

Discussion Questions for *Brooklyn*

by *Colm Tóibín*

1. It seems the issue of whether Eilis evolves is one many of us questioned. *Judy Catterton* asks if she has? *Margaret Kirby* questions if our initial impression of Eilis changed over the course of the novel.

Related to the above, *Kim Burnett* asks us to consider the ways Tóibín uses the details of ordinary life—baseball, eating spaghetti, the weather—to illustrate Eilis’s challenges and growth.

2. Another character question: Do you agree with this quote from the author about Eilis: “She thinks and notices and reflects with considerable force, but then she doesn’t act on her intelligence.” (*Margaret Kirby*)

3. Is there enough plot to keep readers involved, asks *Margaret Kirby*. *Karen Schneiderman* echoes this when she writes “It is amazing to me that such a quiet novel in which there was basically no tension until the last nine pages could be such a page turner. How did Tóibín do that??

4. Pacing is another issue: Says *Kim Burnett*: Tóibín writes several long scenes that left me wondering about his authorial purpose. Why do you think he took so much time with the vomit-on-the-ship scene? How does the long trying-on-the-bathing-suit scene add to narrative? Or did it?

5. A *New York Times* reviewer calls Tóibín an “expert, fisherman of submerged emotions.” Do you agree? (*Judy Catterton*)

6. Class and race issues weave throughout the book. Discuss the ways Tóibín raises the class and race issues of 50s Brooklyn through the meals at the boarding house and Eilis’s work at the department store. (*Kim Burnett*)

7. What does the story of Eilis moving to the bigger room in the basement tell us about Eilis? Is this crucial to the overall narrative? (*Kim Burnett*)

8. In an interview Colm Tóibín said, “I think the whole point of a novel is that you give the characters autonomy so that the next thing that happens was predicted by no one.” Does Tóibín succeed in this objective in *Brooklyn*? (*Judy Catterton*)

9. What do you think of the decisions Eilis made? How do you feel about the ending? (*Margaret Kirby*)

What most interested me about Eilis is that she had an “external self” (who the world saw and how she was supposed to feel) and an internal one (who misses home and isn’t happy in

the way it seems her family expects her to be). Perhaps all people, all characters, have this, but Tóibín seems to use this as a central tension in the book—even an element of plot (so much happens because Eilis pushes down her internal self. Is this enough plot?