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The life and work of Betty Smith, author of "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn"

Johnson, Carol Siri, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1995

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THE LIFE AND WORK OF BETTY SMITH,
AUTHOR OF A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

by

CAROL SIRI JOHNSON

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

1995

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The Life and Work of Betty Smith,
Author of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn
by
Carol Siri Johnson

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK GRADUATE CENTER

ABSTRACT

The Life and Work of Betty Smith,
Author of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

by

Carol Siri Johnson

Adviser: Professor W. Speed Hill

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is an American classic. When it first appeared in 1943 it was an immediate bestseller, and it has since become an icon of our cultural consciousness, a symbol of the American Dream. Even now echoes of the title are heard in headlines across the country; many people remember the story of Francie, who grew, like the tree, in the tenements of Williamsburg. Nevertheless, so little is known about the author that she is included in an anthology of Irish American writers even though she is of German-Austrian descent; few people know that she wrote three other novels and over seventy plays. Smith wove stories about herself all of her life, but her first novel became a public myth.

When A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was published, it was a cultural phenomena: it was widely regarded as the best novel of 1943, it was read by thousands, it caused the Armed Services Edition to go into a second printing for the first

time, and it was the first American novel to be translated behind the iron curtain. Recent critical history has not been so kind to Smith: she is now labelled "sentimental" or a "woman's writer." Smith was sometimes sentimental, and she was a woman, but A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is, at base, an empowering representation of the immigrant and working-class myth, written for women and men, young and old. Smith was unashamed of her working-class brutality and sentiment; A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is a bildungsroman of the American Dream.

PREFACE

Speed Hill encouraged me to work on this topic; my husband, Alan Sonfist, supported me; John White, at the University of North Carolina, became a friend; the women at the John Jermain Library were of immeasurable help in locating secondary texts; my two readers, Luke Menand and Neal Tolchin, gave me invaluable advice; my Alma Mater, Mount Holyoke, gave me money; but most of all, I thank Betty Smith for writing A Tree Grows in Brooklyn which has given me, as well as millions of others, much pleasure in reading.

C. S. J.

Sag Harbor
December 1994

The Life and Work of Betty Smith,
Author of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

Table of Contents

Preface

(1) Introduction: A Weed in the Hothouse.....	1
(2) Common Folk.....	19
(3) Working Girl, Working Woman.....	33
(4) Wife and Mother.....	41
(5) Writer.....	50
(6) Plays.....	61
(7) Yale.....	72
(8) Noncommercial Theater.....	84
(9) Chapel Hill.....	93
(10) The Long Meditation.....	104
(11) Harper & Brothers & Sisters.....	116
(12) Any Port.....	133
(13) The Novel.....	143
(14) The Fans.....	150
(15) The Critics.....	159
(16) In the World.....	168
(17) At Home.....	184
(18) Post-War Depression.....	192
(19) The Second Novel.....	209
(20) Broadway.....	234
(21) Bob.....	242
(22) Ashes in the Wind.....	253
(23) Full Circle.....	276
(24) Critical Slide.....	291
(25) The Westminster of the Common Folk.....	305
Afterward.....	320
Bibliography.....	322

A Weed in the Hothouse

Any biography has to be based on the assumption that the author is, indeed, not dead. After four years of research and writing, Betty Smith has come to life in my mind, and hopefully she will take life in the minds of my readers. This living Betty Smith, of course, has her limitations. She sometimes looks and acts a little like Carol Siri Johnson, and understands the world a little like Carol Siri Johnson. These are the inescapable limitations of biography, and with these in mind, perhaps a shadow of the true person will cast itself on the wall. Or perhaps the facts that I have supplied will allow every reader to imagine Betty Smith in his or her own image.

One thing that can help us, reader and writer, to differentiate Betty Smith from our own projected images, is remembering that Betty Smith's time was different from ours. Betty Smith is a person, yes, but she is also a product of her times. The Betty Smith who published her bestselling novel in 1943 could not have done so in 1923, when publishing was accessible only to the privileged few, or in 1963, when the world had different things on its mind. Not that Betty Smith wouldn't have written: she probably still would have produced that substantial text, A Tree Grows in

Brooklyn, but it would be in a kitchen cabinet, or a cardboard box in the attic somewhere. One of her grandchildren would read that manuscript and say "this should be published some day," and then it would go back into that desk drawer or that cardboard box for the next generation, since no one is interested in the ramblings of an old lady. But history was propitious for Betty Smith; her novel was published, and it led her to spend her adult life in a world radically different from the one in which she grew up.

Of primary importance in this biography is Smith's relationship with her publisher, Harper & Brothers. The firm and its editors--Edward Aswell, Elizabeth Lawrence, Frank MacGregor, Jack Fischer, and Evan Thomas--supplied the kind of support and encouragement that older sister and brothers Smith herself never had. Moreover, they were instrumental in the literary product that became the "Betty Smith," the public "Tree Lady" who is remembered by most people who grew up during the second world war. Harper & Brothers published her novels, even when she began to argue with her editors, they pushed her to write until her final years. The personalities at the publishing firm and the inter-office memos are as much a part of this story as Betty Smith herself. As a reader in the archives and a researcher in life, I was able to see many different sides to her story. This is the way in which a contextualized biography can go beyond the mere "personal"

to give a wider picture of the forces that create a literary and public figure.

The basic theory of this dissertation, then, is that literature occurs at the intersection of three variables: the life of the author, the context of history, and sheer chance. When those variable coincide, e.g. Betty Smith plus 1943 plus Harper & Brothers, a viable public text results. Conversely, if any of those variables had not occurred, if Betty Smith had sat in a corner chair growling, if men had settled the moon in 1943, instead of going to war, or if Harper & Brothers had decided that under no circumstances would they hire or publish women, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn would never have been published and the world would be the poorer for it.

For those of you who have not read A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, I urge you to do so. It is a beautiful and sad bildungsroman of a girl growing up in the tenements of turn-of-the-century Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Although it has acquired a reputation as adolescent literature, few high school students in the United States can now read its 430 pages in their entirety. It is still read in Europe, and still provides Europeans with one picture of American city life. I read it when, in my twenties, I had just moved to Brooklyn and was making a daily commute on the crowded subway to Manhattan. Although A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was (and is) accused of being sentimental, that danger is a

canard. In fact, the book is graphically recalled social history recording the details of inner-city life at the turn of the century. One of the great beauties of Betty Smith's writing is the elevation of the quotidian to the memorable; the sadness of the novel comes from everyday losses.

A critic's theory is often dictated by his or her subject matter. My theory, that "Betty Smith" is alive but made possible only through the convergence of the variables of personality, history, and chance, arose out of the study of Smith's work and life. Similarly, this dissertation will be paying special attention to those issues which were important in Betty Smith's work and life, on both the personal and the social levels. Smith's personal themes, which resound throughout her work, are her great love for her father and her grief at his death, her mixed feelings for her mother and her ambivalent feminism, and her love for her children. The social themes which are necessarily a part of her text, since they were a part of her life, are poverty, sexual abuse, and class.

In Writing Lives: Principia Biographica, one of Leon Edel's principles is that the biographer must discover the keys to the private mythology of the subject. He calls it "searching for the figure under the carpet [or] the private self-concept that guides a given life" (30). Edel's theory is that "the public facade is the mask behind which a private mythology is hidden," and it is the biographer's

task to "sort out the themes and patterns, not dates and mundane calendar events which sort themselves" (30). When I first began this dissertation, I thought that Edel had described the way that his subject, Henry James, was to be approached, and that his words would not apply to Betty Smith and me. I thought Edel was too mystical and relied too heavily on symbolism within the authors life and writing. Smith, I thought, was a straightforward plebeian working-woman whose concerns were money, her children, and writing works that would communicate with the world. However, Edel's theory applies as much to her as it did to James: behind the hard-working, chain-smoking mother who wrote a novel despite her poverty are the dreams which motivate her actions.

Edel writes that it is the biographer's difficult task to become "for a while that other person, even while remaining himself" (40). In a way, it is like being a psychoanalyst: the biographer must strain to keep his or her mind open to the texture of the experiences of the subject, while at the same time seeking resonances with her own experiences. Both ways--detachment and identification--can lead to insights. "To be cold as ice in appraisal, yet warm and human and understanding, this is the biographer's dilemma" writes Edel (41). The inevitable transference must be tempered with the material in the archives.

Consequently, when I began this project, I started with

some faulty assumptions which I had to change along the way. Most of these pertained to Smith's interaction with Harper & Brothers: I saw the publisher as the big bad wolf, forcing her to change her story to appease the moral majority. Imagine my surprise when I came across a paragraph, early in Smith's correspondence with her publisher, in which she offers, unsolicited, to make those very changes that I had attributed to Harper & Brothers! I learned that, when writing a biography, it is important to keep an open mind for as long as possible, and to let all of the facts take their place before drawing conclusions. And if there's one thing I learned, it's that you can't make any assumptions about the publisher-writer contract: they're all different, they're all complex. And, of course, they change over time.

I cannot avoid the topic "autobiography" in a treatment of Smith. Two of her novels are unabashedly drawn from her life experiences, following the events in her life closely, and the other two are events pieced together from memory and the emotions resulting from two marriages. All four are, in a sense, performance pieces about her life. She wove in contemporaneous autobiographical events, like the strange soldier who appears, out of nowhere, at the end of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, asks Francie to marry him, then abandons her to marry his childhood sweetheart. It was not until late in the dissertation-writing process that I woke up one morning, saying to myself: "That's Bob Finch! He did that

to her, just as she was writing this!" Smith could never separate her fiction from her life.

In regard to her personal myths, I was surprised to discover how much her search for her dead father had influenced her life. In a way, it was responsible for her divorcing her hard-driving and ambitious husband George Smith; it was responsible for her search for solace in the writing of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn; it was responsible for her divorce from the kind Joe Jones; it was responsible for her marriage to a confirmed alcoholic, Bob Finch. Also, her ambivalent relations with her mother created a complex feminism: Smith disliked women, but she assumed that women were superior to men, and this aspect of her personality allowed her to occupy the powerful position she created for herself and to have an elemental confidence in her actions at all times. What was special to Betty Smith is the same thing that is special to Francie Nolan: it is her heroic aspiration and her courage of conviction.

Smith found a receptive audience for her tale in the 1940s, but over the decades her audience has eroded, and now she is in danger of being forgotten; "Betty Smith" is an unknown name in the academic world. Paul Lauter writes that "in the twenties processes were set in motion that virtually eliminated black, white female, and all working-class writers from the canon" (436). Smith was one of the casualties of this systematic exclusion, on two grounds: she

was from the working-class, and she was female. As Resa Dudovitz writes in The Myth of Superwoman: Women's Bestsellers in France and the United States:

Serious consideration of bestselling women's fiction which falls outside the area of formula fiction is still quite minimal despite the fact that women's fiction in all its many forms, in addition to being a multi-million dollar international business, reaches an enormous number of women throughout the western world.

(1)

In "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors," Nina Baym explains that male psychology causes men to attempt to separate themselves from women, therefore creating a "literature of celibacy": women are excluded; women become the "enemy" (130). How surprised the creators of the canon would be to discover that Betty Smith would agree with them on that last score!

Even the decade of the 1940s has been excluded from the American canon: there is an assumption that since the men were away at war, no writing was done; consequently, there is little critical work available on the war years. In one of the few literary analyses of the 1940s, Chester Eisinger presents the period as one of great social conservatism and personal alienation, and although initially this sounds convincing, in two independent analyses of popular literature, Ruth Miller Elson and Susan Ellery Greene each found that 1940 marked the largest shift in ideology in

American literature in history. Eisinger observes that "[t]he conservative imagination, on the other hand, finally won a secure place in this period as a part of the landscape of American fiction. . . . The quest for the self was intensified in the fiction of this decade in such a way as to assume the proportions of a movement" (5). In popular fiction, Greene found exactly the opposite, the "emergence of a mature American middle and upper class willing to cope with the complexities of the modern world" (161). Just as mainstream America was opening its mind to new experiences, the male genius shut down, and academic historians apologize for the loss.

In Sensational Designs, Jane Tompkins urges us to "move the study of American literature away from the small group of master texts that have dominated critical discussion for the last thirty years" (xi). There are advantages to studying popular fiction: it describes the political, economic and historical events in the culture at large. Dudovitz writes:

Until the massive take-over of the publishing world by huge financial groups, the bestseller was a fairly reliable indication of popular tastes and concerns. The examples are quite obvious: from Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) to Nevil Shute's On the Beach (1957) to Solzhenitsyn's Cancer Ward (1970), bestsellers have been books which address major concerns of a population. (25)

In contrast to Eisinger's canonical assessment, American popular literature in the 1940s was socially conscious and socially progressive; politically, it was the culmination of New Deal philosophy (Greene 156). Elson writes:

If best sellers are a clue to the intellectual history of the ordinary American then the early 1940s are a watershed. Up to that time almost all of the best sellers plucked the reader from his complex world and set him down in the never-never land described by Sinclair Lewis. From the 1940s on most of the popular books were still of this sort, but the best seller list now included books that seriously faced many of American's most unhappy problems. . . . (10)

Elson names Grapes of Wrath (John Steinbeck, 1939), Never Come Morning (Nelson Algrin, 1942), Strange Fruit (Lillian Smith, 1944), Hiroshima (John Hersey, 1946), The Amboy Dukes (Irving Shulman, 1947), The Naked and the Dead (Norman Mailer, 1948), and Jailbait (William Barnard, 1949) as examples. Subjects that had previously been taboo, such as poverty, slums, the experiences of Jews and Catholics, and relations between the races, became desired and desirable public reading.

The roles of women in fiction are also an indicator of cultural expectations. In Greene's analysis of popular literature from 1914 to 1945, she finds two waves:

The views on the position of women, as related to that of men, follows a pattern in these novels similar to those on social questions. In the books that appeared from 1914 to 1916, male characters are central in the

stories and they dominate female characters. Women generally are portrayed as pure creatures who are to be honored. Their lives are limited to their homes, except for a few single women who hold a limited number of jobs until they find husbands. During the period of conscious rebellion, 1918 to 1927, men are no longer either as central to the stories or as dominant over women. Women also follow a wider variety of professions and exotic hobbies. The novels published from 1928 to 1937 mark a partial retrogression in that men again are more central to the stories and more dominant over women. Women do, however, continue to hold a wide variety of jobs. The same situation is true in the mysteries. By the time of the appearance of the last group of novels, 1938 to 1945, the strong role of women is restored. The rebellions of the twenties are now accepted. (159)

I would add that in the 1950s another retrogression occurred, eliminating women from the workplace and the professions, including the academy; the past exclusion of women such as Betty Smith from the canon of American literature is part of that social retrogression.

At the end of 1943, the publishing industry released figures that showed that book sales were up 20 to 30% from 1942.¹ Time Magazine wrote:

For 1943 seemed to mark the second year of an epoch that sober, responsible publishers and all the carriers

¹ This is documented in many articles appearing between December 1943 and February 1944: a spokesperson for the publishing industry must have mailed out a press release.

and custodians of U.S. culture had hoped for all their lives: a time when book-reading and book-buying reached outside the narrow quarters of the intellectuals and became the business of the whole vast literate population of the U.S.²

The article also mentioned that "It was a bumper year for best-selling novelists (most of them women)," naming Smith, Ilka Chase (In Bed We Cry), Elizabeth Janeway (The Walsh Girls), and Helen Howe (The Whole Heart), and mentioning Ayn Rand (The Fountainhead) and Christine Weston (Indigo) as previously remaindered writers who had now become best sellers. Elson attributes this shift in the subject matter of popular literature towards socially-conscious realism to

the unique combination of the depression of the 1930s and the war of the 1940s. Social problems here and abroad now became personal dilemmas. The changes in lifestyles--everybody's--engendered by the Depression and the War rubbed most noses in rather grim realities, realities not actually new, but newly perceived.

Middle class America now had to relate to problems they had assumed happened to other people

Interestingly enough these catastrophes--Depression and War--increased both the size of the reading public and the amount of time people could devote to reading.

(Elson 10-12)

This was likely the only time that A Tree Grows in Brooklyn could have been published: the public was hungry for realistic books about social problems in the 1940s, and it

² Time Magazine, 20 Dec. 1943.

was willing to listen to the voices of women.

Smith has been excluded from the academic canon partially on the basis of her class: she grew up in the tenements and always remained "a poor person at heart."³ In The American Dream and the Popular Novel, Elizabeth Long writes:

the people who work in trade publishing are, like most potential readers of hardcover novels, middle- and upper-middle-class. The industry and the processes described above are therefore limited to a certain social class. . . . most authors came from the middle and upper-middle class. . . . most authors [are] from the ivy league. (35, 37, 41)

It was only in that brief era that publishing houses began to listen to other voices than that of the middle and upper middle class. This is a difficult fact for most readers to confront, and the mind immediately starts searching for exceptions to the rule, but Long has carefully tabulated her data:

Authors known to have had parents who were laborers, skilled craftsmen, or relatively poor tradesmen and white-collar workers never account for more than one-fifth of the authors of any period, and sometimes for no more than 10 percent. (Long 38)

It was the alignment of the political, social and economic forces of the depression and post-depression era that made

³ Betty Smith, quoted in The New Yorker, 9 Oct. 1943.

middle-class book-buyers interested in poverty; the writer Smith came of age during the Roosevelt administration, when the government took a positive and supportive interest in the arts.

Published literature occurs at an intersection between a private world and a public one. To fully understand literature, it must be placed within its social and economic context: "Ideally scholars and critics should know more about the literary marketplace of the author's time than the author would have known" (West 1). A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was a bestseller, and bestsellers are social events that occur because of a peculiar need in a social order at a certain time. Bestseller criticism, by definition, is contextual criticism. By not looking at the economic sources of literature the critic risks making conclusions from class-based assumptions, or operating within a closed world of signification, meaningful to a few elite but meaningless to the populace at large.

New Criticism failed to give a complete view of a work of art: the object, disconnected from its environment, lost meaning within that environment. According to Linda Brodkey in Academic Writing as Social Practice, New Criticism and "new New Criticism," such as deconstruction, maintains "the unmitigated privileging of formal properties as the basis of 'reading'" (67). In "Who Paid for Modernism?" Joyce Wexler interrogates the myth of James Joyce as a persecuted,

alienated artist who could not find a commercial publisher. She argues that he did not want a commercial publisher, and since he found a patron, he did not need one. Indeed, the myth of the artist in the garret is finally detaching itself from a more realistic concept of poverty: after all, "garrets, studies, and libraries are obviously signs of the leisure requisite for writing" (Brodkey 59). In A Moveable Feast, Hemingway complains continuously of poverty while living on parental subsidy. Wexler writes that "contempt for the commercial side of publishing was common among modernist writers" (440), and this is in keeping with the British tradition of aristocratic patronage of the arts. James West writes that:

The European model of book publishing works well for an author in a traditionally minded, aristocratic society in which there are numerous (if not especially generous) sources of private, institutional, or governmental patronage. In a free-enterprise democracy, however, one needs an active, aggressive, profitable publishing industry in order to support a class of literary authors. (43)

In this way Betty Smith is more "American" than most writers in the canon of American literature. American literature needs an active, aggressive author in order to connect with that publishing industry and get a book to the press. These factors, together with the location of the publishing industry, favored writers from New York (Long 39).

Betty Smith was an extraordinarily hard-working woman, but she did not live outside of history: her success as a best-selling working-class novelist would not have been possible if the economic and social conditions had not been propitious. The post-depression American public was interested in the lives of the poor, the quasi-socialism of the Roosevelt administration gave Smith the leisure to write, and World War II drew men away from business, and their absence left women such as Smith and her editor, Elizabeth Lawrence, in control. Paper was rationed, fewer novels were printed, and those that were enjoyed larger runs. Smith had the personality required for success, and history offered the chance.

The critics loved A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, and the press loved the working-class celebrity Betty Smith, but during her lifetime, she saw her public shift away from the sensibility that had given her a place in American literary life. Increasingly her writing was accused of sentimentality, a derogatory term intended to exclude her from literary history. It worked. Until recently, the literary academy has concentrated on the upper classes and the events, politics, and ideas that surrounded them. The writings of Betty Smith were by, for, and about the poor and the events, politics, and ideas that surround them. In the past, this designation was enough to consign a book to the academic dust heap, but we are now beginning to realize that

no one social group holds the key to life and that writings of all economic, ethnic, and gender groups are valuable. The writings of Betty Smith will add a different vision and a valuable dimension to the critical study of American literature, and her life needs to be made available to students and scholars.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn captured the public's interest first in 1943, and still holds the public's interest today: the novel is still a strong seller, and nearly everyone is familiar with the story of Francie, who grew up in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. It is likely that its public popularity will continue because A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is a classic tale of the American Dream. Smith's tree, as described in the preface, is a metaphor of the poor struggling to survive:

There's a tree that grows in Brooklyn. Some people call it the Tree of Heaven. No matter where its seed falls, it makes a tree which struggles to reach the sky. It grows in boarded-up lots and out of neglected rubbish heaps. It grows up out of cellar gratings. It is the only tree that grows out of cement. It grows lushly . . . survives without sun, water, and seemingly without earth. It would be considered beautiful except that there are too many of it.

Francie's grandmother tells her, in broken English, that it is only through reading and writing that one can escape her poverty, and that is Francie's journey through the novel: to get herself an education. That is what Francie did, and

that is what Smith did as well: A Tree Grows in Brooklyn
became the muse of the American Dream.

Common Folk

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is about the youth of Francie Nolan, a heroine very much like Elizabeth Lillian Wehner, who later became Betty Smith. Smith often said that she wrote the novel "not as it was, but as it *should have been*." This phrase is quoted in many articles, letters, and interviews with Smith's relatives and associates: it was the statement she used, whenever anyone asked, as she knew they would, if A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was true. "Maybe it didn't happen that way. But that's the way it should have been!" Smith quotes her father.¹ But no one knows if Johnny Wehner ever really said that, or if it was another of Smith's fabrications; indeed, it is a problem that her biographer must contend with, that Smith seldom told an unadulterated tale. Consequently, even though A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is an accurate portrait of quotidian life in turn-of-the-century Williamsburg, Brooklyn, the characters and events cannot be taken as fact.

There were fans of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn who knew every street and store in the novel; one wrote to her: "It

¹ Betty Smith, unpublished manuscript, A Child, A Tree, A Book, from the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

is so true to life of the low class of Williamsburg I could not help but wonder where you lived"; another was able to retrace Francie's steps and figure out which school she attended from the novel.² Smith attributed her memory, from which she wrote, to her mother's power "for almost total recall,"³ and after writing the novel, she felt her memories were exhausted.⁴ However, she also said that each character is a composite of other people that she has known.⁵ The conclusion is, I think, that we can understand the social details of the novel as accurate urban reportage, the characters as products of her own mental creation, and the events as semi-true. I think we can accept A Tree Grows in Brooklyn as an accurate portrayal of Lizzie Wehner's emotional journey through her difficult childhood and adolescence.

² Fan mail to Betty Smith, Dec. 1943 and Feb. 1945.

³ Betty Smith, "Talk with the Author." Newsweek 24 Feb. 1958: 108.

⁴ She wrote: "As for the next book, I haven't thought of that yet. When I finished this one, I thought, 'This is everything I know. I don't know anymore than what is in this book..'" Betty Smith, letter to Eugene F. Saxton, 31 July 1942.

⁵ "Johnny Nolan has been dead a long time. Katie Nolan is a composite of myself and several women who are dead. The character from which Sis was drawn is an old lady and cannot read or write. She too, is a composite. Eva is made up of a dozen aunts and cousins and neighbors. There was no Neeley. A lot of what happened to Francie Nolan happened to me." Betty Smith, letter to Eugene F. Saxton, 27 June 1942.

The description she later wrote of her grandparents, the Hummels and the Wehners, resembles the family history in the book.⁶ Katie's parents, Thomas and Marera Hummel, emigrated from Germany; he was a carpenter, she was a wife and mother.⁷ Later in life, Smith recalled that the Hummels came from a small town near Schwarzwald and Thomas married Marera when he thirty and she was fifteen. They came in steerage class and moved to Bushwick where they had four girls: Marera (Mammie), Lotty, Annie, and Katey. According to Smith, Thomas Hummel took each daughter out of school at age 12 and put them to work, taking the money that they earned. Consequently, they all married and left home as soon as possible. Grandmother Marera was not allowed to see her daughters, so they would visit behind his back. Thomas Hummel was a curmudgeon; in A Tree Grows in Brooklyn he "hated everybody and everything" (43); Thomas Hummel "was never so happy as when he hated someone."⁸ Thomas Rommely hated Germany but refused to speak in English, and forbade the speaking of English in his home (43); Thomas Hummel knew some English but pretended he didn't.⁹ Smith, however, was

⁶ Betty Smith, unpublished manuscript, Look Back with a Smile.

⁷ Catherine Hummel, birth certificate, 25 Nov. 1872.

⁸ Betty Smith, unpublished manuscript, A Child, A Tree, A Book.

⁹ Betty Smith, unpublished manuscript, A Child, A Tree, A Book.

not afraid of the old man. She recalled that when she was invited to lunch with him, "My brother and I used to walk around together in the parlor just to shiver at the way his eyes seemed to follow us. One day I suggested that I walk in one direction and he in another to see if Grampa's eye's crossed."¹⁰

Betty Smith's maternal grandparents were Catholic. Her grandfather was proud that he once carved a church alter, from which he saved the pieces; from the pieces he carved individual crosses, which he sold from door to door; when he was too old to carve, he sold canaries instead.¹¹

Grandmother Marera was devoutly religious as well as superstitious, and passed this combination on to her daughter, whose letters to Smith are full of exhortations to the saints. Marera died when Smith was seven and Thomas when she was twelve; Smith's own Catholicism was tempered with her father's agnosticism (and her grandfather's temper).

Like Johnny Nolan in the novel, John Casper Wehner was one of four sons, each a year apart: Franky, Johnny, Ambrose (Andy) and George (Georgy). The Wehner family had come to America many years before. John Wehner's father died young, and his mother, Regina, was possessive of her sons: John

¹⁰ look back with a smile

¹¹ Betty Smith, unpublished manuscript, Look Back With a Smile.

Casper went to see her every Sunday and her mother wouldn't talk to him when he came home.¹² This information accords with the novel, in which "The Rommelys ran to women of strong personalities. The Nolans ran to weak and talented men" (51). Smith's favorite aunt Annie, like Sissy in the novel, visited her frequently, so that women were the main force in the household.¹³

Smith's parents were married when Katie was twenty and John twenty-two, on February 16, 1896. Katie Wehner must have been pregnant within a month, because she gave birth to Smith on December 15th of that year. Although Smith's birth date in the New York Public Library catalogue is listed as 1904 and she later maintained that she was born in 1906, Elizabeth Wehner was born December 15th, 1896 in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and christened at Holy Trinity Church on Montrose Avenue.¹⁴ Her brother, William Wehner, was born a year later, in 1897, and her sister Regina was born in 1900.

When Smith needed a copy of her birth certificate to get a passport, she was surprised to discover her name

¹² Betty Smith, unpublished autobiography, Look Back With a Smile.

¹³ Betty Smith, unpublished manuscript, A Child, A Tree, A Book.

¹⁴ As recorded on her birth certificate in the New York City municipal archives and in the Smith family bible.

listed as "Sophia." Her mother told her: "A midwife officiated and she could speak little English. When she went to report [the] birth, the official kept shouting 'name?' at her and the befuddled woman thought he meant her name so she said, 'Sophie.'"¹⁵ It seems unlikely that a practiced midwife would be so naive, so perhaps this is an example of Smith remembering things "as it *should* have been." Smith was baptized as Elizabeth Lillian Wehner,¹⁶ her mother refers to her variously in her letters as Lizzie or Little, her schoolmates wrote to her as Elizabeth or Beth, and when she first began writing she published her articles under the name Elisabeth Wehner. After her divorce, she began calling herself Betty Smith, and, except for her husband Joe Jones (who called her Elisabeth) that name stuck.

Smith was not loved by her mother. In the novel, Francie understands that, and, in an effort to get close to her she identifies with her instead. This is probably the source of Smith's fortitude and courage, and one source of her ability to tell stories. In her autobiographical writings she describes mother her as a major creative influence:

¹⁵ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, Sept. 1946.

¹⁶ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview, 10/11 May, 1991.

I remember how we sat around the cooking range (our only source of heat) on a cold winter's night and listened to my mother tell of my birth. She was a dramatic story teller and her dark eyes flashed and her pretty hands gestured as she told of the dastardly midwife who had delivered me.¹⁷

When Daphne Athas, a novelist and friend of Smith's daughter Mary, went to visit them in her teenage years, she "could make no connection between this woman and Katie Nolan" (25):

The old lady had dun-gray hair, the sister henna, and they acted perfunctory, treating Mary as if she'd been there only yesterday. They were polite, but stared at us with flat eyes and talked with flat voices. There was something unspoken, off limits. (Athas 25)

It seems clear that her mother favored her brother Bill and left Elizabeth to her own devices. Bill and Regina, Smith's younger sister, lived with Katie for many years, Bill only marrying in middle age. In her autobiographical manuscript, Smith wrote in a meditative mode:

We never understood each other, Mother. And I know I gave you a hard time. I know now why I gave you such a hard time, asking you so many questions and inventing such foolish answers. It was because I wanted you to talk to me. I know now why I told you so many lies, Mother. I wanted you to notice me. And I didn't mind it too much when you scolded me.

¹⁷ Betty Smith, unpublished manuscript, A Child, A Tree, A Book.

I would rather have had you scold me, Mother, than ignore me.¹⁸

The writer Max Steele remembers a conversation he had with Smith about her mother:

Even when I saw her again, when she was old, I asked her about her mother and she said her mother had been down to see her and she said "She looked at me, and she said, 'Betty, I made a hard woman out of you.' She said, 'It was necessary. I knew you were going to have to survive in this world and you won't forgive me but I had to make you a hard woman.'"¹⁹

This antagonism, ambivalence, identification and love runs throughout the novel A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. Betty Smith's mother lived nearly as long as Smith herself.

But her father was the parent with whom she was obsessed, throughout her life. She credits her desire to move to Chapel Hill to the sentimental songs he sang about North Carolina.²⁰ But her relationship with him must have been troubled as well. John Wehner's occupation is listed on his marriage certificate as laborer, on Smith's birth certificate as bartender, and on his death certificate as waiter. He died at age forty, on December 21, 1915, six days after Smith's nineteenth birthday. Like in the novel,

¹⁸ Betty Smith, unpublished autobiography, Look Back With a Smile.

¹⁹ Interview with Max Steele, 5-24-91:

²⁰ Betty Smith, unpublished manuscript, A Child, A Tree, A Book.

he was buried the day before Christmas. It is probably that he was an alcoholic like Johnny Nolan, since Smith was obsessed, throughout her life, with helping male alcoholics. On his death certificate, the cause of death is listed as pneumonia, as is Johnny Nolan's in the novel.

In her early years, her parents moved from Brownsville to Williamsburg, from one crowded immigrant district to another, closer to Manhattan. Smith had mixed feelings about her home. On one hand, "It was exciting, churning, bewildering, ever-changing and overcrowded. It was the world of the immigrant."²¹ She wrote that she was proud of the accent that developed when she went to school with "the children of Irish, German, Italian and Jewish immigrants. We all fought to retain our own speech patterns and accents. A cohesive Brooklyn accent resulted."²² But Smith also wrote to her editor that

If Hitler's bombers should ever get over and if any portion of this great city has to be wiped out, it would be a blessing if it were that section. Evil seems to be part of the very materials that the sidewalks are made out of and the wood and brick of the houses.²³

²¹ Betty Smith, unpublished autobiography, A Child, A Tree, A Book.

²² Betty Smith, autobiographical summary, 1936.

²³ Betty Smith, letter "Gentlemen" at Harper & Brothers, 25 Nov. 25 1942.

Like the Lower East Side that Jacob Riis documented so well, Williamsburg was a crowded and uncomfortable place, with sub-standard housing and no parks or open spaces. Smith was "Continually cramped by the lack of space and air in the crowded Brooklyn tenements in which she grew up."²⁴

Immigrant families were squeezed in, one on top of the other, in railroad flats that were "sound boxes" with no privacy; it is likely that Francie's tree was the only green thing in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Smith's childhood was lonely. She tried to play with her brother but she felt she couldn't get him away from her mother.²⁵ There was love between the children, but the competition was dominant. Athas describes

how she used to eat in Brooklyn, jutting her elbows out around her plate like ramparts. "Once I had a meatball, and my brother made a joke. So I laughed, and it was gone." She speared the imaginary meatball in a lightning motion, mimed it into her mouth. "You have to keep your eyes on the plate." (Athas 28)

She wrote that she pretended that the flagstones were her playmates; she'd talk to the flagstones and pretend that they were talking to her. She personified everything, even kitchen appliances. Her mother told her that she would end

²⁴ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, Twentieth Century-Fox Publicity Department.

²⁵ Betty Smith, unpublished autobiography, Look Back With a Smile.

up in a loony bin or a booby hatch.²⁶ Smith's interior life was as rich as her exterior life was deprived. Her mother remembers she always had a pen in her hand.²⁷

Although the only films she was allowed to see were the Chaplin films, "From five to fourteen my brother and I went to the theatre at least twice a week (ten cents in the gallery.)" She saw plays such as "The Old Homestead," "Way Down East," "East Lynne," "Shore Acres," "The Great Divide," "Bertha the Sewing Machine Girl," "Sweeny the Barber," "London After Dark," and Yiddish plays that she did not understand but was "enthralled by the violent physical emotionalism of the actors." She saw Caruso in the performance that led to his death and Sarah Bernhardt, making a farewell tour.²⁸ In 1911 Smith went to the Lyceum Theatre in Brooklyn and to see a play called "The Two Orphans"; she must have felt strongly about this play, because it is the only program she saved.

Smith later had an excellent education, but it did not come to her easily. Public school was a mixed blessing: it was an opportunity to learn, but was is also an initiation into the American class system. Still, school is where

²⁶ Betty Smith, unpublished autobiography, Look Back With a Smile.

²⁷ Catherine Keogh, quoted in The Brooklyn Eagle, date missing.

²⁸ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

Francie learns to read, and "On that day when she first knew she could read, she made a vow to read one book a day as long as she lived" (124). Most academics can identify with Francie's love for the library:

The library was a little old shabby place. Francie thought it was beautiful. The feeling she had about it was as good as the feeling she had about church Francie thought that all the books in the world were in that library and she had a plan about reading all the books in the world. She was reading a book a day in alphabetical order and not skipping the dry ones For all of her enthusiasm, she had to admit that some of the B's had been hard going. But Francie was a reader. She read everything she could find: trash, classics, time tables and the grocer's price list. (18)

Francie's love of reading is partially born from despair at her home life. Her mother's small amount of love is directed to Neeley, and their days are an unending round of trying to find enough money to eat. Her only pleasure during the week was her trip to the library on Saturdays and the weekend's freedom to read books.

Francie finally decides to take her education into her own hands: exploring the area, she discovers that in another, wealthier neighborhood there was a small school. She brings her alcoholic father to see it, and Johnny forges a letter for her, against her mother's wishes, so that she can transfer to that district. Consequently, Francie knows "that there were other worlds beside the world she had been

born into and that these other worlds were not unattainable" (132). Smith describes the high point of Francie's life: "I wish I could always wear a white dress and carry red roses and that we could always throw money around like we did tonight," she thinks, a sentimental but sincere longing in the face of constant poverty and hunger. In the Betty Smith papers in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, one of the earliest items that Smith saved was an autograph book with her eighth-grade friends writing notes to her. Even this gift she gave to herself: Smith's autograph book proudly begins: "Presented to Miss Elizabeth Lillian Wehner/ As a Graduation Present/ to herself/ In the year of our Lord/ 1911/ on the 28th day of/ June."²⁹

Even as a child, Smith was always making books.³⁰ Her archives contain four scrap-books of collected poetry from her childhood. There is commentary on some of the verse: "I don't quite understand this I mean to study it out some day" regarding the poem "Far, Far, Away" by Tennyson and "I love Robert Burns and all things connected with him."³¹

²⁹ Betty Smith Papers, autograph book, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

³⁰ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview, 10/11 May 1991.

³¹ Betty Smith Papers, Scrapbook #2, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Overall, there is much sentimental verse, some pretty photos, many short tracts on how women should act or general morality pieces, songs sung by Jenny Lind in poetry form, poems by Shakespeare, Keats, Arnold, Byron, Blake, Wordsworth, Goldsmith, Cowper. The volumes show a transition in the type of poetry she was reading and her later censorship of her youthful sentimentality. One clipping, from Thomas Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard," is particularly apt:

Let not ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys and destiny obscure;
Nor grandeur hear, with a disdainful smile,
The short and simple annals of the poor.³²

Smith was essentially an autodidact, teaching herself through reading in the library and making books from the scraps of literary life around her. Smith also had some small articles published in the Bushwick School Bulletin on June 30, 1910, the year she graduated from school. But Smith's childhood was short: by the end of 1910 she was working to support her family, at age fourteen.

³² Betty Smith Papers, Scrapbook #4, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Working Girl, Working Woman

The novels of Betty Smith concrete descriptions of the conditions of everyday working life in various blue and white collar jobs throughout Brooklyn and Manhattan. In that sense she serves as a cultural historian, documenting a social reality about which few authors had first hand experience: the lives of working women in early twentieth-century New York. She apparently started work in 1910, when she was fourteen years old. She later recalled, prefacing an account of her early working experience: "At fourteen, my father died and left my mother and her three children destitute. Mother and I went to work, I was fourteen but insisted I was eighteen and worked at [the] following jobs."¹ John Wehner died in 1915, not in 1910, so that Smith was nineteen when her father died; since she continually adjusted the date of her birth, she had to adjust the dates in her autobiographical statements as well, and it is likely that she left school to work five years before her father died. John Wehner evidently did not make enough money to support his family; in all likelihood he was an alcoholic, as is Johnny Nolan in A Tree Grows in

¹ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

Brooklyn.

In the novel, Francie's first job is in the kitchen of the bar where her father spent most of his time and money. Smith too lists her first job as in a restaurant.² The bar and restaurant business seemed to run in the family: her father had been a bartender and a waiter, and her brother, Bill, eventually opened up Keogh's Bar and Grill, a successful gas station and restaurant combination, on Merrick Highway in Hempstead. Smith lists her second job as a "leaf putter-onner in artificial flower factory," a job which is also described in A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. The flower workers were "Brooklyn migratory workers following seasonal work from one part of the borough to the other" (326); at first Francie has a hard time fitting in with the older, hardened women: they all sat at the table doing the piecework together, and for entertainment they poked fun at the newcomer. However, when Francie discovered that she could laugh with them at the boy who came in to collect the work, she relaxed and fit in. She also had to slow her work down to keep pace with her fellow workers, since they knew that when they finished this job, they would be laid off and have to look for another. When the migratory workers moved on to a different neighborhood, Francie didn't follow.

² Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

Smith then worked as cashier in a Manhattan department store.³ Although there are no descriptions of this job, Smith does describe Francie's reactions to riding the subway to work:

She didn't like working in New York. The crowds continually swarming about her made her tremble. She felt that she was being pushed into a way of life that she wasn't ready to handle. And the thing she dreaded worst about working in New York was the crowded El trains. (289)

Like Francie, Smith must have felt overwhelmed at having financial responsibility for her family and at entering an adult world for which she felt she was unequipped.

The next job she records, as reader of complaint letters in mail order house, is documented in Tomorrow Will Be Better.⁴ Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this description is the rituals enacted in the women's washroom while the workers are on break. There they seek for and hold social positions, discuss engagements, marriage and the absent girls. In the novel, Margy is not an outcast, but she is not popular either, since "the girls were beginning to notice she had no decent clothes" (73). As in the novel, Smith was giving all her earnings to her mother, so she

³ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

⁴ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

could not afford any new clothes.⁵

Smith's favorite job was in a clipping bureau; there she read two hundred newspapers a day.⁶ This job is also recorded in detail in A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. Finally Francie finds a job that used her skills as a reader, and it paid well, too. However, this job also has its drawbacks. Because she reads so much fine print during the day, Francie cannot read at night, or even go "to the movies because they jumped around so and hurt her eyes" (360). As a consequence, Francie has nothing to do in the evenings, and she is lonely:

She remembered with affection the girls who had written in her autograph book. She wanted to be one of them again. They came out of the same life as she did; they were no further along. Her natural place was going to school with them, not working competitively with older women. (333)

It must have been difficult for Smith to separate from the friends who signed her eighth-grade autograph book and join the adult working world.

Part of the difficulties Smith faced as a girl worker was that she was essentially unprotected from the adults who were around her. In A Tree Grows in Brooklyn when Smith

⁵ In the 1936 autobiographical statement, Smith says of her last job that since her mother had remarried she was allowed to keep her earnings and consequently was able to spend money on herself.

⁶ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

describes the job in the clipping bureau, she notes that although Francie was the fastest reader they had, she was never paid as much as the other workers. When she was finally given a small raise, the boss warned her not to engage in "washroom gossip" and tell the others because they would be jealous; "Since Francie never became friendly enough with the girls to be taken into their confidence, she had no way of knowing how grossly underpaid she was" (329). In this way, Smith was taken advantage of because of her youth and her inexperience in negotiating the competitive adult world.

The next thing that Smith did was learn to be a teletype telegrapher so that she could work nights and go to high school in the day.⁷ This was in 1915, the year her father died. She had "the Columbus Ohio to New York line and liked working nights in a skyscraper where my window overlooked New York Harbor. Did my studying on L trains back and forth to Brooklyn. Learned to get along on very little sleep."⁸ Smith went to Girl's High School in Brooklyn from age 19 to age 21, where she was the editor of the school paper.⁹ She spent time at the Jackson Street Settlement House, an institution for the education and

⁷ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

⁸ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

⁹ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

advancement of immigrants' children: there she taught sewing Saturday afternoons.¹⁰ She also acted in plays for the first time and learned to dance. Smith's social life revolved around the settlement house.¹¹ There is only one scene in her books about the settlement house, however: in Tomorrow Will Be Better, an upper-class woman who is volunteering her time makes fun of the lower-class accents.

The most important thing that happened to Smith at the settlement house was that, while debating on a team, she met George Smith. By then it was 1917 and Smith was in her last year of High School, at age 21; George was 19. George was an extremely ambitious young man. He was attending Brooklyn College during the day, taking law courses in the evenings, and working weekends in the Long Island Train office as a telegrapher. In A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, Smith describes "Ben" as being equally ambitious:

He was a senior at Maspeth high school. He was editor of the school magazine, president of his class, played half-back on the football team, and was an honor student. For the past three summers, he had been taking college courses. He would finish high school with more than one year of college work out of the way.

In addition to his school work, he put in his afternoons working for a law firm. He drew up briefs,

¹⁰ Weekly Program at the Settlement House for the Year 1915-1916.

¹¹ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview, 10/11 May, 1991.

served summonses, examined deeds and records, and searched out precedents. (380)

Perhaps this is what attracted her to him: they were both poor kids working hard to make a better life for themselves. But both were ambitious, and their ambition was bound to come into conflict. Smith always writes about "George" with a bit of irony. In A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, after listing more of Ben's accomplishments (you can almost imagine Ben listing them to her) she ends up: "At nineteen, his life was planned out in a straight unswerving line" (380). Like Ben, George preceded Smith to Ann Arbor, leaving her to her own devices for another year.

The last job that Smith held during this period was in 1918, the year her mother married Michael Keogh. Smith took a civil service exam, and, not surprisingly given her love of learning, did very well. Consequently she qualified for a high-paying job detecting forgeries for the postal service. She also edited the weekly newsletter of the money-order department.¹² She abandoned high-school again for this job: she was 22, and for the first time in her life, her mother did not need her financial help. Smith had a ball. Her mother permitted her "to keep my money and live a life of extreme luxury for nearly a year. Bought expensive perfumes and hats and lingerie and clothes and ate

¹² Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

at expensive places. All this in reaction to the lean years when we were so poor."¹³ Smith also interacted with her peers for the first time, recording their fun with a camera. From the photographs in which she and her friends are clowning and laughing, it is likely that this was one of the happiest times in her life. Then, in 1919 when she was 23, she eloped to Ann Arbor with George.

All of this work experience was valuable for Smith: it colored her life and her writing. Each one of her novels has working-people in it, and each one represents a aspect of economic New York that is interesting simply in terms of sociological history. Not only did she put her work experience into her plays and novels, but she learned lessons from each of these various experiences as well. She gained confidence, and when she went to school at Michigan and Yale she was more equipped with business skills than her peers. Later, when she attempted to negotiate the waters of New York, she had a basic sense of how things happened, and this knowledge helped her greatly in her career.

¹³ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

Wife and Mother

Any treatment of Smith's marriage has to contend with her final semi-autobiographical novel, Joy in the Morning. With this novel, and with the return to autobiography, Smith achieved the clear and persuasive voice that she had lost in her two middle novels, which were written under the pressure to capitalize on the success of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. Joy in the Morning is the continuation of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, in which a young girl from New York City, Annie Brown, moves to the midwest to marry a law student. On June 6, 1919, Smith eloped to marry George Casper Smith, a law student at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor; the service was performed by a Methodist Minister.¹ Although she was 23 and he was 21, in an autobiographical statement written at the request of Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer (who made a film of the novel), Smith gave an account of the courtship and marriage in which she states that the reason for the secrecy was that she was under age. It is much more likely that both the parents objected to the marriage, much as the parents of Carl and Annie do in Joy in the Morning and Frankie and Margy do in Tomorrow Will Be Better. Both were

¹ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, [1964].

hardworking and ambitious: early on they decided that George would go to Ann Arbor and enroll in law school and Smith would follow him there when he was settled. By doing so they elected a life of hardship, but they also ensured that they would have the possibility to go beyond the economic status of their families.

In the novel the relationship is ambivalent from the beginning. While the fat judge, breathing heavily, slowly reads the ceremony, Carl checks his watch because he does not want to miss the big college football game. When their rented room is not ready for them, Carl begins to feel Annie's breasts on the porch, and she becomes furious with him. But the novel is not about a perfect marriage: Smith wrote to her editor "In JOY I just wanted to prove that two very young people could make a go of marriage against all odds."² Eventually they do make love, live together, and despite their differences, enjoy each other.

When Carl and Annie are getting married, Annie has a flashback to a conversation with her mother in which her mother accuses her of getting married because she "had" to. Annie tries to explain that the reason she "had" to get married was that her stepfather was kissing her at night, but her mother thinks that's unimportant. Then, when the judge finishes the wedding ceremony, he stepped forward

² Betty Smith, letter to Evan Thomas, 5 April 1963?

saying "'I believe that I have the privilege of kissing the bride' [but] Annie threw herself at Carl and buried her face in his coat. 'Don't let him touch me,' she whispered hysterically. 'He's like my stepfather'" (9).

There is no direct evidence that Smith herself was sexually abused in her life, but in a letter to a friend she wrote mysteriously:

I have undergone such unscreamable physical pain that I wondered why there wasn't some brand on me; something to point out to people, "Here is a woman who has had as much agony as Joan of Arc at the stake." Once on a bright sunny morning, all of the things that had made life the utterly joyous thing it had been, went all to pieces, like a crust of hard dry bread under the impact of the rolling pin. I sat quite still for three hours waiting to die. I reasoned, "No one could go on living knowing things that I know." But I got over that too. The way I look at it now, everything that has happened to me is good copy. Swell copy! I wouldn't have missed it for anything. I'll use it all some day.³

There is nothing else in Smith's copious files that refers to this mysterious experience of pain and terror. What else but abuse would qualify for such a description? Smith's method of writing was to take what she knew from life and put it down on the page. There is abuse, sexual and psychological, in three of her four novels. A wall of silence, however, surrounds the historical foundations of

³ Betty Smith, letter to Murry Godwin, 16 Nov. 1928.

such meditations.

The positive years of Smith's marriage to George are separated basically into three parts: Smith as wife of a student at Ann Arbor, attending Ann Arbor High School and trying to finish her degree; graduation and the move to the small town of Belding, and then to Grand Rapids, where George moved from country to city lawyer; and the return to Ann Arbor, where George got his master's degree and Smith was able to attend college for the first time.⁴ This last move had special consequences for Smith: it enabled her to define herself as an individual, and it led to her decision to be a writer.

Joy in the Morning is a beautiful evocation of the struggles of a young couple trying hard to live together and make ends meet. It is so undramatic that when MGM decided to make a movie of it, they had to add an ending wherein Annie considers leaving Carl but changes her mind.⁵ In the book there is no such question: Annie and Carl are simply trying to do what hundreds of thousands of young couples do every year: live together. Their main problem is money. In the novel, Carl's mother stops sending him his weekly \$5 allowance after he gets married; Smith recalls that it was

⁴ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, handwritten outline of Smith's life, 11 May 1991.

⁵ Even with that attempt at a dramatic ending, the movie is flat and dull and was never popular.

his father who stopped sending him money: he said to George, "If you're old enough to marry, you're old enough to support a family."⁶

The young couple lived simply and sparingly. George worked several jobs: teaching ice-skating, delivering the college paper, and tutoring failing law students. Smith worked briefly as counter girl in a restaurant, and a few weeks as an apprentice in a beauty shop.⁷ She wanted to attend the University, but she couldn't because she had only completed two years of high school, so she enrolled in Ann Arbor High School. According to Smith, the "Principal thought it irregular for married woman to be high school junior but could find no law against it."⁸ It must have been difficult for her to fit into this new world, but by now she was used to being an outsider, and once again, she became the editor of the school paper, the "Optimist."⁹

In Joy in the Morning, Annie and Carl run out of food when Annie is seven months pregnant. In desperation, Annie writes to her mother, who responds by telling her that she doesn't have any money to send her but advising her to write to her stepfather: "Write with a feck shown [affection] and

⁶ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, [1964].

⁷ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, [1964].

⁸ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

⁹ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, [1964].

he will send you money. He always had a feck shown for you like you was his own daughter and he will send money I know" (197). This letter is nearly a transcription of one that her mother wrote to her:

well Little I'm glad you wrote to dad about the moneey he thought a lot of it an if he wants to give it to you he can send it back to you. Dad likes you an if I were you I wood often write to him he often speake of you, an he like you he said you fair an honest an as long as he like you it may mean a lot to you some day allways keep in touch with him. . . .¹⁰

Annie in the novel is too principled to write to her stepfather for money, but Smith probably did. The next month she also must have sent them a picture because her mother reports that "Dad said you look wonderful on your picture an said you wood win the beauty prize."¹¹

Three years after their elopement, on November 11th, 1922, Nancy was born. The account of pregnancy is also sensitively handled in Joy in the Morning. In fact, it is one of the few books that follows the course of a pregnancy with such realistic and sympathetic views. In her later disclosure for MGM, Smith contrasts her real-life experience in a Catholic hospital with the birth episode in Joy in the Morning: "The interns and nurses in the hospital are

¹⁰ Catherine Keogh, letter to Betty Smith, 11 March 1929.

¹¹ Catherine Keogh, letter to Betty Smith, 30 April 1929.

fictional. They are the kind of interns and nurses I would have liked to have. My nurses were nuns" and she was in labor for two days.¹² But the joy of this experience, although they were continually on the verge of poverty, is also clearly expressed in Joy in the Morning.

But once again, Smith was not able to graduate from high school. George passed the bar exams and got a job in a the mill town of Belding, Michigan, doing mainly divorces. Two years later, when Mary was born, they lived 60 miles away from the hospital and (according to Smith) George was in another town defending a rapist.¹³ She had a practical nurse with her and a doctor got there, through a storm, just in time for the birth. But Smith wrote: "These two years and the two that followed were the happiest and most serene of all my life. I was so glad to have the babies and my whole world settled down into a calm and lovely period."¹⁴

George was ambitious, and Belding was just one stop on the road to success. George advanced from country lawyer to city attorney to county prosecutor to nominee to the House of Representatives, although he was defeated.¹⁵ At the same time he was becoming more and more interested in

¹² Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, [1964].

¹³ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, [1964].

¹⁴ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

¹⁵ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

international affairs and increasingly disillusioned with the legal profession.¹⁶ In 1925 George got a job in Detroit, and they moved to Grand Rapids, "then a mushroom-like prosperous boom city."¹⁷ In one account Smith writes that, although George was extremely successful, and wanted to live beyond his means to attract a wealthy clientele;

All our money was invested in possessions. We bought a town house and a country cabin and had two cars and hired people to take care of these things. But everything went wrong. We sort of grew to be strangers to each other because his work kept him more in New York and Chicago than in Detroit.¹⁸

George was appointed secretary to the League of Nations, but Smith's loyalties remained with the working-classes and with the poor: "I was one of the three 'professional' ladies of the town and found it very difficult to keep setting and upholding social and class standards. I thought the mill people more interesting than the professional and monied people."¹⁹

This underlying conflict is illustrated in Joy in the Morning: Annie's most interesting interactions are with the taciturn Native-American storekeeper and his wife, the

¹⁶ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, handwritten outline of Smith's life, 11 May 1991.

¹⁷ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

¹⁸ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

¹⁹ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

florist and her landlady. There is also a conflict about Annie's working-class accent: Carl continually tries to correct her grammar and pronunciation, and Annie tries, but cannot, reflecting Smith's own feelings about her New York accent in the midwest. Later, when Smith moved to Chapel Hill, she was able to enjoy her accent and the accents of others: she often told the joke "When I first came here I just couldn't understand the Southern accent. Paul Green would go around saying I am an impo'tent man. I thought, why would he go around saying he's impotent?"²⁰

Overall, these years present the picture of a young couple learning how to get along with each other, and at the same time, growing up. Joy in the Morning is a "slice-of-life" from the day-to-day realities of Betty and George Smith. At the end, the couple is happy, but it is not clear that they will remain so, and indeed that was not to be the case. As George became successful as a lawyer, Smith started to become successful as a writer. George seems to have had affairs with other women, and Smith eventually left him. Although they tried to stay together for several more years, they were destined to have a warm but distant relationship as ex-spouses.

²⁰ Daphne Athas, personal interview, 21 May 1991.

Writer

Betty Smith became a writer at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. George and Betty had moved frequently during their married years; from Ann Arbor to Belding to Grand Rapids, and, finally, back to the University of Michigan and "start all over again."¹ George returned to school, getting a Master's Degree in Political Science, and finally Smith was able to take college courses. The University had a new president, Clarence Cook Little, and Smith went to see him to ask permission to audit classes. He allowed her to enter the University as a special student and take up to five hours a week without matriculating.² Smith was forever grateful for this, and her gratefulness is expressed in the portrait of the Dean in Joy in the Morning.

The first course Smith took was journalism. As part of the course, she had to submit an article to the newspapers; this was what began her career. Smith had a businesslike New York attitude, and it gave her the courage to share her unique vision with others, regardless of class and social

¹ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

² Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, [1964].

differences.³ Smith was not as naive as Annie Brown in the book, and she did not worship her teachers quite as much as Annie does. She wrote to a friend about her first teacher: "One day, I almost smote Brumm one for speaking out of turn." This was the reason:

Five-and-ten cents stores, especially those in the large cities, fascinate me. I like to prowl around in them on a Saturday afternoon. It's all so gay and carnivally. People so obviously enjoy living. You can buy anything there from the first pair of rubber pants you wore as a baby, to those tin cornucopias which your friends will buy for you after you have died and will fill with artificial flowers from counter number eight and stick in your grave right over where they judge your heart to be. You can buy jewelry and perfume; the wherewithal to make lampshades and nightgowns, phonograph records, frankfurters and radio parts. And nothing over ten cents!

I tried to put something of his into a theme I wrote for Brumm. And he rose up in class and called it good, But he added; "I compliment the author of this on her courageousness, for it requires a great deal of courage to confess to a knowledge of the ways and habits of the sort of people that have their being in such places as five-and-ten-cent stores."⁴

³ George has the same ambitious instinct: after Smith had an article published in Plain Talk, George published one in the same magazine about being a young lawyer. Catherine Keogh, letter to Betty Smith, 27 Jan. 1930.

⁴ Betty Smith, letter to Murry Godwin, 16 Nov. 1928.

Smith found herself again an outsider in an unusual situation: she was unlike the other college students--she literally spoke with a different voice--and yet she spoke so powerfully that none could ignore her. She lived life intensely and cared passionately about matters that others could only guess at, and the teachers recognized this. Smith found herself in a position where she was the most successful writing student at the University of Ann Arbor, even though she had only graduated from the eighth grade.

When Smith submitted an article to the N.E.A. Syndicate, they hired her to write one article a week. Between January and May of 1928 she sold them 19 recipes, sewing tips, and household hints. She also published 32 recipes in the Detroit Free Press, and was later appointed assistant editor of the women's page.⁵ Altogether, in 1928 Smith made \$176.75 from selling 52 articles to the N.E.A. Syndicate, the Chicago Tribune, Plain Talk, the Detroit Free Press, the Herald Tribune, Zenith Magazine, and Ramer Reviews.

The articles were mostly brief, humorous vignettes. For example, Smith wrote in Ramer Reviews the following, accompanied with an art-deco illustration of two sophisticated women smoking and drinking in a bar:

The two women paused before the door. Inside, men could be heard talking and laughing. The younger of

⁵ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

the two girls drew back timidly.

"O, I haven't the nerve," she cried.

"Don't back out now," said the older one. "I've been there many times before and nothing ever happened to me."

"O, but the first time! You feel sort of ashamed the first time."

"A man never feels ashamed, honey," said the older woman wisely. "If they want to they go; the married men as well as the single."

"But," timidly, "people sort of look down on a girl who . . . Besides, my folks . . ."

"Well," answered the temptress, "hasn't a woman got the same feelings as a man? Why shouldn't she amuse herself? If it's all right for a man, why not for a woman?"

"But I have heard that it's so rough and brutal."

"Maybe it is. That's why I like it. The rougher the better. There's something elemental about it. I like 'em brutal."

The younger girl was weakening, but she held out a bit longer.

"But the price you have to pay! The terrible price! Is the fun that you get out of it worth the price you must pay?"

"Yes," agreed the older woman. "It's a stiff price. But you can't see a good prize fight anywhere for less than five dollars."

So they went over to the door, bought their tickets and went in to see the prize fight.⁶

In 1929 Smith made \$202.30 from selling 38 articles to such

⁶ Betty Smith, "The Broadway Way," Ramer Reviews, Feb. 1929.

publications as well as B'nai B'rith Magazine, Chatelaine Publishing Company, Mayfair Publishing Company, Mother's Journal, Phelps Publishing Company, and True Story Book. Betty Smith had discovered a way in which, as a wife, mother, and writer, she could make money from the home.

Psychologically and economically, it was empowering, a way to keep poverty at bay. Each small amount of money she made she carefully entered into a register, and kept minute records, as if it were a testament to her growth as a writer and her financial independence. She kept records of amounts as small as a penny until 1943 when her finances moved into a different realm. These records were cross-indexed on cards for every year up until 1943, when there was a sudden change and her index cards were abandoned. As Nancy Smith Pfeiffer wrote: "Food and writing always were closely associated with Mother, perhaps because the writing was responsible for our food," but writing really meant more than that: for Smith, it meant that she was following her own fortunes at last, that her early years when she dreamed on the fire escape had not gone to waste. And there is an element of cynicism underlying Smith's early writings: as her daughter Nancy Smith Pfeiffer recalls, Smith never tested the recipes she wrote or made the patterns that she encouraged others to try.⁷ Not only did she discover that

⁷ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, Twentieth Century-Fox Publicity Department, [1945].

she could make money by writing and sending things through the mail, that she could gain a measure of fiscal independence, but her commercial writing helped her to perfect a voice that could reach the people.

Over a period of three years, Smith took all the writing courses the college offered: short stories, novel writing, playwrighting, journalism and poetry.⁸ She also became one of the editors of the college literary magazine, the Inlander.⁹ Smith had other writing successes as well. For instance, in 1927 she entered a brief public dialogue with the analytic philosopher Bertrand Russell regarding his article "Education without Sex Taboos," which was published in The New Republic. In the 1920s and 1930s Russell was an "intellectual high priest turned popular moralist": he commanded an international audience with his views on sexual relationships, marriage, and child-rearing. He was assured of an audience. "His fame for incomparable feats of intelligence put people in awe of any opinion he might utter. . . . [He was] the 'great intellect' tackling the day-to-day problems of progressive people who sought how to live better" (Brink 153). His solution for the question of sex education was simple: all the progressive adult had to

⁸ Betty Smith, "On Looking Back," Our Michigan: An Anthology Celebrating the University of Michigan's Sesquicentennial (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1966): 78-80.

⁹ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

do was to do away with the taboos; to allow children to "see each other and their parents naked whenever it so happens" and answer children's questions without undue passion as they arise. Russell wrote "The right attitude seems to me to be purely scientific: the facts are so and so."¹⁰ Later, in a letter to Smith, he describes himself as "a person who has succeeded in acquiring a scientific outlook on sex matters."¹¹

Smith wrote an essay that made a variety of criticisms of Russell's article, all of which generally point to one theme: that Russell has oversimplified a complex and probably insoluble problem. Rather than systematically attacking Russell's argument, she attacks his entire position: "I do not want to be cynical, but I wonder whether Mr. Russell formulates his idealistic theories of the capacities of children for sex education in that charming hour, just before bedtime, that he spends with his children."¹² Smith writes that, if she were living in a society of people like Bertrand Russell, she might be able to teach progressive sex education to her children, but in

¹⁰ Bertrand Russell, "Sex Education without Taboos," The New Republic, (Nov. 16 1927): 346-8.

¹¹ Bertrand Russell, letter to Betty Smith, 4 Jan. 1928.

¹² Betty Smith, "Mr. Russell and Sex Education," Plain Talk. 3.1 (July 1928): 96-98.

her world she could not because "my community and my friends and my relatives are not ready for it."¹³ Thus, unlike Russell, Smith takes the network of interrelationships within the community into account before she making a decision. Still, she is aware of the failure of the system of sex education in her own life, and she admits it:

The knowledge of sex that I brought to my marriage, I had acquired from filthy jingles on the walls of the toilet rooms of the public schools of New York City; from the conversation of other children who had received garbled versions of it from lack of privacy between their parents and from obscene things that I had overheard on street corners. I was ashamed of sex as I knew it.¹⁴

With her own child, Smith concludes that "I had failed terribly at this thing," and the only alternative she provides is to continue with the imperfect mixture of knowledge and taboo. Smith submitted her article to The New Republic, and the editor, although he rejected it, suggested that she send it to Russell himself. This she did, as well as submitting it to Plain Talk, the magazine which finally published it.

Russell immediately sent a Smith a lengthy personal

¹³ Betty Smith, "Mr. Russell and Sex Education," Plain Talk. 3.1 (July 1928): 96-98.

¹⁴ Betty Smith, "Mr. Russell and Sex Education," Plain Talk. 3.1 (July 1928): 96-98.

reply, as well as sending a letter to the editor that appeared in the next issue of Plain Talk. In it he stressed that Mrs. Smith's "failure" was Mrs. Smith's fault: "It is obviously Mrs. Smith's shrinking timidity which causes her child to embarrass her so much," and he assumes that she is "easily frightened."¹⁵ Russell's early childhood education probably contained too little sex and Smith's contained too much, but this is a class and cultural issue. Even though Smith had "lost" this battle, it made her happy. She wrote to the editor a personal letter: "As for Bertrand Russell, another day, another time for him. It's Indian summer in Michigan now. To-day, there's a warm June breeze and an April sky. It's a grand day for washing one's hair."¹⁶

At the University, the teacher who taught her the most was Kenneth Thorpe Rowe, a playwright, who also taught Arthur Miller the dynamics of play construction (Miller 227) and countless other young playwrights as well. At Ann Arbor, Smith experienced success as playwright: her first play, Wives-in-Law, was chosen to be published in a book edited by Rowe; her second, The Day's Work, was also included in the anthology and ignited controversy all over the campus. It was produced and made it to the final rounds of a one-act play contest, but it caused "bitter diversity

¹⁵ Bertrand Russell, letter to the editor, Plain Talk, 3:4 (Oct. 1928): 505-507.

¹⁶ Betty Smith, letter to G.D. Eaton, 4 Oct. 1928.

of comment"--some thought it was a "strikingly original use of the one-act form"¹⁷ and should win the contest, but others thought the subject (a doctor and an ambulance driver smoking cigarettes over a dying suicide) was too violent. Finally, she lost to Hobard Skidmore, class of 1932, and his play Lassitude. She had another play, Mrs. Trent's Husband, a boarding house romance, produced and reviewed; then, Jonica Starrs, a three-act about the break-up of a marriage, won a three-act contest and was produced June 3-5, 1930, to good reviews. The culmination of this activity for Smith was that she won the Avery Hopwood Award for Jonica Starrs, a sum of \$1,000, which was a great deal of money for an unemployed housewife in the midwest.

The Avery Hopwood award was a turning point in Smith's life, as it was for other writers, such as Arthur Miller. In his autobiography, Timebends, Miller defines it as "the student equivalent of the Nobel" (209) and mentions it eight times in his autobiography, as a marker in his life which gave him encouragement to become a playwright. The award worked in the same way for Smith: it encouraged her to make playwrighting her career. Now there was no turning back: she had tasted success, she had learned how to make money writing, and she had all the tools to follow her dream of becoming a writer.

¹⁷ Michigan Daily, 29 April 1930.

It may be at this time that Smith's headaches began. She makes references to these headaches in her letters to her mother and Murry Godwin, and later to her husband Joe. She took Veronal¹⁸ for these headaches, and her mother warned her not to take pills, but to take Petrolager (a cure-all product) instead.¹⁹ She was straining for something more than being wife and mother. Her mother wrote:

pleas dont take those Pills they are very harmful in time I read so much about them, Im suprise you take that you be so dope up well im sure you must know if they harmful or not, you old enough But master yourself an dont study so much²⁰

Smith never followed this advice, and her migraines continued to plague her throughout her life. As in the fairy tale, "The Little Mermaid," there is a price that women must pay to see their dreams come true.

¹⁸ I have been unable to find out what Veronal is. If anyone knows, please write to me.

¹⁹ Catherine Keogh, letter to Betty Smith, 19 May 1929.

²⁰ Catherine Keogh, letter to Betty Smith, 30 April 1929.

Plays

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of playwrighting to Smith's career. As soon as she discovered she could put characters on a page and make them speak and move, an entire new world opened up within her. The beginnings were humble, indeed. In Joy in the Morning Smith describes her introduction to playwrighting. When Annie first put pen to page she thinks:

Now what'll I write about? How about Carl and me? Not the way we are, but if we were different people living in a different way. First I'll give us different names. After some thought, she decided on Linda and Lance. Now where will I lay it? This room? I'll figure that out later. I'll write down the conversations first and put the other stuff in after. She began writing a play. (50)

It is evident from Smith's early play manuscripts that she was doing just this: taking the situation in which she found herself and letting the characters interact in different ways. It was also through writing plays that she developed the style of spare simplicity, repetition, and accurate rendition of conversational style and dialect that is so evident in her novels.

The play that Annie writes in Joy in the Morning is incredibly silly and melodramatic. The dialogue goes something like this: LANCE "Sit close to me, dearest of dears, while I study torts." LINDA: "Oh, Lance, I wish I could hold pens for you" (51). The sophisticated literary critic may cringe, but, as with all of Smith's writing, she knew what she was doing: she even named the play "Stupid Heart." Smith had a silly streak that was sometimes stronger than her desire for literary distinction. In fact, Annie in the novel doesn't give two hoots for literature as it is taught in the academy--she loves it, she loves all literature, but naturalism and realism alone were insufficient for her to express herself. While Annie's playwrighting teacher reproaches her for her "combination of sordidness and sentimentality," he still admits that "the dialogue is authentic" (147). Betty Smith remained true to language as she knew it, however, and wrote with the working-class combination of brutality and pathos that is characteristic of that culture.

Smith's silliness and sordidness was immediately evident in her earliest plays. Just like Annie in the novel, Smith was overjoyed to have two plays published in an anthology by Kenneth Thorpe Rowe, University of Michigan Plays (1930). Her most successful play, Wives-in-Law, is a ridiculous, complicated love triangle. It starts out as a "wife" confronting the "other woman," but it turns out that

the "wife" is an actress hired by the husband to retrieve his love letters from his lover; when the lover leaves, the "actress" reveals to the husband that his whole romance was a set-up, and that she was working with the lover. She blackmails him for \$500. Then it turns out she really was an "actress" after all and blackmailed him for fun. At the end he propositions her. This story is a more ornate version of the "dirty stories" she was writing for Ramer Reviews at the time, but the plot taxes credulity. The characterization of the "wife/actress" who is the heroine is very powerful, however, and Smith's teacher must have recognized the potential of the writer, since when the play was produced it won a regional contest.¹

It is interesting to contrast this Wives-in-Law to her concurrent publication, The Day's Work. That play was also produced, but it did not make it to the final rounds of contest. The Day's Work is slice-of-life nihilism. A man has just jumped from a five-story building; a crowd forms, a policeman comes, disperses the crowd, a surgeon and ambulance driver come and dismiss the policeman. In a deadpan linguistic execution, the doctor refuses to give the man morphine, even though he is still alive, because he's dying anyway, and he wants to sell it. He sits down, steals

¹ The final showing judging was 28 May 1930. Smith later published the play again under the name "Gander Sauce."

the man's money and cigarettes, and watches him die. It is a profitable business: the doctor gets \$6 from the dying man's pocket, \$1 for the morphine he saved, and 15% of whatever damages his lawyer can scare out of the landlord. The driver is appalled, and the doctor explains to him: "Listen Willie, don't let this stuff get you. It's all in the day's work" (26). The students at the University of Michigan may have been shocked, but A Day's Work was published along with Wives-in-Law in the student anthology, and the newspaper wrote:

Judging by the quality of her creative work this year, together with the practical pointing of her talents which production this year can certainly give, one might hazard the label of Mrs. Smith as the "white hope" of the recently-born tradition of Michigan drama.²

It is important to note that Smith was here regarded highly for the first time in her life. Moreover, the accolade was in the newspaper. After Smith had learned how to gain publicity while in Michigan, she used public relations and the press to her advantage whenever possible.

Smith's three-act play that won the Hopwood Award was never published, but it was produced during her time in Michigan; more interestingly, it gives us a window onto her life during the break-up of her marriage. It is the first

² Michigan Daily, 29 April 1930.

in a trilogy--Jonica Starrs, Divorce Lawyer, and You Promised Me--that are the same situation worked out in different ways, as if Smith was trying to decide what to do with her life. In a way, they are performance pieces: as she wrote her life, she lived it, rewrote it, and finally, in the end, it worked out as she wrote. This technique--writing her life, living what and how she wrote--was something that she did until her dying day.

If you identify the young wife Jonica with Smith herself, even the title Jonica Starrs is a wish-fulfillment: living as she was with the ambitious and confident George H. E. Smith, in the world that he chose, where he was active and she was passive, often wishing that she played a more major role. And, in her plays, she does. Jonica Starrs is funny, and as in much of Smith's drama, the love-triangle is an important theme. As usual, she was aware of what she was doing: she refers to "the eternal triangle" in Act 2 scene 1 (page 15). Jonica Starrs recalls Sinclair Lewis' Babbitt (1922), but the story is told from the wife's point of view. The play starts out in a lower-class beauty parlor, and Jonica Starrs, a doctor's wife in mid-America, is thought of as an upper-class upstart (as a professional's wife from would be, in a small midwestern town). The women maliciously reveal to Jonica that her husband, David, has set up a mistress, Stella Hart, in Chicago. In the second scene Jonica confronts David and Stella and decides to

divorce him, all the while predicting that he would be back to her within a year. In the third scene, Jonica's predictions turn out to be true: both David and Stella have become unhappy with their relationship, and both have new lovers; David goes back to Jonica, who by then has become a published writer and is involved with a famous novelist, Leonard, who loves her deeply. Jonica then ends her relationship with Leonard to go back with her husband for the sake of the children. But Smith is open-minded: in one version in the archives, a note at the end says she will change the ending according to suit the director.³

A central aspect of the play is Jonica's developing career as a writer: it is a central aspect of the break-up as well. Early in the play David complains to Stella: "I believe that [Jonica's] cold-bloodedly developed a warm artistic temperament to go with her writing." Stella responds: "She'd have a lot to write about....if she knew about us." David says: "I don't doubt but what she'd make capital of it. She'd write a poem and entitle it.....i suffer."⁴ Here Smith is poking fun at herself again with a glee she was unable to suppress. Both of the men in the play question Jonica's sincerity: David and Leonard always

³ Betty Smith, notes attached to Jonica Starrs, unpublished manuscript, 1930.

⁴ Betty Smith, Jonica Starrs, unpublished manuscript, Act 2 Scene 1: 4.

feel she's secretly laughing at them. Leonard complains "Ever[y] emotion is just so much copy to you; just so much material to use in the next installment of whatever it is you spent your time writing You are the most self sufficient woman in the world."⁵

At the time this was written, Smith was separating from George; Leonard is reminiscent of Bob Finch, whom she met later. Like Jonica, who has moved to a cabin at the seashore, Smith was spending her summers at Lake Ronkonkoma with her children. Like Jonica, who eventually supports herself by writing for Really and Truly Stories Magazine, Smith was partially supporting herself by writing romance stories for Modern Romance. Smith uses her life as fodder for her fiction, just like Jonica. Jonica says to David about "the eternal triangle": "The theme has endless possibilities. In one issue, you come back to me; a better and a wiser man. In another, you wanted to stay with Stella but she wanted some one else and you decided to come back to me," and "In this issue, I find true happiness with someone else and I chase you out when you come back." In You Promised Me, the last play of her "trilogy," Leonard hangs around the newsstands each month, waiting for True Story Magazine to come out. When the heroine asks why, he answers "So I could see what was happening to you." During this

⁵ Betty Smith, Jonica Starrs, unpublished manuscript, Act 3 Scene 1: 6.

time it is impossible to separate Smith from her writing.

Divorce Lawyer was her second play in this vein; the play is Jonica Starrs from the man's point of view. The plot is pretty much the same, except that our hero is a lawyer, and there is a complicated sub-plot about how he betrays the confidences of a trusting country client for big-city profits, and the other woman, rather than just being a Babbitt-type floozie, is a rich lady who helps him up the ladder of success. His wife leaves him, he becomes a hardened money-grubbing lawyer, he gets screwed, goes broke, she comes back, he makes a commitment to being a good man, and she reveals she's pregnant. The play was never produced. It functioned for Smith, though, to work out her feelings about George and her divorce, and, like all her writing, it is inextricably entwined with her life. It's got handwritten notes on it, from George, I think, about the verisimilitude of the legal situation, and he can't help commenting on other things as well. Not only did Smith take her life and put it on the stage, but she made her antagonist consider his role as well.

You Promised Me concludes the trilogy. It starts off in Act Three of Jonica Starrs. The husband is a doctor again, and Leonard, the Finch-like lover, has just proposed to our heroine. Although they are deeply in love--in a way that she never could be with her philandering husband--the heroine decides to give the husband one more chance, but

they start quarrelling immediately. Finally Leonard comes back out of the rain and the mist (just as Claude Bassett does repeatedly later, a dream figure of her dead father), and she moves in with him for six weeks. She is about to marry him when he suddenly confesses he doesn't like children. The heroine decides to remain a single mother.

The only three-act that Smith wrote that deviates from her autobiographical theme is Becomes a Woman, also entitled Francie Nolan (the first appearance of that name in her writing). It's an anti-romance, probably written in reaction to producing stories for Modern Romance. The play starts with three women working in a department store, one of whom is pretty, if cheaply dressed. She is propositioned by various lower-class men throughout the day, and she virtuously turns them all down. Then, in traditional Modern Romance fashion, Leonard Kress, the son of the store's owner, enters the store and propositions her. She does not turn him down.

The similarity to romance fiction ends there. The heroine Francie is being abused by her father (who beats them all), and she has a brother who has hypophrenia, a mental disorder where he laughs suddenly at the most serious times; then Francie brings Leonard home to announce their marriage. Francie's father refuses even to put his shoes on for the occasion, and when he finds out Francie is pregnant, he threatens to kill Leonard. Thereupon Leonard changes his

mind and won't marry her. Her family kicks her out, she convinces Leonard to marry her in name only so that the baby won't be illegitimate, and she lives by herself, as a single mother, with a co-worker that had been similarly disgraced in the past. Then Leonard's father comes to visit her, likes her, and tells Leonard that he will give him money if he settles down with Francie. When Leonard comes around begging to get back together, Francie insists on a divorce anyway. In this "romance in reverse" the heroine is given the chance to spurn the wealthy (anti)hero.

Smith's plays functioned in several ways for her: first, they gave her an outlet for her ambition to express herself; second, they allowed her to look at her life closely and consider which way she wanted to live; thirdly, they allowed her the temporary victory of writing a wish-fulfillment; but most important is that they served as apprentice work for writing fiction. Their strength is her ear for rendering spoken language exactly as it sounds. In the beauty shop, one woman is explaining why she doesn't want to go under a dryer: "I want it to dry natural. I don't believe in having all that wetness dry on your head. I'd rather have it go off in the air."⁶ Now this is so odd that Smith could have overheard it and remembered it, jotting it down gleefully that very night. She does this

⁶ Betty Smith, Jonica Starrs, unpublished manuscript, Act 1 Scene 1: 4.

with all sorts of dialects: lower-middle class, middle class, black, Native American, etc. In comparison with the other plays published at the same time, this was a very special gift that few playwrights had. Smith was a great observer of language, and her ability to render colloquial dialogue stood her in good stead when she wrote her novels.

Yale

When Betty Smith began as a writer and playwright at the University of Michigan, she gained confidence and maturity; soon she was able to challenge her position with George. If Joy in the Morning is any indication, their early years were happy ones, and if her autobiographical/performance plays are any indication, he began to move away from her both in terms of their relationship as lovers and in his career. As they moved from Ann Arbor to Belding to Grand Rapids and back to Ann Arbor, those two differences followed them. As for many people during the depression, 1930 was a difficult year for Smith and her husband, and they found themselves moving once again. George's parents had joined them in the midwest, but his mother had a stroke and died, and his father died shortly thereafter. Smith's stepfather, Michael Keogh, was also sick, dying in 1933. Smith's professional correspondence mainly stopped, and she did not write as much--she only sold five articles (to Joy Stories and the Washingtonian) for \$62.78. Perhaps more significantly, she did not add up her writing totals for the year.

The Smiths decided to return to the East and start anew (again):¹ although each was on a personal flight, perhaps they thought if they began again at a university close to home, they could reconcile. First, George first spent a summer at Amherst College while Smith stayed in a cottage at Lake Ronkonkoma, on Long Island.² This is probably where the last scenes of her trilogy are located, since the prodigal husband comes to visit the heroine at the beach. The children spent the 3rd and 4th grades with their aunt and their grandmother in Queens while the couple was separated.³ Then, as in the play You Promised Me, they reconciled once again in New Haven: George taught at the College of New Haven and eventually became an assistant professor in the Institute of International Studies at Yale, and Smith used the Hopwood award to enroll in the Yale Drama Department. The couple reconciled for a year, and the girls spent 5th and 6th grades in North Haven.⁴

Yale was an important stage for Smith. She studied under George Pierce Baker and was eventually one of a select

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- ¹ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.
 - ² Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview, 10/11 May 1991.
 - ³ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, handwritten outline of Smith's life, 11 May 1991.
 - ⁴ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, handwritten outline of Smith's life, 11 May 1991.

group, Baker's dozen.⁵ In 1932, She had two one-act plays produced: Mannequin's Maid on Jan. 18th, and Blind Alley on May 23rd. She was "very much dismayed when [she] discovered that the technical aspects of production were much more important than the writing of the play."⁶ She undertook to learn about production, acted in and directed other plays, and met people who would be useful to her throughout her career. Elia Kazan was a classmate whom the students called "Gadget," due to his habit of carrying around many tools.⁷ Smith remembers dating Kazan, and even thinking of marrying him.⁸ Kazan, however, has no memory of Smith at all.⁹

Most importantly, Smith met Bob Finch at Yale. Finch was "the love of her life"¹⁰--he was everything that George was not: alcoholic, moody, and needy. He was the youngest of a family of four children who moved to Dillon, Montana, when he was only six weeks old, in 1909. His father taught education and geology at Western Montana College, and his

⁵ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview, 10/11 May 1991.

⁶ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

⁷ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview, 10/11 May 1991.

⁸ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 13 Dec. 1943.

⁹ Elia Kazan, letter to author, 26 March, 1993.

¹⁰ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview, 10/11 May 1991.

mother was a pianist for the Methodist Church. One of his brothers grew up to take over his grandfather's farm in Iowa, another earned his doctorate at Yale, becoming an English teacher at Phillips Exeter Academy; his sister became a violinist.¹¹ Finch was the youngest in the family, and he was the artist:

After studying at the University of Montana Robert Finch did newspaper work and led an orchestra. In New York he studied at the Elizabeth Grimball studio of the theatre and later joined Eva LeGallienne's studio group. He has played in several Broadway productions and in stock companies. A few years ago he came to the university here to study playwrighting under Mr. Koch, and he has attended the Yale drama school. He has been stage manager of several new York productions and done radio work.¹²

Like Smith, Finch finally undertook that most difficult of professions, playwrighting. Together they wrote and published eighteen plays, largely on Finch's topics--the outlaws, ranchers, cowboys and mountaineers of Montana (Spearman 72). But by himself, he could barely get any work done; he sat in the wilds of Montana, drinking and feeling sorry for himself.

At Yale they were inseparable. They wrote and produced plays like The Desert Shall Rejoice, a sentimental Christmas

¹¹ Helen Finch Dial, Beaverhead County History, 169.

¹² Chapel Hill Weekly, 8 May 1936.

play set in cowboy country. The play is a transparent allegory of the birth of Christ, and it was one of Smith/Finch's most successful plays. It was published in the Book of Radio Plays (1940) and by Samuel French in New York (1941) and also made into a Warner Brothers Moving Picture (1941). Another example of a Smith/Finch collaboration was a play that was clearly written to a certain audience: Heroes Just Happen: A Comedy of High School Days in Three Acts. The play is prefaced by a synopsis:

There never was such an unlikely boy as Joe Thomson. He was always outgrowing his clothes and the pork-pie hat he wore gave him a very vacuous look. He had been expelled from some of the finest high schools in the country through no fault of his own. He had no parents and had been shunted about from relatives to relatives with the change of the seasons. Finally he landed at Ivy Lane High School where, because of similar names, he was mistaken for a great football hero. . . . (5)

Although these plays are well-crafted, they were probably not written with a concept of "art" in mind. After Smith became famous, a fellow playwright wrote, recalling their days together, "I remember the script that you and Bob Finch did on that desert parody of Christmas Eve--with Nick, the Greek and his big electric star (which he got from a 'busted down movie house')." ¹³ Whether or not the plays were

¹³ Brad McCuen, letter to Betty Smith, 24 Dec. 1943.

parodies, Smith and Finch were training themselves to write to sell to a changing dramatic marketplace.

Smith was trying to break into the theater world in any way that she could. Now that she was back in the East, she used her native New York intelligence to meet theater professionals in the city, a thing which Finch never figured out how to do. Smith was always expanding her network, and she was learning how to use the press to her benefit. During her first year at Yale, she had a three-act play, Candy Farm, produced in the Detroit Playhouse in the Institute of Arts; she sent out a press release and the newspapers covered it, every step of the way.¹⁴ First they printed an article "Author to See Play" that read: "She is best known locally as the wife of George H. E. Smith, a founder of the Detroit Institute of Adult Education, and an authority on international relations."¹⁵ The article also said that Smith was a graduate of the University of Michigan and that Candy Farm had won the 1931 Avery Hopwood Award, both untrue. In fact, it is even doubtful that Smith ever went to Detroit to see her play performed. She then sent this article to the New York Times, since an article

¹⁴ Although I have not seen any press releases in Smith's hand, it is likely that she fed them the information, because the facts are always tailored to suit her needs at the time and contain many falsehoods.

¹⁵ Detroit Free Press, 31 Jan. 1932.

appeared a week later, restating the same misinformation.¹⁶ From thence it spread to Variety.¹⁷ When the play was performed, however, it received bad reviews: "It is, in its entirety, too immature a work to be considered seriously."¹⁸ But Smith was also good at recycling her work. Later the play was optioned by three producers in succession, and it was eventually produced as Sawdust Heart in Hoboken, at the Stevens Theatre, in June 1935.¹⁹

In 1932, Smith began an important correspondence with a long-time friend and supporter: she started writing to Barrett H. Clark, who at that time was an editor at Samuel French, the "Oldest Play Publishers in the World with Offices in London, New York and Los Angeles." Clark bought several of her plays for the Dramatist's Play Service and offered to work as her agent and try to sell some of her other plays to the movies. In March of 1932, she came down from Yale to visit him in the city. He gave her good advice, as when he told her that most of her plays were still "'prentice work," but he continually encouraged her.²⁰

But change was inevitable. Smith and George were not

¹⁶ New York Times 7 Feb. 1932.

¹⁷ Variety, 1 March 1932.

¹⁸ Detroit Times, Feb. 1932.

¹⁹ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

²⁰ Barrett Clarke, letter to Betty Smith, 18 March 1932.

getting along, and in 1933 they separated legally. In later years Smith would blame the break-up of her marriage on her mother-in-law: she wrote "was hateful and ruined my marriage. . . . I hate mothers-in-law."²¹ But it was also probable that both had to be King of the Mountain. George was an ambitious conservative Republican: he became a staff director of the Republican Policy Committee in the United States Senate in 1944, which he helped organize with Senator Robert E. Taft; he was admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1956; he collaborated with Dr. Charles A. Beard, a scholar of American literature and culture, on several books, the best known of which was The Old and the New Deal; he collaborated on a textbook Industrial Organization and Management. His obituary also notes he wrote humorous reviews and articles for legal and political science journals and for the Book Review Section of the New York Times.²²

Their difficulties probably stemmed from the different courses that their lives were taking as well as from the fact that George wanted a wife whose primary role would be as wife in social situations: he needed someone to put on parties and talk to people; Smith was never a social person,

²¹ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 9 July 1945.

²² "Betty Smith's First Husband Dies," Chapel Hill Weekly, Dec. 1962.

and she had her own ambitions. What is also likely is that Smith's "true love" was a man much more like Robert Finch, a dreamer who needed to be taken care of, rather than the professional and demanding George H. E. Smith.

George shared the responsibility for the children with her. After several years of anger, eventually he paid child-support, and often he had them visit during the summer. This must have been helpful for her: it meant that she did not have to support them for a short period of time and also that she had a break to do some of her own work. Later Smith would spitefully write on her dust-jacket biography that she was the sole support of her daughters. George, the lawyer, immediately threatened to sue; Smith never shamed him again. She also kept the name "Betty Smith" as her professional name throughout her life.

After the separation, Smith found it harder and harder to be a student. At first she tried to continue her studies at Yale, borrowing money for her tuition and getting several paid directing jobs, through Yale. One was organizing and directing a musical for a large Catholic Church, and it was so much work that she decided never to do something like it again.²³ Then she tried to support her theatrical education by writing skits for the Woodmont Follies at the

²³ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

Woodmont Country Club.²⁴ One of her associates from that time wrote about how they used to bum around together and "that summer of 32 or was it 33 when we three used to haul those broken down flats home made drops in that dilapidated Chevy sedan of yours" and they would "blow off the top" while driving to Woodmont.²⁵ She also taught an evening course in drama at New Haven College in the fall of 1933, but none of it brought in enough money to support a family.

Smith was also becoming disillusioned with her studies as a playwright: George Pierce Baker had died and she could not get accustomed to Walter Prichard Eaton, who took his place.²⁶ Eaton criticized her play, "Divorce Lawyer," too quickly: he thought it was written by a student with no experience of the law profession. Smith never forgave him.²⁷ Increasingly, Smith doubted the value of the education she was receiving in terms of its ability to support her. As a single mother with no income and two daughters to support, she had to think fast.

Smith left Yale and returned to her mother's house in Woodside, Queens. She began to suffer from the economic problems that would plague her until the publication of A

²⁴ New Haven Register, 30 Aug. 1933.

²⁵ "Old Blood and Guts White," letter to Betty Smith, undated 1943.

²⁶ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

²⁷ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

Tree Grows in Brooklyn. She bought and read Modern Romance and True Story and, for about a year and a half, turned out confession stories for 2-5 cents a word. She made about \$1,000 before the market went dry.²⁸ It is here that the conflict between her commercial and artistic sides began. She wrote that, in order to get enough money to pay rent, she sold five hundred dollars worth of stories in six weeks, but then "I tried to do some decent writing but the confession technique got in the way. I tried to write more confession stories but my literary technique got in the way."²⁹ It was the middle of the Great Depression, and something had to give:

Now it was the fall of 1934 and I was very destitute and discouraged. I could no longer write things for money and had forgotten how to write for pleasure and satisfaction. The children became ill and the rent was unpaid and food itself was a grave problem. Thought of remarrying but the person I liked at the time had no job either.³⁰

Smith wrote to Barrett Clark and asked him to sell any of her plays for twenty-five or fifty dollars. Clark arranged for her to get some money from the Author's League, and started the machinery for getting her a job with the WPA

²⁸ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, notes on draft, 25 April 1994.

²⁹ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

³⁰ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

Theatre.³¹ He helped her to get a job with the Civil Works Administration that paid \$24.50 a week.³² Clark wrote "I am glad to know that the clouds are shifting a little and you are getting ahead a bit."³³

Smith made enough money to rent a top floor railroad apartment at 63 Richmond St. in Brooklyn from her brother-in-law, William Hall. It was only a few stops away from her mother's house by subway, so the girls moved with her and enrolled in school: the family was together again, minus George. Moreover, Smith was working in a profession: she had a federally-funded job, working out of a building at the Port Authority, acting in plays on the subway circuit.³⁴ She had broken away from her role as a lawyer's wife and she was on her way to becoming an artist.

³¹ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936.

³² Barrett Clark, handwritten memo to Betty Smith, 1935.

³³ Barrett Clark, letter to Betty Smith, 3 May 1935.

³⁴ Betty Smith, autobiographical statement, 1936. I am assuming they did skits on the subway, much like informal outdoor theater today.

Noncommercial Theater

The job with the Civil Works Administration supported Smith in her early days as a writer; once she found she could support herself in the arts, she never held another working-class job again. During the later years of the depression, Smith found it possible to pick up money here and there--federal money set aside for the arts, grants, fellowships--and she strived ceaselessly to make money by her pen. There was a market for plays then that no longer exists--the world of noncommercial theater.

Smith played an important role in the largely undocumented world of noncommercial theater of the 1920s and 1930s, and the populist drama movement is an important part of her career. The populist drama movement itself is a broad enough subject to warrant a dissertation. In Curtains Going Up (1939), Albert McCleery and Carl Glick quote Gilmore Brown:

It is the non-commercial and community producing groups, existing all across the country, that are responding to the desire of the American people for a non-merchandized, personal theatre. It is very largely through them that a national theatre is coming into being. They are closer to the people than any professional theatre can be and, therefore, at their best they present a truer and more fundamental

reflection of American life and thought. (v)

Interest in community theatre was a nation-wide movement that created amateur theater groups across the United States. Participants used remodeled buildings for community theaters, including churches, barns, schools, speakeasies, libraries, farmyards, and even a potato chip factory. McCleery and Glick write with a populist zeal: "Here and there throughout the country is emerging a native drama" they wrote, "plays written by native playwrights, unknown to Broadway. It is a healthy sign. A dramatic literature of the highways and by ways, of the hearthstones and street corners of America is being born" (342). Smith's good friend, Barrett Clark, was the "astute champion of these native playwrights," and his article "West of Broadway," was the movement's manifesto.¹

Even Ann Arbor, Michigan, was a hotbed of noncommercial drama: "The whole town is theatre-minded. There are production groups in every women's club, church, school, and young people's organization" (26) notes Jean Carter and Jess Ogden in Everyman's Drama: A Study of the Noncommercial Theatre in the United States. It was a fine art for the many (Carter 13), a theater not for the people, but by the people. It was the theater of democracy:

The noncommercial theatre certainly bears witness to

¹ Barrett H. Clark, "West of Broadway," New York Times, 27 Oct. 1935.

the continued existence of democracy in America if we accept the idea that a distinguishing characteristic of democracy is the existence of many forms of propaganda rather than a single form. . . . so that the community as a whole has access to many points of view. (72)

There were "little theatre groups" everywhere in the United States, but there were more in the areas in which Smith lived than elsewhere: in Brooklyn there were ten, and in Manhattan fifty-seven (Perry 38). Ann Arbor was a dramatic town, and later, when she won the Hopwood Award and enrolled in Yale School of Drama, Smith entered another regional center which was very influential in the development of noncommercial theater:

The study of dramatic arts in colleges and universities became popular about the same time as the little theatre movement. It had begun, however, to show signs of life in the early years of the century with the work of George Pierce Baker, first at Harvard and later at Yale. It was his vision of the possibilities of noncommercial theatre that spotted the country during his lifetime with Harvard and Yale theatre graduates whose influence is still felt today. (28)

Later, when she moved to Chapel Hill, she settled in the heart of yet another regional theater movement. It was a world that Smith took to immediately, conquered, and loved.

The noncommercial theater, which probably had its roots in a cultural desire for entertainment (or to make a cultural fiction) was eventually replaced by television, but in the 1930s it was all that the American public had. Even

the Federal Government began to take part in the nationwide movement: in 1935, when Roosevelt set two million dollars to be spent immediately on relieving unemployment in the arts, he hired Hallie Flanagan as director of the Federal Theater Project. Flanagan's biographer notes that, like Smith, she was inspired by George Pierce Baker and decided to make a "national federation of regional theatres," based on the idea that "the theatre had an important social and educational contribution to make to American culture" (Joan Bentley 190). Both Smith and Flanagan believed in the ideology of New Deal--that art and education were the keys to solving all manner of social ills:

The Arts Projects, Hallie concluded, would be "part of a tremendous re-thinking, re-building and re-dreaming of America." They would represent "the new frontier in America, a frontier against disease, dirt, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and despair." Her dream and that of the others was the dream of the New Deal. (189)

The Living Newspaper was overtly based on a communist ideal: "In Russia, where illiteracy was widespread, staged dramatizations of current issues served to publicize the new regime's sweeping social reforms" (Bentley 210). Flanagan chose this method for ideological and artistic reasons, but also because it was an inexpensive alternative to the sets

and costumes required in traditional theatre.² Her manifesto for the Living Newspaper read, in part:

Authenticity should be the guiding principle in Living Newspaper production. Let it be kept in mind that some of the most fascinating and also dramatic statements are to be found in the daily columns of the press. Assemble a wide, firm foundation of factual material and upon this can best be built the architecture of good theatre.

The research department of any Living Newspaper Group can well be likened to the lens of a camera. . . . Full and sympathetic discussions between the battery of dramatists and the research workers should take place at many points during the production of the script.³

Through the Living Newspaper, Smith learned invaluable skills that she would later sharpen: the choice of social realism as subject matter and her ability to work collaboratively with others (writers, directors, producers and editors) in the production process.

When money became available through the Federal Theatre Project, Smith began working on the Living Newspaper. The play she wrote, "King Cotton," was about migrant workers in the South. Although it was never produced, she used the research material later on her screenplay "School Bus."

² The Living Newspaper is still done in Sweden, according to my friend Ingela Rolfsdotter, who teaches it under the title "The Living Workshop."

³ Undated mimeographed handout written by Hallie Flanagan in the Betty Smith Papers.

(Smith never wasted material--she recycled it until it finally found its form, and was accepted as a part of the American public fiction.) Not all of her writing was successful, however: even "School Bus" was never produced.

The noncommercial theater movement was not solely the creation of Federal funding, however. Throughout her career as a writer, Smith wrote and published one-act plays for little theater groups. These short plays are different from her three-acts in that they were less autobiographical, more polished, and more expressive of cultural expectations. Still, they show a great variety of quality and subject matter. Several themes reappear in her work, such as religious allegory, suicide, and love triangles with two women fighting over one n'er-do-well man. Mannequin's Maid is a triangle play; it takes place behind the scenes at a department store floor show of women's clothing, another sociological detail of past life that is lost today. The maid responsible for waiting on the models, here called mannequins, is in love with a man who has been dating one of them. She takes a pill and dies. It is satisfying, in a masochistic sort of way, like the Spanish film Love--A True Story, in which one corner of the triangle slits her wrists while sitting outside in the cold rain. Fun After Supper was her first treatment of the Nolan family theme, which developed into A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. In So Gracious is the Time, Smith tackled the topic of abortion, and the play

won a prize. However, her treatment of the subject is so closely tied to biblical language that the outcome is obvious. On the day before Christmas, a couple going to an abortion clinic, keeps walking around block. They see a variety of people come and go: a madam and a prostitute ("Eve" and "Lillith"), a mother of four who was turned away because her \$8 relief check was not enough, a woman who was made sterile from the clinic. They say things like "smells like death" and "seems like murder," and the people have names like "Tamar," "Sheba," and "Ruth." Finally the woman decides not to have abortion because "He may be the one that the world is waiting for." It turns out her name is Mary.

Smith was ambivalent about her Roman Catholicism throughout her life: in her personal letters, she is largely agnostic, in her novels she is often antipathetic to Catholicism, but occasionally, in her journalism and plays, a religious sentiment appears. Her attitude towards religion is like her attitude towards her mother: she hates it and she loves it. So Gracious is the Time is an example of the triumph of sentimentality in her writing. But the Roman-Catholic church troubled her later in life when she was attacked as an anti-Catholic because of passages in A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.

Smith continued writing these plays throughout her years in New Haven, New York and Chapel Hill. She also continued selling them, winning prizes with them, discussing

them with friends and colleagues, and using the writing of them to structure her artistic life. But if there had not been support from the government for the arts, it is likely that Smith would have had to stop writing altogether in order to support her children. However, because of the New Deal acts, she was able to develop a voice in American culture.

But what was the social significance of the one-act play in the 1940s? The little theaters may have been amateur, but the playwrights and editors putting the many anthologies together were professionals: Walter Prichard Eaton, the chairman of the Yale Department of Drama; Paul Green; Elmer Rice, the New York head of the Federal Theatre Project; Martin Flavin; and Zona Gale. In his preface to One-Act Plays for Stage and Study (1949), Emmet Lavery asked:

What *has* the one-act play meant to us? Was it merely the five-finger exercise of our piano playing days? A kind of "busy" work which teacher of play writing devised for classes that should not be exposed to the more certain frustrations of the three-act form? A way to fill out the program for the college or the community theatre--a kind of training ground for audiences, as well as actors, playwrights and directors? Or was it something more? (x)

Lavery draws parallels between the one-act and the new medium, television. Writers who were well versed in the one-act form, Lavery suggests, may find "larger fields to

conquer. . . . Television might even turn out to be a blessing rather than a curse" (xi). Writing one-act plays became a training ground for other forms of communication. At the time they were a necessary part of our culture, a live art form. Today they are hidden on back bookshelves and few readers can bring themselves to crack the spine and raise a cloud of dust.

Smith's plays taught her how to write. They have a rough-edged power, but they aren't very good in her early years, and in the later years, with the death of the Federal Theatre and the populist drama movement, she lost her market.⁴ After her success, when Smith could write her own ticket, she tried to do a three-act for Broadway, but she became disillusioned about playwrighting in general: "A playwright must love to write with people breathing down his neck."⁵ Shortly thereafter she stopped writing for the stage. But the craft of playwrighting was essential to Smith: it was her practiced ability to transcribe the nuances and variations of common American speech that formed her characteristic style.

⁴ I remember the death of the little theater movement within my own life: I attended school and YWCA-sponsored theater classes nearly every year until high school, when the community lost interest and cancelled the dramatic club.

⁵ John Chapman, "A Novelist Discovers Writing for Theatre is a Little Different," New York News 14 Oct. 1948.

Chapel Hill

Smith was a part of the political and artistic movements of her times. When she was living in New York, things were happening in the Federal Theatre Project that would effect her life. When choosing regional directors, Hallie Flanagan immediately thought of Frederick Koch, who had been running the most successful small theater in the South--the Carolina Playmakers. She wrote to him: "It is unthinkable that any great theatre project should be launched in America without your support," and asked him to become the regional advisor for the Southeast.¹ When the federal government allotted two million dollars to be distributed to theatre professionals on the dole, there was a problem: theatre professionals were so used to unemployment that they seldom registered for relief, and if they did so, they did not list their occupation as "theatre professional." The dearth of "theater professionals" on the unemployment rolls was even greater in the South than in the North, and although Koch was successful in starting a theater in Asheville, North Carolina (the birthplace of Thomas Wolfe), other communities were could not find enough

¹ Hallie Flanagan, letter to Frederick Koch, 30 Aug. 1935.

people interested in the theater to take advantage of the project. One local headline read: "No Destitute Actors Found Here--Theater Project Lost."² "Proff" Koch, as he was fondly called, found himself stymied by bureaucratic paradox, but he did not let it deter him from using his position to strengthen the Carolina Playmakers: he imported theater professionals from the North. In August of 1935 the Chapel Hill Weekly ran an article saying that professional actors might come to join the Carolina Playmakers in a repertory program, and in May of 1936, the Durham Sun announced that "Four professional playwrights have been sent to Chapel Hill in connection with the federal theatre projects." Two of those playwrights were Betty Smith and Robert Finch. The Chapel Hill Tar Heel added: "In connection with their work the playwrights are consulting with Paul Green, and are attending Professor Koch's courses in playwrighting and modern drama," appending one of Smith's characteristic exaggerations: "Mrs. Smith was the first woman to win the Avery Hopwood award of \$1,200 for work in the drama."³

² Greensboro Record, 25 Jan. 1936.

³ Chapel Hill Tar Heel, 5 May, 1936. Smith was neither the first woman to receive the award, nor was the amount \$1,200 (the amount of the award went up throughout her lifetime, just as her age went down).

Smith had probably heard about "Proff" Koch, Paul Green, and the Carolina Playmakers from Bob Finch, who had gone to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for his undergraduate work. When she (and Finch) heard that Fred Koch was looking for theater professionals in the South, she jumped at the chance. She immediately sent a telegram to Paul Green, who was choosing the participants, and begged him to ask for her, saying that he wouldn't be sorry.⁴ Paul Green did, and he was not: they became fast friends, and he gave her professional support throughout her career.

Smith and Finch were hired, at first, to work on a play catalogue for the "Bureau of Community Drama." The "Bureau of Community Drama" was set up by Koch to "encourage the writing of original plays drawn from traditional and local history and also from present-day life of the people" (Spearman 24). Koch was immensely influential on Betty Smith.⁵ Introducing the term "folk play," Koch explained that it was

⁴ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview 10/11 May 1991.

⁵ Proff Koch was also very influential for Thomas Wolfe who, like Smith, originally wanted to be a playwright. Wolfe wrote in the preface to his first play "It is the fallacy of the young writer to picture the dramatic as unusual and remote. The dramatic is not unusual. It is happening daily in our lives" (Spearman 11). Smith and Wolfe both took Koch's teachings to heart and used them in different ways in their writings.

concerned with folk subject matter: with the legends, superstitions, customs, environmental differences, and the vernacular of the common people. . . .

The chief concern of the folk dramatist is man's conflict with the forces of nature and his simple pleasure in being alive. (Spearman 16)

Koch's description of a folk play could nearly be read as a formula for A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.⁶

Betty Smith's trip to Chapel Hill was another turning point in her life. When she got off the bus with her daughter Mary (Nancy was staying with her father in New Haven), she knew she had found a home where she could fulfill her dreams. Smith often told the story that when she disembarked and looked at the magnolia blossoms, her daughter, tired of moving from place to place, asked her 'Mama, how long are we going to stay here?' Smith replied "Forever."⁷ In Chapel Hill she found the distance she needed from her ex-husband, her mother, and from her harsh childhood in the tenements of Williamsburgh: "700 miles from Brooklyn, she began to see it in its proper perspective."⁸

⁶ In Robert Hemenway's biography of Zora Neale Hurston, he notes that she was involved with the regional theater in a college setting, just like Smith.

⁷ Daphne Athas, personal interview, 21 May 1991; this was one of Smith's favorite anecdotes, and she used it often.

⁸ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, Twentieth Century-Fox Publicity Department.

In April of 1936, Smith moved into an upstairs apartment in the house of a Miss Alice Jones, a retired Latin teacher and social arbitrator of Chapel Hill. Miss Jones was "one of those characters that Chapel Hill was known for," and she took Smith, as a northerner and a single mother, under her wing.⁹ Smith lived near the center of town, within those few blocks, for the rest of her life.

Smith loved Chapel Hill and was loathe to leave it. When she moved there, she moved into the center of the noncommercial theater movement. Samuel Selden described Frederick Koch as

like the former Johnny Appleseed, a persistent planter. He took a boyish delight in each opportunity to journey to some spot where he had never been before. Always he carried with him his precious seed, and never did he return without sowing some of it. "Preaching the Gospel," he called his labors. (Henderson 24)

The Playmakers Theatre was the first in the United States to be dedicated to the creation of a native drama, and in the spring of 1937, 131 little theaters in North Carolina competed at the Drama Festival (Carter 14). In her central position in the world of little theater, Betty Smith was able to be both a contestant and a judge. Smith's friend and supporter Paul Green went on to create the first long-running historical pageant, The Lost Colony, staged by the

⁹ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, notes on draft of present dissertation, 25 April 1994.

sea at the site of the landing of Sir Walter Raleigh's colonists. Smith acted in this popular play both in her student days and, after she became famous, as a benefit to her benefactor.

Smith entered the theatrical life of Chapel Hill with characteristic immense energy. In May, she and Finch worked on the production of Lysistrata, directed by Koch with the Carolina Playmakers at the Forest Theatre. Here she met some of the people who would be her friends and associates for the next several years: Jo and Elmar Oettinger, Noel Houston, Josephine Niggli, Walter Spearman, and Samuel Selden. In 1937 Finch appeared as Caesar and Smith as a Christian Prisoner in the Forest Theatre's presentation of Shaw's Androcles and the Lion (Spearman 59). In 1937 Smith won a Berkeley Playmakers award for her play So Gracious Is the Time (which was published in One-Act Play Magazine) and in 1938, she won another for Three Comments on a Martyr. The Whiteville Masquers put on a Smith/Finch collaboration, Western Night, in March of 1938. Another collaboration, Murder in the Snow, was produced in a festival of the Folk Plays of the Carolina Playmakers in April of 1938, and Smith's collaboration with Chase Webb, Lawyer Lincoln, was produced in the Carolina Dramatic Association Annual Festival State Tournament for 1939-40. In 1940 the Carolina Playmakers held a regional theater festival, "Drama in the South," that included appearances by Brooks Atkinson, the

New York Times critic, Clifford Odets, and Zora Neale Hurston (Spearman 80). Although they finished and published the catalogue, Plays for Schools and Little Theaters, in 1937, and Smith's job was officially over, she had no intention of leaving: she had become a part of the theatrical life in Chapel Hill.

Smith's problem now was to find enough money to be able to do so. Paul Green helped her to get a Rockefeller Fellowship of \$1,200 in 1939 and a Rockefeller & Dramatist Guild Award of \$1,000 in 1940. Fred Koch hired her as a judge for the North Carolina State Play Tournament, in which she would travel from town to town on the weekend, seeing and judging plays. George eventually paid her \$60 a month in alimony and child support, and she was writing stories for Modern Romance, but none of this money went very far. In an attempt to augment her income, Smith placed an ad in the Author and Journalist offering to criticize a one-act play for \$2 and to revise a three-act for \$30.

Smith was very good at giving and taking criticism and collaborating with other writers. Although one of her associates would say that she was a better play-doctor than a play writer, it was a strength that held her in good stead in her chosen profession.¹⁰ The plays were given small

¹⁰ Transcript of reminiscences of friends, Paul Green, Walter Spearman, Rhoda Wynn, John and Darice Parker, and Sam and Emily Selden, July 7, 1974 from the Betty Smith Papers in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North

productions, included in anthologies, or published under a royalty agreement with Samuel French. If she sold a play outright she made \$25, and if it was a royalty play she split a small payment, each year, with her co-authors. Sometimes the amounts, often split between two or three writers, are in pennies, that Smith duly counted and noted on cards before 1943. Later she must have looked at these cards with amazement.

Jay Sigmund, a Cedar Rapids insurance salesman, poet, and author who had several short stories listed among The Best Short Stories of 1927 (edited by Edward J. O'Brien), was one of Smith's collaborators. Together they wrote and published seven plays: Common Ground (1940), Folk Stuff (1937), Trees of His Father (1937), Vine Leaves (1937), The Saints Get Together (1938), Darkness at the Window, and They Released Barabbas (1939). A few of them are religious and in verse, and a few of the others are moralistic tales, sweet or frightening. Smith had several other ongoing collaborations as well. She worked with Chase Webb, publishing Lawyer Lincoln in 1939, Manana Bandits in Best One-Act Plays of 1938 (1939), and One Act Play Magazine in Dec./Jan. 1941-42. She also worked with Clemon White on Bayou Harlequinade, published in Twenty Short Plays on a Royalty Holiday and in pamphlet form by Samuel French (both

Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

1940), and West from the Panhandle, published in American Folk Plays (1939) and One Act Play Magazine (Feb. 1939). These plays, and the ones that Smith wrote by herself, show a range of subject and treatment with is impossible to summarize here: suffice it to say that some of them are good and some of them are bad. None are as bad as the standard folk play of the time, in which well-meaning white authors try to render black English and other colloquial language believably.

Smith's most intensive and long-lasting collaboration was with Robert Finch. Based largely on Finch's topics--the outlaws, ranchers, cowboys and mountaineers of Montana (Spearman 72), they wrote and published eighteen plays together. Although they met and were good friends at Yale, Smith's serious relationship probably didn't start until the moved together to Chapel Hill. When Finch was in Chapel Hill, he was a fixture in the Smith household. He was:

a rangy, hollow-chested man like John Ireland, the B-movie cowboy, leaning against the mantle. Bob Finch was Betty Smith's collaborator; they'd written more than thirty-seven plays according to Nancy, which made it legit rather than disreputable. But she was the first mother I'd ever known who was divorced, the first mother who had a man living with her, and the only mother who was a writer. (22)

Smith and Finch did have a relationship, but they maintained separate residences. Not only was Finch a night writer and

Smith a morning writer, but there was no open acceptance of extra-marital relationships in the 1930s.¹¹ They were, first and foremost, writing partners: they would spend their evenings together, reading passages from their scripts, talking and laughing till all hours of the night.¹² But Finch left Chapel Hill when the Federal Theatre Project was over, and their love affair was carried on by letter from his hometown in Dillon, Montana and later from New York, where Finch attended the New York School of Theatre at 254 West 54th Street.¹³ Finch often visited her, however, and he was also awarded a Rockefeller playwrighting fellowship, so he was able to spend the years 1940 and 1941 in Chapel Hill as well.¹⁴

In her correspondence with her collaborators, Smith wove tales out of her life; she embellished her letters according to the interests of the recipient. She assumed a macho role when writing to Jack Woodford, who was a

¹¹ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, notes on draft, 25 April 1994.

¹² Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, May 10/11, 1991.

¹³ Playbill from the Brooklyn Little Theater, 122 St. Felix St., missing date.

¹⁴ Biographical Data on Robert Finch, compiled for his play "Whistler's Grandmother." It is frustrating that this biography, like the autobiographies of Betty Smith, may or may not be true. In the case of Smith, I have several to compare, but with Finch, I'm only guessing that what Green was able to do for Smith he was also able to do for Finch.

Hollywood novelist and scriptwriter, outdoing his macho stories point by point. She wrote that once she was so poor that she and her daughters had to sleep on the sands of Coney Island, and then bragged that she made three thousand dollars in three weeks writing confession stories but that she had given that up. She also told him that she wrote propaganda stories for a "very large and strong communistic organization" in New York (the Federal Theatre Project).¹⁵ Throughout their correspondence, Woodford was trying to help Smith get a writing job in Hollywood, and it is possible that if A Tree Grows in Brooklyn hadn't been published, she would have been one of the first female scriptwriters in Hollywood.

Smith was always on the lookout for work and for publication opportunities. Eventually, she convinced Greenberg Publishers to let her edit an anthology of plays. They gave her a budget in order to collect plays for the volume, and Smith advertized for plays in the Author and Journalist. Smith published 25 Non-Royalty One-Act Plays for All-Girl Casts in 1942. Her daughter remembers a play coming to her by the then-unknown playwright, Tennessee Williams. Smith said that someday this writer would make his mark in the theater world, and she bought his play for

¹⁵ Betty Smith, letter to Jack Woodford, 20 Aug. 1936.

two women, At Liberty.¹⁶ Smith's second play compilation, published in 1943, 20 Prize-Winning Non-Royalty One-Act Plays got excellent reviews: "Selection is amazingly fine, and quality of the work included makes it the best value for the money in entire one-act anthology field."¹⁷

If Smith had not been drawn to telling her story more fully, in a prose novel form, she probably would have continued working within the noncommercial theater for the rest of her life. The way was open to her: she had all the necessary contacts (Paul Green, Fred Koch, Barrett Clark), and she would probably have led a satisfying, if financially improvident, life.

¹⁶ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, notes on draft, 25 April 1994.

¹⁷ Library Review, 15 Sept. 1943.

The Long Meditation

Writing takes place in dialogue with a writing community, and when Smith began writing A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, she was influenced by several things. One was her work on the Federal Theater Project. Perhaps she was remembering the words of Hallie Flanagan regarding the Living Newspaper--"Authenticity should be the guiding principle . . . Assemble a wide, firm foundation of factual material"¹-- when she walked her reader through the Williamsburg neighborhood in which she lived, taking them into every store and describing the contents of the shelves.² Certainly she was encouraged to use the material from her past by the teachings of Frederick Koch: his main focus was to encourage dramatists to use "the legends, superstitions, customs, environmental differences, and the vernacular of the common people" (Spearman 16). The acceptance of populist ideas among the writers and intellectuals during the depression allowed the emergence of

¹ Undated mimeographed handout written by Hallie Flanagan in the Betty Smith Papers.

² One fan wrote to say that he knew exactly which stores she was talking about, and others wrote recalling other details from A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.

material that had previously been taboo.

Thomas Wolfe was an influence on Smith's writing as well. Like Smith, he had been trained by Koch with the Carolina Playmakers--and he was writing stories and novels from the same vein that Smith wanted to tap. She often said that she was originally challenged to tell her story when she read his short story "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn" and felt that he had got it all wrong: "I realized that he had caught the lost feeling of Brooklyn, but his stories weren't authentic. This challenged me to write what I know about Brooklyn, to show it as it really is."³ The first notes regarding A Tree Grows in Brooklyn were scribbled in her copy of Of Time and the River.⁴ On the front flyleaf there are some emotional and philosophical meandering, not unlike Wolfe's own, and on the back cover there is an outline which roughly conforms to the plot of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. The seeds of the "tree" were planted by this book. In 1934, her daughter recalls:

On the way home from work one evening during the depression, Mother passed a bookstore whose window displayed a new book by the North Carolina novelist, Thomas Wolfe. Only a few minutes hesitation: The

³ Raleigh News May 9, 1943. Daphne Athas remembers a night that Smith read the story aloud; Athas was taken by the cadences of Smith's Brooklyn accent.

⁴ This volume is in the Southern Historical Collection at the Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

three dollars in her purse would buy lunch for a week or She came home with a copy of "Of Time and the River" under her arm.⁵

Although she continually refers to Wolfe as her major influence, Smith was inspired more by his method than his style: whereas Wolfe's sentences can run for several pages, recalling every nuance of a memory or thought, Smith's style is short sentences with simple diction, and it creates its rhythm through repetition. Smith was captivated by Wolfe's unashamed self-absorption, since she was quite capable of this herself. As her later friends remember: "Everything revolved around Betty."⁶

Smith's style was evolving more in the direction of other depression writers, such as John Steinbeck, James T. Farrell, and Henry Roth. She wrote plainly, but without the condescension of some popular contemporaries, such as Erskine Caldwell. Smith's style was directed to the uneducated reader: it was simple, it mimicked regional dialects, and it used repetition as a stylistic device, what Arthur Miller, in Timebends, calls "the thrilling lyricism of the thirties" (Athas 26). She read and respected Farrell, who also wrote about the life of the urban lower classes, but she soon outstripped him in readership since

⁵ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, Twentieth Century-Fox Publicity Department.

⁶ Drs. Fullilove and Lesage, personal interview, 18 May 1992.

she included humor in her vision of the struggling classes. The style that she eventually developed was her own. "She worked hard to make her language simple and easy. It wasn't an accident of style, but one she worked at consciously."⁷ Little did she know that this style, based on the grim realities of the times and influenced by the communist ideal of the Living Newspaper, would later serve to keep her out of the canon, demoted to the status of "high-school literature."⁸

Henry Roth's Call It Sleep, published in 1934, indubitably influenced Smith's confidence in her subject matter as well. Nancy Smith Pfeiffer recalls that when Roth's novel was published in 1934, it was "the cutting edge with experimentation with style," and says that Call It Sleep gave Smith "permission" to write down her memoirs.⁹ The subjects of Smith and Roth are nearly identical--the brutality of childhood and youth, one "Irish" and female, the other Jewish and male, in the immigrant tenements of New York--and the same somber tone pervades both novels. But again, Smith's style is nearly opposite to Roth's. Roth's

⁷ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, notes on draft, 25 April 1994.

⁸ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview, 10/11 May 1991, notes that Smith was put on many high-school reading lists due to the accessibility of her writing.

⁹ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, interview, May 10-11, 1991.

novel was a literary experiment with transcription of actual language change and stream-of-consciousness that did not always take the reader into account, or, rather, assumed a patient and literate reader, as well as one weaned on Joyce and a modernist fictional aesthetic. Smith chose to make reading as easy as possible for her reader.

Smith did not overtly identify with the line of American women's writing, running from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Sarah Orne Jewett to Willa Cather. She respected these women, and one of her plays, Little Immortal, is a scene recreated from Stowe's early life. Although she was indubitably influenced by the tradition of women's sentimental writing, she would tell the press in later years that she was most influenced by Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and Thomas Wolfe.¹⁰

These are some of the threads of the American literary dialogue that Smith brought with her to the kitchen table with her yellow foolscap to type out her life, ten pages a morning for several years. Writing was the most important thing in her life; little else mattered. Athas remembers her functioning in two modes, "writing as behavior and motherhood as habit" (28). Nancy wrote:

since "the novel" was so much a family affair and so much a part of our lives, my sister and I read it,

¹⁰ John K. Hutchens, "Books and Authors: 20 Years, and Still Growing," New York Herald Tribune 11 Aug. 1963.

discussed it, and made suggestions. As children, we too, had lived in Brooklyn, and the scenes were familiar to us. When we came home for lunch, the first thing we'd ask for were the new pages of the novel. It was like reading a serial in the Post or Collier's, only it lasted two years instead of seven or eight weeks. Mother says that was one of the things that kept her working at it so consistently--the fear of disappointing us children.¹¹

She wrote approximately ten pages per morning: "she'd be sitting there in her bathrobe and the house would be cold and she'd have a cigarette in her mouth with an ash about an inch long, just forgotten it, and she'd be typing away with four fingers."¹² When she lived in an upstairs apartment, Smith explained, "The people downstairs built a fire at daybreak and their chimney goes right up through my room and I simply put my back to the chimney and wrote by the light of early dawn."¹³ As Nancy remembers, there were certain sacrifices in being both a mother and a writer, aspects of her life that she had to give up:

I can remember when she was writing A Tree Grows in

¹¹ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, Twentieth Century-Fox Publicity Department.

¹² Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview 10/11 May 1991.

¹³ Transcript of reminiscences of friends, Paul Green, Walter Spearman, Rhoda Wynn, John and Darice Parker, and Sam and Emily Selden, July 7, 1974 from the Betty Smith Papers in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

Brooklyn she let dishes pile up on the sink and she'd go right to the writing and had this ability to let nothing else matter. She said people would drain her, with all the endless triviality and the chit-chat. She pretty much made up her mind who she was going to talk to and shut out other people.¹⁴

Athas remembers that Smith was known in Chapel Hill as a hermit: she walked with her head down and never engaged in small talk: "she wouldn't ever speak to you, not because she didn't like you, but because she didn't do that."¹⁵ If subsequently the Southern town of Chapel Hill never accepted their Northern celebrity, it is quite possible that Smith never noticed.

Smith continually scrambled to make enough money to make ends meet. Throughout her correspondence there are constant references to her lack of money--she was feeling the strain. During these years, Smith's daughters often spent the summer in Connecticut with their father, and Smith sometimes sublet her own apartment and moved in with her mother to save money. A typical letter to her daughter Mary starts off about kittens and ends up about finances, and this was how her mind would work: she could not keep away from this ongoing problem.¹⁶ As her daughter Nancy

¹⁴ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview, 10/11 May 1991.

¹⁵ Daphne Athas, personal interview 21 May 1991.

¹⁶ Betty Smith, letter to Mary Smith, 1 Aug. 1938.

remembers: "There were financial difficulties all the time. The whole first half of her life, for forty-seven years, it was hand to mouth."¹⁷ In her very first letter to Harper & Brother, Smith mentions money: "The last year has been very hard financially. Plays and editing pay very little. I have had no fellowship. In short, there has been no money."¹⁸ This is not an exaggeration: she kept exact records of each penny received from her writing, and the amounts are tiny. Athas remembers one night when Smith was judging plays in Chapel Hill:

She put her Fowler's bag of groceries on the Playmakers floor by the aisle, and when she returned to her seat it was gone. She ran up the aisle, her face red, a vein in her temple pulsating. She looked as tragic as a gypsy. Has anyone seen my groceries? she asked no one in particular, about to cry. Her breath sounded heavy, sort of a frightened snorting. (23)

As her daughter Nancy remembers, "We had no money for food and one day I found on the street an envelope, and somebody had put in two dollars to pay the water bill, there was no name and no address, and I gave it to my mother and she bought a lot dried beans and cooked them."¹⁹ The concern

¹⁷ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview, 10/11 May 1991.

¹⁸ Betty Smith, letter to Eugene Saxton, 27 June 1942.

¹⁹ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview, 10/11 May 1991.

with money is an important aspect of Smith's writing--first, much of her writing is about poverty, and second, she was writing to the level of reading of those who also lived in poverty.

The problems were mounting in Smith's life. As Smith progressed with the book and commissioned plays from aspiring playwrights, Finch became jealous of her success, and in February he broke off their relationship. His letters were exceptionally vituperative--he accused her of stealing his plays and ruining his life--but since he often wrote while drinking (and he was known to be a hard drinker) it is likely that much of this was drunken self-pity. In spite, he joined the army and married his childhood sweetheart, Marjorie Estelle. Smith immediately took her revenge, by writing the incident in her novel as the strange romance that Francie has with the soldier.

Smith's daughters were in high school and college during these years. Mary was special friends with Daphne Athas, a writer who Smith later helped, and they hung out with their boyfriends, Walter and Wayne. Throughout her life, Smith was always interested in moody, anti-social young men, and she loved Walter Carroll. Carroll was an orphan and a playwright, and the following summer Mary married him. A friend remembers "actually, Betty loved

Walter. . . . That was why Mary married him."²⁰ Walter was rejected from the draft for psychological reasons, and Smith tried to help him to launch his career: "Engineered by Betty and Paul Green, Walter had received the first Kay Kyser scholarship" for drama (Athas 27). But Walter was constitutionally unable to stop his wandering way, searching and drinking with equal intensity (Athas 28). He led both Smith and her Mary on a wild ride.

George also was giving Smith a hard time: he was a rigid man, and he didn't like her "irresponsible ways." He was getting remarried and wrote to her:

It is time you broaden your own responsibilities. Both of us have a duty toward the children which is not yet discharged and I expect you to get some steady work and help toward whatever obligations we have to take on their account. You cannot go on as in the past.²¹

Although Smith wrote A Tree Grows in Brooklyn with no immediate prospect of publication, her business sense, gleaned from the streets of New York, made her keep circulating her story in the mail. She continually submitted batches of pages to publishers: in December of 1940 she sent fifty pages of They Lived in Brooklyn to Houghton Mifflin and a section to Random house; in 1941 she submitted sections to Scribner's, Greenburg Publishers, Ives

²⁰ Drs. Fullilove and Lesage, personal interview, 18 May 1992.

²¹ George Smith, letter to Betty Smith, 1 June 1942.

Washburn, and Little Brown & Co.; in 1942 she submitted it to Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer. And she was repeatedly rejected: most publishers were not ready to take on a story about a poor girl growing up in the slums.

Harpers & Brothers & Sisters

Finally, in May of 1942, Smith submitted They Lived in Brooklyn to the Harper & Brothers 125th Anniversary Nonfiction Contest, carefully referring to it as her "manuscript" rather than her "novel." Her hopes that she would have a chance in the contest must not have been great, because when she didn't hear from them within two months, she wrote asking to have her "novel" sent back. This letter is probably what prompted the publishers to look at her manuscript; there is a handwritten note on her letter in the Harper files that reads: "Since it is a novel it is not a candidate for the contest. Too literate to dismiss quickly. Write & say it is being read as a regular entrant--put in weeded pile."¹ The note is signed EFL--the Elizabeth Lawrence who eventually became Smith's editor and confidante. Lawrence's secretary wrote Smith a noncommittal letter, saying that her novel was being considered "in the regular way," and that they would notify her "in a week or so."² A month later, in an agony of expectation, Smith

¹ Betty Smith, handwritten note on letter to Harper & Brothers, 8 May 1942.

² H.G. [secretary to Elizabeth Lawrence], letter to Betty Smith, 18 May 1942.

wrote back asking their decision. She received a letter from the editor, Eugene F. Saxton, saying that since the novel was fiction it was not eligible for the contest;

I am glad to say, however, that the book has aroused a great deal of interest, and is undergoing a third reading which will be completed in two or three days, when I shall have an opportunity to write to you finally about it. Your book has many engaging qualities, and it is due to our serious interest in its possibilities that readings have been more thorough and have taken a little longer.³

Smith carefully underlined the phrases "the book has aroused a great deal of interest" and "Your book has many engaging qualities." This letter was probably the most exciting letter she ever received: she was caught up in a whirlwind of desire.

Smith had been waiting too long for her big break to let this opportunity take its own course. She immediately wrote Saxton a long letter, giving an account of her background, her writing, her projects, and the revisions she planned on making, ending it by saying she was coming to New York to discuss it in person.⁴ There she met Elizabeth Lawrence, the first female editor at a major publishing house. Lawrence had been made editor at the time of Smith's

³ Eugene Saxton, letter to Betty Smith, 24 June 1942.

⁴ Betty Smith, letter to Eugene F. Saxton, 27 June 1942.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn because Saxton had become ill, and, since World War II was going on, there were no men to replace him. Within a week Smith received a call via her upstairs neighbors (since she did not have a phone) that her novel had been accepted for publication.⁵

Smith immediately went to New York. There she met with Lawrence and Saxton. Although the topics discussed during this second meeting are lost, by this time Saxton had read the book as well, and in July of 1942 Smith got an advance of \$500 and a contract. Immediately she was uneasy regarding the split: Harper & Brothers wanted 50% of everything, including serializations, foreign editions, and film rights. Smith spent the money and sent the contract back unsigned.

But Smith was desperate for money. By February of 1943, she was broke again. She was in the Watts Hospital in Durham for an emergency operation for kidney stones, and she had to write to Lawrence requesting another advance: they sent \$200. And Finch, despite his angry alcoholic renunciations, continually wrote from his post in the army, asking for money. Mary was preparing to marry Walter Carroll in May, and Nancy had graduated as salutatorian of her high school and wanted to go to college. Desperate for publication, Smith saw the printing of her novel as the only

⁵ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview, 10/11 May 1991.

solution to her continual and taxing poverty.

It was at this time that Saxton wrote to Smith, encouraging her to enter A Tree Grows in Brooklyn in the Harper & Brothers yearly novel contest. It would mean a slight delay in publication for Smith, but he assured her that it was the kind of entry they liked to see.⁶ The contest was to be judged by Stephen Vincent Benet, Irita Van Doren, and Christopher Morley. Saxton wrote tactfully that, if money was a problem, he could offer her another advance to get her through. However, Smith wrote back that, although she was sure she would win, she did not want to enter. Her reasons for this were complex. One was money: "I am so anxious to have it published soon because I simply don't know what to do about money."⁷ She also needed to know whether she would "sink or swim via that book": she was in a torment of hope and worry.⁸ She wrote to Saxton:

Sometimes I had fits of black depression about the book, thinking that the critics would jump on it because they might suspect I was ignorant of the technique of the novel. Other times, I had feelings of elation because I convinced myself that at least the

⁶ Eugene F. Saxton, letter to Betty Smith, 30 Dec. 1942.

⁷ Betty Smith, letter to Eugene F. Saxton, 26 Dec. 1942.

⁸ Betty Smith, letter to Eugene F. Saxton, 2 Jan. 1943.

material was different.⁹

Later, Saxton explained to the critics that Betty Smith didn't enter the Harper & Brothers novel contest because she was an author of "real modesty."¹⁰ Martin Flavin won the prize for his novel Journey in the Dark. It was never reprinted.

Finally, Smith had to sign the contract. But first she wrote to Saxton that she had promised John Elliott, an agent at Leland Hayward, that he could handle the film rights. Saxton wrote back generously that he would leave it to her to settle as she thought proper.¹¹ Later that August, Smith generously wrote in a letter that Harper & Brothers could have 50% of the movie sale as well as of the sale of any first serial rights, and that she would pay Leland Hayward out of her half. She wrote:

I don't care one way or the other about the amount. It will come down to something that is manipulated on a pad of paper and it means only that some income tax lawyer will be paid a fee far our of proportion to his work in hunting about evasions for me.¹²

⁹ Betty Smith, letter to Eugene F. Saxton, 23 April 1943.

¹⁰ Eugene F. Saxton, letter to Clifton Fadiman and Irita Van Doren, 12 March 1943.

¹¹ Eugene F. Saxton, letter to Betty Smith, 5 August 1942.

¹² Betty Smith, letter to Eugene F. Saxton, 8 June 1943.

Later the money did become an issue to her; when the movie sold to Twentieth Century Fox, Saxton generously (or guiltily) paid the agent's commission, but the percentage that Smith gave away became a bone of contention for her. She was angry at everyone--at John Elliott, Leland Hayward, Harper & Brothers, Twentieth Century Fox--and felt that they had all stolen from her.

At the time, however, Smith was dependent upon the support of her publisher: "Young authors are particularly vulnerable to high-handed editors because they are eager to be published and will make almost any compromise to see their work in print" (West 69). Smith was overjoyed that her book was going to be published and grateful to both Saxton and Lawrence. Her letters to them immediately took on a personal and relaxed tone. The support and friendship that she received through the firm over the years may well have been worth the 50% of her first novel's income.

Eugene Saxton was a senior editor at Harper & Brothers. In Up & Down & Around: A Publisher Recollects the Time of His Life, Cass Canfield describes him:

Gene Saxton was one of the best editors of his day. His approach to his job was deliberate; he would read a manuscript and leave it lying on his desk for weeks. Why, I'd ask him, hadn't he made a decision on it? He would reply: "I want to see whether the book sinks in, whether I remember it. Often, on first reading, I may like a manuscript quite well, but if it doesn't make a

lasting impression, I turn it down." (90)

Canfield credits Saxton with bringing in most of the big writers in the firm. It is a chance of history that World War II made men scarce, so that when Saxton became ill, there was no man to replace him. Even though Harper & Brothers, like other publishing firms, did not hire women as editors, the war created unusual opportunities for women.

Elizabeth Lawrence began as a reader but became one of the first female editors.¹³ Lawrence recalled that "The position of temporary copy editor at Harpers was to be for one month. At the end of one month she was asked to stay another month. Then after several months they just forgot to ask."¹⁴ According to both Cass Canfield, in his memoirs, and Eugene Exman, in The House of Harper, Lawrence was the editor who discovered Betty Smith. Lawrence was tactful, thorough, and an extremely successful editor. Cass Canfield credits her with being able to empathize with her readers (204). He referred to her editing projects as the "Lawrence Mysteries," since she seemed to have a magical knack for choosing novels that would become best-sellers.¹⁵ Lawrence was to become one of the most beloved editors in Harper &

¹³ The only other woman made an editor at this time was Joan Kahn. Genevive Young, telephone conversation, 18 Sept. 1992.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Lawrence, letter written by Mary Jo Reiter to author, Dec. 1992.

¹⁵ Reiter, Mary Jo. Letter, Dec. 1992.

Brothers' history.¹⁶

Smith's first letters to Saxton are very open and candid. It was then that she confessed to Saxton that she had no plans for writing any further novels:

As for the next book, I haven't thought of that yet. When I finished this one, I thought, "This is everything I know. I don't know anymore than what is in this book. If it isn't any good, then I'm no good because I can't write anymore."¹⁷

Although she immediately followed this statement with a qualification, her initial instinct was probably correct: although she wrote three other novels, none was as powerful--or as successful--as A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.

As the senior editor, Smith corresponded mainly with Saxton at the beginning of her relationship with Harper & Brothers. However, Saxton soon became ill and he died before the book was published. Consequently Elizabeth Lawrence handled most of the editorial changes. Smith and Lawrence worked well together: Lawrence was humorous, caring, and tactful, and Smith responded to criticism gracefully throughout the revision process. She wrote to Lawrence:

I consider the criticism and the reworking of

¹⁶ In my research, everyone who remembered her loved and respected her. Cass Canfield dedicated his memoirs to her. Lawrence died 7 Jan. 1993.

¹⁷ Betty Smith, letter to Eugene F. Saxton, 31 July 1942.

criticized material as equivalent to a very valuable education in the writing of a novel and I want to profit by it. If I feel that something should stay as written, I will say so, frankly and give my reasons. Otherwise, I'm glad to make whatever changes are necessary.¹⁸

On her side, Lawrence's editorial letters requesting change were models of tact. She always started with a positive statement before moving to a criticism, and often blamed the necessity for change on the "booksellers" or others.

One of the major sections of the book that they had to change touched on sexuality. Lawrence felt that she had to write to Smith regarding a scene where the children play blow up condoms like balloons:

all the salesmen have had a chance to read the manuscript and have had their enthusiasm confirmed. There is one thing, however, which disturbs them from a sales point of view. That is the episode of the balloons. Everyone is amused by it, but experience tells them that it is likely to offend the Catholic market. Its inclusion might mean a considerable loss of sales in this quarter.¹⁹

However, Lawrence admitted that the "balloon episode" was essential to the plot. Consequently, she asked Smith to just tone it down and "free it from any connection with the

¹⁸ BS to EFL, Jan 14th, 1943.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Lawrence to Betty Smith, Jan. 12th, 1943.

Catholic church."²⁰

Unfortunately this caused some loss of detail in the novel. It is likely that condoms had not yet been described in a novel, and Smith had the description all ready to go. They were disguised in a cigarette box: "There was six dull yellow articles, folded and rolled to look like cigarettes. The color was muted by a film of fine white dust. Francie unfolded them, shook them out and blew off the powder. Now they looked like unblown balloons."²¹ The children then blew them up and hung them out the window, disappointed with the results. Unfortunately, Smith had to tone this down. The published version reads merely that the "contents [of the box] were very uninteresting" (91). But Lawrence was right; even this excision was not enough to placate certain religious readers.

Smith had also originally written a long section on the reaction of the Catholic community to the blown-up condoms hanging out the apartment window. In her original manuscript, the Nolans were verbally condemned by their priest in a sermon so vehemently anti-contraception that the neighborhood birth-rate increased by a third. Smith also removed a description of the childhood of this priest whose

²⁰ Elizabeth Lawrence to Betty Smith, Jan. 12th, 1943.

²¹ A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, original corrected manuscript, p. 182.

parents, since he had been "promised" to the church, allowed his siblings to die of malnutrition in order to pay for his education. All of this is omitted from the published version of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.

As publication neared, Lawrence mediated other removals and changes. Again she referred to the salesman:

word has been received that book sellers are finding the vendor's language in the Christmas tree episode very strong meat. Will you look over it and see what might be done by way of placating the defenders of decency? It is always interesting to discover who is shocked by this sort of thing--invariably the men to whom the language is commonplace.²²

Smith revised this section, but she was able to keep enough of the original language to maintain her meaning. "Shut your f-----trap" became "shut your lousy trap," "It's a God-damned, sonofabitchin', f----- world!" became "It's a God-damned, rotten, lousy world!" and other swearing was omitted.²³ Smith's gift for rendering colloquial language in a believable way here is crucial, since it integrates two aspects of working-class language, brutality and sentimentality. In a yearly ritual, the left-over Christmas trees were thrown at the children, who, if they caught them, could carry them home;

²² undated note from EFL to BS, 1942/43

²³ These changes can be compared to those requested of Richard Wright in Native Son (1940) and Norman Mailer in The Naked and the Dead (1945).

For the split part of a moment, the tree thrower went through a kind of Gethsemane.

"Oh, Jesus Christ," his soul agonized, "why don't I just give 'em the tree, say Merry Christmas and let 'em go? What's the tree to me? I can't sell it no more this year and it won't keep till next year." The kids watched him solemnly as he stood there in his moment of thought. "But then," he rationalized, "if I did that, all the others would expect to get 'em handed to 'em. And next year, nobody a-tall would buy a tree off of me. They'd all wait to get 'em handed to 'em on a silver plate. I ain't a big enough man to give this tree away for nothin'. No, I ain't big enough. I ain't big enough to do a thing like that. I gotta think of myself and my own kids." He finally came to his conclusion. "Oh, what the hell! Them two kids is gotta live in this world. They got to get used to it. They got to learn to give and to take punishment. And by Jesus, it ain't give but *take, take, take* all the time in this God-damned world." As he threw the tree with all his strength, his heart wailed out, "It's a God-damned, rotten, lousy world!"

When some of the older boys pulled the tree away, they found Francie and her brother standing upright, hand in hand. Blood was coming from scratches on Neeley's face. He looked more like a baby than ever with his bewildered blue eyes and the fairness of his skin made more noticeable because of the clear red blood. But they were smiling. Had they not won the biggest tree in the neighborhood? Some of the boys hollered "Hooray!" A few adults clapped. The tree man eulogized them by screaming,

"And now get the hell out of here with your tree, you lousy bastards."

Francie had heard swearing since she had heard words. Obscenity and profanity had no meaning as such among those people. They were emotional expressions of inarticulate people with small vocabularies; they made a kind of dialect. The phrases could mean many things according to the expression and tone used in saying them. So now, when Francie heard themselves called lousy bastards, she smiled tremulously at the kind man. She knew that he was really saying, "Goodby--God bless you." (154)

In terms of contemporary variation theory in the field of linguistics, Smith's understanding of the relativity of language and was revolutionary at her time. Smith had a memory for melody, and was able to demonstrate the strange mixture of realism and sentimentality in working-class language.²⁴

Perhaps the most interesting change between the manuscript and the first edition was the ending. Reviewers and critics noted that the last section was very much different in tone from the rest of the novel. Rosemary Dawson wrote in The Saturday Review of Literature: "toward the end of the novel the rhythm is broken. As soon as Francie is out in the world, getting a job and finding the first love of her life, the novel takes on more of the mechanics of the usual popular piece of fiction and becomes

²⁴ When the novel was first published, many critics found that it was "sordid," and therefore unacceptable; as time went on, it became "sentimental," and therefore unacceptable.

less real."²⁵ The first three books of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn are largely realistic in content and naturalistic in tone. Francie Nolan's problems are a lack of money and a lack of love: throughout the novel she struggles with crippling poverty, her mother's cold practicality, and her father's feckless alcoholism. Barely able to stay in school, her plans for her future are crushed when her father dies and she must work to support her pregnant mother. But after the father's death, the novel suddenly changes in genre and in tone. It stops being lower-class realism and becomes working-class romance: Francie meets a soldier, falls in love, is jilted, works several jobs, and meets another man. Then the novel ends on an unrelated wish-fulfillment: even though she has only graduated from the eighth grade, Francie matriculates at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

In her first letter to Saxton, Smith mentioned that she had several more chapters outlined, but "the death of Johnny seemed a natural ending to the book and the other stuff seemed anti-climactic to me."²⁶ Nevertheless, she went ahead and expanded the novel, thereby changing the ending. When Smith finished it, she sent it to Saxton with a letter:

²⁵ The Saturday Review of Literature, Rosemary Dawson, Sept. 11th, 1943.

²⁶ Betty Smith, letter to Eugene F. Saxton, 27 June 1942.

"I have taken the outline of a planned second book and hitched it on to the first. It is really two books in one. The first ended when Johnny died."²⁷

In the manuscript of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn in the archives of the Southern Historical Collection in Chapel Hill, the novel ends after the death of the father. The two children, Francie and Neeley, are sitting miserably at the kitchen table looking forward to a life of increased poverty and hunger. Smith writes with her characteristic mixture of sentimentality and despair. Francie says:

"I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and His mother, Holy Mary. Jesus was a baby like we were once. And he went barefoot in the summer like we do. I saw a picture. And he had no shoes on. He lived like other people lived and He went fishing like papa did once. He was always where there were poor people" She made the sign of the cross as every Catholic does when speaking of Jesus. Then she put her hand on Neeley's knee.

"But I will say now and I will always say - To hell with God!"

Neeley put his hand on Francie's hand and echoed fearfully,

"To hell with God!"²⁸

²⁷ Betty Smith, letter to Eugene F. Saxton, 26 Dec. 1942.

²⁸ manuscript, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, Betty Smith Papers.

In the manuscript version, the novel ended here. Although this ending is more naturalistic, and although it is more satisfying to the structure of closure expected by the literary academy today, Harper & Brothers would never have allowed that ending out of their publishing house. Moreover, Lawrence had scented a commercial success and Smith was willing to tailor her novel to reach the largest possible audience. By adding nearly a hundred pages and a happy ending, she changed the generic structure of the novel from a literary naturalism which would appeal only to the educated classes to an hybrid genre specific to the American working-class: "dime-store naturalism," or "urban folk-writing."

Smith's changed ending also reflects her ambivalent feelings about Roman Catholicism. Throughout her life and her writing, she alternated between anger at an unkind god and religious sentimentality. The anger which was present in the original manuscript, written in a state of financial and emotional poverty, was temporarily assuaged by the acceptance of her novel for publication: Smith felt good, and that feeling is reflected in her writing.

There were some aspects of the novel that Smith would not change. When Smith submitted her novel, the title was They Lived in Brooklyn. Harper & Brothers was not satisfied with this, so Smith discussed it with her associates in the playwright group. A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was evidently

suggested by Josefina Niggli, a writer and friend of Smith's.²⁹ Although at first Saxton was against using a full sentence as a title, he finally agreed. It was a wise decision since it set off a chain reaction of imitative headlines in the press; even today, most people are familiar with the title. Then Smith wrote a preface that made the metaphor, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn distinct; she was also very specific about what tree she meant. When she received a copy of the dust jacket, the artist had painted a generic city tree. Smith made him change it to the ailanthus tree, that ubiquitous growth visible on railroad trestles, in empty lots, and in any crack that has accumulated dirt in New York City. Then the artist painted an ailanthus, but it was surrounded by an iron fence. Smith wrote:

Brooklyn trees are considered noxious and people chop them down, burn them and put poison on them to kill them off. No one would ever put a guard around one of those trees, no more than would fertilize a field of dandelions it grows on neglect the way the children of my neighborhood do in the book.³⁰

Smith was firm in her commitment to this metaphor. Her instinct on this matter was correct: the tree that grew in Brooklyn became an American icon.

²⁹ Josefina Niggli wrote to Smith "I have always felt I had title rights in *The Tree*." Josefina Niggli, letter to Betty Smith, 19 August 1959.

³⁰ Betty Smith, letter to Eugene F. Saxton, 28 Nov. 1942.

Any Port

As the date of publication approached, it became increasingly evident, from the bookselling and publishing professionals' advance reaction to the novel, that A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was going to be a bestseller. Nancy had gone to college, Mary was married, and Finch had left her in the lurch. Smith was very much alone, facing one of the most important events in her life. But not for long. Smith had started a correspondence with Joe Jones, a columnist for the Chapel Hill Weekly, who wrote with the same spare simplicity that she used. Jones was in the army, stationed in Virginia, handsome and ten years her junior. Smith wrote him a note saying that she admired his column. Jones wrote back. Smith immediately offered to help him get a book of his columns published and very soon they were writing every day. Joe Jones knew Smith by sight, but they never spoke because she always looked at the sidewalk or straight ahead as she walked down the streets of Chapel Hill. After they began corresponding, however, Nancy showed Smith a picture of him, and Smith said "I'm going to marry him."¹ She sent Jones an advance copy of her novel, and he loved it,

¹ Joe Jones, personal interview 21 June 1991.

responding to it in detail. Soon she wrote: "So far in my life, you're the only person I've written to every day."² By late June, he wrote "It would be wonderful if you could spend a vacation at Virginia Beach."³

Perhaps the best description of what ensued was published the following month in his Chapel Hill Weekly column:

As a civilian he worked on a weekly newspaper. As a soldier he continued to contribute articles to the paper. They were read and liked by a young woman writer in his town. She told him so in a one-sentence letter. In replying he enclosed a shoulder insignia of his regiment, and soon a steady correspondence was going on. At this stage of the game they had never spoken to each other. He had seen her, on the streets of the town where they had both lived for six years, but she had never seen him.

She sent him an advance copy of her first novel. He thought it was one of the best things he had ever read. Many of its pages were so beautiful and compassionate that they made him weep. He loved the book, he loved the letters, and soon he knew he loved the woman who wrote them.

In her letters she talked a lot about his newspaper stories on Army life and said she would like to try to get a publisher to make them into a book. He invited her to come to nearby Virginia Beach to talk this over, and when she accepted he made up his mind he would ask her to marry him. He was free to do this since he had

² Betty Smith, letter to Joe Jones, 28 July 1943.

³ Joe Jones, letter to Betty Smith, 22 June 1943.

no other alliance.

He didn't mention his plan to anybody. He had no idea whether or not he would be accepted. Neither one had said anything about love in their letters, but from time to time there were certain little lines here and there that almost said something about it. Almost, but not quite. Those letters, on both sides, were masterpieces of very delicate feeling out, with never an actual thrust.

When she stepped off the train that Thursday morning in Norfolk, very beautiful in a stylish black suit and hat and lacy veil, his resolution was shattered, for when he made himself known to her she murmured a platitude, gave him not so much as a single glance, and as they walked to a nearby bus chatted away in a cool distant impersonal voice. It was not until they were half way to Virginia Beach that she even looked once in his direction, and that only for a fleeting instant. This was a very trying time, and the mood prevailed throughout the rest of the day.

The next forenoon it was a little better. They worked on his stories, and just before lunch time they went for a walk on the esplanade. It was during this walk that a terrible thing happened. Suddenly out of a clear sky, she was struck with the thought that he didn't like her and that he was sorry she was there.

She said she wanted to change her dress before lunch. He waited in the lobby of her hotel a long time while she sat in her room trying to decide whether or not to leave. A fateful quarter-hour.

At last she returned to him and they sat down to lunch but did not eat. When he tried to dispel her fears he only made things worse. The people at the neighboring table knew something tense and desperate

was going on. It was still there when the two arose from the luncheon ordeal. Nothing had been resolved.

That was what she thought. He had made a decision, and when they left the dining room he guided her to a quieter spot. There he proposed and was accepted. It was the first time either one had mentioned the subject of love or marriage.

The next day they went to Norfolk, got a license and rings, and were married by a justice of the peace -- all in less than two hours.

That was Saturday. His pass was up at 9 a.m. Sunday and he couldn't get it extended because his outfit, a coast artillery unit, had been put on a 24-hour 6-day alert. A tough break if there ever was one!⁴

What the column doesn't say is that the hotel Jones chose to stay in accepted only officer's wives, so that there was a big scene until an officer's wife intervened and convinced the hotel management to let Smith stay.⁵ They were married August 7th, 1943, eleven days before the publication of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.

This marriage was a necessary, if desperate, move for Smith, who could not have faced the upheaval of success alone. Even by Jones' newspaper account, it is clear that the couple had little in common and were grasping at straws in order to find romance. But Smith has just lost her daughters to adulthood and her lover to angst and

⁴ Joe Jones, "Courtship and Marriage," Chapel Hill Weekly, 20 Aug. 1943.

⁵ Joe Jones, personal interview, 21 June 1991.

professional jealousy; these were the people who made up her whole world, so her world was now uninhabited. This change may have been negotiable for her if she had continued in her present life, in her town, with her friends; but as it was, her life was about to change radically. Smith needed Jones as a port in a storm.

Then the hurricane hit. A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was published, the reviews were ecstatic, and from that point on, Smith was in the public eye. Although they were separate on publication night, Smith and Jones appeared the next day at a booksigning at the Abraham & Straus department store in Brooklyn. This was great press--best-selling lady novelist has whirlwind romance with soldier--and extended her publicity beyond what Harpers & Brothers had planned. Smith was always proud of the plebeian sound of her own name, and her marriage to a common private, Joe Jones, must have pleased her further.⁶ Every newspaper carried a picture of the lady novelist and the handsome soldier. Jones provided a description of this day as well: he met her at 7:00 a.m. at Penn Station, but they had little private time together:

Only an hour or two together, and then downtown to keep an appointment with her publishers, Harper and Brothers. Introductions there, then off to Brooklyn

⁶ Daphne Athas wrote that their names "exalted the Common Man, a bequest of the Depression. It meant America" (22).

for a luncheon and autograph party at the Abraham and Straus store. From 2 to 4 o'clock Elisabeth autographed "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" for the cash customers. . . . Since then there have been many pictures and stories. Our two telephones ring all day long, and our apartment seems always to be filled with reporters and photographers. They come in pairs--a reporter and a photographer. The photographer tells me how to hold my head when I smile at my wife, and when he is through with us we are taken over by the reporter.⁷

Smith no longer stayed in her mother's railroad apartment on her trips to New York, but in a suite at the Savoy Plaza or on an upper floor of the Sherry-Netherlands. Smith's mother and sister attended the signing but were cowed by the spectacle of Smith's sudden celebrity: they stood in the back of the crowd without making themselves known.⁸

Even though she was now a celebrated author, surrounded by her family and professional friends, Smith was still lonely. Smith and Jones were separated soon after their marriage--he was stationed at Fort Story (or Fort Monroe) near Virginia Beach, and Smith shuttled by train between Chapel Hill and New York. She had barely seen her new husband, and she didn't really know what he was like. Smith wrote this account of one of their rare evenings together to

⁷ Joe Jones, "A Happy Furlough," Chapel Hill Weekly 27 Aug. 1943.

⁸ Joe Jones, personal interview, 21 June 1991.

her daughters:

The first meal I cooked was fried potatoes and fried chicken. He said [sic], H'm fried chicken! I didn't say anything. Last night when we went to bed, I noticed he had new pajamas. (I had given away those brown specked ones which I hate.) These new ones consisted of red, green yellow and [sic] brown stripes, worse than the ones I gave away. He said, do you like 'em? I said, yes. But I like the ones I gave away better. Before going to bed he said, shyly, isn't it nice that Mary and Walter painted their living room a dull finish Kem-tone. . . . So, Nancy, let me give you advice. Don't marry the first man that asks you simply because you're flattered. I wish with all my heart that Joe was a heel, then I could divorce him next week.⁹

In the light of all this, it is surprising that they stayed married for seven years, but then Smith had a nearly infinite capacity for patience with men, and Jones was a genuinely kind person. Smith concluded that "I'm not unhappy with him, but I can't say that I'm happy."¹⁰

Smith helped Jones to get his columns published.¹¹ After several rejections at other publishers, Smith sent the text to Harper & Brothers. She was doing her favorite

⁹ Betty Smith, letter to Mary and Nancy, Nov.1943.

¹⁰ Betty Smith, letter to Mary and Nancy, undated [1943].

¹¹ Smith helped many young writers into print: among these were Max Steele, John Ehle, Josifina Niggli and Daphne Athas.

thing, collaborating with a man; she wrote to Elizabeth Lawrence:

I'm going to go over the letters and rewrite them for him and get better titles and try to weld them together--rearrange letters in more interesting sequence, etc. By spring, he will have a lot more and the slighter ones can be weeded out. Maybe then, you'd be so kind as to re-read them when they are in manuscript form.¹²

But soon Smith and Jones were arguing through the mail. When he wrote a letter to Elizabeth Lawrence and mailed it without showing her first, she criticized each paragraph sharply, writing her angry comments in the margins.¹³ Smith then began to type his essays and give them chapter titles, and when Jones objected, she used that as an excuse to vent some more of her frustrations.¹⁴ Jones was profusely apologetic, countering those charges, as well as others (that he was too involved with his family), with protestations of undying love. Eventually his book, 1-B Soldier, was published, and Smith wrote: "Joe is delirious about his book. He's read it about ten times trying to read it from the viewpoint of various persons."¹⁵ 1-B Soldier

¹² Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 1 July 1943.

¹³ Betty Smith, letter to Joe Jones, 11 Jan. 1944.

¹⁴ Betty Smith, letter to Joe Jones, 10 Jan. 1944.

¹⁵ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence 4 May 1944.

was a commercial failure: after his advance of \$300, his royalties totaled one dollar and twenty-two cents.

While they were separated, Smith and Jones wrote to each other nearly every day. Jones's letters are repetitive accounts of his daily activities, and although they reveal a steady, genuine, and loving character, sometimes the steadiness, humility, and excessive devotion are merely infuriating (no one can possibly be that good). At times Smith was infuriated with him, but then she would apologize and tell him that she wasn't good enough for him. But his devotion was a source of comfort for Smith during the first several years of her celebrity, and there is no doubt she relied on him: if he neglected to write one day, she missed his letter and wrote to chastise him about that, too.

On the first Christmas of her successful years, Smith was still separated from her husband. Still, she must have had some comfort: for a woman used to making approximately three hundred dollars a year, she had made \$95,805.76. And, in an era where entrance into the publishing world had been reserved for white men or upper-class women, Betty Smith had made a splash by becoming the first urban working-class woman author. With hindsight, it is remarkable that Smith was able to endure the change in her life so well. She treated it just as she would any other crisis--whether it was the loss of a bag of groceries, a divorce, or living without money. She did what she had to do to survive: she

took a chance, married a man she didn't know, and, for better or for worse, had a companion in her success.

The Novel

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is an American classic. When it was first published it was a social phenomena: it a bestseller widely publicized as one of the best novels of 1943, and it became the staple of religious and social club discussions. Even now echoes of the title are heard in newspaper headlines across the country; many people remember the story of Francie, who grew, like the tree, in the tenements of Williamsburg. It was such an astounding success, in part, because it was the first American novel about the lives of ordinary working-class people that was written in a style and with an ethic that ordinary working-class people could understand. A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is a classic presentation of the American Dream.

Like Horatio Alger's hero Ragged Dick, Smith's heroine Francie Nolan begins the novel poor and hungry and ends it well-clothed, fed, and moving up the social scale.¹ The novel begins in 1912 as Francie Nolan is sitting on a fire escape, reading a book, surrounded by the leaves of the only

¹ Horatio Alger was probably an influence on A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. Smith mentions him on page 139, and her character Johnny Nolan has the same name as Alger's stock Irish n'er-do-well, Johnnie Nolan.

tree that would grow in tenement districts. The Nolans are extremely poor: Francie and her brother Neeley look forward to the weekend because they can turn in the results of their weekly rag-picking and make a few pennies; Francie earns an extra "pinching" penny for letting the junk man pinch her cheek. Francie also does the shopping for her mother who, as the janitor for three buildings, does not have time herself. Francie is entrusted with bargaining for pennies, fighting with a crowd for day-old bread and tricking the butcher into grinding fresh hamburger for her.

The novel then provides a flashback--the story of Francie's parents, turn-of-the-century Austrian immigrants and American-Irish poor. Katie and Johnny Nolan are poor but happy until the birth of their first child, Francie. On the night of the birth, Johnny loses his job by spending the night drinking, and the family is cast into a poverty from which they cannot escape; the strength and endurance of Katie is all that holds them together. Katie's immigrant mother, Mary Rommely, relays her philosophy of life:

"There is here, what is not in the old country. In spite of hard unfamiliar things, there is here--hope. In the old country, a man can be no more than his father, providing he works hard. If his father was a carpenter, he may be a carpenter. He may not be a teacher or a priest. He may rise--but only to his father's state. In the old country, a man is given to the past. 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."
(73)

This is as clear a description of the American Dream as one can find in American writing. Mary Rommely tells her daughters that the way will not be easy and that they cannot hope to rise much beyond their parents, but stresses that they, at least, can learn to read: "The secret lies in the reading and the writing" (74). She instructs Katie to teach Francie the two books she has heard about, the Protestant Bible and Shakespeare. She tells Katie that she must read to the child every night, even if she does not understand what she is reading, and to save money, no matter how dire their poverty, so that they can buy a piece of land.

A year later Francie's brother Neeley is born and Katie falls in love: "I am going to love this boy more than the girl but I mustn't ever let her know," she thinks (85). But Francie understands: "Francie felt the way her mother thought about her. She grew an answering hardness against her mother and this hardness, paradoxically enough, brought them a little closer together because it made them more alike" (86). Johnny starts to drink even more heavily, disappearing for days at a time. After a scene of delirium tremens, Katie feels they must move to save the family pride, and they are so poor that all of their belongings fit into one wagon:

a double bed, the babies' crib, a busted-down baby buggy, a green plush parlor suit, a carpet with pink roses, a pair of parlor lace curtains, a rubber plant and a rose geranium, a yellow canary in a gilt cage, a plush picture album, a kitchen table and some chairs, a box of dished and pots and pans, a gilt crucifix with a music box in its base that played "Ave Maria" when you wound it up, a plain wooden crucifix that her mother had given her, a wash basket full of clothes, a roll of bedding, a pile of Johnny's sheet music and two books, the Bible and the *Complete Works of Wm. Shakespeare*.

(92)

Eventually they find a narrow top-floor apartment where Katie can clean three buildings in return for free rent.

Book Three is the longest section and contains the main narrative action of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. Smith carries the reader through time by using holidays and important events, like the start of school, as life markers. School is a central issue for Francie. Katie holds Francie back a year so that she can walk to school with Neeley so "they can protect each other" (129). Nevertheless, in the overcrowded, immigrant classroom, the teacher is sadistic to all but the well off and does not even allow the poorer students to go to the bathroom. Even though the teachers are abusive to her, Francie likes the routine and relative safety of school. And in school she learns to read.

Then Johnny Nolan is expelled from the waiters' union for drinking and goes on a three-day binge that leaves him

huddled in a doorway, nearly dead with pneumonia. The Christmas holidays are another important marker for Smith: a few days before Christmas Johnny dies (just as her father did), leaving Katie pregnant with their third child. The funeral bills use up all the insurance as well as the money they had been saving to buy property. When the Nolans buy their bit of land, it's a burial plot.

Book Four was added after the novel was accepted by Harper & Brothers for publication. It is similar to Smith's next two novels in that it depicts a young woman struggling within the working world. The Nolans are financially destitute, and Katie decides that Francie must work to support the family, even though she wants to return to school, and Neeley does not: "*Neeley has to go back to school . . . if I don't make him he'll never go back . . . where you, Francie, will fight and manage somehow*" (346). Francie's first job is at an artificial flower factory, terrifyingly dull work that had to be done slowly to keep pace with the other "Brooklyn migratory workers" who knew that they would be laid off when they finished their tasks. Francie considers her future:

"This could be a whole life," she thought. "You could work eight hours a day covering wires to earn money to buy food and to pay for a place to sleep so that you can keep living to come back to cover more wires. Some people are born and kept living just to come to this."
(328)

At fourteen Francie finds a better job, as a reader for a clipping agency. However, she is lonely because she is unable to read at night due to eye strain. Although she was proud of the money she could make, she was overwhelmed with adult responsibilities and unequipped to handle them, especially on the subway:

There had been that time in the train when, hanging from a strap and so tightly wedged in the crowd that she couldn't so much as lower her arm, she had felt a man's hand. No matter how she twisted and squirmed, she couldn't get away from that hand. When she swayed with the crowd as the cars swerved, the hand tightened. She was unable to twist her head to see whose hand it was. She stood in desperate futility, helplessly enduring the indignity. She could have called out and protested but she was too ashamed to call public attention to her predicament. (342)

As any female commuter on the New York subway knows, this is an inevitable harassment which is only alleviated through experience: Francie was too young to know how to protest, and therefore she was a target. Sissy advises Francie to relax and enjoy it, but Francie takes her mother's advice and begins to carry a hat-pin in her pocket.

Although this section is interesting for its portrait of working-class life, the book loses its plot line. World War I begins; Francie loses her job and starts another job at a lower pay; decides to attend classes at Brooklyn college; meets a boy named Ben. Ben goes to college in the

midwest; Francie falls in love with a soldier; Francie is jilted; and finally the family plot recoups itself: Sergeant McShane, the policeman who found the dying Johnny Nolan huddled in the doorway, courts and marries Katie, and Francie is free to return to school.

When Elia Kazan made a film of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, he wisely left out the section about Francie as a working-class girl. After the eighth-grade graduation party, Katie marries McShane, and the family is finally provided with a good man to watch over them, so we can assume that they live happily ever after. In Smith's manuscript version, the story ends at the death of Johnny Nolan, and no resolution is offered. The Book Four that Smith came up with is a compromise between nihilism and romance. But, finally, she ends on a wish-fulfillment: Francie prepares herself to go to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor where she has mysteriously been able to matriculate despite her eighth-grade education. Then her skillful dramatic technique takes over: on the last page, Francie sees a little girl on a fire escape just like hers, and the novel comes full circle.

The Fans

From the response of the booksellers and reviewers, Harper & Brothers knew that they had a hit on their hands. According to Eugene Exman in The House of Harper, they issued it as a "'Harper Find,' a designation calling for special promotion of a new author's work" (241). The book had a ten thousand dollar advertizing budget and it went through three printings even before it was published on August 18, 1943.¹ As Exman wrote, "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was off to the races" (241). Immediately they ran into a snag, however: under wartime restrictions, Harper & Brothers only had a certain amount of paper, and, with their runaway bestseller, they ran out of paper (Exman 241). The Blakiston Publishing firm of Philadelphia, which still had reserves of paper, made a special arrangement with Harper & Brothers whereby they would issue the novel. In the meantime there were several large advertisements run in newspapers asking that readers be patient while waiting for their copy. A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was a wartime book, subject to wartime restrictions: these restrictions served only to push sales higher as the American public pressed to

¹ Publisher's Weekly, 24 July 1943.

purchase their copy of the story of Francie and the American Dream.

The popularity of the novel was immense: the success of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn made publishing history (Exman 241); the only previous novel that had sold more copies was Gone With the Wind.² Although there were many novels which were popular during the 1940s, no other sold as well, generated so many club meetings and news articles, and became a Hollywood movie and a Broadway play; moreover, none other became a household name. The phrase A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is known to most Americans today, even if they don't know where it came from; and with that memory there is some understanding of the plight of the poor. According to the sociologist Elizabeth Long "Reading bestsellers is a social rite as well as an individual exercise, and reading books that are 'in the air' is often the token of membership in a given social group--a ritual, as it were, of social integration" (51). A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was special because it was the first novel that penetrated the disparate social groups of the poor, middle class and upper class; A Tree Grows in Brooklyn represented a nation united.

Book societies gave talks on it; ministers used it in their sermons; Parent-Teacher Associations, libraries, women's clubs, and neighborhood associations organized

² Irene M. Hughes, letter to Bob Tabs, 10 Jan. 1958.

discussions about it; articles appeared in papers across the nation, citing it as the most popular novel at the public libraries. The press followed Smith's heels and reported any mention of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. Louis (Lepke) Buchalter, kingpin of Murder, Inc., was reading it on his way to Sing Sing, while awaiting execution; he recommended it highly to his guards.³ At home, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn seemed more important than the war:

Edward Weeks, the erudite editor of the Atlantic Monthly, who lectured at the Woman's Club of Wisconsin recently, had just finished telling an excited audience about a thrilling bombing mission to Germany. Twenty-four of our twenty-five planes participating returned safely. With this story, he terminated his talk and, after a slight pause, asked if there were any questions. "Yes," spoke up a woman quickly. "What do you think of 'A Tree Grows in Brooklyn'?"⁴

A friendly letter from the editor of Good Housekeeping sums up the impact of the book on the American public as large:

Your book is sifting down to the People, capital P. All the traveling salesmen who usually read dirty jokes--the girl who manicures my nails who gets her literature from the B features--the hired man on a New Jersey farm who has not read a book since he left school in the seventh grade . . . It is a folk book and that makes it more important than anything which

³ New York News, 22 Jan. 1944; Brooklyn Eagle, 23 Jan. 1944; New York Post, 14 Feb. 1944; and others.

⁴ Milwaukee, Wisconsin Journal 20 Feb. 1944.

accrues from it.⁵

Americans, at home, needed distraction from their problems and yet were more socially conscious at this time than a decade later. The social upheaval of the war followed the social upheaval of the depression, and it was a unique time in that middle-class readers could identify with the poor. A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was a great democratic bestseller.

The fan mail had started first from the reviewers, then it poured in from all over the world. Most letters started with the words "I don't usually write to authors but I loved your book so much . . . ," and many said that "It moved me more deeply than anything I ever read."⁶ Readers felt that Smith had captured something especially real about human beings; a typical letter began: "Never have I read anything so completely understanding of human nature and its emotions."⁷ A Unitarian Minister wrote "I sincerely believe [A Tree Grows in Brooklyn] deserves the wide popularity it has made for itself,"⁸ and he was only one representative of one denomination of many different religions that wrote to

⁵ Margaret Cousins, letter to Betty Smith, 17 Jan. 1944.

⁶ Mrs. Margery Hanan, letter to Betty Smith, 20 Nov. 1943.

⁷ Mrs. Russell C. Dennen, Mrs., letter to Betty Smith, 1 Nov. 1943.

⁸ George G. Howard, letter to Betty Smith, 23 Nov. 1943.

her with words or praise. One woman wrote to say that, although she had never lived in the inner city, the Nolans were "real" to her: "I feel like I know the Nolans."⁹

Smith was overjoyed--she had achieved her goal of validating her experiences by sharing them and having their reception acknowledged. At first she responded to all the fan letters, marking each letter "A" for answered. She even started correspondences with a few of her needy male fans. One of the most poignant is her correspondence with a alcoholic singing street sweeper, almost an exact replica of Johnnie Nolan in A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. Joe Moran wrote Smith a fan letter, ending it by telling her dejectedly not to respond, so of course she did, encouraging him, and in return he sent her tickets to one of his few singing engagements at the Ruffin vs. Greco "fite" at Madison Square Garden where he performed the National Anthem. The tickets were used, and the correspondence continued for a year.¹⁰

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn also became one of the Armed Services Editions reprints and reached hundreds of thousands of soldiers overseas in a small, pocket form. In "The ASE in Publishing History," Michael Hackenberg wrote that "ASE books had a captive audience of millions of people far from home, who found themselves in a situation where periods of

⁹ Henrietta Clifton, letter to Betty Smith, 15 Dec. 1943.

¹⁰ Joe Moran, letter to Betty Smith, 21 June 1944.

boredom alternated with periods of intense activity" (Cole 17). The ASE provided contemporary fiction and nonfiction in a small, pocket paper form so that the soldiers could carry the books with them. A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was so popular among the service men that a second edition of 97,000 copies was issued in July of 1944; it was the first book in the Armed Services Editions to go into a second printing.¹¹

Many of Smith's most compelling fan letters came from overseas. One letter from a Sergeant told that he had to wait ten weeks to borrow a copy of the book, and he was only half-way through it when he had to give it back.¹² At times Smith received four letters a day from overseas:

One letter tells of 200 men on the waiting list for the book; another on a transport ship says the librarian showed favoritism in handing out the few copies and that the soldiers complained to the chaplain who brought about fair play.¹³

The soldiers wrote her long accounts of how the book affected them. A letter from a Sgt. Bill Ressler was typical:

I wouldn't know how to begin to explain how your story affected me. You see my outfit was handed a pretty

¹¹ Elizabeth Lawrence, letter to Betty Smith, 3 May 1944. Smith made one-half of one cent per copy.

¹² Jack Winter, letter to Betty Smith, 12 Mar. 1944.

¹³ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 5 May 1944.

tough assignment over here and we carried it out, and now things are beginning to cool off and my nerves are slowly loosening up. The other day the book came and I started to read and just couldn't stop. When it got dark I read by flashlight in a dugout and for those hours I was carried away, my heart was light with the Nolans' triumphs and a thing I thought impossible, so impossible it never entered my mind was that I actually cried at the description of Francie's and Neeley's grief when John died.¹⁴

Smith treasured these letters and always thought of the soldiers as her biggest fans.

A tiny percentage of the mail that Smith received consisted of angry letters from readers who were shocked by the book's treatment of the Catholic Church or depiction of the lower-class life in the slums. There was a strange, vehement letter from the novelist Taylor Caldwell, accusing Smith of encouraging anti-semitism. Caldwell wrote:

I doubt that you really intended the many cruel inferences in your book against the Jews. That is why I now take issue with you, with considerable heat and anger. (Incidentally, as all defenders of Jews seem to be suspected of being Jews, themselves, let me hasten very quickly to assure you that I am not a Jew, but of Scotch-Irish stock who fought proudly and vigorously with Cromwell

Nowhere in her tightly-typed two page letter does Caldwell refer to an actual incident in the book. In fact, her

¹⁴ Sgt. Bill Ressler, letter to Betty Smith, 1 March 1944.

letter seems unrelated to the novel. But the letter upset Smith. Caldwell continued:

Every Catholic writer, these days, ought to be very careful what he says, and what he writes, for his enemies are watching him. The Catholics stimulated and broadcast anti-Semitism in America. The dread fruit is now on their own table. And, they will probably have to eat it, and perhaps die of it. Don't you remember how Hitler began with the Jews, and wound up on a grande finale with the Catholics? "It can happen here."¹⁵

Caldwell's letter was strange, especially since A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was not anti-semitic. In her historical study Myths and Mores in American Best Sellers, 1865-1965, Ruth Miller Elson notes that Smith's portrait of a Jewish doctor was one of the first positive portraits of Jewish people in popular fiction (133). Caldwell was off the mark there, but she hit Smith's sore point regarding Catholicism, and Smith wrote to Lawrence: "It made me sick to think that there was someone in the world who seemed to hate me so much. My first impulse was to answer and defend my views" ¹⁶ Lawrence advised her to write a tactful note to Caldwell and forget about the letter.

¹⁵ Taylor Caldwell, letter to Betty Smith, 15 Sept. 1943.

¹⁶ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 15 Sept. 1943.

When one priest took it upon himself to organize speeches and meetings against Betty Smith and A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, it reached into her family life:

My poor mother is very tormented by Father Belford and his disciples. She receives anonymous abusive letters quoting what Father Belford said. She receives similar phone calls. One person went to her parish priest armed with Father Belford's opinions of the book and insisted that he induce my mother to move out of the neighborhood. One person nailed a placard to a tree before out [sic] house which stated "Catholic Haters live in this house." I can't blame my poor mother for not wanting me home.¹⁷

These cruel responses left a bitter taste in her mouth, but the flood of fan letters was so unrelenting that she did not have time to dwell on them long. However, she was still conscious of these slights when she wrote her next novel, Tomorrow Will Be Better.

By 1945, nearly three million copies of the book in the English language alone had been sold. Not only was it a bestseller in America, but A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was quickly translated into sixteen other languages as well, and was one of the first novels to be able to get behind the Iron Curtain.¹⁸ Overnight, Smith had been transformed from a lonely writer to a household name.

¹⁷ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 29 May 1945.

¹⁸ John Fischer, letter to Betty Smith, 12 Dec. 1947.

The Critics

Nearly every newspaper in the United States reviewed A Tree Grows in Brooklyn: the New York World Telegram wrote "[A Tree Grows in Brooklyn] hit the big town's literary hatchetmen this week like a Roman candle over Red Hook."¹ Most of the reviews were ardent--the critics loved A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. The Chicago Sun called it "Excitingly Beautiful First Novel" and the Philadelphia Record called it "A Brilliant First Novel About a Brooklyn Girl."² In the New York Times, Orville Prescott wrote: "It is the best novel I have seen in many a moon, and is the best novel of any kind that I have read in 1943."³ At the end of the year, Sterling North assessed the literary season in the New York Post: "Women, first slaves in any fascist regime, have contributed subtly to the defense of democracy in books ranging from Ellen Glasgow's 'A Certain Measure' to Betty Smith's 'A Tree Grows in Brooklyn,' still my choice for this year's Pulitzer Prize."⁴ He and others maintained that

¹ Mel Heimer, New York World Telegram 20 Aug. 1943.

² America Chapel, The Chicago Sun 22 Aug. 1943; Louis Nicholas, Philadelphia Record 29 Aug. 1943.

³ Orville Prescott, New York Times 18 Aug. 1943.

⁴ Sterling North, New York Post, 22 Aug. 1943.

Betty Smith should win the Pulitzer Prize for her runaway bestseller on the social conditions of turn-of-the-century Williamsburg, but she lost nevertheless.

But nearly all of the reviews of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn were laudatory, and that must have given Smith satisfaction. Although it was addressed to a very different audience from the daily newspapers, the Yale Review was typical:

Here is a first novel of uncommon skill, an almost uncontrollable vitality and zest for life, the work of a fresh, original and highly gifted talent. It is a story about life in the Williamsburg tenement district as lived by the Nolan family, particularly by Francie Nolan, aged one to nineteen in the course of the book--my favorite heroine for 1943.

Francie is an imaginative, courageous, altogether lovable child, a superbly drawn character. Her friends and relations are funny, pathetic, gallant, and real. The terrible misery, squalor, and grinding poverty of their lives are here in their unsavory detail. Miss Smith spares nothing. But she has the vision to know that loyalty and laughter and accomplishment and pride are also part of slum life, something too many writers forget, so *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is a warm, sunny, engaging book as well as a grim one. It is also a rich and rare example of regional, local-color writing, filled to the scuppers with Brooklynese, Brooklyn folk ways, Brooklyn atmosphere. I shouldn't be surprised if Miss Smith had written the best novel of the year.

Certainly it is the best so far.⁵

Many reviewers thought A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was the finest novel of the year.

At first, the only negative reviews were from conservative Catholics who thought that the treatment of Catholicism in the novel was heretical. Indeed, Catholicism (or lack thereof) is a large part of the novel. Sterling North wrote:

The emotional stress which accompanies conversion to Catholicism--or a break with the Church--seems to produce literature.

For every Chesterton or Willa Cather who has turned to the comfortable confines of an ancient faith, there is a James T. Farrell or a Betty Smith ready to question some of the revealed "truths" of a childhood credo.

The first group turns to mysticism and medievalism; the second to sociological case histories and realism.

"A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" is our choice for this year's Pulitzer Prize. It is a powerful and . . . contains some of the finest descriptions of poverty in the English language.⁶

The fine descriptions of poverty also earned Smith censure from some readers: the New Yorker recorded that "[Smith] has received a letter from a stern lady in Boston, to the effect

⁵ Unsigned review, Yale Review, Nov. 1943.

⁶ Sterling North, "A Toast to Betty Smith--Brooklyn's James T. Farrell," New York Post, 19 Aug. 1943.

that the author of such a novel ought to live in a stable."⁷ Even though the time was propitious for A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, some critics still felt that an urban life of poverty was not an appropriate topic for novels. They called the novel "sordid," called Francie an "irrepressible slum-child," and called her family the "shanty Nolans." However, as time went on these criticisms faded away and another took their place--Smith was adjudged guilty of sentimentality.

Diana Trilling, a socialist by profession, took particular umbrage at the book. She wrote in The Nation:

By now you will have been assailed by the avalanche of advertising extolling the virtues of Betty Smith's "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" (Harper, \$2.75). I am a little bewildered by so much response to so conventional a little book. Like the heroine of her first novel, Miss Smith was born and raised in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, but even without knowing this fact we could guess that the story was autobiographical. Women authors, especially, always regard their own childhoods as if the process of growing up were an experience reserved for people who will one day have the sensibility to write a book about it. . . . Because Francie Nolan is very poor, Irish, a Catholic, and I suppose because a member of her family drinks, I have seen "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" compared to the novels of James Farrell, and all to the credit of Miss Smith's novel. This makes me very sad both for the condition of fiction reviewing and for Mr. Farrell, whatever his

⁷ The New Yorker, 9 Oct. 1943.

faults as a novelist of stature. Of course Francie Nolan's story is more cheerful than Danny O'Neill's and a more popular commodity; but surely popular taste should be allowed to find its own emotional level without being encouraged to believe that a "heart-warming" experience is a serious literary experience.⁸

This was the first article accusing Smith's writing of the dire offense *sentimentality*, but it caught on; as Smith continued to write about the urban poor and working-class, the reviewers increasingly accused her of sentimentality, thereby excluding her from consideration as a serious writer.

Now, to a certain extent, Trilling is right. If sentimentality is defined as emotion, rather than fact, and in its pejorative sense, mawkishness, then Smith is sometimes guilty. Mawkishness is one aspect of her technique, just as cold, stark realism, and occasional humor are. And mawkishness works for her: A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is a powerful novel, so powerful that it temporarily enabled the upper-middle class reader to empathize with the poor.

Sentimentality is an inherent part of the ideology of the working-class, and it is a basic tenet necessary to a

⁸ Diana Trilling, The Nation, 3 Sept. 1943. It is interesting to note that, out of all the reviews of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, this is the one that is most often quoted in contemporary author biographies.

belief in the American Dream. The stiff upper-lip of the British ideology had its place in the formation of the American character, and it is still to be seen in rural parts of New England, but for the majority of Americans huddled on the teeming shores, sentiment is crucial. It is a part of working-class ideology, an ideology by and for the working-class that permits members of the working-class to reify and justify their lives. It has also functioned as a signifier, a flag to say "this is a text of the people."

Trilling followed up her initial assessment of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* with "What Has Happened to Our Novels?" in which she wrote:

Thus a book like *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is typical of our fiction of this war despite the fact that most of its action antedates the last war. In Miss Smith's picture of American poverty there is neither ugliness nor rebellion, only sentiment; the explosive family life of James Farrell's realistic novels is replaced, in the "realism" of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, by a sweet co-operativeness. National unity reflects itself in family unity, and fiction arms us with the illusion of domestic security against the insecurity of the world.⁹

The idea is that a working-class writer should not be complacent with her position, as Smith is in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (Francie makes the best of what she has), but

⁹ Diana Trilling, "What Has Happened to Our Novels?" *The Nation*, May 1944.

should portray the life of poverty as rotten to the core, such as in the Studs Lonigan Trilogy, in which Lonigan leads an unfulfilled life and dies an alcoholic huddled in a doorway. The doctrinaire socialist, Trilling felt that Americans should not pacify themselves with sentimental ideology, but strive to change their condition. Smith was too focussed on her inner life to be politically aware.

The difference in language is another major reason that A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was never accepted into the canon of American literature. The New Yorker quotes Smith thus:

"When I was makin' a hundred dollars a month and takin' care of the kids, I paid forty-five dollars a month for rent, and people said I was a brave little woman," she told us, lettin' her g's fall where they might. "Now I'm makin' a thousand a week and spendin' nowhere near forty five per cent of my income on rent. I've always wanted luxury, but essentially, I'm still a poor person, in my heart."¹⁰

The interview ends with a description of her passing up urban revelry (such as an evening in the Algonquin) for an afternoon at the race track. The tone is that of ironic condescension, implying the question: how could a writer who could not even speak proper English be taken seriously? Smith was hurt by such criticism, but the good--especially the fan letters--outweighed the bad. Later she wrote:

¹⁰ The New Yorker, 9 Oct. 1943.

It seems [the soldiers] will definitely mold the new trend in literature--realism, without the all-out condemnation of the ordinary virtues of home and family. You can see by this sentence that I'm smarting under the criticism of Trilling Honestly, I believe there is a new era in writing coming up--realism without sneering.¹¹

Although A Tree Grows in Brooklyn never caught on in the American academy (its hybrid form didn't fit comfortably into the schools of New Criticism, Proletarian literature, or American Naturalism), it crossed class boundaries, demonstrating that the strange mixture of sentiment and realism is integral to the American working-class.

Social orders are essentially conservative: they resist change, and they change only when change is forced upon them. When an oppressed social group attempts to wrest control of its own ideology from that of the dominant group, there is bound to be protest. Increasingly, Betty Smith faced a more critical audience, precisely because her first novel was so intensely popular; her critics were casting about for some tag to pin on her that would diminish her power. When they discovered the tag "sentimentality," they applied it to novels that were sometimes sentimental but also spare, sad, and undramatic. Smith's direct expression of commonplace feelings--her so-called "sentimentality"--is

¹¹ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 21 July 1944.

part of her working-class idiom, and she could not do without it.

In the World

Betty Smith was now a celebrity: from now on, every move she made was watched, every word she spoke was relayed through the press. She was the recipient of a flood of mail--fan letters, requests for appearances, solicitations from charitable organizations, agents wanting to represent her, and magazine editors wanting stories. Radio shows begged for her, the Sherry Netherlands Hotel offered to let her stay there for free, she did wartime propaganda in Brooklyn, and she did tea at Briarcliff College. John H. H. Lyon from Columbia University included her in his series on living artists, "The Literature of Today" (along with Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein, Sinclair Lewis, Dos Passos, Erskine Caldwell, J. T. Farrell, and Somerset Maugham). The Pen and Brush Club gave her honorary membership, a women's club called the Chiropean Organization of Williamsburgh invited her to luncheon; all across the nation, book clubs, PTAs, churches, synagogues, women's clubs, and libraries gave talks on Smith's novel, and the discussions were summarized in the following day's paper. A public controversy raged as to whether A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was a beautiful, heartbreaking novel or a shameful treatment of the Catholic church and slum life, and the

former won, hands down.

During this time, Smith became easily upset by professional matters that impinged on her family and her past. One of the romance magazines, Love Story Magazine, had used her name on their usually anonymous stories. Even though she had herself written for similar pulp magazines, she had not written for this one, and she was upset at the deception. She would never have known of it if her sister Regina hadn't told her. Smith immediately thought of starting a lawsuit, but Smith's editor at Harper & Brothers dissuaded her because of the dubious value of such publicity.¹

On November 19th, Smith addressed the Book and Author Luncheon, along with Henry J. Kaiser and Lewis Gannett. Although she was similar to the solitary, bookish Francie, Smith had also been an actress, and she proved to be an inspired public speaker, never neglecting to add humor to her talks. The New York Herald Tribune wrote an account of that speech:

Betty Smith, author of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, told of letters she received from readers who presumably believed the characters in her book were actual people. She mentioned a North Carolina nurseryman who, she said, wrote her he was putting in his fall stock and "would you please tell me where I can buy that tree

¹ Edward Aswell, letter to Betty Smith, 26 Nov. 1943.

that grows in Brooklyn?"²

Edward Aswell, who replaced Eugene Saxton at Harper & Brothers, wrote: "I am still full of admiration for your extremely calm and effective speech the other day. It would have been beyond the power of most people to carry it off."³ Accounts of the luncheon circulated in every newspaper, and Smith's picture made the rounds again, pushing the sales of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn even higher and making her an even more sought-after high-profile celebrity.

Smith's year of publication passed in a whirl. Many of her dreams had come true--her entry into the literary world as a major figure, a glamorous and publicized marriage to a handsome soldier/writer ten years her junior, and enough money to be able to live gloriously. By 1944, she had both a film and a play in rehearsal as well: the previous July she had sold the movie rights to A Tree Grows in Brooklyn to Twentieth-Century Fox for \$55,000, "no small sum for an unknown first novelist,"⁴ and Michael Todd, the Broadway producer, had decided to stage And Never Yield, Smith's dramatization of a novel, about a Mormon woman, by Elinor Pryor. But neither her professional life nor her personal

² New York Herald Tribune, 19 Nov. 1943.

³ Edward Aswell, letter to Betty Smith, 26 Nov. 1943.

⁴ John K. Hutchens, "Books and Authors: 20 Years, and Still Growing," New York Herald Tribune 11 Aug. 1963.

life were without problems, and "Francie" would have to face things that she never would have dreamed of in her summers of fire-escape reading. Success had brought with it a whirlwind of opportunities, events, and problems.

All spring the critics had been declaring that she was the most likely candidate for that year's Pulitzer Prize.⁵ When the time came, however, Smith did not win the Pulitzer: Martin Flavin, the author who had won the Harper's prize, did. Smith was heartbroken. She wrote to Lawrence:

I feel badly that the book did not receive the Pulitzer Award. I would gladly give up the position of best seller and most of the money if my book had been acknowledged as "distinguished" by the judges. I'm so anxious to write something that may be added to the literature of America and winning of this Prize automatically gives a book a place. I know at college in courses in contemporary writing, our texts were the Pulitzer Prize novels. It's a great disappointment and I cannot be comforted.⁶

Like Smith had earlier longed for money, now she longed for intellectual affirmation, and although she received endless popular acclaim, she was not enough. If she had had the financial security and the patience to hold off and enter

⁵ Sterling North, in the New York Post, Boston Post, and many others -- these newspapers copy each other. When one says something, they all do. There is also a story about how Flavin won on the microfilm. I need to document this more fully.

⁶ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 4 May 1944.

her novel in Harper contest, it is likely that she would have won that contest and then gone on to win the Pulitzer Prize and all the intellectual affirmation that that brought with it, but then she would have found another aspect of her life that was unfulfilled: Smith could not be comforted.

However, Smith was made a judge for the Harper & Brother novel contest the next year. She voted with Irita Van Doren, and J. Donald Adams, the editor of the New York Times Book Review, to give the 1944 prize to an unknown writer named Jo Sinclair, author of Wasteland. Wasteland is one of the first books about the analytic experience: its hero, Jake, lives within a dysfunctional family and has a lesbian sister whom he loves and trusts. Through the analytic experience, he is able to overcome his shame at his heritage. Richard Wright wrote:

Jo Sinclair's *Wasteland* is a monumental psychological study in family relationships, and something of a masterpiece in its ability to evoke the emotional frustrations of Jewish life in America. Above all, it is a bitter, surging poem. . . .⁷

Smith was surprised to find out that Jo Sinclair was a pen name for Ruth Seid. Her reaction shows her ambivalence about women. She wrote:

I'm glad it's a woman writer because the book gains thereby. Had I known the author was a woman I would

⁷ Richard Wright, dustjacket of Jo Sinclair's Wasteland. Wasteland is now becoming a part of the feminist canon of American literature.

have realized the book was better than I thought. I believed a man wrote it and I resented the un-masculine sense of detail. But that's all right for a woman writer.⁸

Although Smith herself never made it into the canon, in her day she was considered an expert on fiction, and her views were vigorously solicited: she was receiving two or three novels a week with letters asking her opinion.

Smith did not immediately know how to handle the most vigorous solicitations of her literary capital. In this regard, she had a bad experience with Collier's Magazine. The editor had convinced her to write a story for them soon after publication of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn:

I was badgered into writing a story for Marple. Luncheons, cocktail dates not of my seeking, obligated me. I wrote the story because I couldn't cope with the pressure. The story is no good, I hate it and I'm embarrassed when I think of it.⁹

This theme often resounded through her letters when she was writing to Elizabeth Lawrence: she wanted to be a good writer and not just a popular writer.¹⁰ Smith's next novel, Tomorrow Will Be Better, was her self-conscious attempt at

⁸ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 7 Jan. 1945.

⁹ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 11 March 1945.

¹⁰ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 22 April 1945.

literary distinction.

Smith was continually kept off balance by the events in her life: everything had increased in intensity since the publication of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. Before publication, Smith had been working with John Elliott of the "the glamorous Leland Hayward" agency (Miller 209). She had given the agenting rights of the film version of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn to Elliott because she felt obligated to him because he had worked so hard on getting a producer for And Never Yield.¹¹ Now, finally, And Never Yield was about to be produced, but Smith felt she had done all of the work herself and was beginning to smart under the bad split she had made over the movie rights. By now Smith had a law firm to help her manage her affairs, so Hayward wrote to them:

I read in a column the other day an item to the effect that Betty Smith had fired me as her agent because I had urged and persuaded her to take \$55,000 as a purchase price for her A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN while she had wanted to hold out for a higher price. This, of course, is diametrically the opposite of what actually transpired. . . .¹²

Hayward relates that he was against her accepting the financial deal from Harper's so quickly, but that Smith was desperate for a deal (which is closer to the truth). But

¹¹ Betty Smith, letter to Eugene F. Saxton, 31 July 1942.

¹² Leland Hayward, letter to Morris Ernst, 6 March 1945.

Smith was mad at Hayward, mad at Elliott, mad at Harper & Brothers, and mad at Twentieth Century Fox for acquiring the rights so cheaply. By 1945 she was on the war path, sending out angry letters criticizing everybody, including her husband. Her old friend Barrett Clarke wrote to her:

It makes me unhappy that the deserved success you have had has not given you greater inner satisfaction. These fears that come storming around--don't let them get you down, Betty. Your whole life has been a record of magnificent courage.¹³

Throughout this period, Smith was chain-smoking, drinking, having constant migraine headaches, and "living on veronal" from the stress. Like many authors unprepared for success, Smith took it hard; her life was moving faster and faster, and she had no choice but to keep up with it.

Then in May of 1944, Smith was sued for \$250,000. A relative, Sadie Grandner, sued her for defamation of character, stating that she was the model for the character Sissie. According to Smith, the relationship was distant: Grandner was related, by marriage, to her stepfather. However, since it was family, it was a personal blow. Of course the story was carried by the press, and the local newspaper ran headlines saying "Phoebus author in Lawsuit" and began digging up whatever inconsistencies they could find in Smith's own life, such as her lack of a title,

¹³ Barrett Clarke, letter to Betty Smith, 13 March 1945.

"Miss" or "Mrs."¹⁴ Smith lost whatever peace of mind she had left. More than anyone, she feared her family:

I am very excitable and emotional right now. Mrs. G.'s relatives are making desperate efforts and resorting to all sorts of ruses to see me personally. My mother says they want to beat me up because the resultant publicity would prove that they were so indignant at my alleged portrayal of Mrs. G.¹⁵

Smith went to New York and sat in her hotel room with her mother, going over everything they knew about Mrs. Grandner and comparing it to the portrait in the book. The Betty Smith publicity machine sprung to life, full force, once again. News of the lawsuit was published in most of the newspapers across the United States, as well as Newsweek.¹⁶

The publishing world rallied. The British publisher Hamish Hamilton wrote to Cass Canfield: "From the tardiness of the proceedings and the fantastic amount being claimed, I imagine that it is one of those lunatic affairs which, for some reason, seem to occur more often in the U.S. than here!"¹⁷ and Smith received a letter from Margaret Mitchell, who had experienced similar problems after her unexpected

¹⁴ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 18 May 1944.

¹⁵ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 16 May 1944.

¹⁶ Newsweek, 29 May 1944.

¹⁷ Hamish Hamilton, letter to Cass Canfield, 22 May 1944.

success with Gone With The Wind. Mitchell wrote:

When I saw your wonderful book sticking at the top of the bestseller list, I wondered how long it would be before you were sued for plagiarism, libel et cetera. It is axiomatic among writers that no one ever sues the writer of an unsuccessful book. Just let a book go over twenty-five thousand copies and it is surprising how many people's feelings are hurt, how many screwballs think their brain children have been stolen, and how many people feel that they have been portrayed in a manner calculated to bring infamy upon them.¹⁸

Despite the emotional problems that it caused for Smith, the lawsuit was a simple one to solve. In fact, "Mr. Stern and Ernst [her lawyers] are deliriously cheerful about the suit."¹⁹ It was finally settled on January 30th, 1945, for the amount of \$2,750.00 and an agreement that there would be no further publicity.

And Never Yield was a source of stress as well. It was continually in a state of production, so that Smith continually hovered over New York, rewriting, to be on hand when rehearsals started. Nothing on this project went smoothly. Although Smith finished the play in June of 1944, the producer Michael Todd and his directors requested continual revisions, so that she worked on it steadily

¹⁸ Margaret Mitchell, letter to Betty Smith, 9 June 1944.

¹⁹ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 29 May 1944.

throughout both 1944 and 1945. At first Todd had given the play to Stella Adler to direct, but Adler was not easy for Smith to work with. Smith wrote to Jones: "But she wants me to rewrite the play to suit her and I don't like the way she wants it rewritten. It's not that I'm temperamental or anything but I don't 'get' what she wants."²⁰ Eventually Adler resigned over differences in artistic direction.

There was also a conflict about the agenting of the play. Although it was sold through the agent John Elliott at Leland Hayward, Smith felt that she had done the majority of the work. Elliott maintained that it was his idea and he put her in touch with two novels on the subject, from which she chose And Never Yield; but Smith wrote: "I feel that I sold the play without any help from Leland Hayward. In fact I feel that the agent did everything possible to prevent the sale of the play." And then there was trouble about the size of Elinor Pryor's name: Smith felt hers should be bigger, and Smith refused to sign the contract. There was much acrimonious correspondence before a contract was signed.²¹

Todd's option on the play ran out, and (unwisely, in retrospect) Smith signed a new one. She wrote: "All my life I've been working toward a play on Broadway and it seemed

²⁰ Betty Smith, letter to Joe Jones, 1 Jan. 1945.

²¹ Betty Smith, letter to John Elliott, undated May or June 1944; 4 June 1944.

like a dream that could never come true."²² Todd hired a new director and cast for her and threw a big party at Tavern On the Green in Manhattan.²³ By April, however, things began to stall again and Smith, who was tired of rewriting and exhausted with the endless travelling and delays, decided to give up. Although Smith liked Mike Todd a great deal,²⁴ she wrote to Lawrence: "I am much relieved that the play isn't going on. I don't think I could stand the strain of rehearsal and time is so precious, I don't want to give my time to this play."²⁵ Helen Strauss recalls that "She had rewritten a play seventeen times for Mike Todd and it hadn't even seen a first rehearsal, owing to one of Todd's not infrequent regressions into financial instability" (250). Walter Prichard Eaton, the Chairman of Yale Drama Department, had previously written to Smith, asking if he could use the And Never Yield for a major production (he had been counting on Walter Carroll to write a play for him, but he had written nothing)²⁶ and finally the play was produced as "The First in Heart" at Yale, Nov.

²² Betty Smith, letter to Joe Jones, 27 Dec. 1944.

²³ Joe Jones, letter to Betty Smith, 30 Jan. 1945.

²⁴ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, notes on draft, 25 April 1944.

²⁵ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 22 April 1945.

²⁶ Walter Prichard Eaton, letter to Betty Smith, 26 Jan. 1945.

12th, 1947.²⁷ Smith wrote to Sam Zolotow, the New York Times drama reporter, announcing that she was through with the theatre: she was "weary of 'producers' inarticulate creative urges' and 'trial and error writing.'"²⁸

Without having a play on Broadway, Smith was extremely busy. Within a few months at the beginning of 1945, she appeared on the "Meet the Author" series at Camp Shanks, New York, gave a radio interview in New York, was the guest of honor at the Pen and Brush club, gave another radio broadcast with Gean Orlin, was the key guest speaker at luncheon for the War Finance Committee, gave another interview with Morton Downey, appeared on the Hildegarde show in Chicago, spoke on another radio show "LISTEN -- THE WOMEN!" and was a guest on "Information Please." When Jones visited her in New York on his three-day pass, he almost never saw her. She also did a bond-selling tour with Ogden Nash, S. J. Perelman, Emil Ludwig, and a Captain Frederick Bell, where they were guests of honor at innumerable breakfasts, brunches, lunches, teas, and banquets.²⁹

Smith had her movie coming out in Hollywood, too. It was Elia Kazan's first film as well. When Smith first heard

²⁷ New York Times 14 Nov. 1947.

²⁸ John Chapman, "A Novelist Discovers Writing for Theatre is a Little Different," New York News 14 Oct. 1948.

²⁹ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, Twentieth Century-Fox Publicity Department.

that it was Kazan who was going to direct the movie, she was thrilled. She remembered him as "one of my best friends," and recalls that she used to date him and even considered marrying him.³⁰ Kazan maintains that he never knew her.³¹ When he began to make the movie, he was going through a divorce and was separated from his wife and daughter. In this situation he found parallels between himself and Johnnie Nolan: "The dilemma of all the people in Betty Smith's novel was mine and Molly's. The little girl, who loved her father absolutely despite all, felt what my daughter, I believe, was now feeling about me" (245). Kazan was an inspired filmmaker. His choice of Johnnie Dunn to play the part of Johnny Nolan was a good one: "In casting files, he was marked: 'Drinks!'" (257). Dunn was perfect for the part. Smith herself was gratified: she felt that she offered Dunn a chance for a "comeback after almost ten years of being out of pictures."³² Johnny Nolan, Joe Moran, Johnnie Dunn--Smith was able, during her adult life, to surround herself with stand-ins for her father.

Kazan was bent on making a top-drawer film. When he

³⁰ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 13 Dec. 1943.

³¹ Elia Kazan, personal letter, 26 Mar. 1993. When he did know her she went by the name Elisabeth Wehner Smith, and this may account for the discrepancy.

³² Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, Twentieth Century-Fox Publicity Department.

couldn't find a character who "was" the part, he bullied the character into *feeling* it. In his autobiography, he wrote about the technique he used with the child actress, Peggy Ann Garner, who was to play Francie:

She told me that she often dreamed of her father, who was overseas in the air force. When the day came in our schedule when she had to break down and cry, I talked to her about her father. Implicit in what I said was the suggestion that her father might not come back. (He did.) Peggy cried the whole day through, and we caught that piece of feeling. Her outburst of pain and fear was essential to her performance; it was the real thing. I was proud of that scene, of its absolute truth. (258)

Later the producer at Twentieth Century Fox made him cut that scene and replace it with one more restrained, but Kazan had certainly caught the right emotion. Throughout the making of the film, Kazan related the problems in the Nolan family to the problems in his own life, and the result is a classic film that captures the essential plot of the Smith novel as well as its beauty and sadness.

Smith went to a screening of the movie with her daughter Nancy, who was now working for Twentieth Century Fox, in New York in January, 1945. Although she and the critics cried during the performance, she felt disappointed because they had left so much out.³³ The official opening

³³ Joe Jones, letter to Betty Smith, 8 Jan. 1945.

was in New York on February 28th, and Jones attended it with her, but since the movie had been shown to the armed services before it was released to the general public, it was not the first time for either of them. The whirlwind of promotion was tiring to Smith by now, and she wrote to Lawrence that she was "thoroughly disgusted with being publicized."³⁴

³⁴ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 22 April 1945.

At Home

Smith and Joe Jones finally sublet a cottage together in Virginia, overlooking Chesapeake Bay, but they were still separated. Jones was waiting, daily, to be shipped to Texas and thence overseas, and Smith, just when she thought she could spend some time with him, was needed by her daughter Mary. Mary Carroll was pregnant, and her pregnancy had not gone well: at one point, the doctors thought that either Mary or the child would die.¹ After the baby was born, her husband Walter Carroll refused to help with the newborn or with the housework, so Smith had to fill that role. At first Carroll's emotional problems charmed Smith and Mary, but as time went on he became more and more of a problem. Smith had used her influence to help Carroll enroll in the Yale School of Drama, but he did not repay her interest. Carroll was definitely anti-social: his idea of fun was to go fishing at the beach, bait the hook and throw it in the air so that the seagulls would snag themselves.² When Mary was having difficulty with her pregnancy and Smith and Jones

¹ Betty Smith, letter to Joe Jones, 15 Jan. 1944. .

² Jack Fullilove, Alain Lesage and others, personal interview, 18 May, 1992.

sat "trembling waiting for a wire,"³ Carroll was having an affair with a new student at Yale, the actress Julie Harris, whom he later married.⁴

After Mary gave birth to her daughter, Candance, Smith took the train to New Haven and got them out of the hospital. Smith's life was torn apart:

I got Mary a nurse, stayed two days. Got a wire that my mother was dangerously ill in Woodhaven. Went there Monday, attended to getting a day nurse for her, came back here last night, Tuesday. Find I have to be back in New Haven Monday morning when the nurse must leave for another job. So I am packing my trunk, getting together my income tax material and will leave tomorrow for Virginia. . . . Joe rented the apartment and I am committed to stay with Mary until Feb. 22nd, when I must come to N.Y. to speak at something. . . .⁵

Smith was overwhelmed with responsibilities. She was caring simultaneously for a newborn and an invalid, in the midst of which, Carroll brought "climbers" home to "brag later that they met so-and-so and she was washing dishes."⁶ Smith was trying to juggle all her responsibilities and fit them into

³ Betty Smith, letter to Joe Jones, 15 Jan. 1944.

⁴ Max Steele, personal interview, 24 May 1991. Harris won't talk about Carroll or her relationship with him; they married in 1977 and the marriage lasted only a few years: Julie Harris, personal letter, 13 Nov. 1993.

⁵ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 2 Feb. 1944.

⁶ Betty Smith, letter to Joe Jones, 9 Feb. 1944.

her new life, and it was not working out. Since this was no environment for a child, the young couple considered letting George Smith adopt Candy, but his demands were too great: George would have refused to let Mary take the child back if she changed her mind. Smith wrote: "Her father wants a baby badly but he is a very hard man. He wouldn't be generous and say I'll keep the baby until you can decide what you want to do."⁷ Smith filled that role instead.

For Smith, having a granddaughter was a joy. She wrote to Lawrence that she just wanted to get the baby and settle down in Chapel Hill: "if I have the baby, I have a wonderful excuse to ignore everyone."⁸ Later in the year, when Candy developed Purbia Hemophilia, Smith watched over her for the signs of recovery or death and sent her daughter home to New Haven, since she felt there was no need for both of them to suffer.⁹ Joe's romantic misconception of Smith is neatly expressed when he refers to her problems as "the many burdens you now have on your frail silken shoulders."¹⁰ Smith wrote to her confidante, Elizabeth Lawrence, "Well,

⁷ Betty Smith, letter to Joe Jones, 13 Feb. 1944.

⁸ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 10 March 1944.

⁹ Betty Smith, letter to Joe Jones, 10 Aug. 1944.

¹⁰ Joe Jones, letter to Betty Smith, 1 Nov. 1943.

some writers must have an ivory tower but I need trouble."¹¹

Smith's life was different now, and she knew she could no longer go on living in the apartment that had been her home and the birthplace of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. On her trips to Chapel Hill, she went house-hunting, and on September 1st, 1944 she bought the old Mangum place for \$15,000. According to Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, "the house represents a long-cherished dream. Mother used to pass the century-old house and tell herself that someday she and her family would be able to live there."¹² The mansion was in a fairly primitive condition, and she decided on almost total renovations that cost an additional \$37,000. Since supplies were rationed during wartime, and special permits required, the renovations were more difficult than usual. However, she threw herself into the process. Her letters to Jones were obsessed with the house, and sometimes she decided not to spend their rare weekends together so that she could stay in Chapel Hill and work on it. After the play folded, in May, she was spending all her time happily contacting contractors, trying to get special permissions to install a gas furnace, and making decisions as to which walls should be torn down. By April of 1945, Jones was planting the

¹¹ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 10 March 1944.

¹² Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, Twentieth Century-Fox Publicity Department.

garden with her, and in June they moved in.

The house was symbolic of all of the other changes that had occurred in Smith's life, for it represented how she, herself, had once again to be made over anew. She wrote to Lawrence:

Only it's sad, because now I know I'm settling down for good. I never really settled down. I always felt that whatever life I was living was only temporary and I always had a lot to dream about. But now it's definite. Now I know my future.¹³

When Smith was poor and wrote herself stories, she could dream about wealth and success, and now that she had it, she had to live with it.

Smith had had a great deal of publicity for A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, for her marriage, and for the play, but none of it came near the amount of publicity she got for the movie. At first there were notes in the trade journals and gossip columns about who was appearing in it and directing it. Then there were the reviews. Most of all there was the movie that captured the rest of the American public that A Tree Grows in Brooklyn had not reached: the public that does not read. Consequently, Smith's house and renovations became a tourist attraction, and strangers paraded past her house, peeking in the windows, trying to see the celebrity. Even Smith's maid ran guided tours while she was away so

¹³ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 12 Oct. 1944.

that Smith had to fire her.¹⁴ Smith wrote:

I was there alone in the house at six last night after the workmen had left. I was measuring the floor -- kitchen, for linoleum and I looked up and saw three people staring through the windows and then I went into another room and there were people staring in other windows and I got a little hysterical. They were all people that I didn't know. I got frightened about the house and all of a sudden it didn't seem very good to me.¹⁵

Max Steele remembers that Smith was in trouble with the insular residents of Chapel Hill because the house

was an old Southern Victorian house she took off the porch made it that Williamsburgh and she put round brick steps and the remodelling was going on and the real social-like women came snooping. She was upstairs. They didn't know she was upstairs. They said "Wouldn't you know a woman from Brooklyn would do something like this: look at these steps" and she came down the steps and ordered them out of the house. Showed them what else a woman from Brooklyn could do.¹⁶

Joe Jones recalls that when they ate their first lunch in the new house at the kitchen table during a thunderstorm, a bolt of lightening hit the oak tree near the kitchen,

¹⁴ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 9 July 1945. Nancy Smith Pfeiffer notes that this anecdote is Smith in her "best story-telling form" and may or may not be true: notes on draft, 25 April 1994.

¹⁵ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 11 Mar. 1945.

¹⁶ Max Steele, personal interview, 24 May 1991.

knocking a plate off the mantelpiece. Smith was terrified and thought it was a bad omen.¹⁷

The war was winding down and in the summer of 1945 Joe Jones was discharged. After it became clear to Smith that And Never Yield would not be produced, Smith and Jones moved into the house, and she was back on even keel again, doing simple things and sharing the responsibilities of caring for the baby with Joe. Despite the difficulties in their relationship, Smith was often happy to be with him:

we had a very happy quiet time and I was assured again of something I forget too often; that he is a very decent sweet person and that I'm very fortunate to have my life tied up with someone who is good and faithful and has no axe to grind and wants so very little for himself.¹⁸

She was refusing all calls from New York (Todd hadn't figured out that And Never Yield would never be produced) and, after entertaining her family at Christmas, she escaped to a hotel in Palm Beach where she was inaccessible to the press, her publishers, and her family. Smith was getting her feet back on the ground and writing Tomorrow Will Be Better.

While in Chapel Hill, she went on another play-judging trip to recapture "old times," only it wasn't the same. It

¹⁷ Joe Jones, personal interview 21 June 1991.

¹⁸ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 9 July 1945.

was

a string of receptions and cocktail parties that were "musts" because the hostess had once contributed five dollars to the fund which seemed to entitle her to invite 40 friends to meet her "friend" Betty Smith. All in all, it was very wearing and disillusioning . . . I have tried not to change since the book came out. But it seems that everyone else has changed in their attitude towards me and it does make me different, whether I want to be or not. The Drama Association used to rent me a room in a tourist home prior to 1943. But this time I stayed at the homes of the socialites and was entertained. So, as Thomas Wolfe said; "You Can't Go Home Again." Certainly, it seems impossible to go back again.¹⁹

By the end of 1945, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn had sold nearly three million copies in the English language alone; in a decade where the average salary was \$2,000 Smith had earned \$109,197.08. Smith's life had changed beyond recognition. But Smith was learning how to handle it: she made Harper & Brothers her banker, receiving only \$30,000 a year.²⁰ She kept this arrangement for the rest of her life and managed to live comfortably on that sum.

¹⁹ Betty Smith, letter to Edward Aswell, 3 April 1947.

²⁰ Harper & Brothers, royalty statements, 30 June 1944 and 10 Jan. 1945.

Post-War Depression

While Smith lived with Jones in a whirlwind celebrity life, Bob Finch got out of the army and went back home to Dillon, Montana. There he had little or no money, problems with his wife, and was ill with an asthmatic condition.¹ He began to correspond with Smith again. Although her replies are missing, it seems that she had encouraged him to collect his one-act plays into an anthology for publication by Greenberg, much as she had done years previously, and that she offered to relinquish all her rights to the plays so that he could publish them under his name. Since they had originally copyrighted them under both of their names, however, this proved to be more difficult than she thought, and her lawyers advised her to have him sign a clause "not to bring any law suit nor to threaten any legal action against the editors and/or publishers of the plays" in the contract, a simple safeguard for the previous publishers.² In his lonely, alcoholic stupor, Finch refused to sign this agreement, and in this manner he was able to maintain their connection and to continue his correspondence with Smith.

¹ Bob Finch, letter to Betty Smith, 22 April 1946.

² Bob Finch, letter to Betty Smith, 22 April 1946.

She may have been willing to put up with his legal quibbling, but the Dramatist's Guild was not, and Barrett Clarke wrote to Finch: "Frankly, we prefer to step out of the picture in connection with that publication than to become involved in further correspondence on the matter."³

But the communication lines between Smith and Finch were open. Both were in impulsive, unhappy marriages, made largely on the rebound from their love affair with each other. Smith continued to try to help Finch whenever she could. Eventually she resolved this matter, and he signed the agreement, writing to her that he felt "a pang" when he did so.⁴ Besides resolving the matter of the plays, she suggested that he contact her play producer, Michael Todd.⁵ She wrote to Jake Wilk, the head of the writer's department at Warner Brothers in New York, trying to sell his plays or arrange a writing job.⁶ Eventually two of their collaborations were sold and filmed, "Summer Comes to the Diamond O," retitled "The Grass is Always Greener," and "The Desert Shall Rejoice," retitled "Star in the Night."⁷

Nevertheless, Bob was caught in a trap--he was sick, he

³ Barrett Clarke, letter to Bob Finch, 15 May 1946.

⁴ Bob Finch, letter to Betty Smith, 14 June 1946.

⁵ Bob Finch, letter to Betty Smith, 11 June 1946.

⁶ Bob Finch, letter to Betty Smith, 15 June 1946.

⁷ Robert Finch, biographical data for "Whistler's Grandmother," [1952].

was married to a sick woman, he was an alcoholic, and he didn't have enough money to leave Montana. His letters are lengthy chronicles of self-pity. When Smith repeatedly offered to help him, he responded by complaining how hard it was for him to get a start in the writing world "without the slightest encouragement from any quarter."⁸ Finally Smith sent him money and arranged for him to come to New York to "work" for her for a few days.⁹ Finch went, and they met for "a day or two of lovemaking" then she returned to Chapel Hill and Joe. This brief and passionate meeting would haunt them for years.¹⁰

As usual, Smith had been energetically pursuing all the opportunities available to her as the author of an extraordinarily bestselling novel. Smith met Lazar Wechsler, who owned Praesens Films, a film production company based in Switzerland. Praesens Films distributed through MGM International, a short-lived division of the company, "due solely to the enthusiasm of Arthur, one of the

⁸ Bob Finch, letter to Betty Smith, 2 August 1946.

⁹ Bob Finch, letter to Betty Smith, 27 August 1946.

¹⁰ Bob Finch, letter to Betty Smith, 12 Nov. 1950.

younger members of the Loew family" (Shipman 701).¹¹ Wechsler produced semi-idealistic films such as "The Search" (1948), which was about the rehabilitation of children who survived the concentration camps. Wechsler had a tendency to dampen controversial material, however; even with that subject matter, "the words 'German' and 'Nazi' are never used and the concentration camps mentioned only in passing" (Shipman 701). Smith signed an agreement that she would write a story for a film he would produce in the United States but that she would do the work in Switzerland, a trip for which he would play all expenses.¹² Her assumption was that, by working for a European film company, she would have a freer range than if she were working in Hollywood, especially since her subject matter was poverty and racism in the South. Smith wanted to apply her version of folklore to film.

After a quick trip to New York City to get her fur coat out of storage and say goodbye to Finch, Smith boarded a plane for Europe accompanied by Jones and her daughter

¹¹ Wechsler's other films were "Marie-Louise" (1945), "The Last Chance" (1945), "The Search" (1948), "Four Day's Leave" (1950), "Four in a Jeep" (1951), "The Village" (1953), "Heidi" (1953), "Heidi and Peter" (1955), "It Happened in Broad Daylight" (1960), and "The Shadows Grow Longer" (1962).

¹² Lazar Wechsler, letter to Betty Smith, 27 June 1946.

Nancy.¹³ Smith discovered that she did not like flying. First the take-off was delayed by a hurricane. Then, after a four-and-a-half-hour flight to Gander in Newfoundland and facing a nine-hour flight to Ireland, another plane, bound for America, crashed. Smith had originally planned to be back in New York before Christmas, but as soon as she got to Zurich she turned in her tickets and booked the first free boat, which did not leave until mid-January.¹⁴ Jones has a different memory of the flight: he enjoyed it very much, including being served drinks while looking out over the ocean and having a giant breakfast in Ireland when they landed.¹⁵ By September 20 Smith and Jones were installed in "the Dolder Grand, a famous hotel on top of Zurichberg, the low mountain range flanking Zurich on the north," in a suite recently vacated by Churchill and his daughter.¹⁶ Nancy enrolled in the University of Geneva and settled in a *pension* nearby.

But Smith was not happy: on a drive through Germany, she had seen the condition of the war-torn country, and it fueled her latent guilt at her own prosperity and success.

¹³ Betty Smith to Elizabeth Lawrence, undated letter, Sept., 1946.

¹⁴ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 11 Nov. 1946.

¹⁵ Joe Jones, "Report on a Transatlantic Flight," Chapel Hill Weekly.

¹⁶ Joe Jones, personal interview, 21 June 1991.

She felt that, as Americans, they "were very vulgar and swaggering like the G.I.s."¹⁷ In Switzerland food, heat, and hot water were plentiful, fueling her guilt even more:

So we live here in opulence. But I am not happy.

Because I can look out the picture frame window and see the alpine pass that leads to Germany and know that a scarce two hours away children haven't enough to eat.

It's the same in Italy just three hours away and Paris¹⁸

She cancelled her plans to travel in Europe. The difference between her past and her present must have been brought more forcibly home by the post-war situation.

The writing and production of "School Bus" did not go well either. The film was a socialist melodrama starring a white schoolteacher from the North. It dealt specifically with such subjects as segregation, busing, and the Ku Klux Klan. According to Wechsler, "School Bus" had basically the same theme as A Tree Grows in Brooklyn--that "better education and insight are the best weapons in the fight for social reform."¹⁹ From her experience with the Living Newspaper, Smith wrote a six-page report on Some Factual Material on which this Film is Based and called the script

¹⁷ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 11 Nov. 1946.

¹⁸ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 11 Nov. 1946.

¹⁹ Lazar Wechsler, letter to Betty Smith, 31 Oct. 1947.

the "Dixie Documentary," but that title made Wechsler nervous. In a confidential letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, Smith wrote that she was disillusioned because Wechsler felt that "a best-selling name . . . right away it's a big production job with big publicity and the south must not be antagonized because and because and because."²⁰ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer remembers that Wechsler, as a European, and Smith saw their contractual relationship differently. While she was in Switzerland, Wechsler felt that he "owned" Smith and everything she did, so long as she was his guest:

He was producing another film at the time, and its script was not very good, so he asked Mother's suggestions on revising it. She ended up doing a lot of the work on this other script in addition to "Bus." After awhile I think she felt he was using her and had gotten enough out of her.²¹

That other film was "The Search." Smith always felt that part of that film was hers. Later she wrote to Wechsler that she felt that 50% of the dialogue in the film was hers, and Wechsler responded that it was only 30%, which, Smith rejoined, is a great deal.²²

²⁰ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 11 Nov. 1946.

²¹ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, notes on draft, 25 April 1994.

²² Betty Smith, letter to Lazar Wechsler, 8 May 1948.

Wechsler was not happy with the story Smith wrote. When she returned to New York, he put two scriptwriters, Leopold Lindtberg and Richard Schweizer, in charge of revising it for production. In April of 1947 Smith announced that the film was finished.²³ However, by October, Wechsler had his son write an analysis of the revision, which was a sharp socialist critique, accusing the two scriptwriters of toning down the political significance of the screenplay, backing off from its original intent, and substituting unconvincing plot elements for potentially controversial ones, such as the scene with the Ku Klux Klan. David Wechsler wrote that

Betty Smith's expose [version] makes it perfectly clear and convincing that the decisive cause of the poverty of the tenant farmer lies in the share-cropping system. In the new expose, on the other hand, the responsibility for the failure of the crop and hence for the low intake of the farmers is laid on the lack of young labour and the rain²⁴

Wechsler wanted to paint himself as the hero who was unwilling to let go of the film's socialist message and the scriptwriters as the villains who were trying to destroy the project. Smith tried to stay out of the whole mess. She had been paid \$20,000, she had had her trip to Europe, and

²³ Betty Smith, letter to Edward Aswell, 3 April 1947.

²⁴ Lazar Wechsler, letter to Betty Smith, 31 Oct. 1947.

in return she had written one script and contributed dialogue to another. But Wechsler, who regretted that \$20,000, would not let the matter drop. In December of 1947 Smith wrote to Harper & Brother that the "movie people" were worrying her.²⁵ In January she was actively running away from Chapel Hill to Florida when Wechsler threatened to visit.²⁶

By May of 1948, Wechsler wrote Smith a letter expressing his feeling that he had been used very badly. He understood that, since he had signed a contract, he had no legal rights, but

Some day you may remember that in a small town called Zurich in the country of Switzerland, there is a man whom you caused to be in an impossible situation, a man who did everything of the best for you and to whom you didn't care to repay in the same measure.²⁷

Smith responded with a characteristic mix of common sense and hubris:

I think you wrote me because you feel hurt--feel that I have injured you. I really haven't.--The whole trouble is that you are angry because you had to make a payment to me. This is silly because the money is nothing. You are the only producer I ever worked for--ever will work for. The compliment to you is worth 10 times

²⁵ Betty Smith, letter to Jack Fisher, 22 Dec. 1947.

²⁶ Betty Smith, letter to Jack Fischer, 6 Jan. 1948.

²⁷ Lazar Wechsler, letter to Betty Smith, 4 May 1948.

whatever it cost you.²⁸

It is difficult to unravel what really did happen. Joe Jones remembers that the school bus movie was a mistake from the beginning. According to him, Smith didn't know enough about the South--it wasn't her milieu.²⁹ Nancy notes that the project was dropped because the topic was the wrong one in a conservative era: "The Montgomery marches hadn't taken place, and Wechsler felt that this was too revolutionary, this would never sell in America, and he found an excuse to get out of the contract."³⁰ Smith's lawyer, Harriet Pilpel, agreed: she thought it was likely that the breakdown of communications and the end of the project came about because Wechsler was cool on the project for reasons he did not state: that Arthur Loew was afraid of the subject matter.³¹ All these reasons, as well as the difference between European and American business customs, played their roles in the breakdown of the project.

However, the trip to Switzerland was not an entire loss. Nancy Smith met Dagobert Pfeiffer, a German-Swiss, at a French-for-Foreign Students class at the University of Geneva, and they were married in the summer of 1948. Smith

²⁸ Betty Smith, letter to Lazar Wechsler 4 May 1948.

²⁹ Joe Jones, personal interview, 21 June 1991.

³⁰ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview 10/11 May 1991.

³¹ Harriet Pilpel, letter to Betty Smith, 7 May 1948.

was pleased that Nancy was married shortly before the publication of Tomorrow Will Be Better, just as Mary had been married shortly before the publication of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.³² The couple moved to Denver, where Dagobert enrolled in college and Nancy got a job as a probation officer with the Juvenile and Family Court.

And Smith herself was busy with another writing project: she was revising and finishing her second novel, Tomorrow Will Be Better. Although she started it immediately after A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, the whirlwind of activity and travel stopped her many times, as well as her fears that she would alienate her relatives further. Before she flew to Switzerland she announced that the novel was finished, but it was not, and the Wechsler affair was one more distraction. When she returned, she settled down in her house in Chapel Hill, watching Candy while Mary, who was pregnant, was in New York with Walter.³³ Then later, when her new editor, Jack Fischer, visited her, she wrote that he should stay only two or three days because "There are two screaming babies in the house. There is nothing to do here but eat, sleep and sit around and work. And I'm the only one who mmmm [cancellation] works"³⁴ When the second

³² Betty Smith to John Fischer, 25 Feb. 1948.

³³ Betty Smith, letter to Edward Aswell, 10 March 1947.

³⁴ Betty Smith, letter to John Fischer, 29 Aug 1947.

grandchild, Johnny, was born, this seemed to help her creative process, since she was then able to finish the final revision of Tomorrow Will Be Better.

Tomorrow Will Be Better was published August 18th, five years to the day from the publication of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. The novel immediately hit the best seller list on the strength of her past success and Smith was once again off on her round of publicity and charity events. She repeated her Brooklyn book-signing at Abraham & Strauss, but this time her mother and Brooklyn relatives were with her, rather than hiding in the background. She spoke on September 12th at the Book and Author luncheon, did a booksigning September 13th in Philadelphia, returned to New York, and travelled directly to Richmond. She was made a woman of the year for the second time in Mademoiselle magazine.³⁵ In October she made a trip that took her from New York to Detroit, Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Paul, and back to Chapel Hill.³⁶ On that trip, she probably saw Finch for a few days.³⁷

³⁵ Mademoiselle, 28 Dec. 1948.

³⁶ Betty Smith, letter to John Fischer, 27 Sept. 1948.

³⁷ In a Harper inter-office secretarial memo recording a phone message, she told her editor that she had decided not to go to Montana after all, since her trip to the midwest had been so "successful." Finch had probably travelled from Montana to a city in the midwest to visit her.

Despite the success in Smith's life, there was always an underlying strain of sadness that colored her days (and nights). In 1948 Smith wrote that she had not been feeling well for the entire year.³⁸ She also wrote that she had a "minor nervous breakdown," with "unaccountable weeping and insomnia and lapse of memory about small things and exaggerated anxiety about everything."³⁹ The strain of her fame and the relentless activity was beginning to catch up with her, and her marriage to Jones was a further problem. Finch was stuck, penniless and drinking heavily, in Missoula, Montana. Perhaps she felt lost between men, because in 1949 she began an affair with a man named Alan. It is likely that part of the affair took place in the summer, because the letters from him fondly recall their time playing bingo together at Nag's Head. Early in 1950, Smith sometimes called him twice a day, but already she felt that he was taking her for granted. She was unable to see that he was fascinated with her: "You probably do not realize your great beauty of expression in everything you do, the amazing variations in emphasis, mood, the shifts from light-heartedness to gloom and back again."⁴⁰ During January they spent time together in New York, sometimes at

³⁸ Betty Smith, letter to Ramona Herd, 15 Feb. 1948.

³⁹ Betty Smith, letter to John Fischer, 25 Feb. 1948.

⁴⁰ Alan [last name unknown], letter to Betty Smith 17 Jan. 1950.

his place, sometimes at her hotel, and one day he wrote to her apologetically saying he couldn't meet her train, that he was busy in a conference and working late in the office.⁴¹ Alan was a busy man, not a needy man, like Jones and Finch. They were not cut out for each other. In February he wrote that he remembered their last two weeks together as "full of happy times and much too much luxurious entertaining."⁴² That was the last letter from Alan that appears in the Betty Smith papers.

Smith was on edge and trying to extricate herself from her difficult relationship with Joe. She did not enjoy the time that she spent in the dream house that she had built for herself--Jones was there. In April she checked into the Duke hospital for a complete physical. The doctor found that she was normal and healthy, and there was no organic cause for what he called her "attacks." Further, he wrote:

I believe that the difficulty she finds herself in now is a situational affair, and I have talked with her at great length about it. I believe that it is necessary for her to change her living habits entirely, and at least temporarily if not permanently, change her environment.

⁴¹ Alan [last name unknown], letter to Betty Smith 31 Jan. 1950.

⁴² Alan [last name unknown], letter to Betty Smith 17 Feb. 1950.

I did not believe that her difficulties were based on any psychosis whatsoever, but would put down the affair as anxiety and tension state. Certainly, every time she exposes herself to the environment in Chapel Hill she begins immediately to have the attacks. I think the time has arrived when she should make a complete and clean break with the whole affair.

These words probably released Smith from guilt for leaving Jones: she quoted the medical report to him in the letter asking him to leave the house in Chapel Hill. She also began to refer to her "Chapel Hill neurosis" in her letters to others. Specifically, it was Joe "squelching all spontaneity and frowning on all the wonderful, delirious happy fun I sometimes have with Paul Green, my son-in-law and my other friends."⁴³

The summers of 1949 and 1950 she spent away from Joe, just as she had spent her summers away from George years earlier. She went to Nag's Head, where she owned a cottage that had her "pre-'Tree'" furniture, and she was overjoyed to write that she was there by herself.⁴⁴ The summer following "Alan," she became very close to a doctor, his wife, and their two sons, spending most of her time with them, reading Hamlet aloud during hurricanes.⁴⁵

⁴³ Betty Smith, letter to Frank MacGregor, [1949-50].

⁴⁴ Betty Smith, card to Frank MacGregor, 17 Aug. 1949.

⁴⁵ Betty Smith, letter to Frank MacGregor, [1949-50].

Smith was married to Jones, but she could not get along with him; she was in love with Finch, but she was losing him. She had begun to write to him again, and tried to help him in almost any way she could. First she tried to get him a Guggenheim. Finch was very ill, more and more often writing from an alcoholic haze, and did not appreciate her efforts. Indeed, they only led him to feel more sorry for himself than ever. He wrote to her, while drinking three double shots:

My nerves are all shot from the terrific battle for life I have undergone these past five years, and I can neither rest nor sleep and half the time can't eat. I don't think there is a possibility that I could endure this torment much longer without cracking up pretty badly. I have simply had to drink heavily, in order to get a little sleep once in a while.⁴⁶

Finch was living with a wife who herself had emotional problems and he and his sister Helen were responsible for his mother who was sick with asthma and almost died, possibly from an overdose of sulfa. In these morose and sad letters he recalls his early memories of Smith:

This is the same girl who in the midst of poverty and bleakness of present and apparent future, could laugh and laugh at the name of the street as we walked across Force Tube Avenue on a snowy, dreary Sunday--who laughed because the state of those two frustrated young creators lost in the wilds of Brooklyn, broke and

⁴⁶ Bob Finch, letter to Betty Smith, 17 Feb. 1950.

dismal, seemed the very antithesis of romance, glamor and fame.

Probably the reason for their separation was that Finch was not prepared to follow a woman's career into "romance, glamor, and fame"; he was more comfortable with poverty, and Smith missed it as well. She needed somebody who could understand that aspect of her character; neither Joe Jones nor "Alan" could, so she had to rescue Bob and bring him, along with this side of herself, back into her life.

After all, Smith could do whatever she wanted to do. Tomorrow Will Be Better, even though it was not reviewed well, was a money-maker, and she did articles like "The Age to Marry" for "What Makes a Writer" for Good Housekeeping Magazine for \$1,500 a piece.⁴⁷ In 1948 Harper & Brothers alone paid her \$51,882.67, but they still owed her \$226,266.80.⁴⁸ Soon Smith would hire an agent to maximize her income.

⁴⁷ William Morris Agency, check stubs, 1949.

⁴⁸ Harper & Brothers, accounting statements, 1948.

The Second Novel

In her first letter to Eugene Saxton about A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, Smith had written: "This is everything I know. I don't know anymore than what is in this book."¹ She had to confront this problem nearly immediately after publication, because Harper & Brothers wanted another book; Lawrence kept in constant contact with her, encouraging her to follow up A Tree Grows in Brooklyn with a second bestseller. It was only one month after publication that Elizabeth Lawrence wrote to Smith, "Do you have time these days to give any thought to the next novel?"² Smith was under great pressure: the public demands on her were constant, and she had endless professional opportunities, in film, on Broadway, and on radio. Smith knew that Harper & Brothers would publish whatever she wrote, so she felt her next novel had to prove her literary ability.

But Smith was in a bind. She also felt her next novel had to offend no one. She had been very much frightened by the lawsuit, and by the reaction of a few Catholic priests.

¹ Betty Smith, letter to Eugene F. Saxton, 31 July 1942.

² Elizabeth Lawrence, letter to Betty Smith, 24 Sept. 1943.

Consequently, she made a special effort to use none of the people she knew as characters, and to avoid mention of the church.³ Smith set out to work within standard literary plot conventions. Joanne Frye writes about

how closely our plot expectations are linked to gender expectations: heroines do not kill bears or set out to travel the world; they do not prove themselves in battle or test the boundaries of human survival; they merely fall in love or fail in love. (1)

When Smith sent a version of the manuscript to Lawrence she wrote: "I am happy about it because it convinces me that I can write another novel and another without depending on biographical material."⁴ But Lawrence knew how important memory was to her writing; she wrote back:

Remember, also, not to be afraid to draw on your own experiences. Your life is the best material you have. Borrow from it all you need--so long as characters and situations are not reproduced with photographic fidelity. If you could develop a thick skin it would help. . . .⁵

³ The only mention of Catholicism in her second novel is when a minor character states: "The Church only takes normal men for priests. So they pour all the love they could have for wife and children into the Church and the people of the Church" (205). This is the standard line justifying celibacy.

⁴ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 1 July 1946.

⁵ Elizabeth Lawrence, letter to Betty Smith, 1 Aug. 1946.

Smith, however, had been shocked by the power of her first novel and was terrified of offending thousands of new readers by her second. She had humiliated her devoutly religious mother by her treatment of the Catholic Church and she had exposed the secrets of her tight-lipped German family. This time when Smith sat down to write, she had, in her mind, a huge, variously critical audience peering over her shoulder as she wrote. But she also felt that "I may never achieve lasting literary distinction, but I have to have that goal in mind, otherwise I cannot bring myself to sit down and put words on to paper."⁶ She had a drive for recognition.

While Smith was working on this novel, she faced continual distractions. Her marriage to Jones was comprised mainly of brief meetings between trains; her daughter Mary needed much help in making the adjustment to motherhood; Smith bought and renovated the old Mangum house; her play And Never Yield was continually on the verge of production; the film of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn premiered, World War II ended, and then Smith travelled to Switzerland to work on the screenplay School Bus. In January of 1944 Smith she wrote to Lawrence: "I can't seem to get settled enough to get started. I thought the talks and broadcasts and fan mail would be temporary. But now I've come to think that as

⁶ Betty Smith, letter to Edward Aswell, 15 June 1944.

that as Hardy said, the temporary is the all."⁷ However, with those words, Smith had begun.

Smith worked on the manuscript on and off during 1944, during the summer of 1945 and intensively from January to June in 1946; then she sent Lawrence her "finished" manuscript.⁸ Smith was understandably nervous about Harper's reaction to Tomorrow Will Be Better. On one hand she felt it was a good novel, better than A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, and yet on the other, she felt that it may be too humorless and too "sparse" for the reading audience of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.⁹ She compared her novel to one of James T. Farrell's recent novels, Bernard Clare, citing that she was sure hers was the better of the two. Still, she apologized to Lawrence at Harper for the lack of "dramatic conflict."¹⁰ Smith was still working in the vein of folk realism that she had learned from Fred Koch in her association with the Carolina Playmakers, but this time her subject of folk-analysis was an urban working-class

⁷ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 4 Jan. 1944.

⁸ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 1 June 1946.

⁹ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 1 June 1946.

¹⁰ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 8 Aug. 1946.

marriage.¹¹ The miserable details of these sad lives are made explicit. Smith was right--Harper & Brothers did not want the photographic realism of the WPA years, or one more depressing novel in a series like James T. Farrell's: they wanted a book that would make people laugh and cry rather than think, a book that would sell in large numbers.

Immediately all her editors at Harper & Brothers sent her letters saying that everything was fine, and they wanted to see her soon: they knew Smith was under a lot of pressure, and they planned the meeting with care. Lawrence wrote a note to Edward Aswell and Frank MacGregor saying that they should take care not to appear to "gang up" on her.¹² Instead, they all had a friendly lunch at Giovanni's, and afterwards Lawrence met with Smith alone to discuss the book in detail. This was an unfortunate move on Lawrence's part: Smith never forgave her for her criticisms. In a later memorandum, Lawrence recalled what she had said to Smith:

My principal point was that the story failed for us as good theater--that her characters lacked the warm humanity of the people in A TREE and so did not take hold of the reader's imagination--that the conflict was

¹¹ It is possible that Smith was influenced in her choice of this topic by Paul Green's popular play "Fixins'." Both rely heavily on the use of eggs as a focal point for relentless poverty.

¹² Elizabeth Lawrence, note to Edward Aswell and Frank MacGregor, on undated letter from Smith.

so muted as to be almost non-existent. In A TREE the characters were fighting their environment, they were in vigorous contact with life--either acceptance or rejection--and the reader cared dreadfully what happened to them. In the new novel the characters seemed passive, they took what came, drifted--with the result that they remained for the reader as drab as their background.

We explored possible ways of introducing color and variety and a change of mood through secondary figures, like the boss with the mother-fixation and the girl friend in the clipping bureau who went off to be married. . . .

Cutting was suggested as a way of sharpening. For example, the family bickering that went on so long and repetitiously, and the tiresomely detailed washroom gossip among the girls of the clipping bureau.

I said I had a feeling that she was writing more self-consciously than in A TREE, that she could not forget her audience looking over her shoulder.¹³

Smith, who had once been able to take criticism so well, was tired from her publicity rounds, tired from rewriting her unproduced play, tired from her unproductive marriage--she was feeling very discouraged. Her editors at Harper & Brothers were aware of her state of mind. When Smith returned to Chapel Hill, there was a flurry of letters in

¹³ Elizabeth Lawrence, memorandum to Edward Aswell, 15 May 1947.

which Aswell wrote that he and MacGregor backed Elizabeth 100% and that they all had faith in her, despite her moments of self-doubt.¹⁴

Smith was feeling depressed and angry, but she pulled herself together and responded: "I am humble about wanting to learn. All my life I've had to keep learning things to . . . as the social workers say . . . rise above my environment"¹⁵ but this humility was short-lived. Trouble was brewing, and Harper & Brothers were walking on eggs with their bestselling, working-class novelist. Even in England, Geoffrey Halliday at Curtis Brown Ltd., the international agenting firm, met with Smith on her way to Switzerland and reported back to Lawrence that "for the moment I think there are no special problems."¹⁶ But Smith did not feel that way.

The trouble had been brewing for a long time. Even though the editorial relationship she had with Lawrence would turn out to be the closest she would ever have, Smith had been chafing at the bit, and she did not appreciate Lawrence's professional criticism. She especially did not like to work with a woman. She had given Lawrence some hint of that when she wrote:

¹⁴ Edward Aswell, letter to Betty Smith, 1 Aug. 1946.

¹⁵ Betty Smith, letter to Edward Aswell, 8 Aug. 1946.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Halliday, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 23 Sept. 1946.

But coming from a matriarchal family . . . my father died when I was ten . . . and having all aunts and few uncles and mostly all female cousins . . . one of which or whom sued me and having two daughters who sometimes make demands on me that a son wouldn't, I just get the feeling that I don't like women.¹⁷

Lawrence wrote "I somehow doubt that this is true, but if it is true you are to be pitied for we women aren't on the whole a bad lot at all."¹⁸ But Smith was on the warpath, and she was intent on blaming her problems on a woman, perhaps a stand-in for her mother. Years later, when Smith explained to Max Steele that she just could not get along with Elizabeth Lawrence, she offered him this anecdote:

[Smith] said "You know Elizabeth got so upset when my cousin sued me for \$50,000, and she said 'I hope you remember from now on. . . .'" And Betty said "Well, Elizabeth, Harper's made four million off that story and I made a million, and I think \$50,000 is not too much to pay for that kind of success. We can afford it." [Later Smith said] "I wonder if Harper's will still be nice to me when I'm living in a hallway bedroom?" and Elizabeth said to her "Oh, Betty, I think Harper's can afford that."¹⁹

Smith was retroactively angry about having struck a bad deal with her publishers. Given Smith's talents for

¹⁷ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 22 Dec. 1945.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Lawrence, letter to Betty Smith, 19 Dec. 1945.

¹⁹ Max Steele, personal interview, 24 May 1991.

embellishment, this anecdote is probably more expressive of her feelings than fact--she saw Lawrence as a stingy parent, who took without giving.

It is easy to forget, among literate and polite people, that, as James West writes, "all author-publisher dealings are initially of an adversary nature" (85). Underlying Smith's dislike of Lawrence as a woman and her annoyance at the criticism she made of Tomorrow Will Be Better, there is also the fact that the contract that Smith signed for A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was not to her best advantage. Of all the editors at Harper & Brothers, Lawrence was the one who guessed that it was going to be a run-away success, and perhaps Smith resented her for not protecting her rights. But, as West writes,

Within reason, publishers wish to secure the right to manufacture and sell literary work on terms most advantageous to their houses. Authors wish to receive the highest payment possible for their labors and to retain as many of the subsidiary rights, or percentages of them, as they can (85).

The break between Smith and Lawrence was inevitable. When Smith returned from Europe, Lawrence sent her a routine letter about a broadcast, and Smith blew up: she sent a telegram "ASTONISHED YOU ARRANGED BANTAM BROADCAST WITHOUT TELLING ME THIS BROADCAST IS AGAINST MY WISHES."²⁰ Lawrence

²⁰ Betty Smith, telegram to Elizabeth Lawrence, 3 Feb. 1947.

immediately returned a telegram stating that she had had no intention of antagonizing her and that she thought it was a strictly routine matter, explaining that "In connection with the launching of the Bantam edition of A TREE, there will be a radio program dramatizing a couple of incidents. . . ." ²¹ Smith immediately sent a letter explaining her anger: "I thought how awful that something I worked on for nearly four years could be so hacked and patched to fit a 25 minute program" and apologizing. ²² But that would be the last apology she would make.

From then on Smith refused to correspond with Lawrence. Smith sent her subsequent letters to Cass Canfield, the editor-in-chief, asking him to do the routine matters that Lawrence had once done. That made it easier for her to call him and ask for a new editor. When Canfield agreed to make Edward Aswell her editor, Smith was overjoyed. ²³ In Up & Down & Around: A Publisher Recollects the Time of His Life, Canfield remembers Smith as a writer who presented "editorial problems" (200). Canfield dwells mainly on the difficulty of the transition of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn from "non-fiction" to "fiction": since Harper first received

²¹ Elizabeth Lawrence, letter to Betty Smith, 31 Jan. 1947.

²² Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 3 Feb. 1947.

²³ Betty Smith, letter to Edward Aswell, 10 March 1947.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn as a submission to a non-fiction contest, this story, that the novel had to be rewritten into fiction, subsequently arose. But Canfield probably did not recall the real source of the trouble, which occurred mainly in the editing of the second and third novels.

In her first letter to Aswell as her editor, Smith wrote something that she wanted Lawrence to see:

It is very difficult to explain to a woman . . . "Look! I admire and love you and you are a wonderful editor. But there is something essential missing between us which I cannot explain or describe and without which I cannot function freely as a writer."²⁴

Smith was reacting to Lawrence as if she had been her mother, and, when she could not get what she wanted from her, she went to her "father." Although Lawrence kept tabs on Betty Smith behind the scenes for the rest of her career, they never corresponded again.

Edward Aswell was a different type of editor from Lawrence. He lunched with Smith at Giovanni's, without discussing the novel, and then sent her a letter full of abstract encouragements. He wasn't quite aware of how to handle Smith. In June he wrote a memo to his British publishers, who had been asking about the novel:

We have seen a first draft of the novel, but it called for extensive revision, and the author is now engaged

²⁴ Betty Smith, letter to Edward Aswell, 10 March 1947.

in what amounts to practically a rewrite of the whole thing. She is extremely sensitive and emotional, and for that reason more than ordinarily difficult to handle. Neither she nor we know at this time how long it will take her to revise the book.²⁵

In leaving Lawrence, Smith abandoned editorial continuity (as well as quasi-maternal care). The next time Smith lunched with Aswell, he informed her that he was leaving Harper & Brothers, and her new editor would be a man named John Fischer.

As her new editor, Fischer's first move was to write Smith a letter asking her all the things that Smith had trained Lawrence not to ask: will she serialize, will she sell the radio rights, will she write for Cosmopolitan? Smith, at this point, wasn't writing much of anything--she was having her nervous breakdown. She wrote back:

I am going through a bad time and have the feeling that I can't write anything worth a damn You must overlook it if I seem to be recalcitrant and belligerent or something. I was turned over to you at a somewhat jammed-up period in my life and I've gotten into a neurotic habit of lashing out at everyone and everything.²⁶

Nevertheless, Smith had gotten herself back to work on the novel, and the relationship with Fischer turned out to be a

²⁵ Edward Aswell, letter to Miss Fiske, 19 June 1947.

²⁶ Betty Smith, letter to John Fischer, 12 Sept. 1947.

serviceable one. He was able to help her with concrete suggestions for standard literary transitions and forms that she was then able to put into her slice-of-life, documentary-type narrative. He steered her toward a romantic conclusion, and she provided it, but she was not happy with it. The ending was key to the distribution of the novel. John Beecroft, the president of the Literary Guild, wrote with a suggestion that, if Smith would change the ending to leave more "hope for the future" they would accept it for their club.²⁷ Instead, the Book-of-the-Month Club took it.

In a way, Tomorrow Will Be Better and her next novel, Maggie-Now are as autobiographical as the A Tree Grows in Brooklyn and Joy in the Morning: they are performance pieces incorporating elements of Smith's life. Smith avoided using the people she knew and her own history, but she could not avoid using the feelings in her life and her memories. She created a passive character, Margy, who bears no resemblance to the lively Betty Smith, and she put Margy in a relationship with a man who resembles Joe Jones. In that way, Smith put a puppet on the page and made it act out the angers, frustrations, and memories that haunted her own life. Then she put on a happy ending and title and hoped

²⁷ John Beecroft, letter to John Fischer, 8 March 1948. He also wrote that the "Implications of homosexuality are certain to offend a large number of readers. . . ."

for the best.

A major theme in Tomorrow Will Be Better is the effect of cruel and domineering mothers (like Smith's version of Lawrence) upon three characters -- Margy, Frankie, and Margy's Boss, Mr. Prentiss. Smith had had trouble with this mother figure all her life: she blamed the break-up of her first marriage on her mother-in-law, she had created a fight with Elizabeth Lawrence, and eventually she blamed her second divorce on her mother-in-law as well. This was part of the emotional ground that Smith was covering in Tomorrow Will Be Better. She was also writing about a personal sense of inner despair. Although the title is hopeful, Smith's original inspiration was the Hardy poem that Smith had paraphrased to Lawrence, "the temporary is the all."²⁸ Hardy's poem begins:

Change and Chancefulness in my flowering youthtime,
Set me sun by sun near to one unchosen;
Wrought us fellowlike, and despite divergence,
Fused us in friendship.

'Cherish him can I while the true one forthcome--
Come the rich fulfiller of my prevision;
Life is roomy yet, and the odds unbounded.'
So self-communed I.

Smith had Joe Jones in mind when this poem appealed to her: she had married him without knowing him, on the rebound of

²⁸ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 4 Jan. 1944.

her love affair with Bob Finch, and on the eve of her fame. For the next five years, while she was writing Tomorrow Will Be Better, she was trying to come to terms with this marriage.

There are several other themes in Tomorrow Will Be Better. The novel is about the limited options available to working-class people, but it is also about the roots of intramarital and child abuse and how abuse is perpetuated in and by a culture. It is about the roots of homosexuality as understood in the 1940s and the effect that three similar mothers have on their children. Altogether, it provides a rich and detailed image of the lives of working-class women that had not been previously portrayed in American literature; it is better as a documentary than as fiction.

We first meet the teenage Margy in a recurring nightmare in which she is abandoned by her mother as a child. She finds herself in terror, on a dead-end street with huge iron gates blocking the end. This is the ruling metaphor of Tomorrow Will Be Better; just as Margy is trapped in her box, so are her parents. They eat the same fried eggs and onions for dinner night after night, and have the same fights, night after night: Margy's father thought: "In his dim fumbling way, he had long ago decided that quarreling took the place of lovemaking as far as Flo was concerned" (30). Both parents, like Margy, are locked in a recurrent nightmare of sado-masochistic pain.

Margy's dream is based in fact: her mother had let go of her hand in a strange neighborhood one day, and walked rapidly on without her. Smith explains that Flo did not dislike her daughter:

If the vein of essential truth in her could have been blasted free from its flinty layers of worry, bitterness and inarticulateness, her love for the child would have been revealed. She nagged and fretted at her because the child was her only emotional outlet; was someone to receive her voice; a symbol at which to direct thoughts spoken aloud. There was no one who listened so obligingly, who tried so hard to understand. (8)

Margy gets lost, experiences territorial hostility from other children playing on their blocks, and is almost run down by a brewery truck. Finally, a kindly prostitute buys her an ice-cream cone and takes her home.

Flo finds Margy sitting on the steps of her building eating an ice-cream cone and beats her:

"I'll learn you to scare the life out of me!" screamed Flo.

She slapped the ice cream out of the child's hand. It fell into the gutter. She slapped Margy first on one cheek and as the child swayed, on the other cheek to counteract the sway. She kept slapping back and forth and the child rocked from side to side like a last-standing bowling pin that is reluctant to fall. (22)

The physical abuse ends with this scene, but the psychological abuse does not. Margy tries to tell her

father that she was lost, but Flo denies that it happened.

At sixteen Margy quits school and makes her first tentative steps towards independence by entering the world of work. As a mail-order correspondent at Thomson-Jonson Mail Order House, Margy enjoys her work more than any other part of her life. But her incipient independence is diminished by the fact that she hands over ten dollars of her twelve-dollar salary to her mother. She is ashamed of her poor clothes among the other women. Her friend Reenie encourages her to buy a warm winter coat, but her mother will not allow it. Margy is still trapped in the family routine of poverty and abuse.

The little bit of romance in Tomorrow Will Be Better takes place in the office, too. Mr. Prentiss, the boss of all the women workers, has a soft spot for Margy, but he is ruled by his mother who has kept him single into his forties and who still needs him to put her to sleep every night. She refers to her son as "her best beau" and, in bed one night, he whispers fiercely "I hate you mother" (155).

Margy gambles for a fuller freedom by marrying Frankie, a man with whom she is not in love. What they share is that "Both dreaded the plunge into turbulent family life after an orderly day at the office" (87) and both want escape from their families. Flo is angry at the thought of her daughter marrying and leaving home, and she verbally abuses her; Mrs. Malone, Frankie's mother, is rude and possessive, as if she

owned her son, and she verbally abuses Margy, too. Even though both sets of parents try to destroy the marriage, Frankie and Margy marry and set up housekeeping on a minimal budget in a one-room apartment.

In keeping with the customs of the time, Margy quits her job for a life of isolation as a housekeeper trying to please a man she barely knows. Even though she has escaped her mother, it is a hollow victory because Frankie does not love her; every time she touches him, he shrinks away. Frankie's conduct is inexplicable until he invites two friends home from the office with him. Both are characterized as gay: the woman "wore a severely plain tweed suit, low-heeled brogues and her stiff, straight hair was cut short"; the man "was good-looking, or would be, thought Margy, if he'd get that wavy blond hair of his cut a little shorter" (209). Margy is surprised to see a different side of Frankie when he is with his co-workers--he is "free and expansive," and, after their visit, he has sex with Margy for the first time. This is how Margy conceives a child.

When Margy tells Frankie she is pregnant, there is a "sudden look of revulsion and terror in his face" (213). Margy decides that the baby must be a girl because if she had a son she knew she would look for the affection from him that she was not getting from her husband and that her relationship to him would turn into the same relationship Mrs. Malone has had with Frankie and Mrs. Prentiss with her

boss. The child, a girl, is born dead.

After the baby's death, Margy finds the strength to tell off both her mother and her mother-in-law. The crisis has woken her up from her sleep-walk through life. In a near-crazy, semi-suicidal state herself, she no longer cares what she says to people. She explains it to her mother:

"You see, I wanted this baby so bad. I needed it to prove something; to prove that this could be a good world. I was going to get all the things I never had for this baby to prove that there are more than dreams in a person's life. First, I was going to give it love.

"Ever since I was a child no one ever held me and said 'I love you Margy.'" (250)

Her anger at her mother-in-law was more direct and forceful. To her, Margy says "I hate you!" (253), the same thought that Mr. Prentiss spoke into his pillow.

When Margy wants to return to work to help pay the hospital and funeral bills, Frankie objects, because, as he explains, he wants a wife to support so that he can prove that he is just like any other man. Margy wakes up after another loveless night, takes pen in hand, and . . . writes to her boss. This is the happy ending that Smith provided, the hope for tomorrow: it is suggested that she will get her job back and perhaps begin a romance with Mr. Prentiss. However, the reader is left with the feeling that Smith had: "that Prentiss might be Frankie again but on a higher plane

and that Margy's implied marriage to him might be as unsatisfactory as her one to Frankie."²⁹

Even though this ending did not make natural sense, it did make sense in terms of the reigning ideology of genre:

Even for women's experiential narratives, the initial process of emplotment, then, often becomes an imposition of the culture's dominant expectations for women's lives; their stories become an enactment of what White calls the iconic function of culturally available plot structures, "one of the ways that a culture has of making sense of both personal and public pasts" (Frye 39).

As with A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, Smith had to provide an ending that would fit within the structure of the romantic novel so that it could be sold to readers with the expectation of a positive conclusion. It is likely Smith was deeply influenced by the work of James T. Farrell as well. The Studs Lonigan Trilogy (1935) is nearly as bleak and optionless as this novel. It has the same somber social-realism that does not hesitate to flood the reader with the details of failed lives. And she was writing within the tradition of the theater that had produced such family dramas as Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey Into Night. Tomorrow Will Be Better is a hybrid of all of these forms, and it is a difficult novel to categorize.

Tomorrow Will Be Better was published on the fifth

²⁹ Betty Smith, letter to John Fischer, 25 Feb. 1948.

anniversary of the publication of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, August 18th, 1948. It had the largest pre-publication printing in the history of the Harper fiction department--100,000 copies.³⁰ Smith was on the cover of Publisher's Weekly, which ran a story that Harper was spending \$20,000 in advertising, giving every imaginable selling help for dealers, advertising geared to reach the three million purchasers of A Tree.³¹ Despite its painful mixed message, Tomorrow Will Be Better rose to the bestseller list, and was the fourth best-selling novel of 1948 (Strauss 250). Smith was still riding on the crest of popularity from the publication of her first novel. In this way, Smith's success contributed to her gradual critical decline: the readers of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn were all expecting a novel equal in power to the first.

The great expectations for Smith's second novel so biased its reception that it was difficult for critics to give a realistic assessment of the novel. In the Book of the Month Club circular, Dorothy Canfield stated that she considered it "even better than A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" and Henry Seidel Canby agreed, adding "It's definitely better, as lasting literature." Canby was interested in the novel as a peek at the lives of working-class women who ride

³⁰ Bronx Home News 16 May 1948.

³¹ Publisher's Weekly, 17 July 1948.

the subway to Brooklyn; he wrote with condescending voyeurism:

Tomorrow Will Be Better is about office jobs, and mothers, and marriages. If you think an office is a dull, mechanical place, it is because you have had no Betty Smith to take you on the inside and see and feel the complex of jealousies, affections, ambitions, that make it warm with emotion. To the young girl trying to escape from a too often quarreling family in a dingy, discouraged flat, the office is the first step toward the American Dream which her parents have failed to realize.³²

But no amount of pre-publication advertizing could make Tomorrow Will Be Better a happier novel, and no amount of positive assessment could make the public or the reviewers like it. Tomorrow Will Be Better was essentially about abuse in dysfunctional families, even though it was masked by the form of a romance, and that theme was not au courant.

On August 22nd, the reviews appeared. The New York Herald wrote: "What emerges from [this novel] is something we have always known: the poor make a wound in every society. Miss Smith as artist rubs salt on the edges of the open flesh." One reviewer in the New York Times wrote: "The book makes no suggestions, answers no questions, proposes no solutions." Walter Spearman, Smith's associate in the Carolina Playmakers, wrote in the Durham Herald "there is a

³² Newsletter, Book of the Month Club, July 1948.

deep-seated pessimism and bitterness that permeates the book." Perhaps the best critical summary of Tomorrow Will Be Better was that of Lewis Gannett, who wrote: "Betty Smith's first novel was about a tree that grew, lush and beautiful, out of the cement of a Brooklyn back yard. Her second novel is about weeds that grow between the cracks in Brooklyn sidewalks and shrivel in the dust."³³ Eventually the reviews started playing on the popularity of the former title: "Hope, Punched in Nose, Still Grows in Brooklyn," "Miss Smith's Tree Dies in Brooklyn," and "A Stunted Tree Grows in Brooklyn."

Somehow Smith managed to keep her sense of humor. Harriet Van Horne, in the New York World Telegram, wrote an account of a television show, "The Author Meets the Critics," on which she appeared:

A disdainful man who spoke in highly cultured accents, Mr. Paulding had only contempt for Miss Smith's people. "Why must everybody in the book have such a terrible mother?" he kept asking. He said he felt sure Miss Smith had never actually studied psychology or psychiatry. That she'd simply accepted "notes brought to her by some pimply faced youth."

Miss Smith, when called upon to defend her book, was altogether too humble. I had hoped to see her Irish temper rise a bit. "I've never studied psychology," she said. "But I know my own kind of people. I'm writing of a world I know because I lived in it. The

³³ Lewis Gannett, New York Herald Tribune, 18 Aug. 1948.

conversations in the book are conversations I have heard. That's the way things are in Brooklyn."

As to Mr. Paulding's distaste for the possessive, spoiled Mrs. Prentiss, Miss Smith let go her only arrow for the evening. "Perhaps Mr. Paulding knows a woman of that sort," she hazarded. Then, as if contrite for venturing so far into the life of a stranger, she added, "Forgive me for being a third rate psychologist."

Overall, Smith didn't care too much that her second novel was not a success: her life was a whirlwind, and more and more she could not focus for very long on any one aspect. In this half-crazed state, she produced a novel that was, perhaps, more autobiographical than she wished.

Smith provided an alternative conclusion for Tomorrow Will Be Better. It resolves Margy's recurrent dream: "a change came and she was no longer a child. She was a woman. She pushed the gates open and walked through. The way ahead was known to her. She would never be lost again" (274). Neither ending is convincing, but it is interesting to speculate how Smith would have developed this theme further if she had had the confidence to title her novel after the Hardy poem and center her dramatic situation in a character living a life without love: imagine a novel about physical and psychological abuse in the late 1940s, when the men had returned from the war and the media was busy building an ideology that idealized the nuclear family, the housekeeper, the breadwinner, and the American Dream. The Temporary is

the All would never have been published.

Broadway

Smith had two major ambitions in her life: one was marrying Finch, and the other was having a show on Broadway. Even if she couldn't reach the alcoholic Finch, she was in a position to have her second dream come true. This was made possible through the agency of Helen Strauss, the head of the literary section at William Morris. Strauss was steeped in the world of big men in the media--she knew everyone, everywhere, on Broadway, in Hollywood, and in publishing. Consequently, when a young Broadway producer, Robert Freyer, came to William Morris looking for a story to make into a show with his mentor George Abbott, Strauss, Morris, and Freyer sat down together and went over Strauss' list of literary talents. She had just signed up Smith the week before. Freyer picked A Tree Grows in Brooklyn from the list, and work on the show began.

Strauss called Smith in Chapel Hill, and within a week Smith was back in New York, but she was cautious about undertaking another Broadway production, And Never Yield having fared so poorly. She wrote in the New York Times:

I made it very plain to Helen Strauss, my agent, that I wouldn't work on the play under any circumstances. I came to New York and, accompanied by my agent, went to meet Mr. Abbott. Outside his office door I again told

her very firmly that I wouldn't work on the play.

Mr. Abbott and I started discussing the form the musical would take. I began making suggestions. Miss Strauss broke in to say: "It is understood that Miss Smith does not wish to work on the play." I looked at her blankly and said: "But I *am* working on it." So we began collaborating ten minutes after we met.¹

Smith could not help herself: like a fish seeking water, she went back to the stage, collaborating again with a man. The producer put out a call for backers, and there was no shortage of "angels" to fund the show. William S. Paley from CBS took the largest percentage, and produced a record of the musical. Smith's former agent, Leland Hayward, took a percentage, as did the actor Johnnie Johnston, and Judith Abbott, George Abbot's daughter. The New York Herald Tribune reported that Smith was a "two-percenter,"² but actually she got 3%, 2% for rights to the novel and 1% for collaborating on the script. Frank MacGregor at Harper & Brothers didn't hold Smith to the contract whereby they got 50% of the everything; she gave them 10% instead.³

¹ Betty Smith, "That 'Tree' Keeps Growing," New York Times, 15 April 1951.

² Carol Taylor, "A Show is Born: Angels' Dollars Grew on 'Tree' Before Writers Finished Draft of Book," New York World-Telegram & The Sun, 27 April 1951.

³ Betty Smith, letter to Frank MacGregor, 9 April, 1950.

By February Smith and Abbott were writing letters daily while Smith was living sometimes at Nag's Head, sometimes in New York, and more and more rarely in her house on Rosemary Street in Chapel Hill. Abbott had sailed to South America on Feb. 10th, but Smith wrote "I have his schedule and each night I mail a new scene to another port of call."⁴ They had a first draft by March. Sometimes they wrote separate drafts, sent them to each other, rejected each other's efforts, and started again. Smith later wrote:

I think it was one of the most amiable collaborations in dramatic history.

After the fourth draft, we could no longer say, "My lines," or "Your lines." They were our lines.

Well, after ten months, we had what we called a working script. It was a thin little thing of ninety-four typed pages. All of a sudden the slight script became the center of intense activity.

I answered no mail, resented outside phone calls.⁵ Irving Berlin wanted to do the score and the producers waited for him, but it turned out that he was too exhausted from just having finished "Call Me Madam."⁶ Arthur Schwartz

⁴ Betty Smith, letter to Frank MacGregor, 14 Feb. 1950.

⁵ Betty Smith, "That 'Tree' Keeps Growing," New York Times, 15 April 1951.

⁶ Carol Taylor, "A Show is Born: Angels' Dollars Grew on 'Tree' Before Writers Finished Draft of Book," New York World-Telegram & The Sun, 27 April 1951.

was chosen to write the music, Dorothy Fields to write the lyrics, Jo Mielziner to design the scenery, Irene Sharff the costumes, and Herbert Ross the choreography. Judith Abbott was put in charge of casting. Early on, Shirley Booth was chosen for the part of Cissy so that Cissy's role grew to accommodate the star.⁷ Johnny Johnston, "familiar to movie, radio, TV and phonograph records fans," was a popular choice for Johnnie Nolan.⁸ Nomi Mitty was chosen as Francie, and other roles were played by Nathaniel Frey, Dody Heath, Maida Reade, Harland Dixon, James Little, Joe Calvin and Billy Parsons.⁹ However, they could not find a "Katie Nolan": "None [of the actresses auditioning] could be imagined on their knees scrubbing floors in a Brooklyn tenement."¹⁰ Smith felt that the part was "so truthful and so untheatrical" that it was difficult to find an actress to fit it. Finally they auditioned a violinist who had never acted on stage or sung professionally. Even though her hands shook while auditioning, her acting wasn't polished

⁷ The name Sissy in the novel was changed to Cissy in the stage adaptation, a reflection of the lawsuit.

⁸ Philadelphia Bulletin, 21 March 1951.

⁹ "'Tree Grows in Brooklyn' Opens Tuesday as Musical," Philadelphia Bulletin, 21 March 1951.

¹⁰ Carol Taylor, "A Show is Born: Violinist Find, Untrained as Actress, Gives B'way its Newest Cinderella Yarn," New York World-Telegram & The Sun, 28 April 1951.

and her voice didn't project, she was chosen for the part.¹¹

The musical comedy "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" went into rehearsal in February, 1951, and from then on Smith lived in New York at the Hotel Edison, 228 West 47th Street, across from the Alvin Theater; she worked from ten in the morning until midnight. "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" opened March 19 in the Schubert Theater in New Haven, Connecticut, for a one-week trial run. After New Haven, "the show's executives were violently at odds on whether or not to retain a quite colorful brothel scene." As usual, Smith tried to stay out of the melee; she said "There's no fancy house like that in Brooklyn anyway. They all sit around in wrappers."¹² They hashed it out, and when the show next opened, in the Forrest Theater in Philadelphia, the brothel scene was gone.

The producers, director and writers were still working on the musical when it went through its first performances. Leland Hayward sat in the back of the theater and added his criticism. Smith recalled that the hardest work was the continual revisions while she show was running. After New Haven, they took out two scenes and a song, and while in Philadelphia they took out two more songs and three or four

¹¹ Carol Taylor, "A Show is Born: Violinist Find, Untrained as Actress, Gives B'way its Newest Cinderella Yarn," New York World-Telegram & The Sun, 28 April 1951.

¹² Carol Taylor, "A Show is Born: Betty Smith Never Missed Rehearsal of Musical 'Tree,'" New York World-Telegram & The Sun 26 April 1951.

scenes, and added one song and a scene. It changed the intent of the novel completely: the story became half Cissy's and half Katie's, and Francie didn't even appear until the second act.¹³ Finally it opened in New York to an advance sale of \$325,000 and a legal limit of 30 standees.¹⁴ Smith finally had her show on Broadway:

Three million persons bought her book, ten times as many saw it as a movie. But Betty Smith, who always wanted to write a play, will hit her personal peak of excitement before a very small audience . . . when she arrives early at the Alvin Theater, on April 19, so she can watch more famous people arrive late for the opening night of "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn."¹⁵

Smith waited anxiously for the reviews. Overall, they were good. Many were positive, some even laudatory, but a few mentioned flaws that were all too clear to the public who had come to love A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.

In the New York World-Telegram & The Sun, William Hawkins wrote "This is an experience of real honesty, taste and ingenuity. . . . I find it--Superb."¹⁶ Richard Watts,

¹³ Vernon Rice, "Curtain Cues: It's Still 'A Tree Grows in Brooklyn,'" Post Home News, 17 April 1951.

¹⁴ Richard Watts, "Two on the Aisle: Brooklyn, Songs and Shirley Booth," Post Home News 20 April 1951.

¹⁵ Tex McCrary and Jinx Falkenburg, "New York Close-Up" New York Herald-Tribune 18 Mar 1951.

¹⁶ William Hawkins, "Laughter and Tears Mingle in 'A Tree,'" New York World-Telegram 20 April 1951.

in the Post Home News, called it "an agreeable show"¹⁷ and in the Mirror, Robert Coleman predicted Alvin Theatre will be packed for months to come, as "another Abbott triumph."¹⁸ Women's Wear Daily wrote that "Broadway has another resounding hit,"¹⁹ and Brooks Atkinson wrote that the musical was "One of those happy inspirations that the theater dotes on" and predicted it would have "a long and affectionate career."²⁰ However, George Jean Nathan wrote in the New York Journal-American that fifty percent of the show was good, but that fifty percent was all in the first act.²¹ Otis L. Guernsey Jr. wrote in the New York Herald-Tribune:

There are two shows within the stage version of "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," and by far the better one is Shirley Booth singing and carrying on as a somewhat faded good time girl. The other, a watery hymn of failure with musical tears. . . . a monotonous exposition of a mildly pathetic story, shaded off the

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- ¹⁷ Richard Watts, "Two on the Aisle: Brooklyn, Songs and Shirley Booth," Post Home News 20 April 1951.
- ¹⁸ Robert Coleman, "'Tree Grows in Brooklyn' is Top-Notch Musical," New York Mirror 20 April 20th 1951.
- ¹⁹ Thomas R. Dash, "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," Women's Wear Daily 20 April 1951.
- ²⁰ Brooks Atkinson, "First Night at the Theatre: 'Tree Grows in Brooklyn' Made into an Affable Musical Drama," New York Times 20 April 1951.
- ²¹ George Jean Nathan, "Quick Glances at Some Recent Exhibits," New York Journal-American 30 April 1951.

stage by the spreading foliage of Miss Booth's grand performance.²²

Part of the problem with the second act was a nightmarish dance which was supposed to reflect Johnny Nolan's delirium tremens. Guernsey called it "Halloween horrors in wildly athletic fashion." The musical had an undistinguished one-year run. According to Helen Strauss, part of the failure of the play was that it was rewritten too many times (251).

²² Otis L. Guernsey Jr., "The Theaters: A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," New York Herald-Tribune 20 April 1951.

Bob

After the musical "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" was launched in New York, Smith retreated from her intense activity on the stage to some long-overdue business in her personal life. She couldn't return to her house in Chapel Hill: Jones was still there. Instead she went to Nag's Head where, as a favor to Paul Green, she played an Indian maiden in his drama the "Lost Colony" at the Waterside Theatre on Roanoke Island. She also began writing to Finch again. Even though his letters to her were still acrimonious, even hostile, she kept up the correspondence and soon had told him about her plans for divorce and was offering him money to come to New York to see her. Smith also sent a letter to Jones, asking him to leave the Chapel Hill house and find an apartment for himself. She cited the doctor's diagnosis: "It is necessary to stay out of Chapel Hill on the advice of my doctor, Nicholson of Duke. As you know I was heading for a bad nervous breakdown for the last two years and I had myself hospitalized last spring."¹ In her letters to him, requesting a divorce, she cites that Jones was diagnosed as "psycho-neurotic": he was a hypochondriac, and he staged an

¹ Betty Smith, letter to Joe Jones, 3 June 1951.

illness early in the production of the Broadway show to get her back. But Smith was aware of this aspect of his character when she married him:

Your mother told me that your one great fault was in your believing you had all kinds of illnesses and symptoms. She assured me it was all imaginary. At the time of our marriage, Mr. Graves stated that he hoped I'd cure you of your insistence that you were sickly.²

She chides him for his self-absorption and his irresponsibility. She also advises him to "start a life with the idea that you are young and healthy and that there isn't anything you can't do."³ Like any other couple not getting along, Smith found Jones' weaknesses and thrust in the knife. Max Steele remembers an anecdote Smith often told: "You know, Joe was a great bird-watcher. All he really cared about was birds. [Smith would say] I suppose he might have liked me alright if I had feathers and laid eggs."⁴ There is an anecdote that Smith once lit a fire in the chimney to smoke out a nest of baby birds; later Bob Finch removed all Joe's bird boxes.⁵

² Betty Smith, letter to Joe Jones, 3 June 1951.

³ Betty Smith, letter to Joe Jones, 3 June 1951.

⁴ Max Steele, personal interview, 24 May 1991.

⁵ Transcript of reminiscences of friends, Paul Green, Walter Spearman, Rhoda Wynn, John and Darice Parker, and Sam and Emily Selden, 7 July 1974, from the Betty Smith Papers in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

Strangely, what Smith evidently wanted was a relationship with a man sicker than Jones, and one who was incurable. Over the years of his isolation in Missoula, Montana, Finch had begun to drink more and more heavily and had developed pneumonia as well. At the time Smith was writing to him, he was so dissipated that he had nearly given up on life. His letters were full of morose self-pity, accusations against Smith that she was not helping him enough, and flat-out statements that he was drunk and out of control. He finally agreed to take money from Smith so that he could take a plane out of Missoula, making the condition: "don't give me any problems, because I can not be expected for one moment to cope with them, or do anything but be wrecked by them. If you want to help, do so, but don't tie me into any more knots."⁶ Smith sent him money, and within a week Finch had spent it, and wrote to Smith:

You are, no doubt, furiously angry with me, and I don't blame you. On my side, let it only be said that I have had all the unhappiness, misery, tragedy and poverty that I can stand, and that I am, just as quickly as I can accomplish it, drinking myself to death. I will not last more than a year or two at this rate, I am plastered as I write this. The thought of our getting together again forced me to return again to the days when I had some choice--and I have gone to pieces worse than before. It is no good, it never will be any good, it never could be any good. I wanted what I wanted,

⁶ Bob Finch, letter to Betty Smith, 12 June 1951.

years ago, you knew better, you forced your own way, and nothing ever in this world, for me, could make it right again. It is gone, it will never be again--you never ever in your lifetime wanted to follow me, but only to drag me along on your own path. I never wanted to go, I still don't want to go--and so we are ruined, and nothing can ever be done about it.⁷

By the next month, he was still saying pretty much the same thing: "Things are too hard to face, so I take the easy, liquid solution"; he says, "goodby, don't feel too bitterly toward me, thank you," and "I never imagined life could be so empty."⁸

Smith loved Finch as Francie had loved Johnny Nolan: it was the draw of the artistic, handsome, reclusive alcoholic, just like her father. She was obsessed: she wanted to save him from his own self-destruction, or if not save him, at least live with him, despite all of his faults, and make his final days happy. Smith wanted to resurrect Bob Finch--she was still trying to come to terms with the death of her father. In one of the few letters that Finch saved, Smith wrote:

If I were living with you, each night before going to bed I'd ask you to write me a letter. I'd ask that the first one be about the first thing you remember in your life and to describe it and tell your feelings about it. The next day I'd have the letter typed in correct

⁷ Bob Finch, letter to Betty Smith, 28 June 1951.

⁸ Bob Finch, letter to Betty Smith, 30 July 1951.

form. And then the next night I'd ask you to write me more--then what happened. And soon there would be a book and it might be better than "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn."⁹

She wanted to give him her own life. In that letter, she went on to tell him that she could not get a divorce in North Carolina, that she had to go to Reno, and that no matter what he does, no matter how he tries to hurt her, she would always understand and love him.

Smith sent him more money, but Finch was out of control. He went to visit some friends and, in his own words, "When I was in Seattle staying with the Savages, I would go down the block, say, to buy a paper, and show up again anywhere from a day to a couple of days later."¹⁰ Eventually Smith managed to meet him in Reno, where she had gone to get a divorce. They fell in love all over again. In the letter that he sent to her following this meeting, Finch wrote that it was a shame that she didn't end her marriage to Jones sooner because he'd never loved anyone but her:

How tragic it was that all those years ago in Chapel Hill we didn't just say to each other that it was forever, and look out for each other from then on. That was really genuinely tragic. Two stupid people.

⁹ Betty Smith, letter to Bob Finch, date unreadable.

¹⁰ Bob Finch, letter to Betty Smith, 21 Sept. 1951.

My dear Betty, my own dear Betty, whenever you feel uncertain, just you remember that no one in all the world could have loved you more than I--how wildly I fell in love with you I will never forget.¹¹

This time he planned to meet her, and he wouldn't get lost on the way.

Smith divorced Jones, and Finch met her in Chapel Hill. From then on, Smith's correspondence tapers off considerably. She entered a private world with the man she loved, despite his faults. She took care of him. They went fishing and played bingo at Nag's Head in the summers and lived in the dream house during the winters, sometimes taking trips to see Smith's daughters. Smith's family was around her as well: Mary, (who had just given birth to "Bonnie Mary"), Walter, and their children, Candy and Johnny; Nancy visited for a month, and Smith found herself busy.¹² Smith avoided any contact with Harper & Brothers. She needed a rest just as much as Finch did.

But life with a confirmed alcoholic was not easy. Soon after they were reunited, in August of 1952, she and Bob had a car accident while Bob was driving. Smith hand-wrote a letter to Jack Fischer describing the accident:

It was a bad accident. The Negro driver who hit us was given six months on the road. He had no lights, no brakes, no driver's license, no insurance and he was

¹¹ Bob Finch, letter to Betty Smith, 12 Nov. 1951.

¹² Betty Smith, letter to John Fischer, 10 July 1952.

drunk. We were on our side but couldn't get off the road as there was a 25 ft drop. The injuries were painful and slow-healing. Have permanent scars on my face and will have on legs after they heal. Have been in this pretty, little country hospital [60 miles from Chapel Hill] for one month, and half a week. Will go home to wait until my legs heal because I am getting so depressed. Fingers broken on right hand and will be in splints another month. Makes it very hard to write. Can't use typewriter at all. My car is a total wreck and is being sold for junk. -- Incidentally this driver, where we were about to pass each other, suddenly swerved over and came at us on our side. I had the glove compartment opened, examining a road map by the little light. The open door of the compartment was driven like a wedge into my legs to the bone. My head went through the windshield. Bob Finch who was driving has a deep scar on face and a broken knee cap. He will wear a cast another month and then may have to be operated upon.¹³

Smith experienced so many problems from this accident that it is mentioned in her letters for years to come. One publishing professional recalls being at a cocktail party with Smith years later, and she was still complaining that she had been in a car accident and that there was still glass coming out of her body.¹⁴ Her fingers healed during the writing of Maggie-Now, but her legs never healed

¹³ Betty Smith, letter to John Fischer, 17 Sept. 1952.

¹⁴ Genivive Young, phone interview, 17 Sept. 1992.

completely and continued to give her a great deal of pain.

Bob had to leave the hospital earlier than Smith because he was finally having his play, "Whistler's Grandmother,"¹⁵ produced on Broadway: his dream, too, was coming true. Directly after the accident he went up to New York to begin the production. But when the play opened in December of 1952, it was marred by the appearance of his wife, Marjorie Estelle. He had been trying to get a divorce from her, but she had been resisting his efforts. Seeking revenge, she borrowed money to follow him to New York and harass him there. She wrote him letters, addressed to the theatre, from her hotel, offering him a divorce in one sentence, taking away the offer in the next.¹⁶ Finch had been separated from her for most of the time during the previous two years, and she knew that he was not returning to her. He had written to her that if her ever returned to her "I will go back to being a middle-aged drunkard, living on the handouts of my friends until I eventually land in jail."¹⁷ When his play was about to go on, she had written to him that she had anemia related to a monthly loss of

¹⁵ Smith, the compulsive archivist of her life, did not document the content, success or failure of Finch's play.

¹⁶ Marjorie Estelle Finch, letter to Bob Finch, 17 Nov. 1952, retyped on Betty Smith's typewriter in order to present the evidence legibly to a lawyer.

¹⁷ Bob Finch, letter to Marjorie Estelle Finch, undated 1952.

blood and that she might have cancer and that, nevertheless, she was coming to New York to visit him. Both were vituperative, and both blamed their illnesses on the other. But Marjorie was certifiably crazy. She let her vindictive fantasies go wild when she wrote: "The two of you brother and sister having illicit relations in diverse parts of Los Angeles. How jolly. . . . Of course your dear B.S. will welcome this bawdy publicity. But I can hurt her through her money bags."¹⁸

Marjorie attended the opening night of Finch's Broadway play, but she was disappointed not to see Smith: Mary and Walter were there in Smith's seat instead. Since Finch did not respond to her notes and calls, she lay in wait for him at the stage door, but she missed him by a few moments. Her goal, as stated in her letters, was only to see him one more time: "I'd give the rest of my life for a happy hour with you again."¹⁹ She also wanted money as a divorce settlement, but she was not sure of the amount. In March, she had asked for as much as \$25,000²⁰ but once in New York she named the amount she had borrowed to get to New York,

¹⁸ Marjorie Estelle Finch, letter to Bob Finch, 20 March 1952.

¹⁹ Marjorie Estelle Finch, letter to Bob Finch, 19 Dec. 1952.

²⁰ Marjorie Estelle Finch, letter to Bob Finch, 20 March 1952.

\$600.²¹ Her real motive was probably to embarrass Finch and cause trouble in his relationship with Smith.

As a consequence, Smith and Finch had been fighting by letter and phone. Finch wrote to Smith:

My goodness, how you upset me over the phone. If there are always to be these wild misunderstandings, bringing on terrible quarrels, I just don't know. Due to the general insecurity we have had a very bad effect on each other for a long time. I am sorry about not communicating--I just thought it was understood I would handle things, as per our phone conversation, and that you'd be better off to be left out of it. I can't see that was as foolish and cruel as you make it out to be.²²

The next day he sent her a loving letter apologizing for worrying her. Eventually the vindictive Marjorie went back to Missoula and Finch managed to get a divorce.

After 1952, Smith's life with Finch settled into a routine, and she wrote few letters. Even a letter from her daughter Nancy, who was expecting her first child in November, went unanswered. In November, however, Smith and Finch drove from Chapel Hill to Denver to be with Nancy when she had her baby, and the next year she helped her daughter Mary open a gift shop in Chapel Hill. The following year Nancy visited her with her two children, but it wasn't until

²¹ Marjorie Estelle Finch, letter to Bob Finch, 19 Dec. 1952.

²² Bob Finch, letter to Betty Smith, 17 Oct. 1952.

1956 that Smith had recovered enough from the accident to begin writing again, and then she got back in contact with Frank MacGregor, Jack Fischer, and Helen Strauss. In 1957 Mary, who had by now managed to divorce Walter Carroll, remarried and moved to Washington, which left Smith a little depressed, but in that year she also realized a long dream-- she married Bob Finch.

Ashes in the Wind

Smith's third novel was published ten years after her second. During the long silence she divorced the "Frankie" figure, Joe Jones, and she married Bob Finch, who became a central character in Maggie-Now. During this time she was largely out of contact with her publishers, Harper & Brothers. John Fischer corresponded with Smith about routine matters associated with A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, such as the 25-cent reprint published in 1951, the Literary Guild's "25th Anniversary" limited edition, the sale of the Yugoslavian and Burmese rights, and a radio broadcast made to sparsely settled areas of Australia. In Fischer's letters to Smith, he is continually asking about her, but she answers through letters to his wife Betty, to whom she sent tickets to her Broadway show. By now Smith didn't have to talk to Fischer--Helen Strauss, the head and creator of the literature division at the William Morris Agency, was her agent and did negotiating on her behalf.¹

Frank MacGregor at Harper & Brothers knew that Smith was dissatisfied with her agent, Frances Pindyck at Leland

¹ Strauss orchestrated the new publications, including a hardcover edition of the Broadway script.

Hayward, and suggested to Smith that she consider Strauss.

James West writes:

Most American publishers eventually realized that literary agents could be useful--that they could take over many time-consuming duties for the editor. Agents came to function more and more as editors had once functioned. They answered mail, secured books and research materials, performed errands, renewed copyrights, and assisted authors with their tax returns. Indeed the functions of the editor and the agent eventually became almost identical. (99)

Thus, Betty Smith's life as a writer illustrated the gradual shift in the American literary marketplace from direct author-editor relations to author-agent-editor relations.

Helen Strauss was probably the most powerful literary agent during her time. She had secured a working commitment from Harper & Brothers, and they referred all their writers to her.² Strauss recalls her first meeting with Betty Smith in her autobiography A Talent for Luck:

We met for dinner at the Savoy-Plaza, and as we were seated she looked me over critically and announced, testily, "You know, I can't stand women." Then, over the final cup of coffee, she added, "Well, you're not like the rest of them. I like you. I can't stand women, but I like you." We became close friends and I represented her until I departed the business. (250)

² She recalled, in her memoirs, "I enjoyed an enviable personal and professional relationship with the publishing house of Harper, first through Frank MacGregor, then Cass Canfield, who was to become chairman of the board" (182).

Agreeing to let Strauss represent her interests was probably one of the wisest moves that Smith ever made: Strauss secured her financial future and encouraged her to work in her own manner for the rest of her life. Strauss took over the business end: she was responsible "to recycle a client's writings, to make them yield income repeatedly over a period of years through various forms of republication, adaptation, and performance" (West 102). Strauss understood the ins and outs of every aspect of the mass media, and how to maximize the profits from each venture. Maggie-Now was Smith's first book contract mediated by Strauss, and Smith was overjoyed. She wrote to Strauss:

In "Tree" contract, wherever print said 10% to publisher, 90% to author, it was crossed out the figures 50-50 inserted. Also I was so very pleased when I found you had got me all of the monies that might come from foreign publications. I had always thought the publisher automatically got half.³

Smith concluded: "The commission the agency gets is too small payment for what you got for me. I thank you sincerely, Helen."⁴ If Smith lost money that she could have made on A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, it is likely that she made some of it back in subsequent years by having Helen Strauss

³ Betty Smith, letter to Helen Strauss, 17 Oct. 1956.

⁴ Betty Smith, letter to Helen Strauss, 17 Oct. 1956.

as her agent.

But Smith was having difficulty getting started again. Finally Fischer wrote to Smith "It's been such a long time since we've heard from you that I couldn't help worrying a little about you."⁵ Smith replied:

I should have answered your letter long ago. But in the last few months I've developed a sort of dread of writing anything. I sit at the typewriter to write and I begin to feel ill. I think each day of the letters I should answer and it disturbs my day. Yet I cannot make myself sit down to type.⁶

Smith was afraid to start. She was probably afraid that her next novel would fail like her last. According to an interview, Betty Smith did not plan the writing of Maggie-Now. After her auto accident in 1952 she lost partial use of her fingers on her right hand, and she started typing again, as therapy for her hands. She told Newsweek: "Instead of just writing my name endlessly . . . I began writing dialogue. Later I sent some of this first dialogue to an agent. I was stunned when he suggested I ask for a \$10,000 advance."⁷ Then Smith kept typing away.

Although Fischer was made editor of Harper's Magazine in 1953, he continued as Smith's editor. When she sent him

⁵ John Fischer, letter to Betty Smith, 4 Jan. 1952.

⁶ Betty Smith, letter to John Fischer, 10 July 1952.

⁷ Newsweek 24 Feb. 1958.

some pages of her newly developing novel, he sensed a problem. He wrote to her:

I assume that as the story develops it will take on a somewhat more cheerful tone--as in the case of the two earlier books--and I hope that in the end it will leave the reader with a warm and hopeful feeling. You will remember, perhaps, that the only major criticism we got on TOMORROW WILL BE BETTER concerned the somewhat gloomy key in which it ended.⁸

This was exactly the wrong tack to take with Betty Smith, who had suffered more from her in-house criticism of Tomorrow Will Be Better than from all the reviews. For the next two years Smith did not write to Fischer at all.

By 1956, Smith was back on track, however. Through Strauss she sent the message to Frank MacGregor that she no longer wanted Fischer as her editor. MacGregor gave her Evan Thomas as an editor, a young man who came from a family of publishers. Smith accepted the change. She was mainly worried about the reception of her manuscript, one-third of which had been written. She wrote to MacGregor: "I'll be waiting with great intensity to learn what you think of it."⁹ In September she sent the manuscript to Harper & Brothers through Strauss, and immediately MacGregor telegraphed her, insincerely, "CONGRATULATIONS. YOU

⁸ John Fischer, letter to Betty Smith, 28 Jan. 1953.

⁹ Betty Smith, letter to Frank MacGregor, 17 July 1956.

COULDN'T BE HAPPIER THAN WE ARE. LOTS OF LOVE."¹⁰ But by now Smith was no longer the naive novelist who implicitly trusted her publisher--she was hiding out at Nag's Head, and the telegram didn't find her.

Harper & Brothers quickly focused their best editorial efforts on their bestselling novelist: Maggie-Now became a collaborative effort. Elizabeth Lawrence read book in secret and made a thorough critique which was subsequently used by Evan Thomas to guide Betty Smith. The main point of Lawrence's extensive critique was: "It might save the author revision trouble if she were reminded now to hew to her best and most original characters, let all the action spring from and return to them."¹¹ Thomas used the text Lawrence had written to send a long letter to Smith regarding changes she should make, and before he sent it he showed it to Lawrence with a note: "Is this okay? I have included everything in your notes."¹² Lawrence disagreed with Thomas only on one point--Thomas thought that Maggie's younger bother Denny should be a main character and her father Patrick should be downplayed, and Lawrence thought the opposite: "[Patrick's]

¹⁰ Frank MacGregor, telegram to Betty Smith, 26 Sept 1956.

¹¹ Elizabeth Lawrence, interoffice memo to Evan Thomas, Sept. 1956.

¹² Evan Thomas, note to Elizabeth Lawrence, 28 Sept. 1956.

changing relationship to Maggie-Now is interesting."¹³ Lawrence also wrote: "There's time. Just encourage her to go more deeply into the people she has rather than depend on new ones for motion and variety." Thomas's letter was sent to the Betty Smith operations team, Lawrence, MacGregor, and Strauss.

Smith ignored all this guidance and criticism: she had to make the book come out in her own way, and they couldn't help her know what she wanted to do. One thing that did help Smith was a visit, in January of 1957, from an old Harper & Brothers associate, Ramona Herdman, who had done the public relations for A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. Now Herdman was partially retired and on her way to Florida, but she and Smith sat and read and discussed the novel. It was at this point that Smith decided to make Maggie childless, thereby deciding the fate of that character: Maggie was doomed to the same limited, pathetic routine that had been Margy's lot in Tomorrow Will Be Better. This is a central aspect of Maggie-Now's message, and it is significant that Smith came to the decision on her own with the support of a good friend.

Smith's relationship with Evan Thomas was ambivalent. When she sent him the first revised part of the manuscript, she asked him not to criticize it because she would never

¹³ Elizabeth Lawrence, handwritten answer on note from Evan Thomas, 28 Sept. 1956.

finish the novel.¹⁴ When Thomas received the manuscript, he sent it straight to Lawrence, and she wrote an enthusiastic one-page analysis:

Congratulations to BS. She has brought off more than she promised in the earlier version, and it is very good indeed. If someone wants to predict that this will be a better book than *The Tree*, I wouldn't quibble, though it doesn't reach comparable heights of hilarity. I see no reason why the public shouldn't love it. BS is writing this with her intuitions rather than her mind, and it's all to the good.¹⁵

Lawrence was excited about the possibilities of Maggie being an example of a "giver" rather than a "taker," a paragon of womanly virtue: she ends by saying "The implication being that Maggie, as one of the strong ones of the world, is also one of the fortunate."¹⁶ This must have been an ideological image popular at the time, because it struck them as being reasonable in 1957; today such a Maggie seems unreal.

After receiving the first section of the novel, Thomas flew down to Chapel Hill to discuss it with Smith. After meeting with him, Smith lapsed back into reclusion. A month later Thomas wrote a memo to MacGregor: "Have you had any word lately from Betty Smith? If we don't hear something

¹⁴ April 8th, Smith sends Evan manuscript,

¹⁵ Elizabeth Lawrence, memo to Evan Thomas, 11 April 1957.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Lawrence, memo to Evan Thomas, 11 April 1957.

from her pretty soon, shouldn't one of us call her or something?"¹⁷ He called her but Smith did not pick up the phone. Smith was out at Nag's Head with Bob Finch. Two months later Thomas telegraphed her: "I would not be bothering you except that I want to know that you are okay."¹⁸ Smith's letter crossed the telegram to Thomas, in which she said she had 350 pages done and would revise no more. She explained: "I didn't call back because I surmised the call was from Harper's asking where is the manuscript, and since I didn't have it entirely finished, I didn't want to explain, etc. etc."¹⁹ It was at this point that she wrote: "I have what I think is a fine ending."²⁰

The chase was on: Harper & Brothers started pursuing Smith, trying to get the novel published as soon as possible; Smith used all the avoidance tactics that she knew. When they called, she didn't answer the phone. When she didn't answer the phone, they sent telegrams. When she didn't let them know where she was, the telegrams had to chase back and forth between Chapel Hill and Nag's Head. Thomas sent a telegram equivocating: "THIS RUSH OF PHONES,

¹⁷ Evan Thomas, memo to Frank MacGregor, 31 May 1957.

¹⁸ Evan Thomas, telegram to Betty Smith, 22 July 1957.

¹⁹ Betty Smith, letter to Evan Thomas, 22 July 1957.

²⁰ Betty Smith, letter to Evan Thomas, 22 July 1957.

TELEGRAMS AND LETTERS IS NOT FOR THE SAKE OF TIME PRESSURE (WE WILL PUBLISH JUST AS HAPPILY NEXT YEAR AS THIS) BUT TO MAKE SURE YOU KNOW MAC'S HELEN'S AND MY WILLINGNESS TO BE OF ALL POSSIBLE HELP."²¹ Smith sent one back "SORRY. MANY COMPLICATIONS WITH ME."²² She sent him more pages, but declined to let him know where she was living.

Then Thomas upped the ante: he telegraphed to say that the Literary Guild would consider making the novel a book club selection if they could see the rest of the manuscript or a summary of the manuscript right away, no matter what shape it was in. He apologized "THIS IS A DREADFUL WAY TO TREAT A WRITER BUT YOU KNOW HOW IT IS."²³ Smith telegraphed back, promising to have the material by Monday. However, Smith kept working away at her own pace. A week later Thomas telegraphed with specific suggestions for the ending, offering her "If we can complete in two weeks book will be March selection."²⁴ Smith never did send her manuscript or a summary, but the Literary Guild made it their monthly selection anyway.

²¹ Evan Thomas, telegram to Betty Smith, 4 Sept. 1957.

²² Betty Smith, telegram to Evan Thomas, 5 Sept. 1957.

²³ Evan Thomas, telegram to Betty Smith, 12 Sept. 1957.

²⁴ Evan Thomas, telegram to Betty Smith, 19 Sept. 1957.

By October of 1957, Maggie-Now was finally finished. Although her letters and telegrams were friendly, Smith was still not speaking directly with Harper & Brothers: she mailed the completed manuscript, 786 pages, directly to Helen Strauss, who then sent it to Thomas. The novel had been going directly from Smith's typewriter into the galleys. Thomas had held off sending Smith the proofs while she was still trying to complete the novel, only at her insistence. When Thomas finally had the completed novel in his hands, he began sending her the page proofs, and Margaret Hoyle joined the Betty Smith team to assess the accuracy of the chronology. Smith made what changes were necessary, and then, when she received the last batch of pages, discovered that Thomas had done some cutting and revising of his own. Smith telegraphed Frank MacGregor directly:

42 PAGES WERE DELETED HERE AND THERE WITHOUT MY KNOWLEDGE OR CONSENT PERIOD SUBSTITUTION FOR THE 42 PAGES ARE TRANSITIONS WRITTEN BY SOMEONE ELSE PERIOD TRANSITIONS ARE WRITTEN IN VARIANCE WITH MY STYLE AND MOOD AND FEELING PERIOD EUGENE SAXTON WOULD NOT HAVE PERMITTED THIS PERIOD FOR 700 PAGES IT IS MY BOOK PERIOD FOR THE LAST 60 PAGES IT IS A COLLABORATION PERIOD I DO NOT OBJECT TO MATERIAL BEING SHORTENED PERIOD I OBJECT TO SOMEONE COLLABORATING ON MY BOOK PERIOD I OBJECT TO ARBITRARY MANNER IN WHICH THIS WAS DONE PERIOD I WILL SPEAK TO NO ONE ON THE PHONE EXCEPT

HELEN²⁵

Thomas had written a letter to Smith mentioning what he had done: "What cutting I did was necessitated by a feeling on the part of myself and various other editors that the book was dragging in the end--only in the sense that the author could not seem to let go of her people."²⁶ In a later telegram Thomas admitted "I really dropped that ball."²⁷

Harper & Brothers had reason to rush the writing of Maggie-Now. The Literary Guild had a March slot available, and the advance sale was 44,000 copies. Maggie-Now was published in February of 1958, and Smith did a shortened version of her usual publication rounds because Finch was home sick in Chapel Hill. She was still irritated by Harper & Brothers and took them to task, through Strauss, for not doing enough publicity on the novel. In April she wrote to Helen a list of complaints that Helen dutifully forwarded to MacGregor. Smith wrote: "Harper's seems to have changed. Now the format seems to be a lot of books gotten out and concentrating on each new one for a couple of weeks until the next book comes along."²⁸ Thomas sent back a specific

²⁵ Betty Smith, telegram to Frank MacGregor, 26 Nov. 1957.

²⁶ Evan Thomas, letter to Betty Smith, 13 Nov. 1957.

²⁷ Evan Thomas, telegram to Betty Smith, 2 Dec. 1957.

²⁸ Helen Strauss, letter to Frank MacGregor, 21 April 1958.

list of advertizing costs, saying that they overspent their appropriation by \$2,000. Gene Young, Evan Thomas's secretary, remembers that Smith was difficult to work with, that she had a sense of injustice and felt that people weren't fair to her. Consequently "Harpers was scared of her."²⁹ Smith's relationship with her publisher was never again the close and paternal friendship she had with Eugene Saxton and his successor, Elizabeth Lawrence.

Like Tomorrow Will Be Better, Maggie-Now features a passive heroine, and like Tomorrow Will Be Better, it is a novel with an agenda. However, the agenda in Tomorrow Will Be Better was one of revenge (against Joe Jones and all mothers-in-law), and that of Maggie-Now is revenge against women and the resurrection of her dead father. Smith's description of the novel for the Literary Guild circular Wings reveals a fundamental problem with the novel: she quotes the first words, which are about Maggie's father, and then the last words, which are also about Maggie's father; why, then, is the novel titled Maggie-Now? Like Tomorrow Will Be Better, Maggie-Now was a novel with a split theme, two opposing currents. The Wings circular calls Maggie-Now a simple story of "an older girl, out-going and exuberant," but to the contemporary reader, Maggie is a lacuna, the empty center about which the events of other people's lives

²⁹ Gene Young, phone interview, 17 Sept. 1992.

evolve.³⁰ Maggie is the stereotype of a "good woman" who has few desires and gets none of them fulfilled. It is her father, Patrick Dennis Moore, who is the dynamic center of the novel, and who has all the fun.

Maggie-Now begins and ends with Patsy Moore. He is a self-centered mamma's boy, the "last of a brood of thirteen." Patsy's mother has "a strong mother-hold on her son," (3), and rather than see him marry his sweetheart, she sends him to America. Patsy is lucky enough to be given a job with a Brooklyn politician; he marries the boss's daughter, Mary, securing his future as a street sweeper and living in a two-family house in Williamsburg. Patsy is thoroughly selfish. His own personal refrain "I'll bury youse all!" resounds throughout the book and is a key to its understanding. Patsy is obnoxious, paranoid, always picking fights with people, but people like him anyway, he leads a full life, and he outlives most of the characters. Their only child is named Maggie after Patsy's first love.

At first, Maggie is nameless: "For the first year of its life, the baby was called and referred to as 'Baby'" (85). As she grows, she becomes sweet and compliant and "not the brightest one in the class" (90). One of the nuns

³⁰ The first Maggie introduced is a Maggie Rose, who Patrick is courting in Ireland. This diminishes the "heroine" Maggie further, since she is not even the original Maggie, but the second of that name.

in the Catholic school she attends remarks: "She's a giver . . . She'll have a busy life, then . . . There are ten takers for one giver" (91). Maggie is an example of complete self-abnegation.

Like her daughter Maggie, Mary has no wishes and no personality: both are sacrificial lambs. When Maggie is sixteen Mary gets pregnant again even though she had been warned that it could kill her. She goes to the neighborhood doctor, and he knows that she should have an abortion, but he is afraid. He justifies his decision thus:

Back in 400 B.C., gentlemen, a doctor named Hippocrates said: "Natural forces within us are the true healers of disease." That was right in 400 B.C., and it's just as right in 1910 A.D. We are agreed, I believe, that abortion is against ethics and religion. It is a sin against life--against having the chance for a life to be born. That is all, gentlemen. (134)

The doctor does not inform Mary of her condition and lets Mary continue in labor for three days, until the hospital sends in another doctor as a consultant: if Mary continues the labor, the child is sure to be stillborn, and Mary might live; but if they intervened, the child would live and Mary would die. "So, according to the dictates of the religion, they saved the baby and let the mother die" (139). Thus Maggie-Now's brother Denny is born, and Maggie becomes the mother of own her mother's child.

Maggie-Now becomes her father's housekeeper and her brother's mother, a position that isolates her from other young women and men her age: people in the community assumed that Denny was her child and that she was unmarried. On one of her rare forays into the outside world, Maggie meets Claude Bassett, a travelling salesman peddling a course in salesmanship. Maggie decided to attend, because "(she didn't fool herself at all), she wanted to see more of Claude Bassett" (172). Claude resembles Bob Finch, "tall and good-looking but a little too thin," a chain-smoker with a cultivated accent (170). When he walks her home the very first night, they fall in love. Against her father's wishes Maggie dates Claude and they discuss marriage. Then, suddenly, Claude disappears.

At a church social Maggie meets Son Pheid, the son of Pheid, the plumber. He is a cheerful, kind young man who takes to Maggie right away. In Claude's absence, Son dates Maggie, and when he enlists in the army, he writes long, friendly letters, in one of which he asks her to marry him. Maggie thinks:

I want children, lots of them, and a home for them. Sonny would be a good father, a good provider, a good husband, like Uncle Timmy was. Of course, he wouldn't sit around and talk. He's have his bowling nights and his lodge meeting and one night a week to play cards with the boys and maybe fishing at Canarsie like other men do. I'd be lonesome the first year, then I'd have the children and my life would be full. I like him. I

respect him. I'm proud that everyone thinks so well of him. And that must add up to love--if not now, someday. At least he wants me. It's nice to be wanted. And I want a husband. I want children. I don't want to wait. (261)

But Maggie is doomed: Claude sends her a postcard saying simply "Wait for me. I'm coming back." That's enough for her: Maggie writes to Sonny and tells him no. Here again, she denies herself exactly what she wants--a husband and children--and does exactly what she doesn't want--wait.

Maggie gets a job as a ticket seller in a movie theater and waits. In the darkness of early winter, Claude returns, converts to Catholicism, and they are married. Then Claude disappears again. When he first does this Maggie "went about her housework with violent tremblings in her stomach. 'If I was going to have a baby now,' she thought, 'I'd lose it'" (296). Claude will not tell Maggie when or where he is going--"Claude would be restless and open the window and lean out and feel the wind on his face and close his eyes as though in ecstasy and listen as though he heard a faraway and well-beloved voice calling him" (329)--and he disappears with the spring wind, every year. Maggie-Now wordlessly accepts the situation.

Maggie supports the family by renting her house to tenants and keeping up with the repairs. As the story continues, more and more often Claude asks her for money. This is just like Smith's relationship with Finch. When

Claude disappears, it is like the description that Finch wrote about the beginnings of his alcoholic binges, in almost the same words--"He kissed her and went out for cigarettes and the paper as he did every morning. But on this morning, he did not come back" (317). Patsy returns home whenever Claude leaves and leaves when Claude comes back in early winter: they replace one another. Maggie is desperate for children, and since Claude cannot give them to her, she tries to adopt. However, since Claude is not financially stable, the priest in charge of adoptions will only allow her children in foster care; thus begins another cycle of love and separation.

There are many sub-plots. For example, Denny is a spoiled brat who nearly turns into a hoodlum before he realizes his life's ambition to be a butcher; then he marries a nice girl and settles down. Harper & Brothers and the Literary Guild made Smith remove a line about his fondling a dead pig.³¹ During all this Patsy remains his irascible, self-centered, and lucky self. When he is not comfortably living with Maggie, he moves into Mrs. O'Crawley's boarding house with his friend, Mick Mack. Eventually he decides to marry the widow; "He would have to figure out the best way to *tell* her. It never occurred to him to *ask* her" (415).

³¹ Evan Thomas, letter to Betty Smith, 19 Sept. 1957. Smith's brother ran a steak house.

Then one year Claude came home late. "He went away too far this year . . . Where it was too cold. And he must have had a hard time getting back" (417). He finally explains that he was an orphan, put through school by a secret benefactor. When he was old enough he began searching through phone books, libraries, and office buildings for clues about his parents. What starts out as a search becomes an obsession, and he becomes a wanderer. Claude announces that he's never going away again, and he becomes very ill. The children are taken away from Maggie because of risk of infection. When Patsy comes to see him for the last time, he says, "I said I would. And I will. In fact, I'll bury youse all!" Then Claude dies, and Maggie's last wish is that he be buried in a Catholic cemetery. However, Patsy and his friend Mick Mack do what Claude has asked them to do: they bury him at sea. They bring his ashes to the top of the Statue of Liberty:

[Patsy] removed the cover from the urn. Before he could scatter the ashes, the wind scooped most of them out of the urn. Pat had an instant of terror. The gulls, the screams, the wind and the infinity of sky and sea, and he was such a tiny dot.

There is things I don't know, he thought, and God forgive me all me sins.

Mick Mack was screaming. "Say something!" he screamed. "For the love of God say something! Don't let him go without a word! Say something!"

"What?" hollered Pat.

"Good-by! Good-by!" shouted Mick Mack.

"I'll bury youse all!" shouted Patrick Dennis Moore.
(437)

Maggie's father, her footloose husband, and her spoiled brother live apparently full, happy lives: Patsy, self-centered and mean, is rewarded with a faithful friend and a rich widow to marry; Claude has the best of both worlds, home and wandering; Denny is spoiled, but nevertheless is rewarded by finding both a woman and job that he loves; and Maggie takes care of them all. Throughout the novel the men are free: it is only the women who are trapped in desiccated lives of numbing routine. Although she is centered in the title, Maggie is a marginal character in the book, a shadow in her own house: her life is a cycle of separation, pain, and unrewarded labor.

To a certain extent, Smith was working within the generic expectations of her time. As Joanne Frye writes:

women, if appropriately female--that is, relational, expressive, passive--will not be competent and self-defined. From this gender stereotype spring the traditional character traits and plot choices for female characters; in service of this gender stereotype women in novels are placed in the midst of domestic social reality and bounded by a novelistic coherence of erotic and familial concerns. This same stereotype also implicates women outside novels in the limitation of femininity as it yields a possible "motive to avoid success" or at least undermines their confidence "on achievement-related issues." This stereotype even governs the possibilities for how women are perceived

by others and how they perceive themselves. (198)

This is the set of cultural expectations within which Smith was working. This explains why John Beecroft of the Literary Guild thought Maggie-Now was going to be as popular as A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.³² Since the cultural paradigm of femininity and Smith's version of it in her own life were at such odds, Maggie-Now is a strange, hollow book, unaware of its own intentions.

Smith wrote Maggie-Now after her car accident with Finch, while married to him, and while knowing that he would probably die soon. It is possible that Finch was still disappearing on binges, and that would explain the strange plot of Claude's comings and goings. Smith was again weaving a myth out of her life, partly a performance piece. As Frye writes:

People interpret and even choose their courses of action according to their anticipated ends: projected "conclusions" such as graduation, marriage, separations, departures, births, and deaths. All such demarcating events, in anticipation, shape the human choices prior to them and, in retrospect, shape the understanding of subsequent human experiences. (20)

Smith was shaping her literature concurrently with shaping her own life, and part of what she wanted to do was resurrect her father and make his stand-in, Patsy, live forever. She was willing to sacrifice herself (Maggie) and

³² Evan Thomas, letter to Betty Smith, 19 Sept. 1957.

even her children (Maggie's childlessness) to achieve this end. It's no mystery that the novel begins and ends with Patsy; Maggie has all of her deepest desires filled in him.

In 1958, when Maggie-Now was published to great fanfare, Smith did the publication rounds alone. Bob was sick and couldn't accompany her. In February of the following year he died of a heart attack at the head of the stairs in her home in Chapel Hill.³³ Rhoda Wynn, Paul Green's secretary, remembers:

he was getting up from his typewriter to walk across the room and get some paper and he dropped dead from a heart-attack. She was terribly, terribly upset about that. I attended that funeral. She was just absolutely hysterical. She had felt that they lost so much of their lives together that they might have had.³⁴

Smith had a premonition of Finch's death. In Maggie-Now, Maggie's husband Claude, the Finch-like character, dies at the end of the novel. Of course, it is not unlikely that a woman living with an asthmatic alcoholic would foresee his death. Finch was very, very sick for most of the latter part of his life. And some of Smith's friends and associates were glad that he was gone:

Will you forgive me if I say something brutal? We are old friends, Betty, and I claim the privilege. While

³³ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview, 10/11 May 1991.

³⁴ Rhoda Wynn, personal interview, 22 May 1991.

Bob's death was a terrible emotional shock to you, I feel that for the first time since I've known you you are now free of what amounted to enslavement to him. You were given the pure God-gift of those last happy years together so that your own frustrations were quietened, and now you can remember him for all the good things that were in him. Also, the emotional upheavals that you went through with him contributed, I am certain, to your stature as an understanding artist. But now that the old relationship is all in retrospect, I feel certain there is still another great book in you . . . a book of love hunger which should make you what you ought to be: one of the great writers of this country.³⁵

Smith probably did not welcome Niggli's direct assessment of her life, and her time with Finch must not have been easy. But she did go on to write another book which, although it may not be one of the great texts of the century, was good and true and loving, has given a great many people pleasure, and is still in print.

³⁵ Josefina Niggli, letter to Betty Smith, 19 Aug. 1959.

Full Circle

After Maggie-Now, Smith lapsed into another three-year period without publishing anything. Harper & Row must have given up on their bestselling author, because they no longer pursued her, and when she requested an advance, in 1961, for her next novel, they sent her \$1,000 as "an advance against all earnings derived from the sale of all your books published by them."¹ Smith was appalled. This meant that they did not think she was going to be able to write or sell another novel. And she was furious. She wrote to Helen: "I got to trembling terribly inside and I couldn't eat or sleep and took too many sleeping pills which made even more sick. He has made me feel that my writing was worthless."² Although Cass Canfield immediately sent her a brief note apologizing for the mistake, adding "We are quite willing to change this so that the money will be an advance against author's earnings on her new book,"³ Smith wrote to Helen that the check was unacceptable, and she put Helen in the

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- ¹ Harper & Row, voucher accompanying check, 30 Jan 1961.
- ² Betty Smith, letter to Helen Strauss, 14 Feb. 1961.
- ³ Cass Canfield, letter to Helen Strauss, 8 Feb. 1961.

awkward position of returning it. Strauss arranged for Canfield to issue a new check, but this was not enough. As Smith later wrote: "Cass' attitude on my request for that small advance on the new book was the last straw in a whole lot of minor humiliations";⁴ she wrote a letter to him terminating her relationship with Harper & Brothers:

All three of my novels published by Harper's were (1) Book Club Selections. (2) Best Sellers. (3) Dollar Book Reprints. (4) Paper Back Reprints. (5) Published Abroad. (Harper's still collects 50% of the foreign royalties on the first two books. Harper's also received \$25,000. from movie sale of "Tree.")

Considering this record, I assumed Harper's would be pleased to advance \$1,000. on my new book and would look forward to publishing it.

Your response to my request for this small advance, clearly indicated that Harper's no longer wishes to be my publisher.

A publishing house cannot exist without writers. A writer cannot exist financially without a publisher. But this does not mean that a writer is a stone mason who works at so much per hour.

A writer, aside from a retentive memory and a feeling for words, has all of the virtues and vices common to man. But he has something else not common to all men-- a wonderful intangible something that makes him

⁴ Betty Smith, letter to Helen Strauss, 11 April 1961.

selectively articulate in writing of things common to man.

Because of this wonderful intangible something, a writer, to use an old-fashioned phrase, should be held in esteem by his publisher. He should not be treated like a person in a pawnshop trying to get a loan on a tarnished ring.⁵

Harper & Row did not succeed in maintaining respect for the peculiarities of Smith's artistic temperament, but fortunately Helen Strauss was there.

Smith increasingly depended on Strauss to mediate her relationship with her publisher. Harper & Brothers was no longer a small, intimate publishing house, it was on its way to becoming a corporate conglomerate. Consequently, "many authors came to feel more loyalty toward their agents than toward their editors or publishers. The agent, one presumes, will always be there; the editor may be gone tomorrow" (West 100). Helen Strauss had a personal philosophy of agenting that made it possible for her to work with the authors like Betty Smith, guiding them through the necessary legal, financial, and emotional tangles. In her autobiography she describes the requisites of being a successful agent:

To begin with, one must have an appreciation of good writing and have a feeling for writers, who for the

⁵ Betty Smith, letter to Cass Canfield, 18 Feb. 1961.

most part are lonely, neurotic and usually insecure about their work. Sitting at a desk for days, months and sometimes years writing a book or play without any way of knowing what will happen to the completed manuscript can be very agonizing, especially if the writer is completely dependent on his writing for his livelihood. An agent must have unlimited patience and sympathy for the writer's problems. (51)

Helen understood Smith well enough to avoid her bad side. First she went to a great deal of trouble to get Cass Canfield to change the wording on the voucher,⁶ and when that did not satisfy Smith, she put her own professional relationship with Harper & Brothers on the line by backing her up in her search for a new publisher, agreeing with Smith that "they had acted very cheaply."⁷

Harper & Row then sent Evan Thomas, who had just been made Executive Vice President, down to Chapel Hill to smooth things over. Strauss mediated the reconciliation, and by July 11th, Smith was back in the stable, signing a contract in New York for her next novel. She explained her long-standing anger to Thomas in a letter:

Thank you for the new contract. The old one has been a festering sore to me for nineteen years. I've always felt that Harper's should not have taken advantage of

⁶ "I finally got everything straightened out with Cass Canfield and believe me that wasn't the easiest job in the world": Helen Strauss, letter to Betty Smith, 8 Feb. 1961.

⁷ Helen Strauss, letter to Betty Smith, 14 Feb. 1961.

my (then) humility and gratitude and inexperience to let me sign such a contract. That's why I got so angry when Cass tied up the small advance I requested with my fifty percent of monies coming from the TREE etc instead of on the new book. But now I am content. There is no longer large sums of money involved but I feel that a wrong had been made right.⁸

Shortly thereafter the fight was forgotten and Smith regained the voice with which she had written A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. By August of 1961, Niggli's prediction had come true: Smith was writing again. She wrote: "Right now, I am happily engaged in writing my fourth novel: Annie Brown by Betty Smith. I mean I'm happy because it's nearly four years since my last book was published and this novel is 'coming easy.'"⁹ Helen and Evan both made plans to visit Chapel Hill and encourage her, but Smith fell ill; she had begun to suffer from a loss of memory similar to that in Alzheimer's disease, and since she never fully recovered from the car accident, she gradually withdrew from the world.

In the field of sociolinguistics, it has been demonstrated that local language variations can be overcome with practice during adult life, but that, as people age, they return to the language that they knew as a child. Betty Smith was aging, and she was ill: more and more she

⁸ Betty Smith, letter to Evan Thomas, 30 April 1961.

⁹ Betty Smith, letter to Abe Burack, 14 Aug. 1961.

lived in a world of memories, the same ones that she had used in writing her first novel. Perhaps she was also inspired by her mother's illness and death, since it led her to transcribe her mother's nearly illegible letters, and some of this writing appears in Joy in the Morning. Whatever the reason, Smith returned to the spare simplicity of her earlier writing, and, working directly from memory, produced a novel that was about her first marriage and her first pregnancy: Joy in the Morning.

Evan Thomas did not quite know what to make of the parts of the manuscripts that she sent him. Twice he admitted that he had had to send it to "the ladies" for assessment. "I trust women more than myself," he admitted to Smith, and named Lawrence and Gene Young as his readers.¹⁰ This is probably due to the topic: the novel is about a young woman who has married early, followed her husband to college, gets pregnant, and has a baby. This is clearly not "literature," but "women's writing," soft stuff for the fans of romance. But Smith's novel was not romantic: the heroine has difficulty feeling sexual, even after marriage, because of memories of sexual abuse, and the young couple does not go off into a rosy future, but rather deals with the daily drama of finding enough money for food and shelter throughout a pregnancy. By her very choice of

¹⁰ Evan Thomas, letter to Betty Smith, 25 Feb. 1963.

topic, Smith had just written herself out of the prevailing concepts of literature. But she did not care. She knew what she was writing about, and it was "coming easy."

As 1963 neared it became clear that they would be able to publish Annie Brown on the 20th Anniversary of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, thereby fulfilling Smith's superstition, as well as reaping the rewards of publicity. As usual, there was difficulty in selecting a title; the editor, the agent and the author all offered suggestions, but, as usual, it was Smith who hit upon the final choice: Joy in the Morning. Smith must have forgiven Thomas for his role in the cutting of Maggie-Now since now he took a large role in the revision and cutting of this novel, although Elizabeth Lawrence and Gene Young were making suggestions as well. Thomas wrote to her "I cut more than my lady friends cut in the hospital [birth] scene, because it seemed too long and too clinical . . ."¹¹ and unfortunately Smith followed his advice. She wrote to him that "Fifty-five pages or 16,500 words have been cut from the book."¹² Perhaps this accounts for it being the slimmest of Smith's four novels.

Smith's petty squabbles with Harper & Row were not over, however. Their accounting department deducted \$169.46 from A Tree Grows in Brooklyn royalties for "merchandise"

¹¹ Evan Thomas, letter to Betty Smith, 25 Feb. 1963.

¹² Betty Smith, letter to Evan Thomas, 7 Mar 1963.

she had ordered and Smith wrote to bookkeeping sending them cancelled checks to prove that she had already paid. When they didn't answer within three weeks, Smith hit the ceiling: she would always be touchy about money taken from her accounts for that novel, since she would always feel that they had never paid her enough. Smith acrimoniously wrote to Thomas, and he tried to calm her down, and later she explained: "It is great agony for me to write a business letter. It takes all day because my hopes and fears and temperament get into it."¹³ Later Smith admitted it was her mistake, but this process of accusing others of stealing from her and badgering them incessantly with letters had become a part of her life.¹⁴ It is unlikely that she ever resolved anything in this way, but perhaps she vented some of her feelings of frustration at her own increasing helplessness.

Smith made a lot of money on Joy in the Morning. It rose to fifth place on the best-seller list, and remains a strong seller even today: unlike Tomorrow Will Be Better and Maggie-Now, Joy in the Morning is in print. Strauss also

¹³ Betty Smith, letter to Jane Wilson, 27 Oct. 1963.

¹⁴ She got into a legal squabble with a contractor and a bank over her cottages at Nag's Head. It got so complicated that it was impossible for me to untangle.

sold Joy in the Morning to MGM for \$100,000.¹⁵ And in 1964 Harpers put out their new Perennial Library, which is the present edition available in the bookstores. Although she immediately started on another memoir, Smith's relationship with her publisher was coming to a close. Thomas moved to Norton, and Smith had a series of new editors, among them Raymond I. Bradbury and Buz Wyeth. But Smith never published another novel.

Like A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, Joy in the Morning is a semi-autobiographical novel relying on memory rather than a fictional plot. It is a simple novel recalling Smith's move to Ann Arbor, the early days of her marriage, and her first pregnancy. Smith brilliantly portrays the misunderstandings between a young couple, the joys and problems of pregnancy and birth. The subdued message is that love and marriage are not perfect, but worthwhile nevertheless.

The novel starts in a town hall in a midwestern state where Annie McGairy, just arrived from Brooklyn, is marrying Carl Brown, a young law student. Carl is ambitious and has pretensions, whereas Annie is sometimes ashamed of her accent, yet feels a working class solidarity. When Annie speaks, the clerk is astonished by her accent, and Carl corrects her grammar. As soon as the ceremony is over, the young couple sit down on an outside bench and count how much

¹⁵ Helen Strauss, letter to Betty Smith, 10 June 1963.

money they have so that they can get through the upcoming week. Carl had been earning his meals working as a bus boy in the cafeteria, making five dollars a week on a paper route, and receiving five dollars a week from his mother. Carl's mother discontinues his allowance when he tells her he is married, and, as a married student, he is not eligible for a tuition loan or a scholarship. They realize that Carl will be working so hard that they will almost never see each other. Carl complains about being poor, but Annie says: "But it's not the tenement kind of poor. That's being poor for *nothing*" (128).

Hunger is also at the core of the book. When Annie and Carl eat, they eat fast: "They had little to say to each other during the meal; both, as usual, being very hungry" (38). There is very little plot in Joy in the Morning. The young couple marries, argues, works, and eats; Annie gets two jobs; Annie starts auditing a class and learns she has a gift for writing; then Annie gets pregnant and there is a crisis when they try to figure out how they are going to be able to afford to continue eating. In fact, there are several times when there is not quite enough food, but the young couple, ever resourceful, manage to scrape by.

Annie's special quality is that she makes friends with just about everyone she meets on the street--and no one from the college. When Carl plays tennis with a Japanese-American friend, she hears his perfect English and finds she

cannot relate to a world so alien. Instead, she befriends the owners of a grocery on the wrong side of town--a taciturn Native American and his Swedish wife. Smith portrays their use of language compellingly.

The main source of tension in the novel is in the relationship between Annie and Carl. The impediments to their success are great: they are living on almost no money in the same room, Annie is left on her own while Carl is constantly busy, their parents disapprove of the marriage, and they are elementally very different people. The miracle is that they get along at all, and often the tension is broken by that magic--that everything, at this age, seems possible.

The joy in this novel is the joy of adventure, discovery, and pregnancy. Annie is very happy while she is pregnant. During the summer

She seemed very contented to stay close to home. She sewed diapers, read a lot. She tried her hand at writing poetry She watched her nasturtiums grow. She wrote to her mother once a week. She tried new ways of cooking and baking, and best of all, Carl was with her a lot. The days were hot and still and the nights were cool. She had never known such quietly happy serenity. (168)

But then they run out of money for food. Carl desperately searches the town for a job, but there is nothing until the university opens in the fall. They pawn his tennis racket,

ice skates, and watch, and then they have nothing left to pawn. They write to their parents for money: Carl's mother says "I told you so," and Annie's mother tells her to write to her step-father, which she refuses to do. Finally Carl gets a job as a night-watchman in a factory, which means they will never be together, neither during the days nor the nights, but they will have enough money to survive.

And, as the pregnancy progresses, Annie's attitude changes:

Annie was very hard to live with and she was getting worse every day. Nothing seemed to please her. She complained about being house-bound but refused to go out anywhere except to the store. She begged him to tell her what he'd like for supper. When he said pork chops, she said too much pork wasn't good for a person's system. She challenged just about every remark he made--had him walking on eggs, as it were.
(239)

Carl is on edge, too, worried about money and about being able to be there when Annie has the baby. Joy in the Morning really captures the feeling of impending change brought about by childbirth: it is when everything is centered around that one thing, waiting, for weeks, just before your life is about to change forever.

Finally it is time and Annie goes to the hospital for the first time in her life. The description Smith gives of the birth has an abbreviated sense about it, probably due to Thomas's editing. It is suggested that after a long labor

they want to give her a caesarean, but through sheer willpower she pushes out an eight-pound boy. And, as with all babies of a certain generation, the doctor put the baby on formula "because the child needed more nourishment than Annie could supply." That made Annie feel like only half a woman, and this is probably the first time this very common issue is approached in a novel (268). Then Annie sells a story, her play gets published in a book, Carl graduates and gets a job, and they plan to move. The end.

All this may sound like nothing to those expecting *Sturm und Drang*, but it's a wonderful thing to read about common reality. Young couples go through these things all the time, but they are seldom thought worthy of memorializing in fiction. The slow accumulation of everyday detail is part of the process of growing up that is so exciting in one's younger years: every time you do something for yourself, for the first time, it is new, it is fresh, and even if it is difficult, it will never be as exciting again. It's a process whereby middle and lower-middle class Americans learn how to make a place for themselves within this world. And back in those days, women only left home by marrying. Their lives, then, become a process of growth with strangers at their sides, strangers whom they learn about as they share experiences. In that way, Joy in the Morning can be looked at as the bildungsroman of the newly married young, when cohabitation and pre-marital sex were

not options.

The sentimentality of which the book is accused may be read in the care that Annie puts into buying a ninety-eight cent clock and ashtray for their room, her attempt to copy the dress and walk of the mid-western co-eds, and her unabashed love of the campus library where she walks among the stacks talking to the books. It is also in the first plays she writes, out of boredom while Carl is studying, in which a direct depiction of reality metamorphoses into a wish-fulfillment, just as in daydreams. And in the sections of the novel when Annie is in the classroom, Smith is able to give us a brief history and criticism of her own writing. Although she gets an A in her playwrighting class, her teacher chastises her for writing "a combination of sordidness and sentimentality . . . The two do not mix well . . . However, the dialogue is authentic" (147).

Sometimes the dialogue, especially between Annie and Carl, seems insipid and childish, but if you imagine it being spoken you realize that this is the way people really talk. For instance, Carl calls her a nut, and she says "Just call me Hazel" (61). This, I repeat, is the way people really talk. Smith's gift for rendering colloquial language in written text was her greatest asset beyond her courage and perseverance. When Lopin Lopin (the Native American) comes to pick up his son whom Annie had been babysitting while his wife gave birth, Annie asks him

whether it was a girl or a boy, but he won't say. Annie says: "'You ask him, Carl . . . He's too proud to talk to a woman.' 'How's the wife?' asked Carl in a hearty, man-to-man voice. 'She ketch a girl off me' said the Lopin of few words." (165) Smith was a master of the common person's language.

Critical Slide

The critical slide that had begun with Tomorrow Will Be Better gained momentum with Smith's last final novels: the reception of Maggie-Now and Joy in the Morning clearly displayed a downhill trend. The reviewers were split about Maggie-Now: some saw it as a tour-de-force of social realism, and others found it, like Tomorrow Will Be Better, either (a) too depressing or (b) too sentimental. The headlines ran from "Another Tree Grows in Brooklyn," and "'Maggie Now' Surpasses That Brooklyn Tree"¹ to "Unheroic Catalog of Small People,"² "A Tree Grows But Maggie Never Lives,"³ and "The Humor Fades."⁴ The Times of London wrote "Everybody with the most rudimentary talent for letting go should enjoy it,"⁵ but Time Magazine wrote "Brooklyn's Author Smith almost certainly emerges as the most lugubrious writer since James Farrell. . . . Rarely have the short and simple annals of the poor seemed so simple-minded and so

¹ Pasadena Independent, 2 Mar. 1958.

² Denver Post, 23 Feb. 1958.

³ San Francisco News, 1 Mar 1958.

⁴ James D. Pendleton, unknown newspaper.

⁵ London Times, 4 July 1958.

long."⁶

Orville Prescott, of The New York Times, remained Smith's staunch supporter. He wrote that all three of Smith's novels are "notably significant studies of certain aspects of urban life in this country [and] all immensely readable." He rated Maggie-Now as better than Tomorrow Will Be Better:

written with such unobtrusive skill that it seems to flow along as naturally as life itself. . . . Its picture of Irish immigrant life in Brooklyn is filled with the exact details that alone can insure conviction and interest. And because Miss Smith is an artist these details are distributed with a judicious hand so that "Maggie-Now" never is swamped with social documentation in the manner of many novels about urban slums.⁷

Evan Thomas wrote to Smith's friend, the playwright Paul Green, in order to get a quotable review of Maggie-Now for the dust jacket. As a long-time supporter of Betty Smith, Green was sure to give a positive review, and he did. He wrote:

Betty Smith has written a solid and sincere book in "Maggie-Now." Once more as in "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" she gives us a fine assemblage of characters and incidents out of the rich creative remembrance and imaginings of her own life.

That was the quote that Harper & Brothers used on the dust jacket. However, Green's letter continues: "Frankly though, I don't think the novel comes up to 'A Tree'. But why

⁶ Time Magazine, 24 Feb. 1958.

⁷ Orville Prescott, New York Times 27 Feb. 1958.

should it--or how could it?"⁸ The New Yorker aptly summarized Maggie-Now in a brief note:

Patsy, a dull-witted Irish country boy who is sometimes belligerent and sometimes roguish, emigrates to Brooklyn, avoids work as much as possible, and lives a very long time. Miss Smith has filled four hundred and thirty-seven pages with words about Patsy.⁹

Then the press started centering around a different concern: "sentimentality" became the central issue of contention surrounding Maggie-Now, and by retrospective extension A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. A second reviewer in the New York Times wrote "not everyone knows how to squeeze joy out of pennies" and ended her review: "This is not to say, however, that there is no place in literature for warmth of sentiment and affirmation. It is only to point out that, to bring the Brooklyn of yesterday to life, one 'Tree' was enough."¹⁰ In the Chicago Sunday Tribune, the reviewer wrote "Sentimentality--which is a thin haze that rises out of inordinate or excessive emotion--hovers over the pages. Sentimentality always pleases a lot of readers, and 'Maggie-Now' will be popular, no doubt."¹¹ But Smith had her supporters. In "Speaking of Books," J. Donald Adams

⁸ Paul Green, letter to Evan Thomas, 13 Feb. 1958.

⁹ The New Yorker, 22 Feb. 1958.

¹⁰ Virgilia Peterson, New York Times, 23 Feb. 1958.

¹¹ Richard Sullivan, Chicago Sunday Tribune, 23 Feb. 1958.

wrote an essay about sentiment, as in opposition to sentimentality (a "dishonest sentiment"), naming sentiment as "the only bulwark against nihilism."¹² He defended Maggie-Now against the review in the New Yorker, describing the New Yorker's "deftly polished fiction is as closely confined, in its method and approach, as was the female form in a nineteenth-century corset." Smith's friend, Dr. Fullilove, remembers that she never wore a corset and was "hung rather loose."¹³

The entire issue was brought to a point in the Providence, Rhode Island Journal: there was an article, "Are You For God or Mammon," that explored the central dilemma in Smith's critical reception. It was written about the National Book Awards ceremony at which Randall Jarrell, one of the leading practitioners of New Criticism, gave the main address:

On the side of God, or rather Art--serious Art--was a Southern poet, Randall Jarrell On the side of Mammon, or rather Popular Culture . . . was Betty Smith, author of "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" and her current "Maggie-Now," big fat novels that have been and are being read with gusto by hundreds of thousands.¹⁴

¹² J. Donald Adams, "Speaking of Books," New York Times, 25 Feb. 1958.

¹³ Drs. Fullilove and Lesage, personal interview, 18 May 1992.

¹⁴ Providence, Rhode Island Journal, 23 March 1958.

Jarrell denounced popular culture by stating that, in "an ideally bad society," "Swann's Way" would not have been written at all and Proust would have written Elvis Presley's autobiography. Jarrell's point was simple: "The mass media cannot touch the experience that art, philosophy, and literature deal with," and Smith was his example of poor taste. He pointedly asked "Why is Brooklyn so much richer and bigger, so much more literate and educated . . . [and] so much less productive culturally than was Florence[?]" and ended his lecture by saying "you can be for God or you can be for Mammon, but you can't be for God and Mammon both at the same time."¹⁵

Smith had tried reading Proust when there was no liquor to be had in Chapel Hill, and she didn't enjoy the experience. Her reaction had been "The sentences are so long that I have to read fast in order to get the whole meaning at once. This makes me sleepy"; she had found him too "mannered."¹⁶ The next day Smith was the keynote speaker, and she had her chance. First she recited an anecdote:

she recalled as a child seeing a large, garish Kewpie doll at some amusement park, and hearing a lady breath out, "Oh, isn't that beautiful!" Miss Smith said that it was then that she first learned the meaning of the

¹⁵ Providence, Rhode Island Journal, 23 March 1958.

¹⁶ Betty Smith, letter to Elizabeth Lawrence, 9 July 1945.

truism that beauty lies in the eye of the beholder.

The panel broke up in a thunder of laughter and applause when Miss Smith, apparently as an afterthought, asked casually, "Has anybody read 'Swann's Way' since yesterday?"¹⁷

Smith had run afoul of the dominant critical mode in the academy, New Criticism. The consequence was that she was excluded from the canon of American literature. If you look at her novels through the lens of New Criticism, with its set of expectations, her writing does not seem to be good. In Understanding Fiction, a textbook from the 1940s, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren write: "A piece of fiction is a unity, in so far as the piece of fiction is successful" and "The fact of conflict as an essential aspect of fiction is clearly stated in every handbook" (xvii). The lack of unity in Smith's first novel and the muted conflict in her second and third novels disqualified her from consideration as serious fiction. Understanding Fiction endorses "irony" over "sentimentality," or "popular fiction [that] aims at flattering the ethical sense of the public" (xvi). They conclude that "virtue . . . [does] not flourish in the fiction of our best family magazines. Such fiction is deficient in irony" (xvi). In this way Smith was written out of the canon of American literature as it was being formed.

¹⁷ Providence, Rhode Island Journal, 23 March 1958.

Towards the end of her life, Smith was helping Thomas and Tom McCormack cut Maggie-Now for re-publication in the Harper's Perennial Library. She wrote "For six years, I have felt very very bad about [Maggie-Now]. I wrote it under great duress. But no use going over those sad years again."¹⁸ When Thomas and McCormack undertook the cutting, they began the task with optimism, but soon they ran into trouble. McCormack wrote:

This is an extremely canny and artful book, Evan, as you probably know much better than I. Betty Smith's style seems relaxed, and her voice sounds warm and wonderfully conversational but when you start hunting for the useless superfluity that conversation usually brings it just isn't there. So often in Maggie-Now you start cutting in one place only to hear it saying Ouch! some place else. Only a pro of the first order can weave stuff together like that.¹⁹

Smith may have been troubled during the writing of Maggie-Now, and Maggie-Now may be a troubled book, but it is also a professional one.

If the critics were mixed in reaction to Maggie-Now, they were unanimous regarding Smith's next novel: they hated Joy in the Morning. The New Yorker wrote:

When this novel opens, in the fall of 1927, Annie McGairy, an eighteen-year-old uneducated Brooklynite, has just married Carl Brown, a twenty-year-old law

¹⁸ Betty Smith, letter to Evan Thomas, 28 Dec. 1965.

¹⁹ Tom McCormack, memo to Evan Thomas, 13 Feb. 1965.

student at a Middle Western university. Annie is young for her age; she has not lost her zest for such premarital flings as eating a banana split. When the story ends, in June, 1929, Carl has his law degree, and Annie has a bouncing boy; he has a job awaiting him, and she has had a one-act play and a newspaper feature story published. Furthermore, she has matured to the point where she can no longer stomach banana splits. All this has been accomplished by a formidable exercise of hope, perseverance, intelligence, and supererogatory kindness of Annie's part--she would gild the Golden Rule if she could. Miss Smith's novel, like a banana split, is too sweet for grownups. A Literary Guild selection.²⁰

In a review in The Saturday Review, Smith is taken to task for not taking into account the world events of 1928, the year in which the book was set--"there is no evidence either of them ever saw a newspaper" (thereby assuming that any novel worth reading must include current events)--and Joy in the Morning is named a "sentimental myth."²¹

The tag of sentimentality had attached itself firmly to Betty Smith's writing. One review, "Sentiment Takes Over Betty Smith's New Novel," bemoans that "We live in the Day of the Barbie Doll."²² In a review entitled "Just Too, Too Sweet" the author wrote: "Sentiment is an effective

²⁰ New Yorker, 31 Aug. 1963.

²¹ Babette Hall, The Saturday Review, 24 Aug. 1963.

²² Jay McCormick, unknown newspaper.

ingredient in personal retrospective fiction if it is used wisely and in moderation. Otherwise, the warmth may blow to heartburn."²³ It is possible to read many things in a novel, and at this point all the reviewers were reading sentimentality. The descriptions of finding small pleasures in everyday life are sentimental, but no more so than, say, the running narrative of Henry James in The Golden Bowl, or James Joyce's fond description of the bar tap in Ulysses. The sociologist Elizabeth Long writes: "people generally pay attention to messages that accord with their existing attitudes, screening out communications they do not want to deal with" (52), and thus, to the upper-middle class (usually male) educated reviewer and academic, the intent of Joy in the Morning was largely lost. One reviewer noted that "Betty Smith Writes a Charming Novel for the Ladies,"²⁴ and thus Betty Smith's writing had been ascribed to a sub-genre: women's writing.

In The Modern American Novel 1914-1945: A Critical History, Linda Wagner-Martin writes:

While many readers and critics have considered modernist writing as one apex of American literary expression, critics more recently have challenged its eminence partly on the grounds that it failed to present a range of human emotions and experience germane to all readers, regardless of education,

²³ Judith L. Light, Long Island Press 22 Sept. 1963.

²⁴ Dennis Powers, Oakland Tribune, 11 Aug. 1963.

gender, race, or religious or political persuasion. Collectively much modern literature has emphasized male experience and belief, and it has consistently privileged writing because of its narrative difficulty. But in fact, after fifty years of critical study of the work that was produced during modernism, some critics now contend that modernism was both elitist and reductive in that it ignored whole segments of experience and therefore of readers. (7)

Joy in the Morning is also written with the simplicity that made it accessible to all segments of the population, even those with the most rudimentary reading skills. Therefore, merely by Smith's choice of subject and style, Joy in the Morning was never a candidate to be considered as serious literature.²⁵ The reviewers here functioned to reinforce the increasing hegemony of modernistic dogma.

One reviewer, Virgilia Peterson in the New York Times, actually seemed to have *enjoyed* the book, then attached a negative conclusion to her review. Paterson waxes passionate:

it costs them a violent quarrel on the front-porch of their rooming-house before they can unite in the flesh. And it costs them--as the story unfolds--more effort, more tears and tempers, more sacrifices and more goodwill than were heretofore dreamed of in their philosophy, before they can at last feel truly wed.

²⁵ Hemingway may have been writing with simple syntax and diction, but his subjects were (and are) too different for the immigrant (rather than the monied expatriate) to understand.

After writing a review that demonstrates interest in the book, she writes that, overall, the secondary characters are far too nice and concludes:

As you will have guessed by this time, "Joy in the Morning" is, if not in American life, then most assuredly in contemporary American literature, an anachronism. From start to finish its sentimentality is unalloyed. The little couple is touching enough and their ups and downs are universal. But you forget all about them the moment the book ends--just as you forget, when you emerge from a movie, the false light of the silver screen in the uncompromising reality outside.²⁶

It was as if to give a bad review to this book was a critical imperative: any critic caught in disagreement would be shot. Smith had crossed an unstated boundary, and this step had cost her serious consideration as a writer in America.

It's actually a wonderful book. A rare positive review aptly summarized it:

This human hearted song of joy is more than a pen sketch of human nature. The characterization is essentially dramatic and the dialogue is a marvel of accuracy. . . . As always in [Betty Smith's] writing this adroit naturalness and conciseness keeps the reader interested. The flashes of warm reality, of wit, and of truth, give universal interest to the

²⁶ Virgilia Peterson, New York Times, 13 Aug. 1963.

simple tale.²⁷

It's simple, it's sweet, it's entertaining, it's about Native Americans living within America, it's about poverty and how to live with it, it's a love story where the couple doesn't "overcome" all simply with a kiss, it's sort of a manual of what life can be like if you are eighteen, have no money, and get married anyway. And that's why it's a brave novel. No one had dared to write about a topic as simple and as real as that. No one had dared to approach something so common to the people of America.

Joy in the Morning did find the right complex of qualities for it to become a popular novel. It is a novel of the ideology of poverty--not the ideology of the hegemony which produces poverty justifying poverty, but the ideology of joy in the lives of the poor themselves. Diana Trilling hated A Tree Grows in Brooklyn because she mistook the novel as a defense of the American Dream, whereas to Smith, and to her readers, it was a celebration of it. It is important that all sections of culture has access to cultural production: "ideology is enabling as well as restricting" (Frye citing Mary Poovey 47); a social group can find strength in seeing its own problems and beliefs represented in the cultural capital, cast on the screen of the American media.

²⁷ C. M. Siggins, Best Seller, 1 Sept. 1963.

When Smith began teaching herself how to write, she really had no model on which to base her novels: the writers she read were either women from the upper-middle classes or men. She was a woman from the lower-classes, and she had to figure out how to tell her own story in her own way. Consequently, it took her two novels after her first to find the voice that was hers. When she did find her voice, it was simple and clear enough that everyone could understand it, including people who seldom read. To remain true to herself and her message she had to address this audience: they were her world. And in this way Smith wrote herself out of the canon:

Bestsellers have existed for as long as books have been printed and distributed in an organized fashion, but, as students of literature learn quite early on, they are usually relegated to that dubious category of literature which critics most pejoratively label "popular." And, as most students of literature are also taught, the commercial success of a book is frequently its strongest indictment against literary quality. Furthermore, the fine line drawn in literary studies between those works worthy of scholarly attention and inclusion in the canon and those assigned to the category of popular literature is often contingent upon the author's sex and choice of genre. (Dudovitz 20)

Perhaps the wide-ranging intellectuality of the late twentieth century will be more open to the study of a culture through the life of one of its writers. And if this

is true, what better life to study than that of a writer who was popular enough to share her vision with millions of readers?

The Westminster of the Common Folk

During the last third of Smith's life, she was a recluse. People in Chapel Hill still drove their visitors past her house, pointing out their resident "celebrity," but stopped taking part in social engagements. It was difficult for her to recover from Bob's death. She tried to donate his papers to Montana State University in Missoula, but was refused. She became involved in an acrimonious and battle with Finch's sister, Helen, over the distribution of his few possessions (largely the contents of a locked room in Dillon, Montana), the sale of his property. Her correspondence with her agent and publishers tapered off, and even though she was teaching writing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (often with a student living with her), she kept to herself.

Smith's main pleasure during this time came from her daughters and grandchildren. Mary MacCaulty and Nancy Pfeiffer were very different: Mary stayed close to Smith and Chapel Hill, and Nancy travelled all over the world. Mary wrote to Smith "[Nancy] puts so much of her own life into other peoples. I wish I could be that way. Sit down and play with my children, take them on trips and make their clothes. I'm just not made that way. Nancy is much too

good to them all."¹ Smith had virtually adopted Mary's daughter Candy, for whom she took financial responsibility and a deduction on her income tax return. She sent her to a private school, and Candy came to visit her frequently and travelled with her Washington, D.C., when Smith went to visit Mary. Smith bought Candy a horse for use at the school, and, to be fair, the young Johnnie \$100.² When the family was coming to visit at Christmas, she sent Mary a credit card to make her trip easier.³ In 1960, Smith and Candy took a two-month boat trip to visit Nancy, who was living in Panama.

Smith had lived a hard life, smoking and drinking, driving her energy to her limits and enduring continual stress. She never completely recovered from her car accident, and when she was 65, she felt sick enough to go to the hospital, where she met the best friends of her old age: Dr. Jack Fullilove and Dr. Alain Lesage. She wrote:

This Dr. Lasarge that I know, is head surgeon at Duke Hospital. He is very French, plumpish and looks like the poor girl's Charles Boyer. He lives with or I should say in the house of Dr. J. Fulliluv who is head psychiatrist at the C.H. Hospital. It is a lush,

¹ Mary Smith MacCaulty, letter to Betty Smith, 24 March 1961.

² Betty Smith, letter to Johnnie MacCaulty, 23 June 196?

³ Betty Smith, letter to Mary Smith MacCaulty, 10 Dec. 1961.

beautiful house. full of modern paintings and such. The Dr. gave a cocktail party . . . a whole different world from the kind I know. In comparison with the men of the writer's group here, these wealthy sophisticated medical men make writers seem very homespun.⁴

She wrote to her daughter that Dr. Lesage has escorted her around several times in his "scratched and utterly neglected" Jaguar. Since she did not speak French and Lesage did not speak much English, their friendship was carried on mainly with "wild waving of arms."⁵ At this point Smith was a little in love with Dr. Lesage, but as she grew to know the pair better, she saw this was inappropriate. Doctors Fullilove and Lesage grew to become almost her entire social world, and when Smith wanted to give Candy a wedding, she held it at their house.

By 1962 Smith's mother was sick, and since she was 91, it was not expected that she would live much longer. "She refuses to go to a hospital and will not have a nurse in the house. That makes it hard for all of us."⁶ Smith, who had her own medical troubles, felt guilty that she was not there, but her daughter Mary reminded her: "They never

⁴ Betty Smith, letter to Mary Smith MacCaulty, 10 Dec. 1961.

⁵ Betty Smith, letter to Mary Smith MacCaulty, 10 Dec. 1961.

⁶ Betty Smith, letter to Helen Strauss, 5 March 1962.

tried to help you when you needed help so badly."⁷

Then, suddenly Smith started corresponding with George again. He had written to her about his wife, who was sick, and about their daughter Nancy's poems: he was wondering if Smith could get them published. She described Joy in the Morning to him: "It is a simple story about ///// [the repetitive marks represent cross-outs] a wonderful boy, a married student; about how he works www way through school and the wonderful baby that came along."⁸ She had reached a calm level of understanding with him, where they both looked at their children with pleasure. Smith wrote: "How wonderful to have two nice daughters like Nancy and Mary. They are the joy of my life. Everyone here, likes them so much. I am so very // proud of them."⁹ In this letter she also described her life:

As for myself, I live alone and make mmmm out all right. I like Chapel Hill and I like my home and I always have the solace ///// of writing. And I see Mary and the children and Tom here at Christmas and visit them once a year. And Candy will come to the University here next fall and live with me until she gets into a /////////////// sorority. My health is splendid, although I fall asleep at odd times for no reason at all and must werer classes [sic] when I read or write.

⁷ Betty Smith, letter to Helen Strauss, 5 March 1962.

⁸ Betty Smith, letter to George Smith, 14 July 1962.

⁹ Betty Smith, letter to George Smith, 14 July 1962.

As yet, I have not got a single gray hair.¹⁰

On December 14th, 1962 George H. E. Smith died of a heart attack at his home in Shelton, Connecticut, so that he was never able to read the book that was about their early years together.

Joy in the Morning was published in 1963 on the anniversary of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. Even though Smith was ill, Harper & Row kept the publicity machine running. Smith was a guest speaker at the "24th Annual Book Buyers Conference," McClurg's annual meeting for 500 librarians and booksellers in Chicago. On the first day after her arrival, she was supposed to do Studs Terkel's radio show right before the major luncheon, at which she was to give the keynote speech. This disturbed her: "First I'll have to talk on the radio interview, then I'll have to sit between two people and talk to them while I eat, then I'll have to get up and make a speech to the assembled diners. I would not be able to do it."¹¹ Nevertheless, she pulled it off. In a letter to Strauss she wrote: "I am told that I did all right on the publicity stuff. Everyone was so nice to me. One news item referred to me as a lovely lady with talent. It made me wish I was forty again--or even fifty for that

¹⁰ Betty Smith, letter to George Smith, 14 July 1962.

¹¹ Betty Smith, letter to Evan Thomas, 1 July 1963.

matter."¹² Smith had a gift for public appearances that she used to her advantage throughout her life.

Smith wrote to Stuart Harris, her publicity manager, that she was willing to work on the publicity for Joy in the Morning, but "Now I am five years older and five years more tired."¹³ Nevertheless, Harris arranged a very tight schedule for five days of public appearances. She was to go on a tour of bookstores, have lunch with New York Times critic Paul Gardner, interview with New York World-Telegram, interview with NBC and CBS, interview with Kaleidoscope (a syndicated radio show that reached 550 radio stations), do a live interview on the "Today Show," be the guest of honor at a Harper & Brother Cocktail party, interview with Mike Wallace on "Personal Closeup," interview with New York Post, interview with the Chicago Tribune, interview with Martha Deane, interview with Duncan McDonald, interview with Ted Steele, interview with Audry Clinton of Newsday, and interview on "Celebrity Corner."¹⁴ Smith was able to keep up with the schedule, and Evan Thomas expressed his thanks: "You did a wonderful job while you were here. We're enormously grateful to you and hope we didn't wear you out

¹² Betty Smith, letter to Helen Strauss, 19 July 1963.

¹³ Betty Smith, letter to Stuart Harris, 29 May, 1963.

¹⁴ Harper & Row, typewritten schedule for Betty Smith, Aug. 1963.

completely."¹⁵ Joy in the Morning rose to fifth place on the bestseller list.

Smith returned to Chapel Hill but continued her rounds of public appearances. On May 25th, she gave a press preview and attended a luncheon at the WTVD studio in Durham. On May 16th, 1964, Smith received The Carolina Playmakers Alumna Award. On January 19th, 1965 she gave a talk to the "Law Dames," wives of Duke University law students, probably remembering her years as the wife of a lawyer; on Feb. 12th, she gave a telephone interview to News and Observer, Raleigh Times. Then on April 6, 1967, Smith received the Sesquicentennial Award citation and medal from The University of Michigan Conference, an academic honor from the first college that allowed her to take classes.

And with Helen Strauss on her side, she made the most of subsidiaries. In April, Strauss tried to sell Joy in the Morning as serial in women's magazines but was unsuccessful except for Cosmopolitan, who wanted to run the first 52 pages for \$3000. Smith balked at the price, and checked with Thomas, to see whether it would help rather or harm the sales. He assured her that it would help, and then she named the price \$4000. Helen got it for her. Helen was also trying to sell motion picture rights to Darryl Zanuck for \$75,000 and Smith was thrilled. Zanuck changed his

¹⁵ Evan Thomas, letter to Betty Smith, 30 August 1963.

mind, but Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer bought the rights to Joy in the Morning for \$100,000 instead.

The final grand celebration in Betty Smith's life was the premiere of Joy in the Morning in 1965. The film starred Richard Chamberlain and Julie Harris, and the premiere was to take place in Chapel Hill. It was "Betty Smith Day": she met her guests at the airport, she had her picture taken with the mayor changing the name of a street to "Betty Smith Boulevard," she had her picture taken in front of her house, and arranged that the premiere benefit the Chapel Hill Public Library.

All throughout this time, however, Smith was battling an unknown sickness. She wrote to Evan:

I have a persistent cough and have had X-rays etc. The doctor says it a tension or nervous cough. I am tired all the time but I can't sleep. Constant news from home about my mother's impending death, (she's 86 years old,) keeps me on edge - always packed and ready to leave in an hour. I try to put this out of my mind and end up putting damn near everything out of my mind. I can't remember people's names or the names of the flowers or what day it is.¹⁶

Max Steele remembers her difficulties teaching an honors seminar at the University:

And her memory was getting bad then . . . She would hold up the class. She would say, like, "Where we lived next door to, what were those things called?"

¹⁶ Betty Smith, letter to Evan Thomas, 18 April 1963.

We'd say "Butcher shops? Groceries?" "No, no, not business, everybody has them, you know where you live, what are those things that live next door to you?" Finally somebody came up with the word "neighbors" and she said "Neighbors! It's Neighbors!" But it took five minutes to get there.¹⁷

Even though Smith continued her public and charitable activities, her movements were become more and more troublesome. Early one morning she drove her granddaughter Candy to Raleigh to catch a train to Washington, and on the way back her car slipped off the icy road. She was thrown from it uninjured, but it was 11 degrees and no cars were passing by. When finally she got picked up and brought home:

I couldn't get warm because I was shaking inside and I called my doctor who said I was a candidate for pneumonia. He had pills sent to me and I went to bed, slept the rest of the day but woke up at night. I was sitting up in bed, (about 1/ i:Am and I had this feeling that someone was watching me. I turned my head and there was a hideous face looking at me from the little door windows. He was a gaunt white man with a damaged face and slit eyes and a thin twisted mouth. For a split second I was face to face with him and then he sort of melted away.¹⁸

¹⁷ Max Steele, personal interview, 24 May 1991.

¹⁸ Betty Smith, letter to Helen Strauss, 27 Jan. 1964.

Her life became a battle between the joys that she had found at the end of her life and the gradual, mysterious decay of her body. Some of her longer letters now come from the hospital. She kept up, as much as she could, with the queries still coming to her from those who loved her books and wanted to know more, and she continued writing, as best she could.

Nancy moved back to the Northeast at this time. She had been living in Colorado, Panama, and Switzerland, so she returned just in time to help her mother. She took her on a trip to Ireland, so that she could see the place in which she had set the beginning of Maggie-Now. But it was pretty much all downhill. Daphne Athas remembers: "In the late sixties the town cemented over the grass in front of the post office and erected a knee high iron-rope fence around the flagpole" (29). Smith would get stuck at this new construction, forget where she was, and be unable to walk home. Enough people knew her in the town that, when they found her in this condition, they walked her home. According to Athas, a couple of actors from the university lived with her and looked out for her (Athas 29). Max Steele recalls:

She talked about going to New York and nobody saw her for two, three days, and finally somebody said, "Did she go?" so they called the fire department and broke into the house, and she was there. And they said we thought you were dead she said "It really

disturbs me. I'm very upset about it, because I sit there by myself and think, how do I know I'm alive? Well I know I'm alive because my little dog knows me."¹⁹

Noble and Noble Publishers put out the Falcon edition of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, and in the biographical sketch of Betty Smith, they wrote that she was dead.²⁰ This upset Smith very much: she said "Even my own publishers don't know that I'm alive."²¹

Nancy took over the administration of her cottages at Nag's head, and by and large Smith stopped her routine correspondence. Thomas left Harper & Row for W. W. Norton, and was replaced by Buz Wyeth. Helen Strauss left William Morris and was replaced by Don Gold. The world was changing, and it was no longer Betty Smith's time. She died Jan. 17th, 1972, of pneumonia, like her father, and in Shelton, Connecticut, like her first husband. The New York Times actually listed her correct age: she was 75. They also provided an apt critical assessment of her work:

"A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," published to instant critical and popular acclaim, and Miss Smith's three other novels over the subsequent 20 years, all possessed the same strong autobiographical overtones of precocity amid poverty and enduring optimism amid

¹⁹ Max Steele, personal interview, 24 May 1991.

²⁰ Stephen L. Bair, letter to Evan Thomas, 12 Dec. 1967.

²¹ Max Steele, personal interview, 24 May 1991.

oppression and travail.

But although the three later novels were chosen as special offerings to subscribers by either the Book-of-the-Month Club or the Literary Guild, they failed to measure up to the critical yardstick that had been applied to "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn."

This reception led Miss Smith to lament to her publisher, Harper & Row, that "I wish I'd written my books in reverse."

But had the publishing chronology been different, Miss Smith probably would not have either created the tree that Francie cherished or planted the one that she dreamed would shade her great-grandchildren at her home in Chapel Hill, N.C.

Both of the trees were *Ailanthus glandulosa*, or The Tree of Heaven--a hearty, indestructible variety of Chinese sumac that is found in thousands of lots and courtyards in New York.

Because the tree in her own Brooklyn tenement yard had been cut down in her youth, just as Francie's had been fictionally, Miss Smith promised "to plant a tree everywhere I live." Of the one in Chapel Hill, she wrote: "I've enjoyed its shade. My children and their children have played under it. And, God-willing, there will be great-grand-children playing under it."²²

Smith always gave as much help as possible to the young writers around her, and many were "struck by her generosity."²³ The group of writers who remembered her

²² Robert Hanley, "Betty Smith, Author, Dies at 75; Wrote 'A Tree Grows in Brooklyn'," New York Times, 17 Jan. 1972.

²³ Max Steele, personal interview, 24 May 1991.

agreed on only one thing, "the very kind, unselfish nature Betty had. She had a marvelous kindness Even when she spoke enviously of somebody, it wasn't real envy."²⁴ Daphne Athas was discouraged because when she first approached Smith about reading her novel, Smith refused. But years later Smith remembered that she had refused, and then she did the same favor she did for countless others: she sent the novel to her publisher with her high recommendation, and it was published. She encouraged and helped Max Steele, John Ehle, Josephina Niggli, her husband Joe Jones, and tried to help countless others. She was in love with books, in love with print, in love with writing.²⁵ And she shared that love with others.

Once Smith tried to explain to Evan Thomas the motivation for her novels:

In TREE I wanted to prove that a person could rise above poverty. In TOMORROW: That if a man and woman are not sexually adjusted to each other, that the marriage would fail. In MAGGY-NOW my thesis was not too strong. But it did start with the idea that for a normal healthy girl, any sort of marriage was better than no marriage. It got mixed up with a woman in love

²⁴ Transcript of reminiscences of friends, Paul Green, Walter Spearman, Rhoda Wynn, John and Darice Parker, and Sam and Emily Selden, July 7, 1974 from the Betty Smith Papers in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

²⁵ Nancy Smith Pfeiffer, personal interview, 10/11 May, 1991.

will put up with a man no matter how worthless he is. In JOY I just wanted to prove that two very young people could make a go of marriage against all odds.²⁶

Nancy Smith Pfeiffer notes that it was assumed by Smith's editors and agent that the novels represented the men in her life: Johnny Nolan in A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was like her father, Frankie Malone in Tomorrow Will Be Better represented Joe Jones, Claude Bassett in Maggie-Now was Bob Finch, and Carl Brown in Joy in the Morning was George Smith. This is probably also true.

There is another way of looking at her writing, however: that is that Smith's first novel, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was about the most important person in her life, herself; her second novel, Tomorrow Will Be Better, was about the second most important person in her life, her mother; Maggie-Now was about the third most important person in her life, her father; and Joy in the Morning, her return to happiness, was about the other most important people in her life, her children. Perhaps each novel can be seen as a portrait of those figures; and perhaps, in that way, we can look at the work of Betty Smith as a whole, rather than as a series of successes and failures.

In Chapel Hill there is a beautiful graveyard, with tall oaks and old stone walls, near the center of the town. This cemetery is the equivalent of Westminster Abbey for

²⁶ Betty Smith, letter to Evan Thomas, 15 April 1964.

Southern writers: Paul Green is there; Max Steele has a spot reserved across from him.²⁷ Betty Smith, however, is not there. Chapel Hill's most famous writer is buried in the remote Legion Street Cemetery, an unshaded lawn with new graves between two highways.²⁸ However, she shares a grave with Bob Finch, and that is enough for her.

²⁷ Max Steele, personal interview, 24 May 1991.

²⁸ Thanks to Max Steele for taking me on a tour of these graveyards.

Afterword

Betty Smith burned with an intense and unrelenting energy, trying to make sense of the world and convey that sense to others. When she died, she had come a full circle.

What made A Tree Grows in Brooklyn great was that it was the first novel about finding happiness in poverty. It was the small things that Francie did, on a daily basis, that made life worthwhile: collecting metal and rags to sell to the junk man, arguing with the butcher for fresh ground beef, luxuriously spending her money on peppermint candy, or reading on the fire escape. What made A Tree Grows in Brooklyn great was that it recorded, elevated, canonized, and reified the good in daily experience of the poor. When Smith lost that theme in her adversity, when she was flung out of her world into the world of fame and success, she lost her ability to identify with ordinary people. It wasn't until she separated herself from the "high life," and began to live (in her head) as if she were still Francie Nolan in Brooklyn, that artistic success returned.

But it was only the winds of chance that blew A Tree Grows in Brooklyn into the public sphere. If the depression had not widened the reading public's interest in the poor, if the Works Progress Administration had never happened, if

World War II had not occurred and Elizabeth Lawrence not been made editor, "They Lived in Brooklyn" would never have seen print. How many more novels are there, like A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, hidden away in desk drawers? Without this set of circumstances, Smith might have had a life like Dorothea in Middlemarch--"Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth."

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