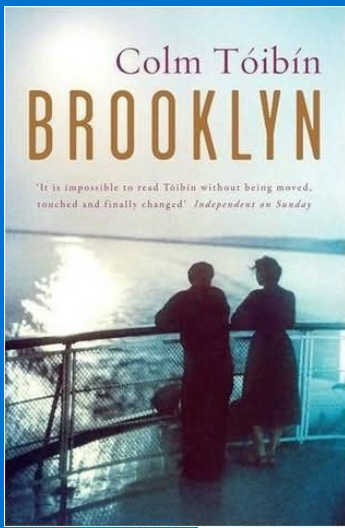


Brooklyn

Colm Toibin



Author Background

- Birth—May 30, 1955
- Where—Enniscorthy, County Wexford, Ireland, UK
- Education—B.A., University College, Dublin
- Awards—Costa Award
- Currently—Dublin, Ireland

Colm Toibin is an Irish novelist, short story writer, essayist, playwright, journalist, critic, and, most recently, poet.

Toibin is currently Irene and Sidney B. Silverman Professor of the Humanities at Columbia University and succeeded Martin Amis as professor of creative writing at the University of Manchester. He was hailed as a champion of minorities as he collected the 2011 Irish PEN Award. In 2011, he was named one of Britain's Top 300 Intellectuals by The Observer, despite being Irish.

Toibin's parents were Bríd and Michael Toibin. He was born in 1955 in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, in the southeast of Ireland. He is the second youngest of five children. His grandfather, Patrick Tobin, was a member of the IRA, as was his grand-uncle Michael Tobin. Patrick Tobin took part in the 1916 Rebellion in Enniscorthy and was subsequently interned in Frongoch in Wales. Colm's father was a teacher who was involved in the Fianna Fail party in Enniscorthy. He received his secondary education at St Peter's College, Wexford, where he was a boarder between 1970 and 1972. He later spoke of finding some of the priests attractive.

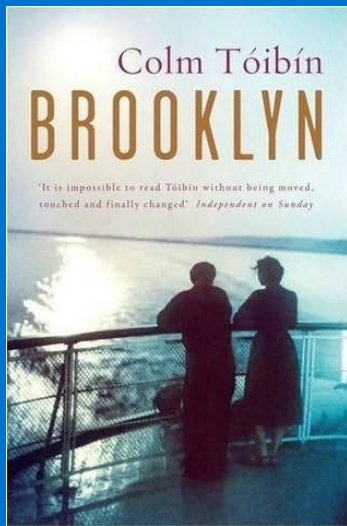
In July 1972, aged 17, he had a summer job as a barman in the Grand Hotel in Tramore, County Waterford, working from six in the evening to two in the morning. He spent his days on the beach, reading *The Essential Hemingway*, the copy of which he still professes to have, "pages stained with seawater." It developed in him a fascination with Spain, led to a wish to visit that country, gave him "an idea of prose as something glamorous, smart and shaped, and the idea of character in fiction as something oddly mysterious, worthy of sympathy and admiration, but also elusive. And more than anything, the sheer pleasure of the sentences and their rhythms, and the amount of emotion living in what was not said, what was between the words and the sentences."

He progressed to University College Dublin, graduating in 1975. Immediately after graduation, he left for Barcelona. His 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 masters 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 for the monthly news magazine *Magill*. He became the magazine's editor in 1982, and remained in the position until 1985. He left due to a dispute with Vincent Browne, *Magill*'s managing director.

Toibin is a member of Aosdana and has been visiting professor at Stanford University, The University of Texas at Austin and Princeton University. He has also lectured at several other universities, including Boston College, New York University, Loyola University Maryland, and The College of the Holy Cross. He is professor of creative writing at The University of Manchester succeeding Martin Amis and currently teaches at Columbia University.

(Adapted from Wikipedia.)



Brooklyn

Colm Toibin

Book Summary

Brooklyn

Colm Toibin, 2009

Simon & Schuster

272 pp.

ISBN-13: 9781439148952

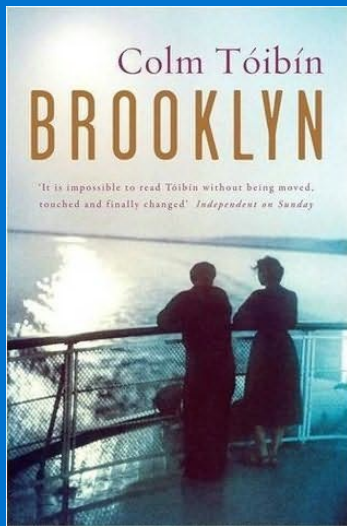
Winner, Costa Novel of the Year Award, 2009

Hauntingly beautiful and heartbreaking, Colm Toibin's sixth novel, *Brooklyn*, is set in Brooklyn and Ireland in the early 1950s, when one young woman crosses the ocean to make a new life for herself. Eilis Lacey has come of age in small-town Ireland in the years following World War Two. Though skilled at bookkeeping, she cannot find a job in the miserable Irish economy. When an Irish priest from Brooklyn offers to sponsor Eilis in America — to live and work in a Brooklyn neighborhood "just like Ireland" — 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, a blond Italian from a big family, slowly wins her over with patient charm. He takes Eilis to Coney Island and Ebbets Field, and home to dinner in the two-room apartment he shares with his brothers and parents. He talks of having children who are Dodgers fans. But just as Eilis begins to fall in love with Tony, devastating news from Ireland threatens the promise of her future.

By far Toibin's most instantly engaging and emotionally resonant novel, *Brooklyn* will make readers fall in love with his gorgeous writing and spellbinding characters.

(From the publisher.)



Brooklyn

Colm Toibin

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?

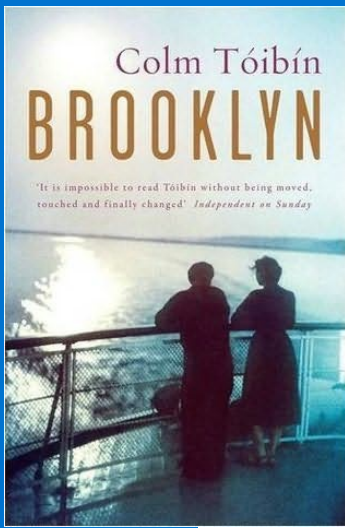
12. If Eilis had been able to choose freely, between Brooklyn and Tony, and Enniscorthy and Jim, what do you think she would have chosen? Or is Eilis really a young woman who does not choose, who allows others to determine her fate?

13. 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?

(Questions issued by publisher.)

Brooklyn

Colm Toibin



Reviews

Colm Toibin...is an expert, patient fisherman of submerged emotions...In tracking the experience, at the remove of half a century, of a girl as unsophisticated and simple as Eilis—a girl who permits herself no extremes of temperament, who accords herself no right to self-assertion—Toibin exercises sustained subtlety and touching respect. He shows no condescension for Eilis's passivity but records her cautious adventures matter-of-factly, as if she were writing them herself in her journal...In Brooklyn, Colm

Toibin quietly, modestly shows how place can assert itself, enfolding the visitor, staking its claim.

New York Times

Brooklyn is a modest novel, but it has heft. The portrait Toibin paints of Brooklyn in the early '50s is affectionate but scarcely dewy-eyed; Eilis encounters discrimination in various forms—against Italians, against blacks, against Jews, against lower-class Irish—and finds Manhattan more intimidating than alluring. Toibin's prose is graceful but never showy, and his characters are uniformly interesting and believable. As a study of the quest for home and the difficulty of figuring out where it really is, Brooklyn has a universality that goes far beyond the specific details of Eilis's struggle.

Washington Post

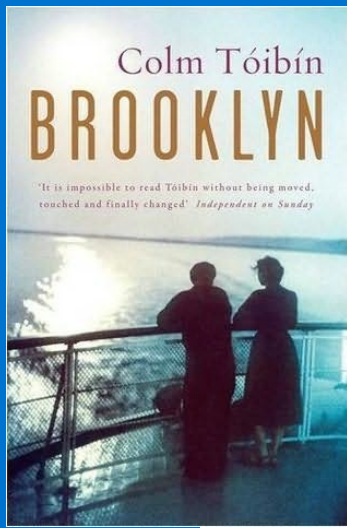
Toibin's brief novel, following his bravura rendering of the life of Henry James in *The Master*, seems modest at first. A diligent young woman with few opportunities in nineteen-fifties Ireland is packed off by her family to Brooklyn, where she works in a department store, goes to church and night school, and acquires a boyfriend, before a family crisis presents her with a stark choice between her new life and her old one. Within these confines, Toibin creates a narrative of remarkable power, writing with a spareness and intensity that give the minutest shades of feeling immense emotional impact. Seen through his protagonist's cautious eyes, even hackneyed tropes of Brooklyn life, such as trips to Ebbets Field and Coney Island, take on a subtle strangeness. Purging the immigrant novel of all swagger and sentimentality, Toibin leaves us with a renewed understanding that to emigrate is to become a foreigner in two places at once.

The New Yorker

Colm Toibin's engaging new novel, Brooklyn, will not bring to mind the fashionable borough of recent years nor Bed-Stuy beleaguered with the troubles of a Saturday night. Toibin has revived the Brooklyn of an Irish-Catholic parish in the '50s, a setting appropriate to the narrow life of Eilis Lacey. Before Eilis ships out for a decent job in America, her village life is sketched in detail. The shops, pub, the hoity-toity and plainspoken people of Enniscorthy have such appeal on the page, it does seem a shame to leave. But how will we share the girl's longing for home, if home is not a gabby presence in her emigre tale? Toibin's maneuvers draw us to the bright girl with a gift for numbers. With a keen eye, Eilis surveys her lonely, steady-on life: her job in the dry goods store, the rules and regulations of her rooming house-ladies only.... When the stage is set for the love story, slowly and carefully as befits his serious girl, Toibin is splendidly in control of Eilis's and Tony's courtship. He's Italian, you see, of a poor, caring family.... I give away nothing in telling that the possibility of Eilis reclaiming an authentic and spirited life

Brooklyn

Colm Toibin



Reviews (continued)

in Ireland turns *Brooklyn* into a stirring and satisfying moral tale.... The decent fellow awaits. Will she be doomed to a tract house of the soul on Long Island? I hear John McCormick take the high note—alone in the gloaming with the shadows of the past—as Toibin's good girl contemplates the lost promise of Brooklyn.

Signatures, Publishers Weekly

This latest from Toibin (*The Master*) begins in the southwestern Ireland town of Enniscorthy during the early 1950s, where dutiful daughter, doting sister, and aspiring bookkeeper Eilis Lacey lives with her mother and older sister, Rose. Her brothers have long since left Ireland to seek work in England, and Eilis herself soon departs for Brooklyn, NY. Once there, she attempts to master living and working in a strange land and to quell an acute and threatening loneliness. Initially friendless and of few means, Eilis gradually embraces new freedoms. She excels in work and school, falls in love, and begins to imagine a life in America. When tragedy strikes in Enniscorthy, however, Eilis returns to discover the hopes and aspirations once beyond her grasp are now hers for the taking. Toibin conveys Eilis's transformative struggles with an aching lyricism reminiscent of the mature Henry James and ultimately confers upon his readers a sort of grace that illuminates the opportunities for tenderness in our lives. Both more accessible and more sublime than his previous works, this is highly recommended.

Library Journal

This plaintive sixth novel from the Booker-nominated Irish author is both akin to his earlier fiction and a somewhat surprising hybrid. Tóibín's treatment of the early adulthood of Eilis Lacey, a quiet girl from the town of Enniscorthy who accepts a kindly priest's sponsorship to work and live in America, is characterized by a scrupulously precise domestic realism reminiscent of the sentimental bestsellers of Fannie Hurst, Edna Ferber and Betty Smith (in her beloved *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*). But as Eilis both falters and matures abroad, something more interesting takes shape. Toibin fashions a compelling characterization of a woman caught between two worlds, unsure almost until the novel's final page where her obligations and affections truly reside. Several deft episodes and set pieces bring Eilis to convincing life: her timid acts of submission, while still living at home, to her extroverted, vibrant older sister Rose; the ordeal of third-class passenger status aboard ship (surely seasickness has never been presented more graphically); her second-class status among postwar Brooklyn's roiling motley populace, and at the women's boarding house where she's virtually a non-person; and the exuberant liberation sparked by her romance with handsome plumber Tony Fiorello, whose colorful family contrasts brashly with Eilis's own dour and scattered one. Toibin is adept at suggestive understatement, best displayed in lucid portrayals of cultural interaction and conflict in a fledgling America still defining itself; and notably in a beautiful account of Eilis's first sexual experience with Tony (whom she'll soon wed), revealed as the act of a girl who knows she must fully become a woman in order to shoulder the burdens descending on her. And descend they do, as a grievous family loss reshapes Eilis's future (literally) again and again. A fine and touching novel, persuasive proof of Toibin's ever-increasing skills and range.

Kirkus Reviews