***Brooklyn*: Combined Reviews and a Personal Reflection**

Brooklyn review – this fairytale of New York casts a spell

4/5stars

Saoirse Ronan is the miraculous still centre of this beautiful, old-fashioned adaptation of Colm Tóibín’s novel about a young Irish woman in America

 ‘One of the most intelligent and compelling screen presences of her generation’: Saoirse Ronan as   
Eilis in Brooklyn. Photograph: PR/Kerry Brown/Fox Searchlight/AP

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What a moving, emotionally intelligent and refreshingly old-fashioned movie this is. The narrative may be perfectly situated in the early 50s, but the style of film-making harks back further still, to a time when “women’s pictures” were the backbone of popular cinema. Contemporary audiences raised on overblown spectacle and overwrought romance may have to recalibrate their reactions to appreciate the rich rewards of director [John Crowley](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1259871/)’s best film since 2003’s unexpectedly punchy *Intermission*. But for those enamoured of the 30s and 40s heyday of Bette Davis, Joan Crawford and Barbara Stanwyck, *Brooklyn* feels like a breath of fresh air.

Empathetically adapted by Nick Hornby from Colm Tóibín’s novel, this tells the story of Eilis (the immaculate [Saoirse Ronan](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/may/27/saoirse-ronan-200-years-young)), a young woman from Enniscorthy, County Wexford who finds herself almost unwittingly “away to America” and the new horizons of the titular East Coast borough. “Sometimes it’s nice to talk to people who don’t know your auntie,” declares a fellow traveller as Ireland recedes and the New World looms. This is a world of red shoes, yellow dresses, maroon and blue cars, a stark contrast to the sternly jacketed women and oily-haired blazer boys (“hardly Gary Cooper”) back home.

With Montreal doubling handsomely for New York, cinematographer Yves Bélanger captures the widening horizons of Eilis’s experience, early scenes of rainy Irish streets and chilly church interiors replaced by warmer American tones that will later find their way back across the Atlantic, all refracted through Eilis’s clear blue eyes.

Initially bereft at the separation from her sister, Rose (Fiona Glascott, excellent), Eilis finds her feet when Emory Cohen’s “decent and kind” Tony Fiorello asks her to dance, introducing her to Italian charm, cuisine and family life. But when weddings and funerals call her back to Ireland, Eilis’s heart starts skipping to a more familiar beat, Domhnall Gleeson’s Jim Farrell offering something of which she could only dream before leaving.

Tapping into a rich seam of émigré cinema (Jim Sheridan’s 2002*In America* is a distant cousin), *Brooklyn* beautifully evokes the sense of being torn between time, place and identity. In Ireland, Eilis is a daughter with a history; in America she is a woman with a future; in both she is filled with displaced longing. Music plays a key storytelling role, the new verses and old choruses of Eilis’s life rehearsed amid contrasting dancehall scenes. In one sublime sequence that echoes the poetry of the Pogues’ Fairytale of New York, Eilis serves a communal Christmas dinner to the downtrodden men who “built the tunnels and bridges”, one of whom (played by angel-voiced [Iarla Ó Lionáird](http://www.iarla.com/)) stands to sing the traditional Irish love song [Casadh an tSúgáin](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=al9-3mW6zw8). Wisely, Crowley allows Ó Lionáird’s voice to ring unaccompanied before Michael Brook’s orchestration appears (wonderful to hear a score that is lyrical without recourse to the ladle), a montage of silent faces offering fleeting portraits of homes left and loves lost.

 ‘Torn between time and place’: Fiona Glascott, Jane Brennan and Saoirse Ronan in Brooklyn. Photograph: Kerry Brown/AP

At the centre of it all is Ronan, who hasn’t taken a false step since earning an Oscar nomination for [*Atonement* in 2008](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTonWx85EJI), and who appears to have developed the ability to act with her pupils, which seem to widen and contract at will. With her timeless young/old face (shades of Grace Kelly?), minutely nuanced gestures and pitch-perfect vocal inflections, Ronan is a walking miracle, one of the most intelligent and compelling screen presences of her generation. In her company, Julie Walters can modulate the broader strokes of matriarchal landlady Mrs Kehoe’s hilarious disdain for “giddiness”; Jim Broadbent can play Father Flood as an utterly benign presence without fear of soft soaping; and Domhnall Gleeson can make a late-in-the-day appearance as the lovestruck Jim without his palpable devotion seeming contrived. Not only do we believe that Eilis could inspire the patient ardour of two very different men, but also that both men could be worthy contenders for her affections.

Particular plaudits are due to the costume, production and hair and makeup departments, which make seemingly light work of complex shifts in context and character, guiding us through the transatlantic voyages of the story, inner development reflected in outer change. Like its heroine, *Brooklyn* does not shout its virtues from the rooftops and it’s significant that the publicity has struggled to capture its anachronistic grace. No matter – those who discover the film, whether by design or accident, will be wooed by its subtle spell and enriched by its deceptively low-key charm.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/nov/08/brooklyn-observer-film-review-saoirse-ronan> [A major British newspaper]

Brooklyn review: a most unconventional conventional romance

A good Irish Catholic girl immigrates to New York but can’t quite leave the old country behind in this delicately understated period drama based on Colm Toíbín’s novel

**[By Donald Clarke](https://www.irishtimes.com/profile/donald-clarke-7.1010751)** [Wed, Nov 4, 2015,](https://www.irishtimes.com/profile/donald-clarke-7.1010751)

It is as you thought. John Crowley’s take on Colm Toíbín’s hugely popular 2009 novel is a lovely, lovely film. It is the sort of film to which you could confidently escort the elderly maiden aunt of unkind stereotype.

Indeed, that 12A certificate (watch out for “moderate” sex and language) seems, if anything, just the tiniest bit harsh. Like its heroine on her first trip to Coney Island, *Brooklyn* wriggles demurely into its bathing suit without revealing so much as a square inch of flesh.

Yet Nick Hornby’s largely faithful script reminds us of the cheeky perversity at the heart of the novel. The film sends young Eilis Lacey (Saoirse Ronan) to 1950s New York, but pays no attention to the counter-cultural buzz building in Manhattan. No Birdland. No beatniks. No skyscrapers. Instead, Eilis spends her time in an Irish- American corner of Brooklyn that, with its supervised dances and close focus on the Catholic Church, seems little more thrilling than similar strips of Liverpool or northwest London.

Eilis ends up torn between a fast-talking Italian-American and the boy she left behind, but no contrast is set up between any wan Edgar Linton and any rugged Heathcliff.

It is to Domhnall Gleeson’s enormous credit that he makes something irresistible of a most unlikely romantic hero: a middle-class chap in a rugby-club blazer, whose decent manners conceal no inner torment.

Emory Cohen may offer exotic flavours as Tony Fiorello, the Brooklyn Dodgers fan who sweeps up the young immigrant, but this stable family man is no more likely to be mistaken for James Dean. *Brooklyn* is a most unconventional conventional romance.

The film ultimately encounters the sort of near-accidental knot of deception that powered restoration comedies. Before that happens, we meet Eilis living reasonably contentedly in a mid-sized town that domestic viewers will recognise as Enniscorthy.

An opportunity arises to emigrate and (because people did in those days) she hugs all reservations to her bosom and boards the ship for New York. The seasickness is bad, the homesickness is worse. On arrival, she secures work in a department store and takes up studies in bookkeeping.

**Low- key perversities**In another of Toíbín’s low-key perversities, the heroine never strains much at the constraints of the era. She is a decent person who stumbles into romantic confusion. Few contemporary actors are better than Ronan at allowing just the mildest intimations of surging emotion to leak through a demure, well-maintained carapace. The challenges of the understated script are grasped with predictable confidence.

The circling supporting players cannot be faulted. There has always been a touch of genius to Julie Walters, and she exploits it to the full with her turn as Eilis’s landlady.

Walters has few jokes to speak of, but, employing timing that would floor Jack Benny, she turns every second line into a comic banger. Jim Broadbent is calmly persuasive as an entirely benevolent priest. (Come to think of it, the only properly antagonistic character is the archetypically bitter gossip, played against type by Bríd Brennan.)

Sadly, not all the film-making is subtle. The surge of white light that greets Eilis as a door is opened on to the New York quay would be more at place in a commercial for haemorrhoid cream. (Step into relief!) Staying with the same theme, the scene around Tony’s comically Italian dinner table recalls nothing so much as the Dolmio family in full flow.

These bum notes observed, *Brooklyn* – less ambiguous in its conclusions than the book – emerges as a triumphant blend of social history and reined-in melodrama. It is meant entirely as a compliment to say that Maeve Binchy would have got on well with it.

<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/brooklyn-review-a-most-unconventional-conventional-romance-1.2416914>

**BROOKLYN (2015)**

**By**[Glenn Kenny](http://www.rogerebert.com/contributors/glenn-kenny) November 4, 2015   |

[Colm Tóibín](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/colm-t%C3%B3ib%C3%ADn)’s 2009 novel “Brooklyn” is one of those books that seems like a miracle, a book that reminds the reader just how much power can reside in relatively unadorned language. The Irish-born writer’s book tells the story of Eilis Lacey, a young woman from a working family circa 1950. She’s bright, open and industrious, and there’s not much meaningful opportunity for her in her small Irish town. An Irish priest visiting from the United States sponsors Eilis for a job in the book’s title borough, and Tóibín beautifully tells of her uncomfortable crossing, her loneliness and alienation in her new world, how she finds her own way and finds romance, and what happens after she’s called back to her old home—away from the place where she’s been working so hard to make good.

The story is simple, and told in a quiet register. Tóibín, who recently wrote a book celebrating the work of the poet Elizabeth Bishop, has both a novelist’s love of detail and a poet’s facility for linguistic magic-by-compression. He uses every word carefully, and every sentence is where it is for a very particular reason; therefore he’s able to weigh those sentences with intimations that are genuinely metaphysical.

Take the opening sentence of Part Two of the novel: “In January, Eilis felt the fierce sharp cold in the mornings as she went to work.” That’s not a barrage of verbal fireworks by any means; one notices that Tóibín declined to separate the words “fierce” and “sharp” with a comma, and that adds to the speed of the sentence, but otherwise it seems well-wrought but ordinary enough. But given where it falls in the sequence of prose, and what follows the sentence ... well, in that context it evokes a whole small world of distress.

I had heard many good things about the film adaptation of “Brooklyn” before I saw it, but I did wonder whether the film would even try to bring this dimension to the screen. I’m happy to report that screenwriter [Nick Hornby](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/nick-hornby) (himself a novelist of note) and director [John Crowley](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/john-crowley) do, on occasion throughout the wonderful film, aim to do that, and succeed.

The director and screenwriter have been gifted with an extraordinary lead actor. In the role of Eilis, [Saoirse Ronan](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/saoirse-ronan) is as alert, intelligent, and emotionally alive as the character herself. Ronan, herself a native of Ireland, has, in this movie, put on a very, if you’ll excuse the expression, Irish-girl face: open, clear-eyed, with a not-hard jawline that’s nonetheless set with a certain kind of determination. It’s the furthest thing from forbidding, but it also sends a clear message: she’ll brook no nonsense.

Eilis is also of course terribly vulnerable. In the film she has a beloved mam and older sister (the adaptation excises the older brothers in the novel) and once she’s ensconced in a quasi-boarding house in a nicely brownstone-and-tree-rich neighborhood of the New York borough to which she’s sailed, she misses them terribly. The movie has a spectacularly good sense of place and time without being too obvious about it; Eilis’ circumstances are cozy, slightly catty, and a little stifling. Once she meets a super-friendly Italian-American fellow named Tony ([Emory Cohen](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/emory-cohen), so wonderful here that I’m now inclined to blame his baleful work in 2012’s also baleful “The Place Beyond The Pines” entirely on that film’s director), her initiation into New-Yorker-dom begins.

Screenwriter Hornby breaks out the interiority of Tóibín’s book by inventing some apt bits that result in heart-warmingly funny scenes. Eilis gets lessons from her roommates in eating spaghetti, and the role of Tony’s smart-alecky but essentially sweet younger brother Frankie is expanded purposefully; the actor playing the “eight-going-on-eighteen” character, James DiGiacomo, is a certified scene-stealer.

Just as things are getting serious between Tony and Eilis, she is called back to her home to cope with a family tragedy. As much as she’s come to love her new life, the forces of homesickness and guilt, as well as the attentions of the kind, handsome local fellow Jim Farrell ([Domhnall Gleeson](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/domhnall-gleeson), worlds away from the feckless cyber-nerd he plays in this year’s “[Ex Machina](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/ex-machina-2015)”) cause no small confusion for Eilis. Her inner conflict is played out with terrific sensitivity and understatement, but the director and the actors deliver the final click of the plot’s tumblers with no small emotional force. It’s a quietly devastating moment that, like much else in the movie, has a resonance that extends far beyond its immediate circumstances.

While Tóibín’s novel feels very much rooted in the time in which it’s set, the movie has more the feel of what [Tennessee Williams](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/tennessee-williams) calls a “memory play.” I’m sure that the excursion-to-a-Coney-Island-day-at-the-beach scenes in the 1941 comedy “The Devil And Miss Jones” or the 1959 “Imitation of Life,” as Hollywoodized as they were, presented more realistic versions of such excursions than this movie does—I mean, Coney Island is/was a lot of things, but lyrical is not one of them. (The Brooklyn colloquial description of the location would be something along the lines of “zoo.”) As a choice, though, it serves the movie’s vision well. If I may be utterly, unabashedly frank, I admit that the first time I saw this picture I started crying about forty minutes in and never really stopped. They were not all sad tears, I hasten to add.

The persistent feeling that this movie so beautifully creates is that even when the world is bestowing blessings upon us, it’s still at the bottom a sad place, and the key to an emotionally healthy existence involves some rooted acceptance of that. The movie ends with Eilis having made some substantial steps to that accepting place, and also determined to move purposefully forward. People have spoken about how understated and old-fashioned “Brooklyn” is, to the extent that it might come across as a pleasant innocuous entertainment. Don’t be fooled. “Brooklyn” is not toothless. But it is big-hearted, romantic and beautiful.

<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/brooklyn-2015>

**Brooklyn: A story that still resonates with Irish emigrants today**

Oct 20, 2015 By Rachel Mahon in Toronto

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I emigrated to Toronto five years ago having struggled for a year to find work in broadcasting, after graduating from DIT. Even with the opportunities of a big city, it took me a few years to break into television production here, but I am now fully ensconced in the lifestyle and culture that Toronto has to offer.

A few weeks ago I was fortunate enough to attend the [Toronto Film Festival](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?q=Toronto%20Film%20Festival&article=true) for the premier of the film Brooklyn, starring [Saoirse Ronan](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_person=Saoirse%20Ronan&article=true). After emigrating from [Ireland](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_location=Ireland&article=true) to New York in the 1950s, her character Eilis Lacey faces the heartbreaking decision of choosing between two homes.

As I’m sure many other Irish emigrants will be when they see the film, I was struck by the parallels between my own journey to Toronto, and Eilis’s migration experience, even though they are separated by seven decades. Like her, my family was instrumental in my decision to move, relentlessly encouraging me to grab hold of the better opportunities that were open to me abroad.

I also related strongly to Eilis’s inner conflict of being torn between two places, and I’m not embarrassed to admit that I cried my way through the film, because it’s highly likely many other emigrants will too.

The film portrays just how grueling and lonely the first few months after leaving home can be, as you learn to navigate and make sense of a new city and culture. I had expected everything to fall quickly into place. Nowadays, social media inaccurately showcases our friends having the time of their lives in their respective new cities, but it doesn’t reveal the stress, frustration and hard work behind the scenes.

It took eight months before I finally felt settled, and bid farewell to the homesickness that had been hanging over me. But I can’t imagine who I would be today had I not endured those challenges of building a new life away from home. At the age of 25, I finally grew up.

On her first trip back to Ireland, Eilis sees her hometown through new eyes. This echoes my own experience, and that of all my Irish friends in Toronto. I became a tourist in my own city on visits back to Dublin, dazzled by the Christmas lights on Grafton Street, visiting museums with my granny, and raving over the beauty of the landscape. I was relieved to discover my old friendships were as strong as ever, and how easy it would be to slot back into my old life.

Yet there remains a great deal of turmoil around my decision to stay in Toronto. The greatest sacrifice Eilis has to make is to live a life where her family is absent. It pains me too that I only see my family for two weeks a year and to think of the precious time I’m losing with my grandmother, that I can’t be there for my best friend after her father’s recent death, and am regularly missing friends’ weddings and other key life events.

I also faced a grueling health issue this year. Although my family was on Skype almost daily, it didn’t come close to having that support in person. There are many times when I would give anything for a hug from my dad.

It’s the simple everyday things I miss most, like tea with friends when I would howl with laughter until my sides hurt and tears ran down my face. But the reality is, my closest friends have dispersed and moved on. A few live in [Australia](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_location=Australia&article=true) and the UK, while others are settling down or marrying.

In [Canada](https://www.irishtimes.com/search/search-7.1213540?tag_location=Canada&article=true), my social circles have become wider and more culturally diverse. By starting afresh, my world has become far bigger than I could ever have imagined in Ireland. Toronto moves at a faster pace, and culturally there’s something on every night of the week, with restaurants, cafes and yoga studios right on my doorstep. The healthcare, new business and personal development resources in Toronto are also fantastic.

It’s only on visits home when the plane comes in to land at Dublin airport that I can no longer deny the piece of me that I’ve left behind. Away from Toronto’s frenetic pace of life, I am forced to confront this reality.

But like many who make a move away, I have reached a point of no return. I love Toronto and could never leave my lifestyle here and everything I’ve worked so hard for in my career. My friends have become my family. In essence, I have outgrown where I came from, and who I am now is deeply rooted in Toronto.

My advice to anyone who decides to emigrate is to never underestimate how courageous you have to be. It’s not going to be easy or without sacrifice, but there’s a new life waiting for you and a city you may one day call home.

<https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/abroad/generation-emigration/brooklyn-a-story-that-still-resonates-with-irish-emigrants-today-1.2398870> [an Irish newspaper]