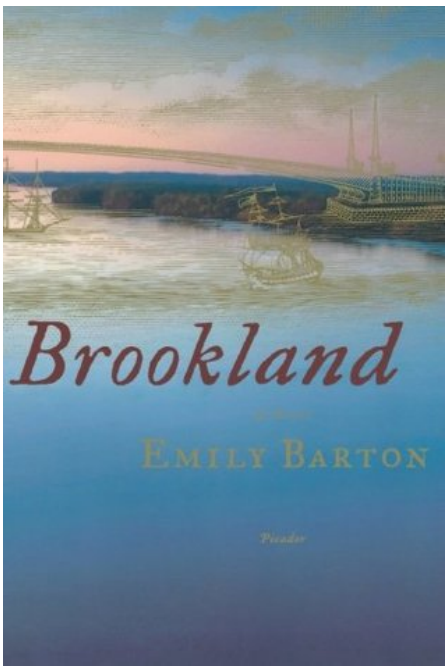

Brookland

Emily Barton

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A *New York Times Book Review* Notable Book of the Year
A *Los Angeles Times Book Review* Favorite Book of the Year

Since her girlhood, Prudence Winship has gazed across the tidal straits from her home in Brooklyn to the city of Manhattan and yearned to bridge the distance. Now, firmly established as the owner of an enormously successful gin distillery she inherited from her father, she can begin to realize her dream.

Set in eighteenth-century Brooklyn, this is the beautifully written story of a woman with a vision: a gargantuan construction of timber and masonry to span the East River. With the help of her sisters--high-spirited Tem and silent, uncanny Pearl--Prue fires the imaginations of the people of Brooklyn and New York by promising them easy passage between their two worlds.

Brookland confirms Emily Barton's reputation as one of the finest writers of her generation, whose work is "blessedly post-ironic, engaging and heartfelt" (Thomas Pynchon).

Brookland Details

Date	:	Published February 20th 2007 by St. Martins Press-3pl (first published 2006)
ISBN	:	9780312425807
Author	:	Emily Barton
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Genre	:	Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Novels, New York, Abandoned

From Reader Review Brookland for online ebook

Heather says

This was an immersive novel, historical fiction, which gently enveloped you in the world of late eighteenth-century Brooklyn, NY.
(I'll try to avoid major plot spoilers but, if you hate knowing anything in advance, don't read this.)
The main character, Prudence, inherits a gin distillery from her father (who, once he got over his disappointment in having no sons, trains her in how to 'rectify' and make gin as if she were his eldest son.) She has a butch sister, Temperance, and a youngest sister, Pearl, who was born unable to speak but writes notes to them in a little book. Pearl is intelligent, but mostly confined to the house doing embroidery, while Tem works with Prue running the distillery business.
The backdrop of the book is everyday life in a village at that time, but the feminist element of Prue taking on a male role vis a vis the distillery is a major one as well.
She also dreams of contructing a bridge to Manhattan, as at the time they crossed by ferry; she marries, her husband is a trained surveyor, and in order to try to make the bridge a reality she needs to negotiate her relationship with him and deal with her own resentments about the fact that he'll have to be the official spokesperson, as he is male. The way that gender roles inform women's public selves and life projects; & the internal conflicts set up by trying to negotiate one's 'big dreams' with a pragmatic view of how the outside world views you re: gender, are likely to resonate with contemporary female readers.
With that said, it doesn't take a tone which would be off-putting to male readers; the male characters are well-drawn and likable as the women, and are not personally responsible for exploitation.
There are reasonably detailed descriptions of the technical processes of distilling gin, and of designing and building a suspension bridge, in case of historical interest in this.
There were more serious bummers toward the end than I was prepared for, and the way some of them were described at some distance made me unsure that I was emotionally quite satisfied by the outcome of the storylines. However, that may reflect a more realistic view of life in that time, than a narrative desire to 'tie up ends' or satisfy the audience.

Liz says

i loved this book ... brooklyn heights in the late 1700's. i read it nine months ago or so & i still think about it. emily barton wove so tight and deep a story ... i'm not sure i've ever read something before where i have stepped back and been totally in awe of the writer's endurance ... wondered what fortitude and discipline she had to call upon in order to let this story come forth ... i cannot look at the cobblestone streets of brooklyn heights & dumbo or the expanse of water that stretches from their shores without wondering what it must have been like with no bridges and the river's edge so immediate.

in addition, i felt barton offered a message so beautifully subtle yet potent about the ability and potential of women... though it is fiction, she let us see in the character of prudence winship, that there have been individual women throughout history (& outside of the historical record) who accomplished so much, were in a position of leadership & dared to dream & then act upon those dreams.

i look forward to more from emily barton

Julia says

As a (kind of) writer of historical fiction with female main characters, I was excited to read about Prue Winship's foray into bridge-building and to see what Brooklyn was like over two centuries ago.

Instead, it made me nervous that my historical fiction was as trite, long-winded and BORING as this novel. Prue and her two sisters were very unlikeable, as much as Barton tried to make us sympathize with them. Prue's childhood curse on her sister was not a strong enough theme to keep the near-500 page book going. Serious disappointment, I can't believe I made it all the way through.

Chris Johnson says

The story of a woman who designs then has built a bridge over the East River from Brooklyn to Manhattan in 1800, about 100 years before the actual Brooklyn Bridge was built.

This is amazingly well written, and basically a study of small-town people interacting among themselves and reluctantly with the larger society they live in. (Brooklyn at this time was a village of a few hundred, and Manhattan itself was in the tens of thousands.)

The way the main characters are described and brought to life is amazing, as is the dialog between them. The author, like Dickens (my favorite), creates a very real cast of individual people whose needs, interests, and conflicts drive the story forward. There is never a false note to pull you out of the story, it seems more like a well-written historical account than fiction.

Also explores how women in power were viewed at the time, and what they were and weren't allowed to publicly accomplish without the backing, even if known to be cosmetic, of a man.

Dolanite says

This was exceptional. I thought at first the language used in this historical fiction would throw me off, but it was so well written as to transport me to a time in history that I don't usually enjoy. Through Barton's writing I see this whole era anew. She told the story of such vivid characters who felt so deeply that it made the book both compelling and delightful. I'm not 100% sold on the devise of the letters used to tell this tale at the start especially, but by the end the twists and turns made it worth the journey.

Ann says

Liked the history alot. Disliked the heavy emphasis on the repetitive, mostly unbelievable psychology of family relations.

Barbara says

Decent historical fiction truly conveying a sense of the place and time, but Barton gets too bogged down in gin making and bridge building. The story also requires much suspension of disbelief about what the main character was capable of doing.

Ann says

I am completely in love with this unusual, challenging, soothing book. I want to recommend it for so many reasons - as a parameter-defying example of what historical fiction should aspire to be; for all the lovely New York moments; as a blanket rebuke to all the hipsters; for being the only American history-related *anything* I've liked since, um, the American Girl books - but it really all comes down to Prudence Winship. I submit that this is the most remarkable portrayal of the tortured paths that a young mind can take since Briony Tallis, and a proto-feminist lesson for all unusual young girls (present company very much included) that even two hundred years ago, we were becoming strange, flawed, beautiful women.

Marie Halloran says

I really enjoyed the book. I liked the characters and storyline and would have given it one more star but the book just ended. It wasn't tied up in a happy ending or in any kind of ending. Sad because as I was reading it I thought I would recommend it but changed my mind at the conclusion.

Emi Bevacqua says

Emily Barton is a great writer, her descriptions of 18th century Brooklyn and the resident Winships who run a gin distillery, are vivid and authentic (although I doubt New Yorkers in 1798 were referring to things as "weird" or "stupid"). The Winship family is interesting, however dour: Matthias and Roxana are the tragic parents of Prudence who takes over the family business (and dreams of one day building a bridge to span the East River to Mannahata), the ironically-named Temperance, and little vocally challenged Pearl. Their gin business is fascinating, especially what with the nascent feminism Winship & Daughters represents, and the love story between Prue and her childhood friend and husband Ben was lovely.

However, I simply could not accept the premise of this book, that Prue was ever consumed with guilt over having successfully "cursed" her youngest sibling into muted physical disability. I mean, she was five years old at the time - who even retains a memory from so early on for their whole life? And how would such an intelligent, sensible person perceive herself to be that ridiculously omnipotent? There were lots of other plot flaws too, I didn't understand why the Winships risked engaging in premarital sex; why not just get married? Mostly I was just wishing there was some premise of truth to the bridge story. Why have Ben blurt out "Tappan Zee" in the middle of the book if there's no connection with that bridge (built in 1950, it didn't even connect to Brooklyn)? Although the real life Brooklyn Bridge did have a wife involved with some limited aspect of its construction, this story bears no relation to that one. But I've always struggled in that way with the "historical fiction" genre.

Sarah says

Brookland is one of the best books I've read in a long, long time. It brings a new meaning to the term "historical fiction," not just presenting us with a fictional account of historic events, but also giving us an original fictional event in a historic setting.

In the years around and after the American Revolution and in the first few decades of the new United States, a remarkable family lives in early Brooklyn, across the water from the island of Manhattan. The title's use of a variant of the latter tips off the reader to the variation between history and pure story. Prue Winship, the eldest daughter, learns to take over the family gin distillery in the absence of a son while also dreaming of bigger things—much bigger things.

The Winship family and sisters are large as life and realistic. It's easy for modern writers to fall into the trap of writing those women fortunate enough to find a place in a man's world as being so modern they're almost our contemporaries, but Barton casts the Winship sisters, their family, and their neighbors well: there are spheres of acceptability, subworlds in which women can be as openly opinionated as men only given the right circumstances. Two of the Winship daughters, Prue (Prudence) and Tem (Temperance) (which may be the funniest name I've ever heard for the daughter of a distiller) fit the criteria. Pearl, the mute middle daughter, does not. Literally silenced in the way that many women of the day were figuratively silenced, she has far less control of her destiny than most other women, never mind her unusually independent sisters.

Prue dreams of building a bridge between Brooklyn and Manhattan—and, with the help of her sisters and lifelong friends/fiancé and distillery foreman, begins to make it happen. The details of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Brooklyn and New York State are fine and rich, and you learn not only tidbits about life in early nineteenth century Brooklyn but bits and pieces of how the early New York State legislature worked, what modern architecture was like, how the ideals of the enlightenment influenced wealthy (if tradesman) society in the young country.

Admittedly, it's now been almost two months since I read this book in early April, which is why I'm giving more details of what happened than how I felt. I'll have to leave this with saying that I felt happier reading this book than I had in a long time: it's one of those rare books that's long enough that I didn't feel as though it was over too quickly without being so long that I got impatient for the end. The characters were well drawn with few, if any caricatures: even the people seldom mentioned are multifaceted, like the boatman who opposes the bridge because it will ruin his business but still wishes the best for the daughters of his old friend.

Before I close off and head to the quotes, I have to spare a moment to mention the gorgeous cover design: an old print done in gold over a photo of a wooded river. The gold shines in contrast to the deep blue of the water

Quote Roundup

12) If heaven was as free from want as the domine described it, then the New-Yorkers' insatiable need of gin & fruit meant they were living in hell.
Even before the United States has formed, here's this idea of New York as a place of gluttony and misery. Perhaps an example of the modern informing the past? Whatever the case, it tickled me to see this idea expressed when New York is in its relative infancy.

28) *Prue, Pearl, and Tem are bungled up "like* Esquimaux*" to explore the ice bridge be between Manhattan and Brooklyn. I had to make a note to look this up, since I was curious about when Europeans would have been in contact with Inuits for the first time. Esquimaux is apparently the French plural form of the word for*

Inuits, and since the term "Eskimo" is a general word applying to indigenous people all around the northern polar areas, it is quite possible that this word and knowledge of these people existed in the early/mid nineteenth century.

98) "'For if ye love them that love you,'" he read, "'what reward have ye?' Why that is commerce, exchange, shilling for shilling. Anybody can do that. 'And salute your brethren only,'—that is, if you greet only those that belong to your church or think as you think, or act as you act—'do not even the publicans so?'"
A common enough sermon, especially in fiction, but I did like the way that this one was delivered. It's refreshing, for Prue (and for me), to hear humor in a sermon (in a book) about such an important topic, one of the most quoted and least followed rules of Christianity.

For some reason there were no quotes for a long stretch in the middle even though I definitely remember enjoying stories of the Winship girls' childhoods.

224) On perhaps Mr. Fischer's fourth night in Brooklyn, Tem had banged in[to the Twin Tankards] at the close of the workday, thirsty for her pint, and poor Mr. Fischer had fallen in love with her in an instant. …
"I've never seen such lovely gams," Ezra Fischer said in a tone of reverence.
"Actually," Tem said loudly, "I'll wager you've never seen any *gams* at all, as women don't *damn well display* them. Unless, of course, you are referring to your taste for whores, quite a pretty few of whom you'll find upstairs."
Go Tem! Also, for those of you curious, "gams" are apparently women's legs. Tem and Prue wear trousers out of practicality from their work in the distillery.

231) *Prue discovers that Pearl knows a good bit about her reasons for wanting to build a bridge, including her original thought as a child that New York was the land of the dead.*
"It isn't only that. I learned I'd been mistaken, of course, a hundred years ago."
[Pearl]It's for Mother & Father?
"And for myself also. To have done something that wasn't handed down to me." She hadn't known she thought this until she said it.
I feel a fair bit of kinship for Prue. Though life is far different these days and parents' work is rarely passed down to their children, I still felt, growing up, a bit like I took the place of the oldest/only son in the family. I inherited my dad's coin collection and interests in the outdoors and working with my hands. I spent more time with him than did either of my sisters, and as much as I feel (and enjoy, to a certain extent, feeling) a responsibility for carrying on the family legacy, I still look for the thing I can do that belongs to myself, the mark I can make that is both part of and separate from my family legacy. Doubt it will be anything as monumental as a bridge, but I'm still trying to figure it out.

272) *An idiot gentleman whose behavior defines the word meets Pearl for the first time.* "Is she for sale, then? I've long fancied a wife who wouldn't talk back to me."
Ben said, "Oh, bless you, but she does talk back," while Pearl wrote, Devill take you, Sir, held it up to her companion in her left hand, and continued on with her breakfast.
Go Pearl! I'd have loved to have her hit him across the face with her book, but there's only so much fiction you can hope for, isn't there?

285) How Prue envied [Ben] his man's figure—his squared shoulders and even his pointy, clean-shaven chin—for how it enabled him to stand up thus before them. She loved him dearly, and at the same time felt what seemed love's opposite: a sickening jealousy.
This is a delicate balance to strike: as I mentioned before, it's easy to fall into the trap of making women seem so modern that they chafe against their roles in the same way that a contemporary woman, transplanted back in time, might feel. I think Barton managed the balance, though. For all her jealousy of Ben, Prue nevertheless feels constrained by the societal norms that dictate that Ben needs to speak while she

remains silent: it's not just frustration, it's a genuine feeling that even though she knows the bridge, she can't do this as well as he could—partly because it's not "in a woman's nature" and partly because that "nature" won't permit other men to take her seriously. For all her frustration, she has more trouble crossing the divide than, I think, most women today would have.

338) The spring thaw arrived early in 1799, though it brought with it the state legislature's Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery. … The Act, Prue realized, struck a fine balance between pleasing those who relied upon slave labor to make their living and assuaging those who opposed it on moral grounds: All adult slaves were to remain in bondage for the rest of their lives, though they would henceforward be called "indentured servants," and all children born after the coming Fourth of July would be freed in the 1820s, after having given their best years of service to their masters.
I spent plenty of time in APUS History discussing the Constitutional note that slavery would be banned in the early 1800s, but I really didn't learn much about legislative bans to slavery at the state level. This discussion was new and interesting to me (I learned a lot of history this book, mostly in the forms of characters whose names now appear on street signs and subway stops), but I also appreciated the reality of Prue's concerns: regardless of her moral feeling about slavery, she has a business to run, one that currently depends on slave labor. Again, it's easy for modern writers to make their historical fictional women characters abolitionist, feminist saints. I admire Barton's successful efforts to complicate her characters in a realistic way.

354) *Another difficult but wonderful moment for the women in this story. Though Prue has never gotten along with her sister-in-law, Patience, the two come to an understanding as the latter comforts the former after a difficult miscarriage. Women don't always have to hate each other forever, just because they have different values and wildly different lives.*

402) Prue had hoped for the best and half expected the worst, and could not quote force this information to fit either category.
Ah, a familiar feeling to us all, I'm sure! Though not always on the scale of what's in this scene.

437) *Prue finally comes to realize the truth of the curse she placed on her sister.*
I saw the curse lay not on the words I had uttered, which had scudded away across to Mannahata never to be recalled; but in the manner in which I'd allowed them to color my behavior toward her, ever since. For 23 years I had showered my guilt upon her, thought of protecting her, bought her gifts, worry'd on her behalf; but I had never once simply looked to see in whose interest I had done all this. Had I done so, I might have seen the depth of that streak running through her, or how she felt confined or unhappy. But you see, I did not.
I found this reveal all the more powerful for how simple it is. It's betrayal on the small scale, devastating in its pervasiveness in a way that her inability to think in Pearl's best interests the one time Pearl has thought in her own doesn't quite capture. It's not just the hypocrisy of her behavior toward Pearl, it's the definition of killing with kindness (albeit unintentionally).

465) I challenge any man who claims haunting by the dead to feel the chill of haunting by uncertainty, & I will shew you a changed man.

477) Even at that sorrowful time, perhaps the oddest thing about the whole affair seemed to me how people on both sides of the river had well nigh forgotten I'd had aught to do with the disastrous bridge. I was still Prue Winship, Distiller of Gin; but your father, wherever he went, was the Architect of the Folly. Few but Ben, Isaiah, & my own two sisters had ever known that the idea, at its origin, had been mine alone; but it struck me as passing strange how even Simon Dufresne & Theunis van Vechten lamented Ben's misjudgment of the foundations, without once mentioning how I had drawn up the articles of our misfortune.
Prue unexpectedly benefits from the sexism of the time; even the people who saw her participation in the construction of the bridge forget her involvement in it because her actions automatically belong to her husband—both because no one would think that a woman was capable of creating something like the bridge and because her husband would be responsible for anything she did.

Jess says

Brookland was a lovely piece of summer reading. The story-telling was gentle & the characters were created to be loved. I felt linked to the family & shared their woes & delights. The characters were odd enough to steer away from being direct archetypes.

As a work of historical fiction, Barton crafts a completely believable world---so much so that i researched colonial architecture after finishing the novel. Barton's compassion as an author holds the world of Brookland in fiction; during the final construction of a bridge that spanned the East River, no workers are killed. This detail is just too good to be true, but it is a kindness to the characters and to the reader.

The novel centers around a household of three sisters who inherit a gin distillery from their parents. Birth and death in this book arrive through extreme circumstances, an homage to the hardships of settler's times. Each of the sisters has a distinct personality, with Pearl being the upset in the course of "average" story-telling. As the eldest, Prue is the leader & parental figure who is most rewarded with a responsible but structured lifestyle. The youngest sister, Tem, is a sort of Helen of Troy figure; beautiful & strong-headed, leaving ruined men in her wake while growing in feminine power. However, the middle sister, Pearl, is the literary adventure. Marked with an affliction from birth, her reactions to the world & situations are unpredictable & her hidden talents seem endless yet modest. She is not the platitudinous mystic superhero sometimes relied on in lesser novels, but she is created with a remarkable number of particulars that make her familiar & fascinating.

Reading this book, i was reminded of the tactile desires & driving forces of people who are often stone in history. The setting is near the conclusion of a revolutionary war, when British soldiers leave their stations in a manner akin to leaving home. Yet daily life is the main driving force of the narrative: how people feel, think, & strive for accomplishments.

While the world of Brookland was created quite thoroughly, i missed poetic language. My favorite authors punctuate paragraphs with certain phrases of sheer eloquence: the beautiful phrases i wish i'd thought of first & copy down as a "quotable." The book is written with incredible craft, but i wished often for memorable extrapolations which could have revealed the author & solidified the imagination's bond.

I love the child's fantasy of Manhattan as a land that housed the souls of the dead.

Alethea says

This novel, about the Winship daughters (Prue, Tem, and Pearl), focuses on their lives running the gin distillery their father bequeathed them, and on building a (fictional) bridge from New York to Brookyn. Barton is an incredibly thorough writer, from the historical perspective. The detail she gives to the distilling process and the engineering of the bridge are marvelous. And Prue Winship is a perfect protagonist, an anti-heroine who makes her own way, in men's breeches and with a no-nonsense attitude. The story of Prue and her sisters' lives is full, rich, and compelling.

Bamboozlepig says

It started off okay and I was into it. Then the pacing slowed waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay down and the plot moved along at the same speed as elderly snails having sex on a glacier. I kept waiting for something...ANYTHING...to happen, but several chapters were devoted to describing in extraneous detail how a gin mill works.

And the characters were blah. No one character stuck out to me as being remotely interesting, not even Pearl. Prue's letters to her daughter were annoying and could've been left out entirely. I noped it out of there after reading yet more about how the gin mill works.

Alicia says

Brookland is a historical novel set in 18th-century Brooklyn. The Winship family raises a trio of unusual daughters who take over the gin mill and control their destinies in a way that was unique for the times. The eldest gambles the family business in order to build a bridge between New York and Brooklyn. Her vision causes stresses within the family. This was a quiet, epic novels that ends with a dramatic conclusion.
