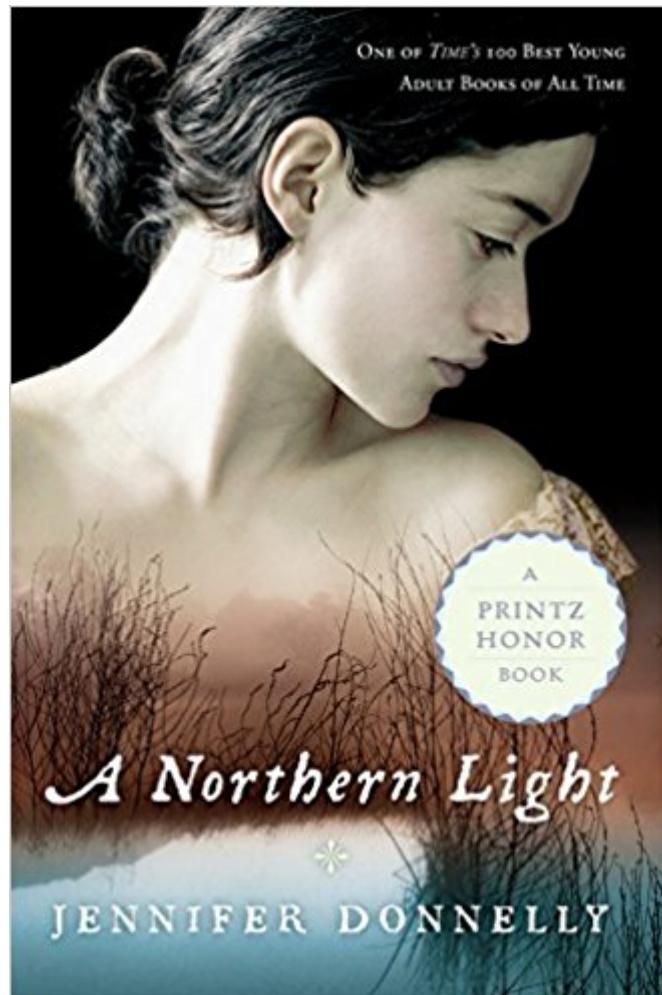


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# A Northern Light



## Synopsis

Carnegie Medal Winner, United KingdomLos Angeles Times Book Prize Winner Borders 2004 Original Voices Award Winner Named a Best Book of 2003 by Publishers Weekly, Booklist, School Library Journal, The Irish Times, The Times (London), The Financial Times and The Albany Times-Union.Sixteen-year-old Mattie Gokey has big dreams but little hope of seeing them come true. Desperate for money, she takes a job at the Glenmore, where hotel guest Grace Brown entrusts her with the task of burning a secret bundle of letters. But when Grace's drowned body is fished from the lake, Mattie discovers that the letters could reveal the grim truth behind a murder.Set in 1906 against the backdrop of the murder that inspired Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, Jennifer Donnelly's astonishing debut novel effortlessly weaves romance, history, and a murder mystery into something moving, and real, and wholly original.Includes a reader's guide and an interview with the author.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

It's 1906 and 16-year-old Mattie Gokey is at a crossroads in her life. She's escaped the overwhelming responsibilities of helping to run her father's brokedown farm in exchange for a paid summer job as a serving girl at a fancy hotel in the Adirondacks. She's saving as much of her salary as she can, but she's having trouble deciding how she's going to use the money at the end of the summer. Mattie's gift is for writing and she's been accepted to Barnard College in New York City, but she's held back by her sense of responsibility to her family--and by her budding romance with handsome-but-dull Royal Loomis. Royal awakens feelings in Mattie that she doesn't want to ignore,

but she can't deny her passion for words and her desire to write. At the hotel, Mattie gets caught up in the disappearance of a young couple who had gone out together in a rowboat. Mattie spoke with the young woman, Grace Brown, just before the fateful boating trip, when Grace gave her a packet of love letters and asked her to burn them. When Grace is found drowned, Mattie reads the letters and finds that she holds the key to unraveling the girl's death and her beau's mysterious disappearance. Grace Brown's story is a true one (it's the same story told in Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and in the film adaptation, *A Place in the Sun*), and author Jennifer Donnelly masterfully interweaves the real-life story with Mattie's, making her seem even more real. Mattie's frank voice reveals much about poverty, racism, and feminism at the turn of the twentieth century. She witnesses illness and death at a range far closer than most teens do today, and she's there when her best friend Minnie gives birth to twins. Mattie describes Minnie's harrowing labor with gut-wrenching clarity, and a visit with Minnie and the twins a few weeks later dispels any romance from the reality of young motherhood (and marriage). Overall, readers will get a taste of how bitter--and how sweet--ordinary life in the early 1900s could be. Despite the wide variety of troubles Mattie describes, the book never feels melodramatic, just heartbreakingly real. (14 and older)

--Jennifer Lindsay --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Grade 7 Up-Letters connected with a tragic drowning in 1906 inspired Jennifer Donnelly to write *A Northern Light* (Harcourt, 2003), a contemporary story about a young woman struggling to fulfill her dreams and commitments. Seventeen-year-old Mattie Gokey yearns to write stories with the new words she learns each day, but a promise to her dying mother has left her caring for her father and three sisters. She's also torn between the handsome neighbor who has asked her to marry him and a feisty black youth, her intellectual soulmate, who urges her to go to New York City where they both have college scholarships. Mattie is forced to confront all her choices as she reads a stack of letters entrusted to her by a female guest at the hotel where she works. Later, the guest is found floating dead in a nearby lake. Hope Davis narrates the novel's intense and humorous moments with equal veracity. She is especially skilled at bringing to life the hotel's Irish cook and Mattie's French Canadian uncle. *A Northern Light* is a treasure trove of richly resonant descriptions of people, place, and feelings. This recording will be one that listeners return to, and it will be a valuable addition to both school and public library collections. Barbara Wysocki, Cora J. Belden Library, Rocky Hill, CT  
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Having read the true account of this murder as well as Dreisers fictional version, I found this a delightful story, well written with great characters, that gives meaning somehow to a senseless, selfish act. It eases the pain of Grace Brown and her baby's death just a little to think that it had fired courage inside another young woman to live her dreams because Grace could not. Bravo, Jennifer, for giving us that hope in this story. And thank you. Grace's letters moved me as well.

This book takes place in 1906 in northern Herkimer County NY. I am from this county and have heard about the murder of Grace Brown by Chester Gillette all my life. Theodore Dreiser's book "An American Tragedy" is about this murder, and the Elizabeth Taylor movie "A Place in the Sun" is loosely based on it. Jennifer Donnelly has written a realistic fiction novel about the tragedy blending original characters with real people who were involved in the event. Since I have known about the true story all of my life, I really enjoyed the author's new take on the story. I believe that people who do not have any familiarity with the incident will still enjoy this coming-of-age story.

Jennifer Donnelly is another one of those author's who writes historical fiction that I simply can not put down. I become so absorbed in her books that I have to drag them everywhere with me, replacing my cellphone for entertainment! (!!) "I know it is a bad thing to break a promise, but I think now that it is a worse thing to let a promise break you." I smiled, I cried, and I laughed in the two days I ploughed my way through *A Northern Light*, and then, I gave the book to my mother and insisted she share in it with me.

4.5 stars This was a beautifully written book, told from the point of view of Mattie. You come to root for both Mattie and Weaver even though there seems to be little hope in their dreams coming true. The mystery surrounding a girl's drowning death is woven into the story well. I was initially the most intrigued by the mystery of the drowning but I was quickly overtaken by my interest in Mattie as a character. She loves books and picks a word from her dictionary each day and attempts to use it--even in word battles with Weaver. I could relate to Mattie as a character and despite Grace (drowning victim) being the person who really existed, Mattie felt the most real to me. I loved the addition of Miss Wilcox and the twist with her background. The circumstances and time in which Mattie lived really makes you think. If I had be born during that time I may have been one of those women who was considered insane just for having a mind of her own....thanks to a plethora of events and time passing now I just get dirty looks and attitude with only scant mentionings of being institutionalized.

I enjoyed the story of the character development of the main character Mathilda (Mattie). I admired her courage and love of reading, books, words, and education in spite of her poverty and loss of her mother. Her love for her father and younger brothers and sisters and the hard work on the farm she displayed was very admirable. I enjoyed her struggle between her wanting to become an author and go to New York City and go to college versus her desire to have a husband and her own farm in addition to wanting to be near her family and having someone to love. The details of life in the North Woods was very well portrayed in her description and added to the story. The use of the word of the day and the device of using the dictionary in the telling of the story was very good.

This book is set in upstate New York in the early 1900's. Maddie is a bright young woman who is balancing helping to raise her family after her mother's death and her wish for an education. A talented teacher convinces her to apply to college, but Maddie knows that getting the money to go, even with a chance at a scholarship will be difficult. The story flashes back and forth over time and we see the two possible paths that her life might take, either going to the city for school or marrying a local boy at the farm next door. She gets the opportunity to work at a hotel and becomes indirectly involved with a terrible tragedy with the death of a young woman in the lake. This young woman, Grace Brown, has given Maddie her letters to burn, but before she has a chance to do this, Grace has been found dead and the young man she was with has vanished. The story puts this true history into the story through Grace's letters and they play an interesting contrast to Maddie's life.

Jennifer Donnelly's historical novel, *A Northern Light*, is one of the finest examples of Young Adult literature I've ever read. Her characters jump from the page, her prose is so beautifully constructed that at times it feels like poetry. She takes a true tragedy and brings it alive. I would recommend this novel for everyone including those who don't usually read books in the Young Adult category.

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