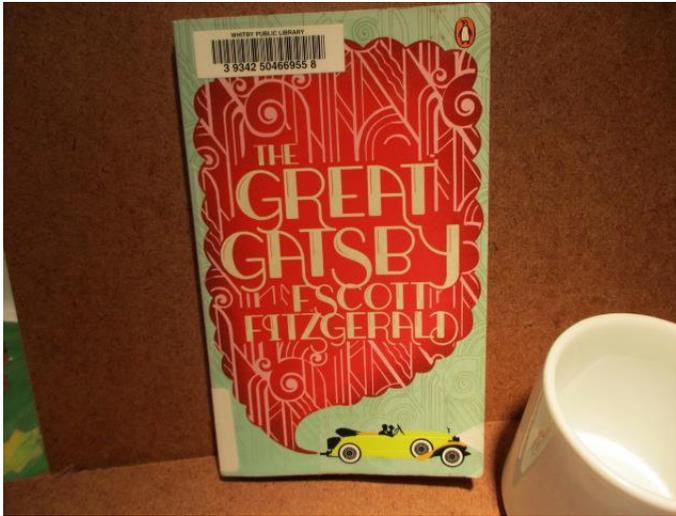


The Great Gatsby

By Rod Fraser



F. SCOTT FITZGERALD (1896–1940) came of age in the years leading up to the Great War. He coined the term '*The Jazz Age*', and flitted between America and France during the 1920s and 30s, all the while earning his living as a novelist and short story writer. He was considered a bona fide member of the 'lost generation' (a group of American expatriate writers living in Paris during the 1920s).

He met his future wife, Zelda Sayre, while stationed at Montgomery, Alabama during the war. At that time, he was a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army, after dropping out of Princeton in the fall of

1917. He wasn't much of a scholar, and didn't distinguish himself in the army. Fitzgerald remained stateside during the war years, where there was little or no opportunity to rise in rank or make a name for himself.

It was Fitzgerald's determination to be a writer that may explain his lack of success in these other pursuits. In his world, school work and soldiering took second place to writing. In 1920, this singleness of purpose paid off. *This Side of Paradise* was published by Scribner, and sold over 41,000 copies in the first year alone.

With his success in writing reasonably assured, he and Zelda soon married. Their daughter, Scottie, was born the next year. The couple traveled to Paris in 1921, and together with Scottie, they lived in France for a few years starting in 1924.

It was during 1922, that Fitzgerald began work on *The Great Gatsby*, at a time when he and Zelda were living on Long Island, NY. The work continued intermittently until 1924, when it was taken up in earnest. The novel was published by Scribner in mid-1925.

In 1930, while in France, Zelda was diagnosed with schizophrenia and hospitalized for observation and treatment. Two years later, when the couple returned to America, Zelda's health deteriorated

further. She was treated in a psychiatric ward at a hospital in Baltimore.

During this time, Fitzgerald worked on *Tender is the Night* in nearby Towson, Maryland. When the novel was finished, it was serialized in Scribner's Magazine in early 1934 and subsequently published in print form.

A few years later, Fitzgerald moved to Hollywood to work as a screen writer. Here he continued his descent into alcoholism until his death of a heart attack in 1940 at the age of 44.

Zelda was to be in and out of sanitariums for the remainder of her life. In 1948, she died in a mental hospital in North Carolina at the age of 47. There was a major fire at the facility, at a time when Zelda was unconscious from sedation. She was unaware of the fire and made no effort to leave the building. Eight other women died in the same fire.

HERE ARE FOUR anecdotes you might find interesting:

1. Fitzgerald's full name was *Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald*. He was named for a distant cousin (*Francis Scott Key*) who wrote a poem, which would later become the lyrics for *The Star Spangled Banner*.
2. Fitzgerald's father, Edward Fitzgerald, was a

Southerner from Maryland, who moved to Minnesota after the American Civil War. One of Edward's distant cousins—Mary Surratt—was hanged in 1865 for conspiring to assassinate Abraham Lincoln.

3. Fitzgerald's daughter, 'Scottie', became a successful journalist after graduating from Vassar College in 1942. She wrote for the Washington Post, The New Yorker and other publications. She was married twice, had four children and eventually moved to her mother's home town of Montgomery, Alabama. She died of throat cancer at the age of 64.
4. Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway were friends and correspondents for years. Although generally on good terms, there were some difficulties with their relationship. One problem was Hemingway's disapproval and dislike of Zelda (a feeling that was strongly reciprocated).

It was Hemingway's view that Zelda distracted her husband from his writing. He told Fitzgerald, "She is jealous of your work and wants to compete with you. In the long run, she will ruin you." Hemingway felt Fitzgerald would never do his best work while Zelda was in his life.

Years later, after Zelda's mental illness resulted in hospitalization, Hemingway told Fitzgerald, "I

thought she was crazy the first time I met her.”

THE GREAT GATSBY is the third and best known of Fitzgerald’s books, although at the time of its publication, initial sales were not encouraging. Over the course of his short life, Fitzgerald wrote five novels (and eight volumes of short stories).

By the end of his life, Fitzgerald considered himself a failure, overwhelmed with the cost of Zelda’s care and Scottie’s education. He should have lived longer. His books became increasingly popular and sales flourished in the decades after his death. He is now considered one of the finest American writers of the 20th century.

The Great Gatsby was made into a film six times. The first was a silent film in 1926. Five other adaptations followed over the years—the latest in 2013, starring Leonardo DiCaprio. After reading the book for a second time in preparation for this review, I watched three of the latest *Gatsby* films. All were available at my library.

I found the book a great read—worthwhile and interesting. The films are even better. In a memoir written by Tennessee Williams, he noted the 1974 film version, starring Robert Redford and Mia Farrow, “made of *The Great Gatsby*, a film that even surpassed the novel by Scott Fitzgerald.”

I tend to agree. The 1974 film was true to the book, well-acted and an overall great movie. Having said that, all the film adaptations I watched were interesting in their own way.

THE STORY OF Jay Gatsby is narrated by Nick Carraway, a Yale graduate who participated in the Great War, "came back restless", then "decided to go East to learn the bond business."

"The practical thing was to find rooms in the city", but Nick chose a "weather-beaten ... bungalow at eighty dollars a month" in a nearby "commuting town". He made do with "an old Dodge and a Finnish woman, who made [his] bed and cooked breakfast".

"With the sunshine and ... leaves growing on the trees ... [Nick] had the ... conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer."

And so it was. Nick had a second cousin, Daisy Buchanan, who lived with her wealthy husband and daughter across the bay in East Egg. But otherwise, he knew no one in his own little village of West Egg.

This was soon to change. His wealthy neighbour, Jay Gatsby, lived in a palatial mansion next door. Although Gatsby lived alone, he hosted lavish parties each weekend. It wasn't long before Nick received an invitation and walked next door to meet his neighbour and enjoy his hospitality.

When he met Gatsby, they realized they had both served in the First Division during the war. They chatted briefly about the army. But Gatsby was soon called away and Nick only spoke to him again to thank him for a lovely evening.

As the summer passed, Nick became friends with Gatsby. Over time, he learned Jay came from a poor family and accumulated his wealth from a number of unsavoury connections (not clearly detailed in the book). Despite this, Nick recognized an underlying decency to Gatsby and grew fond of him.

GATSBY'S HOME IN West Egg was purchased for a particular reason. Years earlier, Gatsby had fallen in love with Nick's cousin, Daisy Buchanan, wooed her and hoped to make her his wife. But he didn't return from the war quickly enough. Or rich enough.

Although Daisy loved Gatsby at one time, she was uncertain, emotionally distraught and didn't wait for him to return from the war. Instead, she met the handsome and wealthy Tom Buchanan, married him and they subsequently had a child together.

When Gatsby discovered this, he conceived a long-term plan to win her back. Being a talented individual, he set about to become wealthy. With financial success in place, he purchased a home at West Egg to be near her. He hoped by hosting lavish

parties, she would hear of them and visit. Then he would attempt to make her his own.

Tom Buchanan was rich, but he wasn't much of a husband. He had a mistress on the side and lacked the sense to be discrete. Nick found out about this affair when Tom invited him to a party in the city. Myrtle Wilson and her sister were there and it was quite clear that Tom and Myrtle were intimately involved.

Gatsby's plan to woo Daisy was successful. He met her, told her of his love and his plans to make her his wife. In the early days, it was all lovely. Daisy was flattered, enjoyed the attentions of a man who loved her deeply, and thought little of the difficulties in making this all come to pass.

When Gatsby and Daisy confronted Tom with their plans, he was not pleased. He was difficult, condescending to Gatsby and refused to consider the matter. He also worked on Daisy to change her mind. Ultimately Daisy's resolve disappeared.

In the last part of the book, there is a horrible accident. Tom and Daisy Buchanan move away to escape from it all. Gatsby is left to take responsibility for something that was not his doing.

I will leave the sad ending for those who choose to read the book or watch one of the films. The novel

is readily available at most libraries and many others will have the film. If not, you can easily order both from Amazon.

Scott Fitzgerald is buried with his wife, Zelda, in a cemetery in Rockville, Maryland. The final line from *The Great Gatsby* is their epitaph: "*So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.*"

Perhaps some of you might wish to hear a song from 'The Jazz Age', one that was played in the 1974 film. I liked it and you might as well. Click [here](#) if you're interested.

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