



# Betty Smith: Life of the Author of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

*Valerie Raleigh Yow*

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## **Betty Smith: Life of the Author of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn** Valerie Raleigh Yow

Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* captured the imagination of readers in 1943. Now, over sixty years since its publication, thousands of readers of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* still enter its world and identify with Francie Nolan, growing up in a tenement in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Betty Smith admitted that Francie was herself and that her mother, father, grandparents, aunts, and uncles were the inspiration for the book's characters. Here, in the first published biography of Betty Smith, their real-life stories are told. The heroes in Smith's novels, all working-class women—Francie in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, the office worker Margy in *Tomorrow Will Be Better*, the housewife Maggie in *Maggie-Now*, the aspiring writer Annie in *Joy in the Morning*—become self-directed and confident. These novels present an insider's view of a blue collar world, of complex characters and psychological dynamics. Smith's vision in her fiction was an unusual combination of no-holds-barred realism and hope. *Betty Smith: Life of the Author of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, carefully researched and precisely documented, is written in a warm, conversational voice. This tale of three cities—Brooklyn, Ann Arbor, and Chapel Hill—is wise, funny, and at times sad, a life of a writer but also of a daughter, lover, mother, and grandmother. AUTHOR Valerie Raleigh Yow, a former history professor, is a psychologist and playwright who lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She has authored several books, including *The History of Hera: A Woman's Art Cooperative* and *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, chosen by the American Library Association for its list, "Outstanding Academic Titles of 2006." Her first biography, *Bernice Kelly Harris: A Good Life Was Writing*, was described as "a wonderful biography that involves her reader in Harris's life."—*Florida Historical Quarterly*. Growing up I read and reread, and loved Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. I was Francie Nolan. Valerie Yow's biography is like being there all over again. Beautifully written, Francie and Betty live in every word. —Ruth Moose, poet and short story writer; *Rules and Secrets* and other books; professor, English Department, University of North Carolina.

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