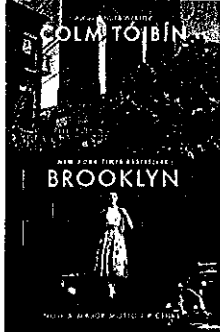


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ie=UTF8&amp;camp=1789&amp;creative=9325&amp;creativeASIN=1501106473&amp;linkCode=as2&amp;tag=litl-20&amp;linkId=JIVWBKXYWVBB2OK5)

**Brooklyn***Colm Toibin, 2009**Simon & Schuster**272 pp.**ISBN-13: 9781501106477***Summary***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.)


Toibin is also the author of *The Master* (2004) and *Mothers and Son*, a collection of stories (2008).

See the 2015 film version with Saoirse Ronan, Oscar Best Actress.

**Listen to the Screen Thoughts podcast** ([http://www.screenthoughts.net/#litlovers---](http://www.screenthoughts.net/#litlovers---brooklyn/u684y)

[brooklyn/u684y](http://www.screenthoughts.net/#litlovers---brooklyn/u684y)) as Hollister and O'Toole compare the book and movie.

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A WELL-READ ONLINE COMMUNITY

**Brooklyn (Toibin) - Discussion Questions**

MOVIES Meet Club

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Summary | Author Bio | Book Reviews | **Discussion Questions** | Full Version | [Print](#)

**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 European 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.)*

top of page (summary)

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SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

## The Reluctant Emigrant

By LIESL SCHILLINGER MAY 1, 2009

Every now and then, with a thrill of connection, you come across a passage in a book that feels as if it had been written with exact foreknowledge of your state of mind: a soothing, specific prescription for unquiet thoughts. During a long-ago solo trip to Rome — a self-assigned distraction after a difficult breakup — I remember opening George Eliot’s “Silas Marner” while sitting at the window of a high room in a cold *albergo* (once a nuns’ cloister) as strains of conversation floated up from the courtyard. Describing her protagonist’s new start in a new town, Eliot wrote of the relief that “minds that have been unhinged from their old faith and love” may feel on finding themselves in a “new land, where the beings around them know nothing of their history, and share none of their ideas — where their mother earth shows another lap.” In such a setting, she wrote, “The past becomes dreamy because its symbols have all vanished, and the present too is dreamy because it is linked with no memories.”

For Silas Marner, this “exile” was self-sought. But for Eilis Lacey, the biddable daughter at the center of Colm Toibin’s new novel, “Brooklyn,” her leave-taking from Enniscorthy, in Ireland’s County Wexford, and her resettlement in New York in the fall of 1951 are imposed on her by her

energetic, well-meaning older sister, Rose. Young, docile and incurious, unscarred by heartbreak or reversals of fortune, Eilis has no desire or need to quit her widowed mother, her friends, her familiar surroundings. Her “old faith and love” are intact, and she seeks no distance from her memories. But she submits to Rose’s plan for her transplanting, bending to a superior force of will, wishing to do what her mother and sister expect of her, wishing to please. “Eilis had always presumed that she would live in the town all her life, as her mother had done, knowing everyone, having the same friends and neighbors, the same routines in the same streets,” Toibin writes. “She had expected that she would find a job in the town, and then marry someone and give up the job and have children. Now, she felt that she was being singled out for something for which she was not in any way prepared.”

Confused by her family’s “almost unnaturally happy” mood in the days before her departure, Eilis is relieved to hear her mother, in response to a friend’s casual inquiry, blurt, “Oh, it’ll kill me when she goes.” But go she must, Eilis assumes, even though she “would have given anything to be able to say plainly that she did not want to go, that Rose could go instead.” But the Lacey women cannot speak plainly to one another. “They could do everything,” Toibin writes, “except say out loud what it was they were thinking.” And so, too young to understand the consequences of her reticence, too obedient to bolt at the dock, too humble to imagine that her own life is her own business, Eilis boards the liner for America, an irrevocable step that her mother, her sister and Eilis herself might never have wished her to make had they thought it through. America is peopled, for the most part, by the descendants of immigrants who had the resolve, the daring and the detachment to leave behind the places and people they had formerly known. But Eilis isn’t such a person; detachment isn’t part of her makeup. It has been thrust on her by women who are as attached to home and family as she is. What were they thinking? They wouldn’t, or couldn’t, say. ? ? ✓

Colm Toibin, born, like Eilis, in Enniscorthy, is an expert, patient

fisherman of submerged emotions. His characters and plots vary widely. In his beautiful, painful novel “The Blackwater Lightship,” he coaxed a touchy, lone-wolf woman to stiffly re-embrace her mother, their reconciliation precipitated by her brother’s battle with AIDS. In his best-known novel, “The Master,” he animated the inner world of Henry James. And in his story collection, “Mothers and Sons,” he tapped the hidden bonds and vexed motivations of diffident men and women — from thieves, shop owners and farmers to a grandmother who plays favorites and gay men who rally to the side of a friend whose mother has died. In one of these stories, “Famous Blue Raincoat,” a woman listens to a song, recorded by her long-dead sister, taken from an album her son has found in the garage. The song “gave her a hint, in case she needed one, of her own reduced self, like one of her negatives upstairs, all outline and shadow, and gave her a clear vision of her sister’s face.” She did not want that clarity, Toibin adds. “She hoped she would never have to listen to it again.”

In another story, “A Priest in the Family,” an aged mother accepts the fact that her son, a priest, will go on trial for molesting teenage boys. “When people stopped to talk to her, she was unsure if they knew about her son’s disgrace, or if they too had become so skilled at the plain language of small talk that they could conceal every thought from her, every sign, as she could from them.” Yet when her son urges her to leave town during the trial, to “spare” her, she refuses. “When he lifted his head and took her in with a glance,” she observes, “he had the face of a small boy.” She tells him: “Whatever we can do, we will do, and none of us will be going away. I’ll be here.”

Through all these books and stories, intimations of attachment, abandonment and strong feeling (felt but rarely spoken) fall like a plumb line. Toibin’s new novel stands apart because its protagonist has such an uncritical nature that she doesn’t see she has grounds for complaint, much less possess any impulse to initiate confrontation. But slowly, equably, and without malice, Eilis exacts a bittersweet revenge for the expatriation she never intended — or,

rather, one unfolds for her unsought, organically.

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. Accompanying her on the ghastly voyage from Ireland to America, where the sea swell has all the passengers green and reeling, he soon brings her to a Brooklyn boarding house run by a respectable Irishwoman. Eilis numbs herself against nostalgia until letters from home awaken her homesickness. Then she grieves. "She was nobody here," she thinks. "It was not just that she had no friends and family; it was rather that she was a ghost in this room, in the streets on the way to work, on the shop floor. . . . Nothing here was part of her. It was false, empty."

Unlike Silas Marner, unlike intentional voyagers everywhere, Eilis hasn't sought the consolations of anonymity. And so, when she meets a man, an Italian-American named Tony, she does what her instinct dictates: puts down roots. When her family calls her back to Enniscorthy, Tony seems to her like "part of a dream from which she had woken." And yet, back in Ireland, Eilis knows that if she were in New York it would be Enniscorthy that seemed like a "strange, hazy dream." Is it surprising if a seed grows where it lands, once it's been scattered? Can it be helped? In "Brooklyn," Colm Toibin quietly, modestly shows how place can assert itself, enfolding the visitor, staking its claim.

BROOKLYN

By Colm Toibin

262 pp. Scribner. \$25

Liesl Schillinger is a regular contributor to the Book Review.



Summary | **Author Bio** | Book Reviews | Discussion Questions | Full Version | [Print](#)

#### Author Bio

- 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.

#### Early Life

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.

### Work

*The Heather Blazing* (1992), his second novel, was followed by *The Story of the Night* (1996) and *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999). His fifth novel, *The Master* (2004), is a fictional account of portions in the life of author Henry James. He is the author of other non-fiction books: *Bad Blood: A Walk Along the Irish Border* (1994), (reprinted from the 1987 original edition) and *The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe* (1994).

Toibin has written two short story collections. His first *Mothers and Sons* which, as the name suggests, explores the relationship between mothers and their sons, was published in 2006 and was reviewed favourably (including by Pico Iyer in *The New York Times*). His second, broader collection *The Empty Family* was published in 2010.

Toibin wrote a play, titled *Beauty in a Broken Place*: this was staged in Dublin in August 2004. He has continued to work as a journalist, both in Ireland and abroad, writing for the *London Review of Books* among others. He has also achieved a reputation as a literary critic: he has edited a book on Paul Durcan, *The Kilfenora Teaboy* (1997); *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (1999); and has written *The Modern Library: The 200 Best Novels in English since 1950* (1999), with Carmen Callil; a collection of essays, *Love in a Dark Time: Gay Lives from Wilde to Almodovar* (2002); and a study on Lady Gregory, *Lady Gregory's Toothbrush* (2002).

He sent a photograph of Borges to Don DeLillo who described it as "the face of Borges against a dark background—Borges fierce, blind, his nostrils gaping, his skin stretched taut, his mouth amazingly vivid; his mouth looks painted; he's like a shaman painted for visions, and the whole face has a kind of steely rapture." DeLillo often seeks inspiration from it.

During Desmond Hogan's sexual assault case he defended him in court as "a writer of immense power and importance who dealt with human isolation."

In 2011, *The Times Literary Supplement* published his poem "Cush Gap, 2007".

Toibín 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 the right-hand side only 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.

### Themes


Toibin's work explores several main lines: the depiction of Irish society, living abroad, the process of creativity and the preservation of a personal identity, focusing especially on homosexual identities — Toibín is openly gay — but also on identity when confronted with loss. The "Wexford" novels, *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship*, use Enniscorthy, the town of Toibín's birth, as narrative material, together with the history of Ireland and the death of his father. An autobiographical account and reflection on this episode can be found in the non-fiction book, *The Sign of the Cross*. In 2009, he published *Brooklyn*, a tale of a woman emigrating to Brooklyn from Enniscorthy.

Two other novels, *The Story of the Night* and *The Master* revolve around characters who have to deal with a homosexual identity and take place outside Ireland for the most part, with a character having to cope with living abroad. His first novel, *The South*, seems to have ingredients of both lines of work. It can be read together with *The Heather Blazing* as a diptych of Protestant and Catholic heritages in County Wexford, or it can be grouped with the "living abroad" novels. A third topic that links *The South* and *The Heather Blazing* is that of creation. Of painting in the first case and of the careful wording of a judge's verdict in the second. This third thematic line culminated in *The Master*, a study on identity, preceded by a non-fiction book in the same subject, *Love in a Dark Time*. The book of short stories "Mothers and Sons" deal with family themes, both in Ireland and Catalonia, and homosexuality.

Toibín has written about gay sex in several novels, though *Brooklyn* contains a heterosexual sex scene in which the heroine loses her virginity. In his 2012 essay collection *New Ways to Kill Your Mother: Writers and Their Families* he studies the biographies of James Baldwin, J. M. Synge and W. B. Yeats, among others.

His personal notes and work books reside at the National Library of Ireland.  
(Adapted from Wikipedia.)

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SIMON & SCHUSTER

# READING GROUP GUIDE

*This reading group guide for **Brooklyn by Colm Tóibín** includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

## Introduction

"One of the most unforgettable characters in contemporary literature," (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*), Eilis Lacey has come of age in Enniscorthy, 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 establish her life in Brooklyn, devastating news from Ireland brings her back to Enniscorthy. Eilis is forced to choose between America and Ireland--and two men who embody these places--in the midst of the sweeping economic and social changes of the 1950s.

## Questions for Discussion

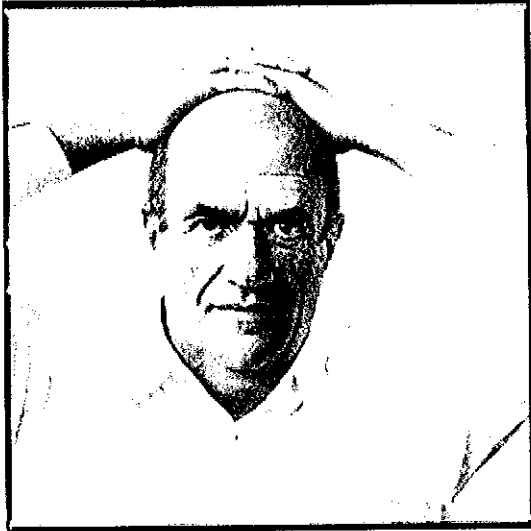
1. Before she goes to America, Eilis believes that, "While people from the town who lived in England missed Enniscorthy, no one who went to America missed home. Instead, they were happy there and proud" (pg 26). Why do you think the Irish had such a rosy view of America? How are Eilis's expectations 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?

### **Tips to Enhance Your Book Group**

1. *I Love Lucy!* was the hit show of the 1950s. However, it depicts a very different life for Ricky and Lucy, also living in New York City, than Eilis experiences. Watching some episodes of *I Love Lucy!* and discuss the differences between this Hollywood version of life in the ‘50s and Tóibín’s depiction in *Brooklyn*.
2. Irish traditions and food appear throughout *Brooklyn*, particularly in the passage about the dances Eilis attends both in the U.S. and Ireland. Listen to *ceili* music at your meeting, and ask members to bring their favorite Irish (or Irish-inspired) dish!
3. Betty Smith’s novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is perhaps one of the most well-known depictions of New York City in the 1940s. Pair the two novels (perhaps reading them in tandem, or for consecutive meetings) and discuss the changes in Brooklyn from Smith’s 1940s to Tóibín’s 1950s.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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## COLM TOIBIN

Colm Tóibín is the author of seven novels, including *The Blackwater Lightship*; *The Master*, winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize; *Brooklyn*, winner of the Costa Book Award; and *The Testament of Mary*, as well as two story collections. Twice shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, Tóibín lives in Dublin and New York.

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