

Bronwyn's Brooklyn Book Club

The story below was written in 2024 before the presidential election. Smith's Family Portraits now include the barkeep, Joe, Sonia and Orlanda, Evelyn and Tommy McMahon and Haywood. The Book Club continues. We have since read Agatha Christie's ABC Murders, James Baldwin's Go Tell It On The Mountain, Jack Kerouac's On The Road, Dennis Lehane's Mystic River, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude and Tana French's In the Woods and many others.

SMITH'S TAVERN, 5th Avenue, Brooklyn, A Community Bar and Book Club.

Something about Italian Wedding Soup...the lady, a minute sized woman with short gray hair and large very alert eyes, was talking at the end of the bar.

I'm having my wine and reading my book...I wish I could hear better....

I was always interested in the conversation of the older regulars at the end of the bar as they talked of Bingo (apparently there is a long-standing Bingo game on the block) and families. Wedding Soup lady's name is Mary Ann and since I have talked with her many times and painted her and her friends at the far end of the bar.

The **Smith's Tavern** book club was started this past summer by the extremely bright super bartender, Sarah, a patron, Rebecca, a ship Captain and lawyer (She actually sails boats!) and me, talking at the front end of the bar. Rebecca suggested we have a book club. Her idea was to read Margaret Atwood's **A Handmaid's Tale**. We all said we had been meaning to read it. Hence the book club began.

There is a core group, Jessica, Lauren, Rebecca, Sarah, Donna, Eamon, Mike and me, but different people join at different times. It is an open book. All are invited.

Sometimes Jimmy, the spouse of Lauren and father of Jessie will make hotdogs and hamburgers. Over the years he upon special occasions keeps a grill outside the bar for customers. Danny Brady, the owner's son supports activities and requests of patrons such as Jimmy's barbecue and more

recently the book club and my paintings which are on the wall of the alcove near the end of the bar where the book club meets.

I call the paintings **The Smith Family Portraits**. It started as my conversations with barkeepers and customers evolved. My first painting was an 8x10 based on a photo of the **Women of Smith's**. From this there were a few commissions and requests. Now there are about 10 paintings on the wall of the alcove. The next was a painting of the **Men of Smith's** (with a couple women), then others documenting the various book club meetings and other patrons I've come to love. Danny says it's ok and I am very happy to have my work on the wall.

I have painted all my life, mostly abstract, but it was not my commercial art form. That was theatre and performance. Post COVID and after I had retired from my hospital palliative care social work job at the Brooklyn Hospital Center, I started painting more realistically from photos. **Smith's** is a fun place to develop my skills. There is a certain level of imperfection, but I really do my best to at least make the people look like the people. Oh well, in the imperfection is the art. Although Eamon, thought I made him look like a girl, a little too much pink on the cheeks. I toned it down for him. Like I said, I do my best.

Smith's Tavern, an Irish bar on 5th Avenue is a community bar. It is 100 years old. This past June Emmet Brady, the owner celebrated his 50th Anniversary as owner and running the bar. I gave him a painting of him and Danny, his son, also a bartender. Emmet and his spouse, Lynn took it home. They liked it. Danny showed me a picture of it on their mantel at home. That makes me happy.

Dan Diers, a local dog walker, a tall man with a gruffy long red beard always accompanied by his clients who were greeted enthusiastically with water, treats and loving hugs. Dan was an interesting guy. a local entrepreneur who had developed this business. I saw him often throughout Park Slope walking his dogs. He was born and raised in the neighborhood. He was 43 years old. He suddenly died of a heart attack this past summer. Tommy McMahon, an elderly gentleman, a veteran and long-time regular and neighbor also died this summer. Tommy was always concerned about my eyes as I read my books

and was responsible for me getting a book light. I think he was a bartender in the neighborhood before he retired.

Tommy and his partner Evelyn are best friends of Mary Ann. She wanted me to do a picture of them to give as a present for Christmas. This was when I wasn't sure who anyone was and from a photograph, I took of the end of the bar I mistook Paulie for Tommy and as a surprise presented Mary Ann with that painting as a gift. She kept it anyway. Paulie is also a close friend. They grew up together. They lived on the same block and were born on the same day. Paulie was upset when the memorial for Polish Vets was taken down when they tore down Prospect Hall. I tried to find out what happened to it but had no success. Mary Ann and Paulie have been friends their entire lives. He walks her home, make sure she is safe. Mary Ann gave me in return that Christmas her recipe for wedding soup.

The community of **Smith's** supports. Collections are taken for memorials and 'wakes' are attended at Duffy's Funeral Home around the block. We also went to the memorial Mary Ann had for her husband at the American Legion Post, also on 9th Street. He had died just before COVID but restrictions prevented a memorial at the time.

Smith's Tavern is a typical Irish sports bar and all that goes with that, the games and the pools and the comradery. We initially met on Sunday's but now with the crowds and noise we switched to Saturday. The games prevail!

In the beginning, at least 10 years ago, I stopped in **Smith's** once every few months. Post COVID and my retirement from my palliative care social work job at the Brooklyn Hospital Center, that has changed. Now it is more like twice a week and now there is the Book Club. We are in our 8th session. I have never been in a book club before, and this has proved to be a surprisingly gentle, lovely and easy experience.

One of the very first times of these more recent times was when my husband and I were going to Ireland in 2017. We had gone to the storage unit on Third Avenue and stopped in **Smith's Tavern**. Orlando was tending bar. He wished us a happy trip and said he would "keep the home fires burning". Since I have met him and his beloved sister, Sonia and other favorite cohorts many times, have had many great conversations and benefitted from his warmth and wit.

Truly one of the smartest and kindest (to quote Rebecca) people I have ever met. Orlando is a well-loved key to the functioning at **Smith's**.

The book today is ***The Bonfire of the Vanities*** (Thomas Wolfe). This was suggested by Mike Daly, Mary Ann's brilliant nephew. We have also read Pete Hamill's ***A Drinking Life***, Danny's choice. ***Killers of the Flower Moon*** by David Grann. Lauren suggested this and ***There are No Miracles Here*** (Casey Gerald), my suggestion. ***Bright Young Women*** (Jessica Knolls). Jessica's suggestion, who also suggested, ***My Year of Rest and Relaxation*** (Ottessa Moshfegh). Jessica is our youngest member, 20 something and her suggestions bring in other bright young women which is fun. Eamon suggested ***Small Mercies*** by Dennis Lehane. This book was the big hit to date, reflecting bussing and racism in the late 60's Boston.

This is the only place I ever saw a **MAGA** hat, worn by one of the patrons at the end of the bar. Also, a **F*** Biden** T shirt. Today I intend to wear my '**la** shirt. We'll see.

*Postscript: No one said anything about my '**la** shirt. I suppose the silence speaks.*