



Brooklyn

By Colm Tóibín

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Genre & subject

Irish – United States -- Fiction

Women immigrants -- Fiction

Ireland – History -- 20th Century -- Fiction

Synopsis

Young Eilis Lacey dreams of life beyond the confines of her tiny Irish village, but unlike her beautiful sister, Rose, Eilis' gifts are of a more practical nature: she has a head for numbers, and is a loving and dutiful daughter. Yet her ambition cannot be hidden and soon is noted by the Parish Priest, Father Flood.

Author biography

Tóibín was born in 1955 in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, in the southeast of Ireland. He is the second youngest of five children. Tóibín grew up in a home where there was, he said, "a great deal of silence". Unable to read until the age of nine, he was overcome by a stammer.

He received his secondary education at St Peter's College, Wexford, where he was a border between 1970 and 1972. He progressed to University College Dublin, graduating in 1975. Immediately after graduation, he left for Barcelona.

Tóibín's first novel, 1990's *The South*, was partly inspired by his time in Barcelona, as was, more directly, his non-fiction *Homage to Barcelona* (1990). Having returned to Ireland in 1978, he began to study for a master's degree. However, he did not submit his thesis and left academia, at least partly, for a career in journalism.

The early 1980s were an especially bright period in Irish journalism, and the heyday of the monthly news magazine *Magill*. Tóibín became the magazine's editor in 1982, and remained in the position until 1985.

Tóibín has said his writing comes out of silence. He does not favour story and does not view himself as storyteller. He has said, "Ending a novel is almost like putting a child to sleep – it can't be done abruptly."

Tóibín works in the most extreme, severe, austere conditions. He sits on a hard, uncomfortable chair which causes him pain. When working on a first draft he covers only the right-hand side of the page; later he carries out some rewriting on the left-hand side of the page. He keeps a word processor in another room on which to transfer writing at a later time.

Discussion starters

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 Toibin 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.
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?
11. Toibin 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?

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