

Shared Reading, Shared Conversation, Shared Community

Roswell P. Flower Memorial Library
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North Country Reads

A Reader's Guide to *A Northern Light* by Jennifer Donnelly

Dear Reader,

Thank you for joining us for the inaugural year of North Country Reads, a tri-county reading program designed to give our community a single point of reference – one book – to spark conversations and kindle connections among residents of the North Country.

The program is organized by Flower Memorial Library, Jefferson Community College and North Country Public Radio, each of which is dedicated to increasing knowledge, literacy and a sense of community in the regions they serve.

The 2006 North Country Reads book selection, Jennifer Donnelly's *A Northern Light*, is a coming of age story set against the backdrop of the scenic Adirondacks and a true-life 1906 murder that shocked the nation. The novel is narrated by 16-year-old Mattie Gokey, a precocious young woman who longs for more opportunities than her tiny hometown of Eagle Bay can give her.

We believe the selection captures the spirit of turn-of-the-century Northern New York and its people, and provides a lens through which we can look at our community life today – with the added perspective of 100 years of history.

Embarking the first year of this project, we hope you'll join us, not only in reading *A Northern Light*, but at events supporting the project, such as author readings, presentations and question and answer panels.

We'd also like to thank our sponsors for funding author visits and book purchases for youth programs, schools, libraries and senior centers.

Please help us make this year a success, ensuring the project will be able to continue to promote shared reading, shared conversation and shared community.

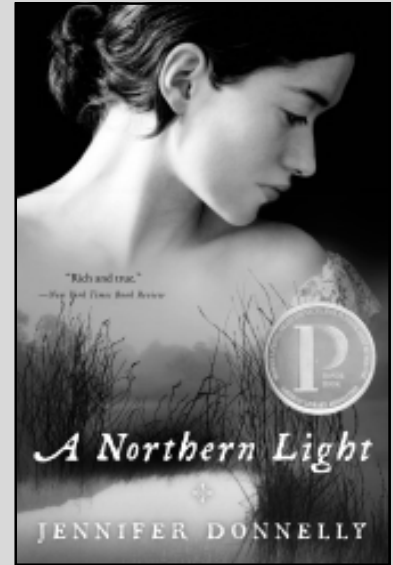
Happy reading!

Sincerely,

Kate Couch & Maxine Quigg

Co-chairs, North Country Reads

For more information about *A Northern Light*, and the North Country Reads project, visit www.ncpr.org/ncreads



North Country Reads Consortium Members and Funders

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The Murder of Grace Brown and the trial of Chester Gillette



Grace Brown, who worked in Gillette's uncle's skirt factory, was murdered on July 11, 1906.

Chester Gillette, who was found relaxing at a nearby hotel three days after the murder.



A postcard view of the Adirondack resort on Big Moose Lake, The Hotel Glennmore, where the couple stayed at the time of the murder.

For more information about *A Northern Light*, and the North Country Reads project, visit www.ncpr.org/ncreads

An Interview with Jennifer Donnelly

Have you always wanted to write?

Yes, ever since I was a small child. I spent much of my elementary and high school career inflicting terrible poems and overwrought stories on my family and friends. I didn't write any fiction in college, but I did write for my college newspaper. Mainly on local restaurants, bakeries, and ice-cream stands, as I had hopes of becoming a food writer. I was to discover, however, that publications like *Gourmet* magazine require better qualifications than mere gluttony, and so I didn't end up pursuing that line of work.



What inspired you to write this story?

First and foremost, Grace Brown's story. The one told about her by friends, family, and eyewitnesses, and the one she told in her own letters. When I read those letters, I was upset—grief stricken, actually—that such a kind, funny, perceptive, decent girl had been trapped by her circumstances and then murdered because there was no way out of them. Mattie was born, in part, because I wanted to change the past. I wanted Grace's death to have meaning. And I wanted her death to allow someone else to escape her confining circumstances and live her life, even though Grace herself didn't get that chance.

Your portrayal of everyday life in the early 1900s is so real and vividly detailed. What kind of research did you do for this book? How long did it take you to write the story?

I consulted oral histories, histories of the area written local residents, tax records, photographs, newspaper clippings, a Cranberry Lake farmwife's diary, court transcripts of Chester Gillette's trial, old camp menus, old postcards and autograph books—most of which were made available to me the Town of Webb Historical Society and the Adirondack Museum. I also used stories told to me by my great-grandmother, my grandmother, her brother and sister, my father and my uncle. These stories were accounts of how my upstate relatives—all Irish immigrants or their children—lived, worked, and played in and around the western Adirondacks. Some were sober descriptions of the hard, everyday lives of poor farmers, hotel workers and woodsmen, and some were out-and-out whoppers. I knew one from the other and I didn't care, I just loved the telling.

About the Author

Jennifer Donnelly is the author of a novel for adult readers, *The Tea Rose*, and a picture book, *Humble Pie*, illustrated by Stephen Gammell. For *A Northern Light*, her first young adult novel, she drew on stories she heard from her grandmother while growing up in upstate New York. She says, "Ever since I was a child, characters in books have been as real to me as flesh-and-blood people. Open a book and suddenly you can hang out with Tom and Huck and Jim, Holden Caulfield, or Heathcliff. What can possibly beat that?"

Jennifer Donnelly lives with her husband, their daughter, and two greyhounds in Brooklyn, New York.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is Pa so against Mattie working at the Glenmore Hotel? Do you think he is a good father? Why or why not?
2. Referring to Mattie's promise to her mother, Weaver says, "God took her life and she took yours." Why does he look at the situation that way? What might have been her mother's motives? Do you think Mattie is obliged to keep that promise? What would you advise Mattie when she wonders if it would be all right to alter the promise?
3. Miss Parrish says Mattie's writing is bad. Miss Wilcox says it is a gift. Why are their opinions and subsequent advice about her writing so different?
4. Why does Royal race his horses when Mattie tells him that nothing is more exciting than books? Why does Mattie agree to marry him?
5. Mattie says at the Glenmore she learned "when to tell the truth and when not to." Under what circumstances might it be better *not* to tell the truth?
6. Why would Grace Brown want the letters destroyed? Shouldn't Mattie tell someone about the letters as soon as Grace's body is fished from the lake? Why doesn't she?
7. Mattie wonders what would happen if characters in books could change their fates. Are there characters in Mattie's story whose fates you'd like to change? Which ones? In what way? Why? How about characters in other favorite stories?
8. Do you think it's possible for Mattie to pursue her love of books without sacrificing the love of another person?
9. Why does Weaver react so violently to the man at the train station when he knows that a similar situation led to his father's death? How else might Weaver have handled the situation?
10. What does Miss Wilcox mean when she says that voice is not just the sound that comes from your throat but the feeling that comes from your words?
11. Weaver wishes there were happy endings in real life. Are there?
12. Why does Mattie finally decide to leave all she knows for a new life in New York?

The Murder, cont'd.

In 1906, the murder trial of Chester Gillette, a prep school graduate accused of killing his pregnant girlfriend, Grace Brown, created an international sensation.



GILLETTE DODGING THE PRESS CAMERA.

The trial attracted media from across the country and Herkimer County Courthouse was filled to capacity every day of the trial.



ALL PARTS OF THE COUNTRY STOPPED IN GILLETTE TRIAL.

Americans of the Victorian Era were particularly scandalized by the personal drama involving Gillette's social climbing and his cool demeanor throughout the trial.

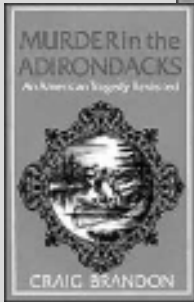
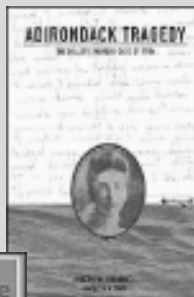
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Other Depictions of the Grace Brown Murder:

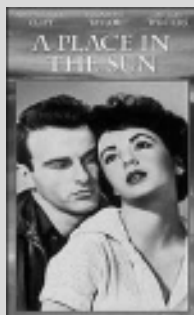
Theodore Dreiser's classic 1925 novel based on the events at Eagle Bay is listed among the best American fiction.



Two nonfiction works have attempted to document the murder and trial.



The Oscar-winning 1951 Elizabeth Taylor, Montgomery Clift film *A Place in the Sun*, was based on Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*.



And in December 2005, an opera of *An American Tragedy* had its Metropolitan Opera debut.

Sources & Suggestions for Further Reading

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Keith, Herbert G. *Man of the Woods*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1972.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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Dreiser, Theodore. *An American Tragedy*. Signet Classics; Reissue edition, 2000.

Web sites:

North Country Reads: <http://www.ncpr.org/ncreads>

Jennifer Donnelly: <http://www.jenniferdonnelly.com>

Herkimer Historical Society: <http://www.rootsweb.com/~nyhchs/>

Adirondack Museum: <http://www.adkmuseum.org/>

