

# The Brooklyn Tolstoy

by **Doug Benerofe**

Illustrated by **Alexander Lee**

Curriculum developed by **Rosalind Helfand** and **Tiffany Owens**

Supplementary curriculum and copy editing by **Léna Garcia**



## OVERVIEW

### Quick Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade Level Appropriateness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ages 14+</li> <li>• Grades 9+</li> </ul>
Genre/s	Fiction
Length	3,209 words
Content Advisories	Discussion of menstrual cycles; discussion of smoking; some references to sex and sexuality.
One Sentence Summary	A widowed father must learn to guide his teenage daughter through the difficulties of puberty even as he struggles with his own grief and fears.

Lesson Planning	
Topic/s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growing-up</li> <li>• Parent/child relationships</li> <li>• Loss</li> </ul>
Key Theme/s Overview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of abandonment</li> <li>• Dealing with the loss of a parent or spouse</li> <li>• Navigating the changing parent / teen relationship</li> <li>• Lost in the past</li> <li>• Life goes on</li> </ul>
Historic Events / Time Period for Study	Julia Butterfly Hill and the environmental protest movement.
Complementary Classic and Historic Texts	Poem: "Life's Scars" by Ella Wheeler Wilcox
Author and Artists Information	<p><b>Doug Benerofe</b> is an English teacher in San Francisco, CA.</p> <p><b>Alexander Lee</b> is a comic book artist in Los Angeles, CA.</p>

<p>Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum)</p>	<p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.A, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6</p>
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## Author Biography

“The Brooklyn Tolstoy” is part of a collection of ten stories about the same characters. Chronologically, “The Brooklyn Tolstoy” is the last story in the ongoing relationship between Neil Gluckman and Jane Wagner. Other stories from this collection have appeared in *Narrative Magazine*, *Rosebud*, and the *South Dakota Review*. **Doug Benerofe** has also published in *Sonora Review*. He earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Saint Mary’s College of California. He lives in San Francisco with his wife and daughter. He is currently writing his first novel. He works as a high school and college English teacher.

## Artist Biography

**Alexander Lee** studied illustration in college and his main interests are in comic, animation, and concept art. He loves to hang out at coffee shops and sketch people and write stories. Often these random people will show up in his stories. His main artistic influences are: Nico Marlet, Akira Toriyama, Peter De ‘Seve, Jeff Smith, Edmund Dulac.

## SYNOPSIS

A 13-year-old girl named Katie, who idolizes the 1990s environmental protest icon Julia Butterfly Hill, has decided to “protest” her father’s decision to not allow her to get second ear piercings by refusing to come down from the backyard tree house. Widowed three years earlier when Katie’s mother was killed in a car accident, the father struggles to communicate with his daughter and make good parenting decisions, while wrestling with his feelings of grief, loss, and inadequacy. The situation is made more awkward when it is revealed that not only is Katie struggling to deal with her mother’s loss herself, but she is entering puberty and doesn’t know how to talk with her father about it. This is a modern fiction story told from the viewpoint of the father.

## CURRICULUM

### Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

#### Topic

Write about a time you had to cope with losing a person or pet in your life. How did you deal with your sadness? Did you talk about your loss with friends or family? Did you write? Exercise? Just think? Explain.

#### Main Ideas

Growing up can be just as awkward for parents and guardians as it is for teenagers. Briefly write about a time when a parent or guardian clearly felt uncomfortable engaging you in a well-intentioned but awkward conversation about something they felt was important.

#### Passage-Specific Themes

Read the following passage from the story:

“I want to tell my daughter about the time, just after my father took off, when I smacked a double off the wall during a junior high school baseball game. After the small crowd stopped cheering – as I stood on second base and dusted the dirt off my pants – my mother, from the bleachers, yelled, “I love you, honey darling.” I wanted to reprimand my mother for being so embarrassingly overzealous. But I feared she would perceive this as a kind of abandonment, and I didn’t want to do to her what my father had done to me. If it came down to it, I would’ve allowed her to greet me at home plate with a hug and a glass of prune juice.”

Consider this passage in the context of the story. Why does the narrator wish to tell his daughter this story from his youth? What message does he hope to convey to her? Discuss in class.

#### Universal Themes

Have you ever been stuck – with a problem or literally stuck in something? Write about that time. How is the father stuck in life? Have you ever been stuck in life? After writing about your experience, share it with the class.

### Key Vocabulary

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
pierce	rouge	bonkers
existence	cosmic	epiphany
logging	hormonal	neurotic
ridiculous	illuminating	claustrophobic
ineffective	bewildering	environmentalists
therapy	lunatic	columnist
scrambling	conference	knish
informal	murky	delirium
data	territory	paraphernalia
widowers	referred	amorphous
tacked	reprimand	accoutrements
gazing	overzealous	fathom
whips	fumble	charlatan
thrilled	frantic	
substitute	stormed	
uptight	circumstance	
perceive	boundaries	
	expiration date	
	simultaneously	
	chaperon	
	ritual	
	menstrual cycle	
	gynecologist	

## Vocabulary Activities

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4 Vocabulary Acquisition and Use** – Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 9-10 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

1. The author uses terms that indicate mental distress on several occasions. Locate and write down at least three of these terms. Speculate on their meanings based on how they are used in the story – the context.

Next, look up the words' definitions. How are the actual meanings similar and different from the definitions you came up with? Which is the best meaning listed in the dictionary based on how each word is used in the story?

Finally, discuss the author's purpose in using such words so frequently in this story? What point or tone is he trying to convey? (Possible word choices: delirium, lunatic, claustrophobic, frantic.)

2. What does the narrator mean when he awkwardly refers to "female paraphernalia" for his daughter? Look up the word "paraphernalia" and read about its history. How did the meaning of the word expand between 1650 and 1791 and which definition best applies in "The Brooklyn Tolstoy"?
3. Define the word amorphous. Now draw it. Share your drawing with your fellow classmates and compare how you each interpreted the word.

## Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. Why does Katie burn the picture of her mother? What does it symbolize?
2. What are Coach Monroe's feelings towards the father? Why won't he reciprocate her feelings?
3. Do you think Katie would really go to China if all of her friends did? Why or why not?
4. What do Katie and the father each do to cope with the loss of the mother? Who do you think has been more successful?

## Text-Dependent Questions

1. Is the father happy? Unhappy? A little of both? What does he seem to fear so much? Explain his mental state and how you know using examples from the text.
2. Why does Katie want to be like Julia Butterfly Hill? What does the treehouse symbolise for Katie?
3. Examine the illustration for the story by Alexander Lee. What body language did Lee give Katie and her father? Is this how you imagined them when you read the story? Explain why or why not.
4. The story ends on an ambiguous note. Do you think the father's relationship with Katie will improve after their conversation in the treehouse? Why or why not?
5. What was the advice column that Katie posted on her father's mirror about? What do you think her reasons were for posting the column and the words, "Dad, aren't you glad you're now a statistic?" with it?



6. Why is it such a big deal to the father to allow Katie to get a second ear piercing? What does he believe this act will symbolize to both other people and to the father? Is he right to be concerned?

## Writing Exercises

### Narrative

Re-read the initial conversation between the father and his daughter, Katie, in the treehouse. Now, rewrite the conversation, but from Katie's point-of-view this time. Include not just what she says, but details of what *she* is thinking, feeling, observing, and remembering during the conversation. Use your imagination!

### Descriptive

How does Katie see the narrator, her father? Write a description of the father from Katie's viewpoint as she sees him entering the treehouse. How does he look? How is he dressed? What expression does he have on his face? What is his body language? What are Katie's thoughts about how he looks? Include plenty of details.

### Analysis

"The Brooklyn Tolstoy" is titled after an elderly man associated with the father's happier memories of his past. Locate and re-read the father's memory where this person is mentioned. After reviewing the memory, research the author Leo Tolstoy. What was the man's similarity to Leo Tolstoy?

Write a short essay analyzing why the author may have chosen to title the story after "The Brooklyn Tolstoy." Identify and explore various possibilities and explain what you believe to be the most likely reason.

Read the following passage from "The Brooklyn Tolstoy":

"This is not the first time Coach Monroe has invited me to things. She's my age, divorced, with a daughter of her own. I believed Jane would be the last woman I'd ever date. Even now, more than three years after her accident, I still feel like a charlatan at times like this."

Why does the father "feel like a charlatan"? Do you think he's a charlatan? Research famous charlatans. Choose one and write an essay comparing and contrasting the behavior of that person with the father. Discuss why the father would compare himself to charlatans and analyze the difference between feeling like a charlatan and being one.

## Complementary Reading Text

The classic poem “Life’s Scars” by Ella Wheeler Wilcox is about the pain that loved ones can inflict on each other—willfully or not—and how it’s a pain that cuts more deeply than others. In “The Brooklyn Tolstoy,” the father and daughter both hurt each other deeply, and yet their love for each other is great.

### Writing Exercise

Read “Life’s Scars” by Ella Wheeler Wilcox. Which character in “The Brooklyn Tolstoy” would identify most with this poem? Use examples from both the poem and story to illustrate your choice.

#### Life’s Scars

by Ella Wheeler Wilcox

They say the world is round, and yet  
I often think it square,  
So many little hurts we get  
From corners here and there.  
But one great truth in life I’ve found,  
While journeying to the West—  
The only folks who really wound  
Are those we love the best.

The man you thoroughly despise  
Can rouse your wrath, ‘tis true;  
Annoyance in your heart will rise  
At things mere strangers do;  
But those are only passing ills;  
This rule all lives will prove;  
The rankling wound which aches and thrills  
Is dealt by hands we love.

The choicest garb, the sweetest grace,  
Are oft to strangers shown;  
The careless mien, the frowning face,  
Are given to our own.  
We flatter those we scarcely know,  
We please the fleeting guest,  
And deal full many a thoughtless blow  
To those who love us best.



Love does not grow on every tree,  
Nor true hearts yearly bloom.  
Alas for those who only see  
This cut across a tomb!  
But, soon or late, the fact grows plain  
To all through sorrow's test:  
The only folks who give us pain  
Are those we love the best.

## Activity Options

### Classroom Activity One

**Overview:** Students will learn about Julia Butterfly Hill and make their own “treehouse” in the classroom. They’ll discuss the concept of protesting and create their own written “protests” to attach to the treehouse.

**Step 1:** Have students research Julia Butterfly Hill online. Read her website as well as articles about her famous protest and recordings of interviews with Julia. Hold a class discussion about Julia’s action and the concept of protesting. Make sure students discuss both the pros and cons of actions like Julia’s.

**Step 2:** Now create a large scale classroom “tree” and “treehouse” with paper and paint and attach it to a wall in the room. Depending on the class size, students can work in different teams on the trunk, branches, leaves, and house.

**Step 3:** Conduct a class discussion on what “taking action” meant for both the narrator and Katie in “The Brooklyn Tolstoy.” What kind of “protest” was Katie making in the treehouse? Have students consider and write down something they’ve protested or have considered protesting – it can be environmental, educational, something they’re not allowed to do at home, etc. Have them share their protests in class.

**Step 4:** Students will now use colorful construction paper to write down what they’re protesting and cut around it. Attach each protest to the treehouse in the classroom.

### Classroom Activity Two

In “The Brooklyn Tolstoy,” the father recalls good times or perfect memories with his wife. One is of their trip to Coney Island. Have students research Coney Island and Brighton Beach online and re-

reflect on what makes these a source of happy memories for many people. Using found images from the internet that the students print and bring in to class, break the class into groups and ask each group to create a perfect memory of an imagined trip to Coney Island in collage form (glue, scissors and paper will be required).

Students will also work together to create a written description of the memory to accompany the image and present their collage to the class. One member of their team will be the recorder to write down the memory description. Another member of the team will be chosen to present the collage on behalf of their group.

### **Home Activity**

Ask students to choose a parent or guardian to interview. The purpose of the interview is to explore a past time when their parent/guardian felt awkward discussing a difficult but important growing-up topic with the student – puberty, avoiding substance abuse, curfew, etc.

Develop the interview questions with the students in class – these should be generalized and not topic specific (the students will be asking their parents/guardians to think of a conversation that they found difficult).

Students will ask for 15 minutes of parent or guardian’s time and write down their answers to the questions. Students will then write about their interview experience and reflect on how the interview changed (or did not change) their view of the past conversation.

### **Guest Speaker**

Invite a local therapist or psychologist to come and discuss grief and loss from their professional perspective. In their professions, how do they help people to deal with and overcome these experiences? What happens in the human brain when loss is experienced and how do people react differently? What kind of schooling and training did they have to get for their careers? What is rewarding and challenging about their careers?

**Alternate or additional topic:** How therapists and psychologists work with families to improve relationships.

### **Field Trip**

Take a class trip to visit and learn about the organization TreePeople. ([www.treepeople.org](http://www.treepeople.org)) Following the visit, organize a class tree planting with TreePeople’s assistance. The goal of the planting will be to “green” an urban location.

Following the planting, ask the students to write personal essays reflecting on their emotional response to “taking action” – helping to green their urban environment. “The Brooklyn Tolstoy” includes themes of seeking to move forward with life – to take action. By idolizing Julia Butterfly Hill, Katie has identified a role model who takes action. Ask the students to reflect on a time when they felt stuck in one place, unable to take action. How did they find a way to move forward? How were the emotions they experienced during the tree planting similar to when they chose to move forward in life?

Break the students into small groups to discuss their moving forward experiences and how that and the tree planting made them feel.

## TEST PREPARATION COMPONENT

### Partner Activity:

Get into pairs or small groups. Acting as either Katie or her father, the speaker in Doug Benerofe’s “The Brooklyn Tolstoy,” create a “double-bubble map” for your character’s life experiences and desires for the future.

Instructions for double-bubble map: In the five bubbles connected only to Katie’s name, bullet note the key elements of her character. In the five bubbles stemming only from her father’s bubble, bullet note the key elements unique to his character. Use the center five bubbles to note similarities between father and daughter.

### Writing Prompt:

Place yourself in the shoes of an expert advice columnist who receives an email from the speaker in Benerofe’s story, in which he asks for advice discussing teen issues with his daughter. Research local parenting resources (e.g., classes, blogs, and meetups), as well as public health organizations, that support single parents and young people. You may also wish to briefly read up on the psychology of 13-year-old girls.

Your task: Write a formal two- to three-paragraph letter in which you help the speaker devise a strategy to talk to his daughter about growing up. Be sure to cite any outside sources you draw upon.

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE

### Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

## Vocabulary Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 9-10 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4.A Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence, paragraph, or text; a word's position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5 Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

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## Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

## Text-Dependent Question Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 9-10 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

## Writing Exercise Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.A: Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.



CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

## Complementary Reading Text Writing Exercise

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6: Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

## Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2: Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

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