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**Abstract: “Ain’t no such thing as a white Jew”:
Understanding the Jew in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn***

The wartime bestselling novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943) includes a surprising amount of commentary about Jews. Set in Brooklyn, New York, during the early twentieth century, the novel is loosely based on author Betty Smith’s childhood. Following protagonist Francie Nolan between the ages of eleven and seventeen, the novel shows Francie’s growing understanding of an “other,” not-quite-white group in her neighborhood: Jews. Coming from an Irish-German-American family, Francie imbibed biases against Jews from her family and neighbors, as the novel makes clear. Called a work of sociology by the social science journal, *Social Forces*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* provided an explanation of how Americans came to their religious and racial prejudices, including those toward Jews. Written at a time when Americans regularly heard news of Nazi persecution of Jews, *A Tree* normalized the experience of coming from a poor and uneducated family where prejudice was rife and young people such as Francie learned new ways of thinking about once-marginalized groups. Drawing on archival material from the Betty Smith collection, this paper focuses on Smith’s portrayal of Jews as existing somewhere between the racial and religious status of Christians and Blacks, as well as the response that this portrayal evoked from readers. Finally, juxtaposing Smith’s 1943 depiction of a racist and hidebound Brooklyn neighborhood with Laura Z. Hobson’s somewhat more open-minded portrayal of cosmopolitan Manhattan in *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947), shows a range of possible visions of tolerance by two commercially successful, New York woman authors.

A Tree part of social message/race novels
Normalized prejudice

"Smith's novel is not weighed down by the need to portray (and sell) the same vision of cosmopolitan liberalism, and the result is a very different account of attitudes toward Jews and Blacks."