francie's Grandma Rommely poignantly observed, "When a woman gives birth, death holds her hand for a little while. Sometimes he don't let go."[26] To cut Katie's pain and ensure a safe birth, the midwife who delivered Francie was ruled by superstition rather than medical training, spending precious time during Katie's labor concocting a charm from a feather, a broken penknife blade, and dirty string all sprinkled with holy water. Due to such midwives' limited expertise and equipment, Francie's Aunt Sissy suffers eleven stillbirths. When Katie Nolan gives birth to her third child, the family can't afford even the five dollars for the local midwife, so Katie's two sisters deliver the baby. Births were carried out without anesthesia, so laboring women's screams are heard throughout the neighborhood. When the two unmarried Tynemore sisters hear Katie's cries in childbirth, one tells the other that she turned down a marriage proposal many years before because she was so afraid of experiencing such agony.

Occasionally, the need for greater expertise was recognized. When Francie ran a rusty nail into her knee her family paid the local druggist two dollars to treat her, and she was examined by an ambulance intern when she was violently attacked. Fully trained physicians, however, remain the purview of the rich. This unwritten law is finally broken when Aunt Sissy gives birth to a living baby at last, only because her husband insists that she be attended by a physician, who administers life-saving oxygen to the newborn.

Sexuality, Birth Control, and Eugenics

A surprising number of the pages of this Gilded Age and Progressive Era story that many have characterized as a children's book are dedicated to the terrible power of sex and the unwanted children that resulted from it. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* makes clear why

Margaret Sanger, leader of the movement to legalize contraception in the United States, chose Brooklyn as the site for her first family planning and birth control clinic.[27] Sexual curiosity and profound ignorance about sexuality and conception abound in a religious culture that made premarital sex and birth control sinful and shameful.[28] "Yes, there was great curiosity about sex among the adolescent children of Williamsburg," but, according to Betty Smith, there was also "a great hush-hush about sex in the neighborhood," primarily because when children asked questions, the parents didn't have the knowledge or the vocabulary to answer them.[29] Francie is enormously fortunate to have a mother who answers her questions about sex in plain terms, although Katie's knowledge is limited.

Married women who once enjoyed sex soon "endured the love-making rigidly, praying all the while that another child would not result." Such "bitter submissiveness" made their husbands "ugly and brutal."[30] Ugly and brutal sex abounds in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Grandma Rommely had been a virgin when she married, and her husband's sexual "brutality early killed all of her latent desires."[31] Francie would frequently hear "the childlike bride who lived in one of the other flats with her apelike husband. The bride's voice would be soft and pleading, his, rough and demanding." After a short silence the husband would begin to snore, and the wife would cry through the night.[32] When this same "apelike teamster" is "ordering his unwilling wife to prepare for bed," and hears Katie screaming in childbirth, he exclaims, "I hope to Christ she don't keep me awake all night," while his childlike bride weeps as she unfastens her dress.[33]

Francie's parents married not quite four months after they met, when Johnny was nineteen and Katie was seventeen. "You married him," her sister Sissy later reminded Katie, "because you wanted him to sleep with you but you were too religious to take a chance without a church wedding."[34] (Other girls took that chance, risking their immortal souls and living out their lives as unwed mothers. They face the disapproval of their neighbors, while the fathers experience no such stigma. As a neighbor of the Nolans observes, "The men have all the fun, and the women, the pain.")[35] To Katie and Johnny's "innocent amazement and consternation," Katie becomes pregnant within a few months of their wedding. When her breast milk dries up shortly after Francie's birth, the midwife tells her it's because another woman gave her the evil eye. Katie pays the midwife to instruct her on concocting a charm to override the spell, but, in truth, the cause is that Katie is pregnant again. And again, the pregnancy seems to thoroughly bewilder her. However, when the midwife offers to sell her an abortifacient for a dollar, she refuses, saying, in keeping with her faith, that she could never kill anything.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn reveals the profound impact of the lack of birth control. Overwhelmed by the poverty and ignorance that continues down through the generations, parents tend to bring up their children, seen as "necessary evils," by "scream and cuff."[36] Although Johnny Nolan is nonviolent and loves his wife and children, he admits, "I never wanted a family," and claims that he succumbed to alcoholism because "I got responsibilities I can't handle."[37] Katie normally considers herself "the boss of my own mind and my own body," and has the fortitude to persevere but, when pregnant, finds that "my body is boss over me."[38] As Margaret Sanger observed, "No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body," adding, "No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother."[39]

Issues of birth control were compounded by eugenics, a new movement among the many progressives who believed that society could be improved by conscious breeding of those deemed fit and desirable, and the conscious limit of breeding by those deemed inferior.[40] In *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, the doctor in charge of smallpox inoculations is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

appalled by the dirt, poverty, and ignorance of Williamsburg. He asks the nurse, "how that kind of people could survive," before he concludes "that it would be a better world if they were all sterilized and couldn't breed anymore."[41] This concept that poverty ran in families was not entirely foreign to the local population, even without the "scientific" framework of genetics. Katie Nolan, like her neighbors, believed some families that produced criminals suffered not from the effects of generations of poverty and desperation, but from "bad blood all along the line," with some people just "naturally bad."[42]

"If normal sex was a great mystery in the neighborhood," writes Betty Smith, "criminal sex was an open book."[43] Smith focuses not just on the sex criminals, but on the shame brought upon their victims. The children of Williamsburg routinely interact with a variety of sexual predators. At the age of ten, Francie always gets an extra penny from Carney, the junk man, "because she did not shrink when he pinched her cheek."[44] A few years later she confided in her diary, "Carney did not pinch my cheek today. He pinched something else."[45] The proprietor of the neighborhood candy story "inveigled a little girl into his dismal back room."[46] A violin teacher made his female pupils take their lessons barefoot, and he spent the hour staring at their feet as they played. A school principal, "a hard-bitten, heaving cruel woman of middle years," whipped the girls through their dresses but made the boys pull down their pants so she could flay their naked buttocks with a cane.[47]

When Francie was nearly fourteen, a prowler had been molesting girls in the neighborhood, but parents were loath to report it, as the victims would be so shamed by the local community as to never be able to return to a normal childhood. Only after a seven-year-old girl was raped and murdered did parents openly warn their children about the dangers of being caught alone in a dark hallway. The murderer is ultimately shot by Katie Nolan just as he prepares to molest Francie, but Francie continues to be the target of sexual predators, as when she is groped on an elevated train so crowded that "no matter how she twisted and turned, she couldn't get away from that hand." Significantly, she is too ashamed to cry out for help.[48]

One of the greatest tragedies in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is that poverty and ignorance prematurely curtailed childhood. Even in the summer, when the days "should have been joyous," there was instead "something sad about the children thin in body but with the baby curves still lingering" because "all their nerve would get them nowhere in the world."[49] At the age of four, Francie is responsible for watching her little brother while their parents are at work. Illiterate Aunt Sissy becomes sexually active at twelve. Married and pregnant at fourteen, she is found jumping rope with the other children.

The American Dream and Conflicting Definitions of Upward Mobility

The novel invites discussion of the causes and consequences of poverty. The characters are neither vilified nor romanticized for being poor. It has rendered some bitter, callous, and cruel, and others, like Johnny Nolan, hopeless and broken. Francie remains heartbreakingly vulnerable, hopeful for better days. Even she, however, is clear-eyed about the limitations of her situation. Much of the book centers on the frustration of the Nolans and their neighbors at their inability, despite all their hard work, to seize the American Dream. In telling their story, Smith explores a key question about the Gilded Age and Progressive Era: When the struggling poor found that the promise of upward mobility was elusive, why was there no rebellion or revolution—or at least a much larger Socialist Party?

Smith's answers to that question are myriad. For many of the first generation, life in the United States did deliver on its promise. For Francie Nolan's paternal grandparents, for

example, poverty was a step up from the sure death of famine-stricken Ireland. Emigration allowed her maternal grandfather to avoid conscription into the Austrian army, something he found worthy of almost any hardship. His bitterness came when the children he anticipated would support him left his household to marry young. It was his illiterate wife Mary who harbored dreams of great generational success. Mary Rommely bore seven children. The oldest of the four who survived, Sissy, remained illiterate because her mother learned too late that her American-born children were entitled to a free education. Her other three daughters were educated through the sixth grade before the family finances demanded that they take on paid-work full time.

Although Mary Rommely missed her homeland, she had wanted her children "to be born in a free land."[50] "For thousands of years," she reminds her daughter Katie, "our people have been peasants working the land of others." "Here we do better working with our hands in the factory," she insisted, for "There is a part of each day that does not belong to the master but which the worker owns himself."[51] When Katie reminds her that her children "haven't done so well," Mary Rommely defends the American Dream: "In spite of hard, unfamiliar things, there is here—hope," noting that, in the old country, no matter a man's talents and ambitions, he could never rise beyond his father's station. "Here he belongs to the future. In this land, he may be what he will, if he has the good heart and the way of working honestly at the right things." When Katie again points out that, despite their good hearts and hard, honest work, she and her sisters have not done appreciably better as second-generation immigrants, Mary's response is twofold. Immediately, and significantly, she blames herself, not the American system, claiming that she was too ignorant to take advantage of the available opportunities, and that her illiteracy left her vulnerable to swindlers. Yet she also asserts that, despite her personal failures, "already, it is starting—the getting better." As she picks up Katie's baby daughter Francie in her arms, she proclaims, "This child was born of parents who can read and write," adding, "To me, this is a great wonder."[52]

The free education that was so central to Grandma Rommely's plan for subsequent generations to achieve the American Dream initially proved to be a mixed blessing. Even the advances in public health that characterize some of the best of Progressive Era reforms are not uniformly met with gratitude. To retard the spread of smallpox, poor children are required to be immunized at a public clinic before they are allowed to attend school. Parents, many of whom did not speak English, are appalled to learn that their healthy children will be injected with a form of smallpox. "A free country? they asked. What's free about it, they reasoned, when the law forces you to educate your children and then endangers their lives to get them to go to school?"[53] Children who are found to have lice are humiliated by the nurse who pays weekly inspection visits to the school.

Issues of class and privilege are prominent throughout the novel. Francie's school is overcrowded and she has been in school "but half a day" when she learns that the privileged students are the children of the neighborhood's prosperous storekeepers. Their daughters are the ones "with freshly curled hair, crisp clean pinafores and new silk hair bows."[54] In this "ugly, brutalizing" school, as a member of "the great crowd of unwashed," Betty Smith writes caustically, Francie "learned of the class system of a great democracy." As Smith's biographer Valerie Yow notes, the novel "explores the impact of assaults in the world outside, such as the dominance of the middle-class interpretation of reality over the working-class interpretation and the confusion caused by ignorance of other ethnic cultures [in which] mistrust persisted and poisoned their daily ventures."[55] The poorly trained, cruel teachers "acted as though they [the poor children] had no right to live." Even the librarian who works at Francie's

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

beloved library hates children. Instead of banding together at school, the poor children "hated each other as much as the teacher hated them."[56] They "learned no compassion from their own anguish."[57] Yet it is at this school that Francie is exposed to the visiting music and art teachers who served all the local schools and "who loved the vast hordes of unwashed and unwanted children more than … the cared for ones."[58] When Francie and her father concoct a plan for her to circumvent the rules and register at a school outside of their district, she becomes a student in "a neighborhood peopled by fifth and sixth generation Americans," where "the parents were too American, too aware of the rights granted them by the Constitution to accept injustices meekly. They could not be bulldozed and exploited as could the immigrants and the second-generation Americans."[59]

For every immigrant who bitterly resents that the rags to riches scenario they had anticipated could not be realized, there is another who, like Mary Rommely, is gratified by incremental generational mobility. Such gains inspire Rommely to believe that even greater successes could be achieved, instructing her daughter in frugality in order to "buy a bit of land that we may hand down to our children … that will raise us up on the face of the earth."[60] Although her daughter is incredulous that her mother could entertain such extravagant dreams, even she is aware that Brooklyn boasts a variety of success stories, including that of a young man who came from Ireland "with nothing but a trunk small enough to be carried on his back." After laboring on the docks while studying nights, he entered the police force, working his way up to sergeant before making considerable money in real estate and aspiring to political office. The American Dream proved to be elusive, but just real enough to keep hope alive for many still believing in the possibility of individual or generational improvement within the current system.[61] Despite her doubts, the purpose of the tin can savings bank Katie constructs according to her mother's instructions is to eventually fund the purchase of land. Even the children contribute, reserving half of the pennies they earn for the bank.

Powerful Traditions: Religion, Unions, and Ethnic Loyalties

Some characters find solace in religion, confident that an eternity of heavenly reward will more than compensate for their brief sufferings on earth. The Nolans are Catholic, and Francie dutifully confesses and performs the assigned penance weekly. Others, including Johnny Nolan, believe that an earthly solution (or at least, dignity and financial solvency) would come from the workers themselves when they organized and bargained collectively. After telling his daughter of the exploitation he suffered as an independent singing waiter, he states proudly, "The Union gets me jobs where the boss has to pay me certain wages, regardless of tips," concluding, "All trades should be unionized."[62] Johnny hopes, "Maybe someday it will be that the Unions will arrange for a man to work and to have time for himself too," before conceding, "but that won't be in my time."[63] When Johnny, "so proud to be a Union man," is kicked out of the union for being "a bum and a drunk," he loses the sense of agency, brotherhood, and support that was his last hope. He refuses to turn in his union button.[64] Once home he "sobbed as though he could never stop," before he slips out into the night. Three days later he is found on the street in a coma, and dies in the hospital without ever regaining consciousness. He is thirty-four years old, the only one of the four Nolan boys to live past his thirtieth birthday. He is buried with his union button and, ironically, the

Waiters' Union sends a huge floral arrangement to the funeral, decorated with a purple ribbon stamped "Our Brother" in gold.[65]

Others in the book, who might have made the unions far bigger and stronger had they identified primarily as workers, are held back by the strong traditions based on ethnic pride within their diverse communities. These fictional constraints reflect the reality of the times. During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, major political figures were concerned about the loyalties of America's huge influx of immigrants and urged assimilation to American ways as the only way forward. Progressive reformer Belle La Follette, wife of U.S. Senator Robert La Follette (R-Wisconsin), was unusual in her publicly stated belief that "different" was not synonymous with "inferior." She asked whether immigrants, "with their older civilizations … do not bring some standards that it would be well for us to adopt rather than displace." She urged that "Instead of the assumption of superiority on our part and limitation on theirs, there should be greater mutual respect and teachability."[66] La Follette's defense of ethnic identity and multiculturalism was drowned out by the insistent pleas of others, including presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, that the foreign-born become thoroughly Americanized. In a 1915 speech delivered at Carnegie Hall to the Catholic service organization the Knights of Columbus, Theodore Roosevelt declared, "There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americans." According to Roosevelt, "The one absolutely certain way of bringing this nation to ruin, of preventing all possibility of its continuing to be a nation at all, would be to permit it to become a tangle of squabbling nationalities, an intricate knot of German-Americans, Irish-Americans, English-Americans, French-Americans, Scandinavian-Americans or Italian-Americans each preserving its separate nationality, each at heart feeling more sympathy with Europeans of that nationality, than with the other citizens of the American Republic."[67]

Roosevelt targeted immigrants like Katie Rommely's Austrian father, who clung tightly to the traditions of his birthplace. For Thomas Rommely, this fierce commitment to not assimilate included hating all Russians and refusing to speak English. In the fight for cultural dominance, perhaps even stronger and more divisive than loyalties to a home country were the concomitant traditions of finding solace, satisfaction, and superiority in prejudice and discrimination against other immigrants, based on traditions of race, religion, and country of origin. When Francie Nolan's Aunt Sissy announces that she will be attended by a Jewish doctor, her sisters are shocked. Aunt Evy sums up their disapproval, urging, "Like should stick to like. You don't see Jews calling in Christian doctors."[68] Antisemitism was so engrained that, as a third-generation immigrant who admires much about the dignity and pride of the Jews, Francie is mystified when a Jewish peddler is offended when she orders a pickle the same as the other kids did: "Gimmee a penny sheeny pickle." The Jew disdainfully calls her "Goyem!" before he retreats to the rear of his store, "where his temper cooled as he sat nodding in his beard dreaming of old days in the old country."[69] Smith notes that "Most Brooklyn Germans had a habit of calling everyone who annoyed them a Jew."[70] Moreover, "all the world knew that the Sicilians belonged to the Black Hand and that the Black Hand Society always kidnapped little children and held them for ransom."[71] When the Nolan family moves to different quarters, Mary Rommely sprinkles holy water "to drive out any devils that might be lurking in the corners," for "Who knows? Protestants might have been living there before."[72] On the flip side of this Catholic vilification of Protestants, Mary Rommely's daughter Evy takes her children out of the Catholic Sunday school and puts them in the Episcopal Sunday school because "the Protestants were more refined than the Catholics."[73] Ethnic slurs abound in the pages of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*: "dirty Irish Mick," "lousy heinies," "wop."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

Betty Smith does not tackle every issue that divides the working class. The Gilded Age and Progressive Era is infamous for the issuing, in 1896, of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation, yet Smith's focus remains tight on the Nolans and their neighbors. People of color barely exist in the Nolans' world. African Americans appear only in "Down Where the Cotton Blossoms Grow," a song Johnny sings to Francie ("Hear the darkies singing soft and low"). The lone Chinese American laundry operator, complete with abacus, is Francie's sole exposure to the "mysteries of the Orient."[74] Yet despite the white privilege based in their shared European origins, about the only thing that unites the diverse residents of the Nolans' poor community is the tenacity of the ties to their separate ethnic identities.

The Paradox of Machine Politics

Notwithstanding these divisions and the grinding poverty that will contribute to his early death, Johnny Nolan celebrates not just the union but also the political possibilities of America, extolling "what a free country we got here." When Francie asks what's so free about living in a country when you have to pay to ride in a hansom cab, he answers that "in the old countries, certain people aren't free to ride in them, even if they have the money." When she counters that it would be more of a free country if they could ride in them without having to pay, he concludes, "triumphantly," that that would be socialism, "and we don't want that over here [b]ecause we got Democracy and that's the best thing there is."[75]

Johnny Nolan's defense of democracy peacefully co-existed with his support for the corruption of that system in the form of machine politics, a signature issue of Gilded Age and Progressive Era urban life that many students find confusing. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* examines the appeal of this corrupt system with considerable nuance. Despite its decidedly undemocratic nature, the local political machine is another institution that led many poor people to believe that they were not entirely powerless within the current system. Although she is a child, even Francie Nolan knows that local elections are not truly democratic because the "party sachems … decided who'd be elected and who mowed down."[76] However, rather than despairing over this widespread violation of democratic ideals, Johnny Nolan believes that Tammany Hall "does a lot of good for the people." He reminds his disbelieving wife that the local political machine provides services such as free legal advice and notifying people when civil service exams are being offered for police officers, firefighters, or letter carriers (plum positions because they offer stability and are eligible for pensions). When Katie points out that a neighbor who'd taken such an exam was denied a position, her husband replies, "Ah! That's because he's a Republican. If he was a Democrat, they'd take his name and put it on the top of the list." For Johnny, like many of his neighbors, this version of "pay to play" was not an unconscionable violation of the basic tenets of democracy, but important evidence that political machines created rare opportunities for poor people to get ahead. "Look at all the jobs they get for voters," he urges, "You know how they get them, don't you?" Katie counters, "They inspect a factory and overlook the fact that they're violating the factory laws. Naturally, the boss pays back by letting them know when they need men and Tammany gets all the credit for finding jobs."[77] When Katie continued to point out the inherent unfairness of political machines, Johnny's response helps to explain why many preferred to support corrupt officials rather than agitate for meaningful political reform: "No matter what you say, Tammany's good to the poor people." Katie's retort, that "For what Tammany gives to the people, it takes from them double," is dismissed out of hand.[78]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

The Importance of Societal Support Systems

The sustenance provided by ethnic and religious organizations is also presented. Upon her husband's death, Katie Nolan wants the attending physician to ignore the acute alcoholism that destroyed his health, and list the attendant pneumonia as the sole cause of death. When the physician resists, it is the Nolans' parish priest who not so gently pressures him to comply. When the doctor remembers that the priest is a member of the hospital board he concedes "as a personal favor."[79] With their savings depleted, Katie decides that Francie must drop out of school at age fourteen to go to work. Although she knows that once Francie "leaves grammar school without graduating, she'll never be able to get into high school," she firmly rejects her sister's reasonable suggestion of getting aid from Catholic Charities, a welcome source of support for many in their community. Aid societies and fraternal orders and lodges like the Sons of Poland, Knights of Columbus, United Hebrew Charities, and Sons of Hermann provided relief, nonprofit life insurance, and a variety of other services to the poor of their particular ethnicity or religion.[80] Their assistance reinforced ethnic and religious identities even as it made life in America more bearable.

Others kept faith with America because of outreach extended to the poor by various civic entities, including police and fire departments. Even when the family's finances waned as Johnny's drinking increased, Katie Nolan remains too proud to accept such aid. When she learns that the police have "passed the hat," ostensibly in recognition of her help in capturing the child murderer, she refuses to accept their reward. The astonished sergeant argues, "Sure you'll be needin' it with your man not workin' steady and the childhern needin' this and that." Katie Nolan insists, "We don't need anything from nobody," but the sergeant's incredulity suggests that other poor people have been grateful for the largesse of the police.[81]

Despite Katie Nolan's refusal to accept charity for her own family, when their finances improve, she suggests that in lieu of Christmas gifts to each other, they pool their resources to buy food for the Tynmores. These two elderly sisters had been scraping by giving music lessons (and living primarily on the weak tea and soda crackers grudgingly provided by the mothers of their pupils at the end of each lesson), but are now going hungry. Helping out struggling neighbors out of love does not, in Katie Nolan's worldview, sink to the same level as an institution doling out relief. Even she takes money from her sisters when times are especially tough.

The Nolans also willingly make use of the free services provided at the local settlement house, where they are treated with kindness and respect. In her youth, Betty Smith (then Elizabeth Wehner) spent Saturdays and several evenings a week at Brooklyn's Jackson Street Settlement House. Like settlement houses in major cities all across Gilded Age and Progressive America, the three-story brick building at 120 Jackson Avenue offered a variety of services free of charge to help poor residents navigate American urban life. An anonymous donor provided the building and volunteers offered classes in life skills. Smith learned to cook, sew, and embroider, and at the age of nineteen joined the staff as a sewing teacher. She not only learned and passed on valuable skills, but also found a social circle, forming close friendships with other girls.[82] In addition, she learned the rudiments of dramatics, piquing an interest that would ultimately lead to the long career as a playwright that preceded her success as a novelist. At the age of twenty-one she joined the house's debate team, coached by George Smith, who became her first husband.

In Smith's novel, Katie Nolan greatly admires Miss Jackson, who teaches at the local settlement house. Although Miss Jackson is poor, and lives in a tiny room on the premises,

she keeps her one dress clean and pressed. And more importantly, she is educated, and "Her eyes look straight into yours when you talk to her. When you listen to her, it's like you used to be sick but hearing her voice, it's making you well again." Like Betty Smith herself, the poor in the story find dignity and empowerment rather than charity at the settlement house (Figure 2). Francie Nolan finds solace, support, and valuable skills there. She enrolls in sewing classes in the hopes of being able to make her own clothes, and takes dancing lessons simply for enjoyment.

Other joys made life in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era more tolerable for the poor. Francie Nolan discovers the local library, a "little old shabby place" that she finds beautiful because it offers her access to the books that reveal the world to her (Figure 3). In the novel's opening pages, after selling her weekly quota of junk, she travels to the candy store, to the library, and finally to the cozy nook she has created for herself on the tenement's fire escape. In a scene that anticipates *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, she is hidden from others and, looking up from her reading, could view the world through the leaves of a towering tree. "As she read, at peace with the world and happy as only a little girl could be with a fine book, a little bowl of candy, and all alone in the house, the leaf shadows shifted and the afternoon passed."[83]

Figure 2. Betty Smith, circa 1951, in the Samuel M. Boone Photographic Collection #P0084, North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

Poverty Redux

"To write about tenement life is to tread on tricky ground," noted the *Oakland Tribune's* review of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.* "Most such stories are one, grim; two, sappily sentimental; or three, determinedly humorous. Betty Smith falls into none of these traps."[84] Instead Smith based her novel "on the belief that individuals—sometimes cruel but often generous and compassionate" populated Brooklyn.[85] Some of her struggles to avoid romanticizing poverty are reflected in the inner turmoil of Francie's mother. While Katie Nolan loves her children and wants them to find happiness where they can, she worries that their "gift of imagination" could color "too rosily the poverty and brutality of their lives," and better enable them to endure it rather than strive for change.[86] Although she doesn't begrudge her children simple joys such as looking at Christmas decorations and displays, she worries that "they think they're mighty lucky that they're living and it's Christmas again … Johnny and the children can't see how pitiful it is that our neighbors have to make happiness out of this filth and dirt."[87] But rather than becoming inured to the poverty around her, Francie finds that "Growing up spoiled a lot of things." She discovers that "the scales at the tea store did not shine so brightly anymore and she found the bins were chipped and shabby looking." Moreover, it spoiled "the nice game they had when there was nothing to eat in the house."[88] (Katie and the children would pretend they were North Pole explorers trapped in a cave, awaiting relief.) Betty Smith pulls no punches in depicting the soul-destroying aspects of poverty, but she captures the moments of warmth and happiness with prose that is equally vivid and compelling. "The Nolans just couldn't get enough of life."[89] "Any kind of musical, artistic, or storytelling talent was wonderful to them [the Rommely sisters] and they felt it their duty to nurture and guard these things."[90]

Figure 3. As a child, Betty Smith frequented this Williamsburg, Brooklyn, branch of the public library, shown here in 1904. It served as the model for Francie Nolan's beloved library. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs LC-USZ62-15718). https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2014647950/.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

In reality, urban life offered plenty of temporary pleasures and cheap distractions, inviting comparisons to how Americans today chose to spend their leisure time and discretionary income, and the impact of those decisions.[91] In the novel, Johnny and his brothers find solace in liquor and betting on horse races. When she can afford it, Katie joins her sister at the ten-cent matinee. In addition to library books, Francie loves the theater, which also stokes her imagination. On dates, Francie enjoys the automat, a dime-a-dance hall, and the movies, an entertainment form growing fast in popularity.[92]

The End of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era

Scholarly arguments rage over when the Gilded Age and Progressive Era begins and ends.[93] Betty Smith's coverage ends in September 1918, as the conditions that defined Francie Nolan's childhood gradually become outdated, for "great changes were taking place in the country."[94] By the end of the book, not all of the characters find success or even survive, but the technology that made the nation's industrialization and urbanization possible continues to produce new marvels that will transform the lives of the urban poor. Gaslight, for example, is declared "out of date. They're putting 'lectricity even into the cheapest tenements," including the Nolans', whose flat is also converted to steam heat in 1917.[95] While airplanes are dismissed as "just a crazy fad [that] won't last long," it is predicted that soon, "Even the horse will be a thing of the past," for "that feller out in Dee-triot's making cars so cheap that soon every working man can have one."[96] Another new invention is being touted: the wireless, which is hailed as the "greatest thing ever invented." Enthusiasts marvel that "words come through the air, mind you, without wires." All one needs is "a kind of machine to ketch it and earphones to listen in."[97] Francie trains to become a touch typist on the teletype machine, thinking it "a wonderful miracle that she could sit at that machine and type and have the words come out hundreds of miles away on a piece of paper on the roller of a machine in Cleveland, Ohio!"[98] Women in the tenements, fearful of the terrors of childbirth, learn of the advent of "twilight sleep," a drug administered in childbirth so that "a woman don't feel a thing when the kid comes."[99]

Social changes, big and small, are also afoot. Women bob their hair. Both the influenza epidemic and the world war that are ravaging the globe make appearances. For some characters, the war lessens the ethnic ties that had so divided the immigrant population. One character changes his name from Schultz to Scott because "I'm thorough with the old country … After what they done to them Belgian babies … I want no part of Germany, I'm an American now."[100] Women's suffrage and prohibition are foreshadowed, as is urban renewal.

As Smith's rendering of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era comes to a close, Grandma Rommely's faith in the American dream is borne out, often in surprising ways. When her husband Johnny dies, Katie Nolan, "remembering something her mother had said fourteen years ago," slowly and carefully reads the deed to the cemetery plot she has purchased, so as not to be swindled. Their savings entirely depleted, Francie asks if they should once again begin to save. Her mother says no, observing that, in their own way, they have achieved the American Dream: "You see, we own a bit of land now."[101] Other markers of "progress" are not so grim. Neither Francie nor Neely has their father's penchant for alcohol. Katie Nolan was right when she observed that the tree that grew in Brooklyn was "strong because its hard struggle to live is making it strong," and prophesied, "My children will be strong

that way."[102] Grandma Rommely's belief in the power of education and generational mobility is realized when Francie learns in school "that there were other worlds beside the world she had been born into and that these other worlds were not unattainable."[103] This knowledge inspires her desperate efforts to continue her education. Despite her lack of a high school diploma she finds a way to remain employed while enrolled in the local college. Because of Francie's income, Neely is able to remain in high school and secures a number of well-paying, part-time jobs. The long-suffering Katie Nolan accepts the proposal of the prosperous and honorable Sergeant McShane, who offers to be not just a faithful husband but to put both Francie and Neely through college. The story ends with Francie preparing to move to Ann Arbor to attend the University of Michigan. Her future, complete with a handsome, supportive, and ambitious boyfriend, looks bright, yet she proudly asserts that "she was a Brooklyn girl with a Brooklyn name and a Brooklyn accent … qualities that she didn't want to change."[104] However, Betty Smith observes, "There would be no old neighborhood to come back to. After the war, the city was going to tear down the tenements and ugly school … and build a model housing project on the site."[105] The Gilded Age and Progressive Era Brooklyn that shaped both Betty Smith and Francie Nolan would soon no longer exist.

Conclusion

One of the challenges for those who identify as scholars of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era is helping colleagues who identify as scholars of a particular subject field (e.g., medicine, the South, African American, gender, etc.,) understand and appreciate that if their work is primarily set in the requisite time period, they are Gilded Age and Progressive Era scholars, as well. In capturing a unique slice of history, Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* demonstrates the need for broader thinking about what might be classified as Gilded Age and Progressive Era literature, and how that literature could be used to introduce students to such a diverse and complicated period. When literature is employed, the tendency has been to focus on literary figures of the period writing about the period.[106] Yet *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, published in 1943, provides a compelling portrait of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era and its challenges in an engaging story firmly anchored in Smith's lived history. Moreover, it provides an important counterweight to depictions of the period, both fictional and nonfictional, that focus exclusively on the elite, or on technological or political developments. This lightly fictionalized version of one woman's girlhood should be recognized and appreciated as a great work of storytelling that has exposed millions of Americans to defining conditions of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. It holds the potential to be a valuable pedagogical tool to help students understand and appreciate the value of studying this complex period.

Acknowledgments. Don Whitebread, Mary Whisner, Lily Sheehan, and Christopher McKnight Nichols generously provided thoughtful edits and commentary on various drafts of this article.

Notes

1 Diana Trilling, *Library Journal*, May 1, 1943.

2 See Robert Cornfield, "The Tree Still Grows in Brooklyn," *New York Times*, Jan. 3, 1999, 27; Alan Kraut, "Books That Shaped America—*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*," Oct. 1, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rUxetvI9BU (accessed May 11, 2022).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

3 Preface to Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), vii.
4 Joyce Zonana, "The Hungry Artist: Rereading Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*," *Hudson Review* 7 (Autumn 2021): 45c–58. See Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940); Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan: A Life In the Theatre* (New York: Knopf, 1988).
5 Harriet King, "Betty Smith," *American National Biography*, 1999, https://doi.org/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.article.1602241 (accessed Dec. 15, 2023); Zonana, "Hungry Artist," 454.
6 Alvin Kleinmetuchen, "A Longed-For Musical from Times Gone by," *New York Times*, May 3, 1998, NJ27; Postscript to Smith, *Tree Grows*, 13.
7 Zonana, *Hungry Artist*, 453; Amy Davidson Sorkin, "Why Mark Zuckerberg Should Read *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*," *The New Yorker*, Apr. 3, 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/why-mark-zuckerberg-should-read-a-tree-grows-in-brooklyn (accessed June 12, 2023).
8 Orville Prescott, "Books of the Times," *New York Times*, Aug. 18, 1943, 17.
9 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 6.
10 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 20.
11 "Immigrants in the Progressive Era," U.S. History Primary Source Timeline, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/progressive-era-to-new-era-1900-1929/immigrants-in-progressive-era/ (accessed June 5, 2022).
12 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 170.
13 "Immigrants in the Progressive Era," Library of Congress.
14 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 191.
15 Kathleen Therrien, "'Why Do They Have to … to … Say Things … ?' Poverty, Class, and Gender in Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*," *Legacy* 16 (1999): 94.
16 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 122.
17 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 130.
18 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 44.
19 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 52.
20 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 13.
21 See David G. Schuster, "The Rise of a Modern Concept of 'Health,'" *A Companion to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, ed. Christopher McKnight Nichols and Nancy C. Unger (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 255–67; Alan Kraut, "Plagues and Prejudice: Nativism's Construction of Disease in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century New York City," in *Hives of Sickness: Public Health and Epidemics in New York City*, ed. David Rosner (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 65–90.
22 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 145.
23 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 438.
24 See Daniel M. Fox, "Social Policy and City Politics: Tuberculosis Reporting in New York, 1889–1900," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 49 (Summer 1975): 169–95; Barbara Bates, *Bargaining for Life: A Social History of Tuberculosis, 1876–1938* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).
25 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 438.
26 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 314.
27 See Margaret Sanger, *The Autobiography of Margaret Sanger* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1938).
28 For an overview on sexuality in the period, see Leigh Ann Wheeler, "Inventing Sexuality: Ideologies, Identities, and Practices in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era," *Companion to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 102–15.
29 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 249.
30 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 232.
31 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 62.
32 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 54.
33 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 340.
34 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 102.
35 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 341.
36 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 43, 232.
37 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 35.
38 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 304.
39 Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 192.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

40 See Charles Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1911); Thomas Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). There is tremendous controversy over Sanger's relationship with eugenics, as summarized in Joyce Berkman's "The Question of Margaret Sanger," *History Compass* 9 (June 2011): 474–84. Scholarship on the political right, including George Grant's *Killer Angel* (2001), condemns her as complicit with eugenicists' elitist and racist agenda. As Berkman notes, Chesler's *Woman of Valor* (originally published in 1992), takes a more nuanced approach, asserting that "though Sanger upheld the eugenicist aim to discourage those deemed grossly unfit from procreating and even supported their coercive sterilization, she opposed the class and race bias of many eugenicists, warning against equating the poor or people of color with the unfit and insistent that 'intelligence and other inherited traits vary by individual, not by group.'" Subsequent works have vilified Sanger (Angela Franks, *Margaret Sanger's Eugenics Legacy* [Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2005]) or defend her by placing her within the political and ideological straitjackets of her time (Carole McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916–1945* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994.]).
41 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 146.
42 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 231.
43 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 251.
44 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 8.
45 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 244.
46 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 10.
47 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 152–53.
48 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 379.
49 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 116.
50 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 82.
51 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 85.
52 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 82.
53 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 144. Gilded Age and Progressive Era debates about the proper balance between freedom and regulation raged over a variety of topics, including compulsory education and vaccinations for children, unionization, and wages and hours. See Mary O. Furner, "Defining the Public Good in The U.S. Gilded Age, 1883–1898," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 17 (Apr. 2018): 241–75; Laura Sawyer, "Contested Meanings of Freedom: Workingmen's Wages, the Company Store System, and the *Godcharles v. Wigeman* Decision," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 13 (July 2013): 285–319; Betsy Wood, *Upon the Altar of Work: Child Labor and the Rise of a New American Sectionalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020).
54 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 151.
55 Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Betty Smith: Life of the Author of* A Tree Grows in Brooklyn (Chapel Hill, NC: Southern Sky Press, 2008), 154.
56 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 152.
57 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 161.
58 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 164.
59 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 170, 174.
60 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 85.
61 Such beliefs were actively bolstered by sources ranging from Theodore Roosevelt's *American Ideals and Other Essays, Social and Political* (Philadelphia: Gebbie and Company, 1903) to Russell Conwell's phenomenally popular speech "Acres of Diamonds." See Russell H. Conwell, *Acres of Diamonds* (New York: Harper and Row, 1915) and Daniel W. Bjork, *Victorian Flight: Russell Conwell and the Crisis of American Individualism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1978). For the impact of the American Dream, see Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the U.S. Working Class* ((London: Verso, 2018); Sarah Churchwell, *Behold, America: "America First" and "the American Dream"* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).
62 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 33.
63 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 35.
64 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 280.
65 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 287.

66 La Follette quoted in Nancy C. Unger, *Belle La Follette: Progressive Era Reformer* (London: Routledge, 2016), 92.
67 Theodore Roosevelt, "Hyphenated Americanism, 1915," in *The Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, ed. William Link and Susannah Link (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 166.
68 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 439.
69 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 45.
70 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 113.
71 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 115.
72 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 103.
73 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 67.
74 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 138.
75 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 192.
76 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 178.
77 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 180.
78 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 181.
79 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 285.
80 See Maureen Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion: Irish Catholic Nuns and the Origins of New York's Welfare System, 1830–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907); Mark Raphael, "The Jewish Community and Ellis Island, 1909," *Michael: On the History of the Jews in the Diaspora* 3 (Jan. 1975): 172–87.
81 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 263.
82 Yow, *Betty Smith*, 37.
83 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 26.
84 Quoted in Yow, *Betty Smith*, 186.
85 Yow, *Betty Smith*, 186–88.
86 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 198–99.
87 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 206.
88 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 217.
89 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 52.
90 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 67.
91 See Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).
92 On the growth of the film industry, see Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
93 See Heather Cox Richardson, "Reconstructing the Gilded Age and Progressive Era," *Companion to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 7–20.
94 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 345.
95 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 399.
96 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 347.
97 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 347.
98 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 426.
99 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 347. See Lawrence G. Miller, "Pain, Parturition, and the Profession: Twilight Sleep in America," *Health Care in America: Essays in Social History*, ed. Susan Reverby and David Rosner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), 19–44.
100 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 347.
101 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 287.
102 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 95.
103 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 176.
104 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 478.
105 Smith, *Tree Grows*, 487.
106 Novels that continue to see considerable classroom use include Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* as well as Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth*. Excerpts from *The Jungle* appear in countless textbooks and course readers, including William A. Link and Susannah J. Link's edited collection *A*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

Documentary Reader: The Gilded Age and Progressive Era (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012). The Bedford Series in History and Culture released an edition of *The Jungle* in 2019, the same year it was published as a graphic novel, adapted and illustrated by Kristina Gehrmann. Both *The Age of Innocence* (edited by Candice Waid, 2002) and *The House of Mirth* (edited by Elizabeth Ammons, 2018) are volumes in the Norton Critical Editions series.

Nancy C. Unger is Professor of History at Santa Clara University. She is the author of two award-winning biographies: *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer*, and *Belle La Follette: Progressive Era Reformer*. She is also the author of *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History* (finalist for the California Book Award) and co-editor of *A Companion to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*. She served as President for the Society of Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era 2020–2022.

Cite this article: Nancy C. Unger (2024) "*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*: Betty Smith's Bestselling Introduction to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* **23,** 49–68. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781423000324