A Northern Light  ~  by Jennifer Donnelly

Summary: 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.-Amazon.com

Major Themes: Women's Rights, Race, Crime, History, Life in the early 1900's

*Based on the Grace Brown murder case —the basis also for *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser (1925).

Writing Activities  (www.webteaching.com/free/light.htm)

- Sensory/Descriptive: Mattie said that if spring had a taste, it would taste like fiddleheads (a young frond on a fern). Use all of your senses to describe the season of your choice.
• **Imaginative/Narrative:** Imagine you are a reporter for a tabloid magazine. You have been given the assignment of writing about Grace’s murder. When you write the article, be sure to focus on the attention-grabbing, sensational aspects.

• **Analytical/Persuasive:** Think about a topic or issue you feel very strongly about. It can be a school policy, a political issue, a disagreement with your parents, etc. Write a persuasive essay that expresses your “voice” through the feelings you evoke.

• **Practical/Informative:** Write a newspaper article about the murder as a reporter at the hotel.

**Book Discussion Questions:** (www.webteaching.com/free/light.htm)

Page 135: “Mrs. Morrison left a lamp burning because it’s unkind to leave the dead all alone in the dark. They have darkness enough ahead of them.”

Page 186: “She is tiny. In the same way that a stick of dynamite is tiny.”

Page 247: “Weaver always seemed to be able to bend the world, just a little, to his will. Just because he dared to.”

**Online test** with immediate results available at: www.webteaching.com/quiz/Northern-Light/quiz.html

**Appropriate Grades:** 9-12

**Book Reviews:**

Jennifer Donnelly has populated her first young-adult novel with a community of distinctive characters who ring rich and true, and grounded it in the often horrific realities of rural life a century ago. We don’t just root for Mattie; we come to understand and cherish her.

*A Northern Light* is a quintessential coming-of-age story ... exceptionally well told. Honest and unflinching in its portrayal of loss, poverty, racism, and pregnancy, it nonetheless avoids melodrama and polemic. And its witty and oddball supporting cast (a renegade poet teacher, an encouraging schoolmate, and a handsome but dull next door neighbor) add complexity and color to Mattie’s journey. The best thing about this book, however, is Mattie's smart, vulnerable voice. We share her desires, if not her unique challenges, on every page.

**Awards:** Carnegie Medal (2004), the Los Angeles Times Book Prize (2003), and was a runner-up for the Michael L. Printz Award (2003).