

Brooklyn
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Summary

Colm Tóibín's *New York Times* bestselling novel—now an acclaimed film starring Saoirse Ronan and Jim Broadbent nominated for four Academy Awards including Best Picture—is “a moving, deeply satisfying read” (*Entertainment Weekly*) about a young Irish immigrant in Brooklyn in the early 1950s.

“One of the most unforgettable characters in contemporary literature” (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*), Eilis Lacey has come of age in small-town Ireland in the hard years following World War Two. When an Irish priest from Brooklyn offers to sponsor Eilis in America, she decides she must go, leaving her fragile mother and her charismatic sister behind.

Eilis finds work in a department store on Fulton Street, and when she least expects it, finds love. Tony, who loves the Dodgers and his big Italian family, slowly wins her over with patient charm. But just as Eilis begins to fall in love, devastating news from Ireland threatens the promise of her future.

Author “Colm Tóibín...is his generation’s most gifted writer of love’s complicated, contradictory power” (*Los Angeles Times*). “Written with mesmerizing power and skill” (*The Boston Globe*), *Brooklyn* is a “triumph...One of those magically quiet novels that sneak up on readers and capture their imaginations” (*USA TODAY*)

Author Bio

Colm Toibin was born in Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford in 1955. He studied at University College Dublin and lived in Barcelona between 1975 and 1978. Out of his experience in Barcelona he produced two books, the novel ‘The South’ (shortlisted for the Whitbread First Novel Award and winner of the Irish Times/ Aer Lingus First Fiction Award) and ‘Homage to Barcelona’, both published in 1990. When he returned to Ireland in 1978 he worked as a journalist for ‘In Dublin’, ‘Hibernia’ and ‘The Sunday Tribune’, becoming features editor of ‘In Dublin’ in 1981 and editor of Magill, Ireland’s current affairs magazine, in 1982. He left Magill in 1985 and travelled in Africa and South America. His journalism from the 1980s was collected in ‘The Trial of the Generals’ (1990). His other work as a journalist and travel writer includes ‘Bad Blood: A Walk Along the Irish Border’ (1987) and ‘The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe’ (1994). His other novels are: ‘The Heather Blazing’ (1992, winner of the Encore Award); ‘The Story of the Night’ (1996, winner of the Ferro-Grumley Prize); ‘The Blackwater Lightship’ (1999, shortlisted for the IMPAC Dublin Prize and the Booker Prize and made into a film starring Angela Lansbury); ‘The Master’ (2004, winner of the Dublin IMPAC Prize; the Prix du Meilleur Livre; the LA Times Novel of the Year; and shortlisted for the Booker Prize); ‘Brooklyn’ (2009,

winner of the Costa Novel of the Year). His short story collections are ‘Mothers and Sons’ (2006, winner of the Edge Hill Prize) and ‘The Empty Family’ (2010). His play ‘Beauty in a Broken Place’ was performed at the Peacock Theatre in Dublin in 2004. His other books include: ‘The Modern Library: the 200 Best Novels Since 1950’ (with Carmen Callil); ‘Lady Gregory’s Toothbrush’ (2002); ‘Love in a Dark Time: Gay Lives from Wilde to Almodovar’ (2002) and ‘All a Novelist Needs: Essays on Henry James’ (2010). He has edited ‘The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction’. His work has been translated into thirty languages. In 2008, a book of essays on his work ‘Reading Colm Toibin’, edited by Paul Delaney, was published. He has received honorary doctorates from the University of Ulster and from University College Dublin. He is a regular contributor to the Dublin Review, the New York Review of Books and the London Review of Books. In 2006 he was appointed to the Arts Council in Ireland. He has twice been Stein Visiting Writer at Stanford University and also been a visiting writer at the Michener Center at the University of Texas at Austin. He is currently Leonard Milberg Lecturer in Irish Letters at Princeton University

Discussion Questions

1. Before she goes to America, Eilis believes that, “While people from the town who lived in England missed Enniscorthy, no one who went to America missed home. Instead, they were happy there and proud” (pg 26). Why do you think the Irish had such a rosy view of America? How are Eilis’s expectations met upon her arrival?
2. As Eilis begins night classes in accounting, she notes the divisions between Italian and Jewish students, and the lack of English or other Irish students. At work, she must confront racial integration when Bartocci’s opens its doors for the first time to black customers. How does Eilis react to the divisions among Europeans immigrants from different countries, as well as those between white and black Americans? How are the traditional ethnic lines of Brooklyn beginning to break down in the 1950s?
3. When Eilis and Tony first meet, she seems more interested in him as an escape from her troublesome housemates than as a genuine romantic interest. Tony, however, is clear about his love for Eilis from the start. Why do you think Eilis is hesitant in her feelings? Is a relationship with such uneven attachment doomed from the start, or do you believe that one person can “learn” to love another over time?
4. Some characters in the novel are referred to as Miss or Mrs., while others are identified by their first name. Does this reflect their relationship with Eilis? Why would Colm Toibin make this stylistic choice? How would your perception of the characters in *Brooklyn* be different if Tobin had written the novel from the “first-person” perspective of Eilis?
5. Imagine Eilis in today’s world. Do you see her primarily as a career-motivated woman, or as a wife and mother? How does Toibin present the conflict between job and family in the 1950s? How is it different today?
6. When the clerk of the law bookstore in Manhattan engages her in conversation, Eilis displays an ignorance of the Holocaust that would startle us today. How do you explain her confusion?

What does it tell us about the Ireland—and New York—of the 1950s?

7. Something happens to Rose that, in retrospect, makes you reexamine the reasons she might have urged Eilis to move to America. Discuss this.

10. Eilis decides to keep her marriage to Tony a secret from her mother and friends in Enniscorthy because she believes they won't understand. Do you believe that this is Eilis's true reason, or might her silence indicate other motives?

11. Does Eilis's notion of her duty to family evolve from the beginning of the novel—when she leaves Enniscorthy—to the end, when she returns to Tony in America?

12. If Eilis had been able to choose freely, between Brooklyn and Tony, and Enniscorthy and Jim, what do you think she would have chosen? Or is Eilis really a young woman who does not choose, who allows others to determine her fate?

13. Tóibín ends *Brooklyn* before Eilis even boards the ship back to America, leaving her future unwritten. Why do you think Toibin chose to end the book there? What do you imagine Eilis's future holds?