

ABOUT THE PLAY

“Taking to the Medium:” Betty Smith, American Playwright by Maya Cantu

Like the tenement-born “Tree of Heaven” inspiring its title, Betty Smith’s *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* endures through generations as one of the biggest bestsellers of the twentieth century. Yet, while Smith found her greatest fame as a novelist, she was most passionate about her work in the theatre. As described by Carol Siri Johnson, “Smith played an important role in the largely undocumented world of noncommercial theatre of the 1920s and 1930s” through her work with three influential university playwriting departments and with the Federal Theatre Project. The author of over 70 one-act and full-length dramas, Smith commented in 1937: “I write plays because I’d rather do that than anything else in the world.” Smith’s plays share with her novels a focus upon working-class women persevering through poverty to craft their own narratives of self-determination, often fueled by their engagement with reading and books.

Smith was born as Elizabeth Lillian Wehner in Williamsburg, Brooklyn on December 15, 1896. She based the Nolans in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* upon her complex relationships with her German American immigrant parents: the idealistic Johnny and pragmatic Catherine. Smith recalled of her childhood in Brooklyn, “It was exciting, churning, bewildering, ever-changing and overcrowded.” Her family’s economic hardship compelled her at fourteen to leave school and take her first job: as a “leaf-putter-onner” in an artificial flower factory. Yet she delighted in “prowling around” the “gay and carnivaly” world of five-and-ten cent stores, and immersed herself in books and theater. Smith reminisced, “I had one objective: To get together a dime a week to see the Saturday matinee at one of the three Brooklyn stock companies in our neighborhood.” She proceeded to take playwriting classes at the Jackson Street Settlement House, where she fell in love with aspiring law student George Smith. Resuming her high school education in 1916, Elizabeth Wehner dreamed of becoming a writer. However, the need to work day shifts for a high-paying new job, detecting forgeries for the postal service, compelled her to drop out of high school—and in 1919, she married Smith.

The couple’s marriage brought Elizabeth Wehner Smith to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. After George graduated and moved with his wife around the state as a practicing lawyer, Elizabeth focused on raising their two young daughters, Nancy and Mary. In 1928, they moved back to Ann Arbor, where George pursued a Master’s degree in political science and Elizabeth won the status of a special student. Although she was unable to count her coursework toward a degree, due to not having finished high school, Smith was permitted to audit three courses a semester, including playwriting and journalism. During this time, she helped support her family by writing articles for publications ranging from *The Detroit Free Press* to *Modern Romance*.

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Under the name of Elizabeth W. Smith, the writer progressed from painful feelings of not belonging to increasing confidence as one of the most acclaimed student playwrights at the University of Michigan. The school’s newspaper, *The Michigan Daily*, commented in 1930 that Smith, “through consistently mature work in Play contests and other wise, has built up for herself a large following on the campus.” She developed her skill and versatility as a playwright under the tutelage of Professor Kenneth Thorpe Rowe, later the teacher of Arthur Miller. Rowe selected two of Smith’s one acts for *The University of Michigan Plays of 1929-1930* anthology. With *Wives-in-Law*, Smith concocted a “light forceful comedy, pleasantly satiric in purpose” about two women teaming up to outwit a cheating husband. By contrast, in *The Day’s Work*, Smith wrote a piercing drama about medical corruption that the Daily called a “strikingly original use of the one-act form; being a hard, brutal attitude of the author successfully symbolized by a situation realistically caught.” For 1930’s *Jonica Starrs*, “an extremely entertaining comedy” for which Smith also designed the sets, she won the Division of English’s Long Play Contest.



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The next year, *Becomes a Woman* was chosen as a winning play of the University of Michigan’s prestigious Avery Hopwood Award. For the play, Smith won a \$1,000 prize, although the university archives list the prize-winning play as *Francie Nolan*. Smith changed the title to *Becomes a Woman* when she applied for a copyright in 1931, but she did not change the name of the play’s protagonist. The play, exploring socially transgressive themes that likely limited its chances for production in the early 1930s, marked the first time Smith employed the name Francie Nolan. When a dozen years later, a younger and more innocent Francie became famous in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* as an autobiographical stand-in for the author herself, Smith might possibly have chosen the name as an homage to the character in her unproduced play.

The 1931 Hopwood Award led to an invitation from the legendary playwriting teacher George Pierce Baker to study with him at Yale University’s Department of Drama, founded in 1925. Expanding her skills in multiple aspects of theatrical production, Smith acted in productions such as *Volpone* (where she played Lady Would-be), and continued to write plays such as the 1932 one-acts *Mannequin’s Maid* and *Blind Alley*, and the full-length *Candy Farm* (produced at the Detroit Playhouse, and under the revised title of *Sawdust Heart*, at Hoboken, NJ’s Stevens

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Theatre). To her frustration, once again, Smith was unable to receive a degree. After finishing at Yale (and separating from Smith, the first of three husbands), the playwright earned her living from selling one-acts, even as success in the commercial Broadway theater proved elusive.

Smith's fortunes changed in 1935, when she found work as an actor and play reader with the Federal Theater Project. In 1936, Smith and her romantic partner and collaborator Bob Finch successfully sought FTP positions at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; she was lured by the opportunity to study playwriting with Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist Paul Green and the drama department's founder Frederick Koch. As an advocate for community-centered folk drama, Koch ran "the most successful small theater in the South—the Carolina Playmakers," as described by Johnson. He also presided over a distinguished writers' group that included Green, Thomas Wolfe, and the Mexican American playwright Josefina Niggli. To Smith's disappointment, the FTP canceled its planned production of *King Cotton*, Smith's collaboratively written Living Newspaper play exploring the effects of rural poverty on Southern workers. Nevertheless, she thrived artistically in Chapel Hill, writing award-winning plays like 1937's *So Gracious is the Time* and editing anthologies such as 1942's *Non-Royalty One-Act Plays for All-Girls Casts*. The latter included *At Liberty*, one of the earliest published plays by Tennessee Williams.

The influence of regionally specific folk plays, combined with Smith's reading of Wolfe's coming-of-age novel *Of Time and the River*, inspired her to begin work on *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Smith later commented, "I don't think I could have written a novel about Brooklyn if I hadn't gotten away." Despite grants from the Rockefeller Fellowship and the Dramatists Guild, Smith's precarious finances also proved a motivation for the book's writing. As *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* profiled Smith in 1943, "For two years she arose at 6 in the morning to devote one hour a day to completing it. The first draft was completed in a year and then it was rewritten four times. She did the final copying to save the typist's fee."

The critically acclaimed 1943 publication of that novel transformed Smith's life, as she became a national celebrity. According to *The New York Times* (in 1963), *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* went into 37 printings, was translated into 16 languages and adapted into an acclaimed 1945 film directed by Elia Kazan (a former classmate of Smith's at Yale). Smith's close friend Josefina Niggli, who suggested the title of the book, commented: "I think *Tree*, stylistically and emotionally, is one of the great books of this generation."

Smith focused her subsequent output upon biographically informed novels, including *Tomorrow Will Be Better* (1948) and *Maggie-Now* (1958). Though now best known for her fiction, Smith continued to write for the stage. In 1943, she began *And Never Yield*, an adapted drama following a Mormon woman's marriage in nine-

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teenth-century Utah. Smith commented: "I'm happy about the play—even happier than about the novel [*Tree*], because I feel at home in my own field." Although the play did not materialize in a planned Broadway production directed by Mike Todd, it was produced (as *First in Heart*) at Yale's Department of Drama in 1947. In 1951, Smith earned her first and only Broadway credit as the co-librettist of the Broadway musical adaptation of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Of her work with George Abbott (like Smith, a former playwriting student of George Pierce Baker), she commented: "I think it was one of the most amiable collaborations in dramatic history." In her final novel, 1963's *Joy in the Morning*, inspired by Smith's time at the University of Michigan, the protagonist longs to write for the stage. Smith channeled herself in young playwright Annie Brown: "She took to the medium heart, soul, and mind." After some years of illness, Smith died of pneumonia at a convalescent home in Shelton, CT on January 17, 1972 at the age of seventy-five.

In a 1959 letter to her granddaughter Candace, Smith reflected on her legacy: "I, your grandmother, never went beyond the 8th grade. I educated myself by sitting in on college courses when I could, by reading everything I could get my hands on. And without undue modesty, I am a world famous writer. A hundred years after I'm dead, people will still be reading *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*." Yet it was Smith's keen dramatic skill, honed at the University of Michigan, at Yale, and at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, that vitally informed her novels. As Carol Siri Johnson observes, "The craft of playwriting was essential to Smith: it was her practiced ability to transcribe the nuances and variations of common American speech that formed her characteristic style." Even as *Tree* remains deeply implanted in the cultural imagination, Smith's plays throb with language and characters as "exciting, churning and ever-changing" as her native borough, and invite rediscovery by new generations.

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