

Brooklyn: Irish immigration through rose-colored glasses

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Directed by John Crowley; screenplay by Nick Hornby, based on the novel by Colm Tóibín.

Irish-born director John Crowley's *Brooklyn* is a quiet film that centers on a young Irish girl who emigrates to America in the early 1950s. Adapted from Colm Tóibín's 2009 novel, Crowley's movie is not a tale about flight from poverty or political oppression, but one about homesickness and the struggle to adjust to an alien environment.

Eilis (Saoirse Ronan) is essentially being sent away from her native Enniscorthy, Ireland, to Brooklyn, New York by her older sister Rose (Fiona Glascott) to escape the town's narrowness and stagnation ("I can't buy you the life you need"). Prospects are bleak and Eilis works part-time for the mean-spirited gossip, Miss Kelly (Brid Brennan). Enlisting the help of kindly Father Flood (Jim Broadbent) in New York, Rose makes sure that Eilis is properly set up in the US. With great sadness and trepidation, Eilis leaves her mother and sister and "is away to America."

On board ship in cramped quarters, Eilis suffers from acute sea-sickness made worse by the lack of access to a bathroom. A veteran traveler (Eva Birthistle) educates her in the mysteries of making the journey to America, including how the young girl must look and act at immigration. Once in Brooklyn, Eilis lodges at a nicely appointed boardinghouse run by the stern, wise and very Irish Mrs. Kehoe (the excellent Julie Walters). All the other boarders are female and most of them Irish, and mealtime is the occasion for good manners and talk about the girls' concerns and ambitions.

Even though Father Flood has arranged for an enviable job at an upscale department store, Eilis is still plagued by separation anxiety. Convinced that his charge could improve her lot, the priest enrolls her in night classes for bookkeeping. When the shy Eilis

meets the confident, affectionate Italian-American Tony (Emory Cohen), her entire condition improves.

Eilis's life seems to be taking a turn for the better in her adopted country, until she receives the terrible news from Father Flood that her beloved sister Rose has suddenly died. Once back in Enniscorthy, her sister's old job falls in her lap and an eligible young man, Jim (Domhnall Gleeson), takes an interest in her—and she in him. Eilis sees Ireland, including its beautiful (if chilly) sea-coast, in a better light. A life with Jim seems tempting, and her staying would please her lonely mother no end. A bureau drawer full of unopened letters from Tony indicates the intense pressures our heroine finds herself under. Eilis must choose between two loves and two countries.

Brooklyn has certain appealing characteristics. Crowley is a talented filmmaker who has a fluid and rhythmic touch. Two of his previous movies, *Boy A* (2007), which treats the fate of a young man just released from prison for taking part in the murder of a girl when he was a child, and *Closed Circuit* (2013), about a terrorist attack and government conspiracies, were substantial works.

Crowley's newest work is essentially carried by Ronan's ethereal, introspective appearance and performance. Additionally, Walters as the Brooklyn landlady is a standout and Broadbent as Eilis' priest and guardian is a smooth ride. Scenes in the boardinghouse are engaging and, in general, the imagery and costumes are refined and luxuriant. The depth of Eilis' heartbreak at her sister's death is emotionally stirring.

Overall, however, *Brooklyn* is a pleasant film, but not an especially compelling one. Both the screenplay by Hornby and the novel on which it is based are fairly limited, even somewhat conformist. One newspaper

review of the book asserted that “Tóibín seems to have deliberately opted for a kind of banality here, choosing a period and setting that are familiar, yet remote from grand historic events.”

“Ordinary” people and “ordinary” events can be the source of significant drama, if the powerful currents in their lives, which are always there and always lie beneath the surface, are tapped into. In this case, however, the writer and filmmakers have set their sights too low. “Ordinary” life is treated here as though it were nothing but ordinary, cut off from every explosive and potentially more engaging historical and social issue. Upon such an edifice, no great art can be constructed.

It is perfectly true that there were success stories in the Irish immigrant community in postwar America—this was a period, after all, of generally rising living standards. But why take pains to make a rather complacent movie out of such stories?

Having taken its plunge into “banality,” the movie goes on to offer a version of America as the land where the streets are more or less paved with gold. Especially disturbing is the long shot of Eilis passing out of the customs and immigration shed into the streets of New York in which the open doorway emits a bright, blinding light, as though the girl were passing into Paradise.

The one relatively brief sequence in *Brooklyn* that suggests that the immigrant experience can be a harsh one takes place in Flood’s church, where the priest and his helpers, including Eilis, serve Christmas dinner to a group of older Irish immigrant men. Flood explains to Eilis that these now destitute and broken men were the ones who built the bridges and tunnels in New York. He tells her he has no idea how the men currently support themselves, but clearly most don’t know where their next meal is coming from. But the scene ends, and the film passes on to more pleasant things.

If *Brooklyn* were made with more urgency and more insight into present circumstances, surely the filmmakers would have been obliged to ask themselves: has it all turned out that well then, the great American “success story” as a whole? Is there not some cinematic-dramatic means of hinting at contradictions to come?

Crowley’s film makes much of the fact that Tony has plans to provide a comfortable life for Eilis on Long Island. But is his dream of living in a suburban

subdivision really going to make her eyes sparkle? Of course, people wanting to improve their conditions are not to be blamed for the choices society leaves open to them at any given point in time, but the suburban lifestyle often underwent criticism in 1950s’ film and television for its conventionality and stifling character.

In any event, America in 1952 was not quite the safe haven and conflict-free assembly line of success that *Brooklyn* suggests it was. This was the period of the bloody Korean War, which resulted in 150,000 American dead and wounded. It was the height of the anti-Communist hysteria and paranoia, with ongoing purges in the film industry and the unions. Between March 1947 and December 1952 some 6.6 million government employees were investigated for “subversion.” By one estimate, 13.5 million Americans came within the scope of government “loyalty boards.” The Rosenbergs were executed in June 1953.

Of course, many people entirely avoided such painful matters, or tried to. But, again, was there no artistic way of suggesting that at least America had “issues”? Instead, we get to watch Tony’s happy-go-lucky Italian-American family, and, all in all, *Brooklyn* convinces us that Eilis, the best student in her class at Brooklyn College, will lead a fairly charmed life.

One has to go out of one’s way to locate a period of American life, sandwiched between a brutal past and a brutal present, where purely personal dilemmas far outweighed the press of social reality. To wax exuberant about the life of a fortunate Irish girl in postwar America lends an elegant movie a somewhat fairytale-like character.



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