



# Book of the Month

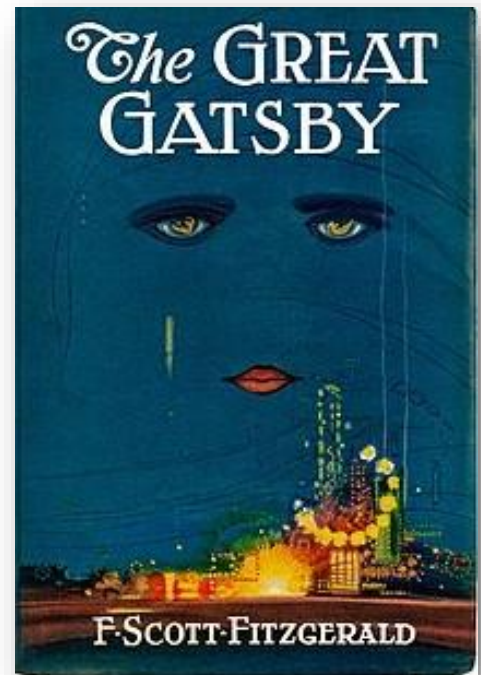
***The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald**

**Book Review by Dr. Nancy Hargrove, William L. Giles Distinguished Professor Emerita of English, MSU, and Library Discussion Leader**

Fitzgerald was the spokesperson for and critic of the Jazz Age. According to one astute scholar, “His biography is one of the saddest records of an American literary life.” Success and failure were closely linked throughout.

Here are the highlights and lowlights of his life. He was born in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1896. As a young man, he went to Princeton, but was not a good student because he partied too much. He left in 1917 to join the military and fight in World War I, as did many young men. In 1918, while in military training in Montgomery, Alabama, he met and fell in love with Zelda Sayre, who was rich, beautiful, unconventional, and ambitious. Scholar Matthew Brucoli says that she was the strongest influence on his life after 1919, and indeed she was the model for his creation of the flapper. However, he was poor, so he was determined to make enough money to be “worthy” of her. He went to New York City, where he worked at an ad agency during the day and worked on his novel *This Side of Paradise* at night. In 1920 his novel was published; this quick and easy success gave him fame, money, and the girl. They married and began an extravagant lifestyle, summed up in this journal entry, “Nobody knew whose party it was.”

For the next decade, they lived in Europe and New York and their daughter Scottie was born, but somehow Fitzgerald managed to publish the novel *The Beautiful and Damned* and a collection of short stories, *Tales of the Jazz Age* as the two of them “played a game for which only they knew the rules,” according to Brucoli. They were a golden couple, who “looked like they’d just stepped out of the sun.” In 1925 he published *The Great Gatsby*, but in the mid to late 20s things started to go downhill: in 1926 he wrote in his journal, “1000 parties and no work.”



In 1930 Zelda had her first breakdown. Fitzgerald wrote, "I left my capacity for hoping on the little roads that led to Zelda's sanitarium" and "Ominous. No real progress in ANY WAY and wrecked myself with dozens of people. June, carried home from the Ritz; July, Drinking and general unpleasantness—first trip jail; August, second trip jail."

In 1934, Zelda had a second breakdown and was in and out of mental institutions from then on. However, Fitzgerald managed to write his novel *Tender is the Night*. From 1935 to 1937, he wrote *The Crack-Up* about his alcoholism, illness, attempted suicide, and debt. He died of a heart attack on December 21, 1940 at just 44 years old, and in 1948 Zelda died in a fire in her sanitarium in North Carolina.

So that is a brief backstory of the Fitzgeralds. *The Great Gatsby*, his most famous work, has two main plots: 1) Gatsby's unsuccessful attempt to renew his romance with Daisy after making colossal amounts of money with which to impress her. This plot ends with his death. 2) Nick's disillusionment with the wealthy and their callous attitudes. The setting is West Egg (Long Island) and New York City from June to September 1922. So it's a story about the 20s set in the 20s and written in the 20s.

The narrator is Nick Carraway, whose first-person, eye-witness account is reliable, compelling, and informal. This choice of narrative voice is a marvelous device that is realistic in that we find things out in bits and pieces, just like in real life. His sources of information include himself (his own observations); his own speculation/imagination; and what others reveal to him, including the newspapers, the inquest, Gatsby himself, Gatsby's father, Meyer Wolfsheim, and Jordan Baker.

The cast of characters is quite large, but there are several main characters, the most important of whom are Gatsby, Daisy Fay Buchanan, and Nick. Gatsby, who is in his early 30s at the time of the main action, has become very wealthy, bought a large mansion, and gives enormous and extravagant parties. He affects the posh language of wealthy, upper-class people ("Old Sport" is a speech tag that runs through the novel), and he is the object of numerous rumors about how he attained his money.

His own account of his past (which is mostly untrue) is that he is the son of wealthy people in Midwest and went to Oxford University, a family tradition. He inherited their money when they died and "lived like a young Rajah in all the capitals of Europe." He tells Nick that he was in the drug business and then in the oil business. The truth is that he seems to have been a bootlegger, a gambler, a dealer in illegal bonds, an owner of drugstores (covers for illegal alcohol in the 20s). We are never quite sure, but he does have criminal friends, like Meyer Wolfsheim, who is said to have fixed the 1919 World Series. THE question is, "Who are you anyhow?" asked by Tom. He is an idealistic romantic, who tells Nick when he guesses that Daisy was driving the car which killed Tom's girlfriend Myrtle, "But of course I'll say I was," like a true romantic hero.

Daisy is superficial, beautiful, wealthy, and of high social status. The imagery of nobility and money is associated with her: her voice "was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it. . . . High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl . . . ." She is the flapper incarnate; she smokes, drinks, wears clothes typical of a flapper, such as a small tight hat of metallic cloth, a cloche hat. She is callous, irresponsible, and amoral; after Gatsby takes the blame for her, she and Tom leave town, and she doesn't send a message or a flower.

Her husband Tom is brutal, unfaithful (but decries women who are), prejudiced, and not very intelligent.

Nick Carraway is the most important character along with Gatsby. He is the narrator as well as a character in the action, an outsider from the Midwest who gets involved when he comes east to New York City to sell bonds in 1922. He becomes disillusioned with the wealthy, delivering two damning moral judgments of Daisy and Tom. The first is on the night of the climactic confrontation and death of Myrtle; as Gatsby and Nick say goodnight, Nick turns around: "They're a rotten crowd," I shouted across the lawn. "You're worth the whole damn bunch put together." The other one is in October when Nick sees Tom on the street: "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made. . . ." So Nick is the moral compass of the book.

The style is marvelous, a wonderful combination of the lyrical and the realistic. It is simple and conversational, but also varied and complex with some elevated words: Tom's heart, for example, is described as "peremptory"; G's house and servants are described as a "caravansary." It is also realistic with slang such as "It's a swell suite"; drunken speech (a drunken Daisy right before her wedding to Tom says: "Tell 'em all Daisy's change her mine"); curse words (Tom after Myrtle's death says, "The God Damn coward! He didn't even stop his car"); various dialects (Wolfsheim: "I understand you're looking for a business gonnegtion" and "He's an Oggxford man," with words spelled as they would be pronounced). Mr. Gatz and Myrtle also have their own particular dialects.

But the best thing about the style is the use of images, symbols, and motifs. The scholar James G. Miller says that the novel captures America and the 20s "through a sequence of powerful, pervasive, and devastating images that force the reader to 'think with his feelings.'" One of the most memorable is the party—a symbol of the superficiality, chaos, and rootlessness of life as well as an escape from the emptiness of life and the waste of the 20s. Parties mark significant moments in the plot such as the first party that Nick attends at Gatsby's mansion, described in Chapter III. The description ends with the words, "The party has begun." In speaking of Gatsby's house after he lets all the servants go, Nick remarks that occasionally a car drove up with "some guest who had been away at the ends of the earth and didn't know that the party was over."

A second image is Gatsby's house; closely allied with the party, it represents materialism and extravagance. When decorated for a party, it is compared to the World's Fair, an amusement park, a roadhouse, and a caravansary. Gatsby's car represents materialism and extravagance. Tom demeans it by calling it a "Circus wagon," which underlines the sense of a show or performance associated with Gatsby. Colors, mostly pastels such as rose, lavender, and apple green, reflect the magical, illusory quality of his lifestyle. Gatsby wears a caramel-colored suit, suggesting a sweet delicacy, as well as a pink suit on the night of the catastrophe. The many references to silver and gold indicate how money and wealth underlie the veneer of the 1920s. Finally, a group of motifs reflect superficiality, insubstantiality, and glitter, conveying the magical quality of this lifestyle: drifting, floating, fluttering, glowing, shining.

However, the novel is firmly grounded in actual elements of the 1920s through numerous references. Perhaps most obvious are actual 20s popular songs such as "Ain't we got fun," "The Sheik of Araby," "It's Three O'Clock in the Morning," and others.

Jordan Baker's name is taken from two popular cars (The Jordan and the Baker Electric). That she is a famous female golf star reflects the love of sports and the advent of women as sports stars in the 1920s. She is based on Edith Cummings, a wealthy socialite and golf star who was the first woman athlete to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine (1924). Jordan is often described as "Jaunty" to emphasize her skill at sports.

The clothing worn by Daisy and Jordan as well as many of the characters is typical of 20s styles.

The themes in the novel also reflect the times. The most dominant—and perhaps the most surprising given the popular view of the 20s as a time of frivolity and fun—is disillusionment, a sense of loss, a lack of values, which reflect the actual mood in America after World War I. Nick becomes disillusioned with the shallow, irresponsible, and callous people who surround Gatsby, best caught up in his ultimate judgment of Daisy and Tom: "They were careless people—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness . . . and let other people clean up the mess." The sense of life's emptiness is also reflected in Daisy's haunting question, "What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon . . . and the day after that, and the next thirty years?"

Other themes are associated with the sense of disillusionment and meaninglessness are 1) the inability to love, to establish meaningful human relationships seen in all the characters, especially Gatsby, who fails in his quest to re-establish his relationship with Daisy. A question to ponder is, "Had he succeeded, would it have been a meaningful relationship?" 2) The criticism of the excessive emphasis on materialism seen in the reputation of the 1920s as a time of enormous prosperity and Get Rich Quick schemes. Although Gatsby thought that he could rekindle Daisy's love for him if he had enough money, a grand mansion, and numerous material possessions (the car, beautiful clothes), he fails to do so and is killed. Daisy, a hollow, superficial, and essentially amoral person, is closely associated with money in descriptions of her: her voice is "full of money," she gleams "like silver," and she is "High in a white palace, the king's daughter, the golden girl." 3) A third theme is the isolation of human beings, whether literally, socially, or morally. Gatsby is always set apart, alone even in the midst of great crowds of people: "A sudden emptiness seemed to flow now from the windows and the great doors [of his mansion], endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host, his hand up, in a formal gesture of farewell." And of course he is alone at his death and his funeral. Nick himself when he is left to try to get some mourners at the funeral says, "I found myself on Gatsby's side, and alone."

Finally, here are some questions for consideration: 1) What does Gatsby represent? Is he a symbol of modern America? Of the American search for the ideal? Of the American belief in the power of money? If so, what does his experience suggest about these? 2) Does Gatsby become aware of the falseness of his dream, of the unworthiness of the object of his devotion? We can only speculate, as does Nick. I myself feel that he does not since it would devalue all the time and longing that he had invested in her. 3) What does Nick learn? The novel is as much about him as Gatsby. We already know his judgment about Tom and Daisy, but what is his judgment about Gatsby? He shouts to him as he's leaving after the terrible day: "They're a rotten crowd. You're worth the whole damn bunch put together. I've always been glad I said that." 4) What is the meaning of the title? Is it serious, or ironic, or both? It definitely contributes to the aura of a magic show or stage performance. 5) A Fitzgerald scholar (Miller) states that, "Although [the novel] is deeply rooted in its time, it is considerably more than a revelation of life in the Jazz Age." What do you think?

The best of several movies on *The Great Gatsby* is the 1974 movie with Robert Redford and Mia Farrow, so get that one. It is absolutely the most authentic with the music mentioned in the novel, clothes from the 20s, depictions of Gatsby's fabulous parties, and numerous other accurate details.

I hope that you will read or re-read this wonderful, if sad, great American novel and appreciate all the artistry that lives in its pages.

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