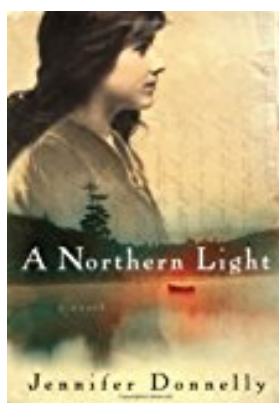


# [PDF] A Northern Light

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**Books Details:**

Title: A Northern Light  
Author: Jennifer Donnelly  
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**Description:**

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 and in the film adaptation, ), 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*

**From School Library Journal** Grade 8 Up-Mattie Gokey, 16, a talented writer, promised her dying mother that she would always take care of her father and younger siblings. She is stuck on a farm, living in near poverty, with no way of escaping, even though she has been accepted at Barnard College. She promises to marry handsome Royal Loomis even though he doesn't appear to love her. Now, Mattie has promised Grace Brown, a guest at the Adirondack summer resort where she works, to burn two bundles of letters. Then, before she can comply, Grace's body is found in the lake, and the young man who was with her disappears, also presumably drowned. This is a breathtaking tale, complex and often earthy, wrapped around a true story. In 1906, Grace Brown was killed by Chester Gillette because she was poor and pregnant, and he hoped to make his fortune by marrying a rich, society girl. Grace's story weaves its way through Mattie's, staying in the background but providing impetus. The protagonist tells her tale through flashback and time shifts from past to present. Readers feel her fears for her friend Weaver-the first freeborn child in his family-when he is beaten for being black and his college savings are stolen, and enjoy their love of words as they engage in language duels. Finally, they'll experience her awakening when she realizes that she cannot live her life for others. Donnelly's characters ring true to life, and the meticulously described setting forms a vivid backdrop to this finely crafted story. An outstanding choice for historical-fiction fans, particularly those who have read Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*.

*Lisa Prolman, Greenfield Public Library, MA*

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