



Two Books, One Community  
GREAT GATSBY & FIRE IN BEULAH

### **Introduction to The Great Gatsby**

F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby* is a tragic love story, a mystery, and a social commentary on American life. Although it was not a commercial success for Fitzgerald during his lifetime, this lyrical novel has become an acclaimed masterpiece read and taught throughout the world.

Unfolding in nine concise chapters, *The Great Gatsby* concerns the wasteful lives of four wealthy characters as observed by their acquaintance, narrator Nick Carraway. Like Fitzgerald himself, Nick is from Minnesota, attended an Ivy League university, served in the U.S. Army during World War I, moved to New York after the war, and questions—even while participating in—high society.

Having left the Midwest to work in the bond business in the summer of 1922, Nick settles in West Egg, Long Island, among the nouveau riche epitomized by his next-door neighbor Jay Gatsby. A mysterious man of thirty, Gatsby is the subject of endless fascination to the guests at his lavish all-night parties. He is rumored to be a hero of the Great War. Others say he served as a German spy. Gatsby claims to have attended Oxford University, but the evidence is suspect. As Nick learns more about Gatsby, every detail about him seems questionable, except his love for the charming Daisy Buchanan.

Jay Gatsby's decadent parties are thrown with one goal: to attract Daisy, who lives across the bay in the more fashionable East Egg. From the lawn of his sprawling mansion, Gatsby can see the green light glowing on her dock, which becomes a symbol in the novel of an unreachable treasure, the "future that year by year recedes before us."

Though Daisy is a married socialite and a mother, Gatsby still worships her as his "golden girl." They first met when she was a young lady from an affluent family and he was a working-class military officer. Daisy pledged to wait for his return from the war. Instead she married Tom Buchanan, a wealthy classmate of Nick's. Having obtained a great fortune, Gatsby sets out to win her back again.

A profound indictment of class privilege in the Jazz Age and beyond, *The Great Gatsby* explores the conflict between decency and self-indulgence. In the novel's conclusion, the characters collide, leaving human wreckage in their wake.

## **Author Biography**

**September 24, 1896:** *Into a family that traces its ancestry to the author of "The Star Spangled Banner," Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald is born in his parents' house on Laurel Avenue in St. Paul, Minnesota.*

## **The Way Up**

Although Fitzgerald's father went bankrupt, Fitzgerald still played with the rich kids in town. This paradox would later inform his fiction. His awareness of his situation sharpened during his years at Princeton, where he studied from 1913 to 1917 until he accepted a commission from the U.S. Army. He never saw combat. During World War I, Fitzgerald was stationed near Montgomery, Alabama, where he began revising what became his first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920). There he also met the love of his life, Zelda Sayre, the charming, mercurial daughter of a judge. Fitzgerald's early literary successes soon made him and Zelda celebrities of the Jazz Age—a term he coined. During the 1920s, Zelda served as his editor, confidante, and rival. Their appetite for excess made them notorious in an age when excess was the norm. The Fitzgeralds moved to France in 1924 with their young daughter, Frances (nicknamed Scottie), where they fell among a group of American expatriate artists whom the writer Gertrude Stein christened the Lost Generation. In 1925 publisher Charles Scribner's Sons came out with Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which has become his most enduring work.

## **The Way Down**

Fitzgerald would not publish another novel for nine years. In 1932, Zelda suffered a breakdown from which she never fully recovered. She spent most of her remaining days in mental institutions. Fitzgerald sold stories to *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Esquire* to keep financially afloat. Implicitly acknowledging his wife's mental illness and his own alcoholism, he drew on their life abroad in the novel *Tender Is the Night* (1934). Fitzgerald relocated to Hollywood in 1937 to write screenplays. His sole screen credit from this period is for the film *Three Comrades* (1938). It joins his other script credit, *Pusher-in-the-Face* (1929), from an earlier California stint. Eventually Fitzgerald began sustained work on his novel *The Last Tycoon* (1941). Tragically, his end came before the books did. Several chapters shy of finishing, Fitzgerald died of a heart attack in the apartment of his Hollywood companion, columnist Sheilah Graham, while eating a chocolate bar and listening to Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony.

**December 21, 1940:** *Fitzgerald dies of a heart attack. His final address: 1403 N. Laurel Avenue, Los Angeles, California.*

## Discussion Questions

1. The novel's action occurs in 1922 between June and September. How does Nick's non-chronological narration shape your response to the events surrounding the mystery of Jay Gatsby?
2. Nick believes he is an honest, non-judgmental narrator. Do you agree?
3. Gatsby believes that the past can be repeated. Is he right?
4. Why does Daisy sob into the "thick folds" of Gatsby's beautiful shirts?
5. What do the faded eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg symbolize? Is there a connection between this billboard and the green light at the end of Daisy's dock?
6. Perhaps the novel's climax occurs when Gatsby confronts Tom in New York. Did Daisy's ultimate choice surprise you? Is it consistent with her character?
7. Do you agree with Nick's final assertion that Gatsby is "worth the whole damn bunch put together"? Why or why not?
8. How does Fitzgerald foreshadow the tragedies at the end?
9. Does the novel critique or uphold the values of the Jazz Age and the fears of the Lost Generation?
10. Fitzgerald wrote, "You don't write because you want to say something, you write because you have something to say." What did he have to say in *Gatsby*?
11. Fitzgerald scholar Matthew J. Bruccoli claims: "*The Great Gatsby* does not proclaim the nobility of the human spirit; it is not politically correct; it does not reveal how to solve the problems of life; it delivers no fashionable or comforting messages. It is just a masterpiece." Do you agree?

## Additional Resources:

- [F. Scott Fitzgerald Centenary](#)  
This website includes biographical information as well as primary sources such as Fitzgerald's ledger.
- [F. Scott Fitzgerald Society](#)  
An affiliate of the American Literature Association, this international society publishes the F. Scott Fitzgerald Society Newsletter and holds conferences.
- [American Masters: F. Scott Fitzgerald on PBS.org](#)  
Go to the PBS American Masters website to hear author E.L. Doctorow's lecture on Fitzgerald, a career timeline, interviews, and photographs.

Information courtesy of NEA Big Read <http://neabigread.org/>