BY F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

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TENDER IS THE NIGHT
THE GREAT GATSBY
THE BEAUTIFUL AND DAMNED
THIS SIDE OF PARADISE

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F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

The Great Gatsby

Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her;
If you can bounce high, bounce for her too,
Till she cry "Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover,
I must have you!"

—THOMAS PARKE D'INVILLIERS

EDITED BY
James L. W. West III

SCRIBNER
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

SCRIBNER
An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

This Scribner trade paperback edition April 2018

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-0-7432-7356-5
ISBN 978-0-7432-4639-2 (ebook)

ONCE AGAIN
TO
ZELDA

INTRODUCTION

by Jesmyn Ward

I first read *The Great Gatsby* as a teenager; I imagine this is when most Americans encounter F. Scott Fitzgerald's seminal work. Our teachers, rightly so, hail the novel as a masterpiece, so we read it under their influence, when we are young. We read it when we are bewildered and delighted at our changing bodies, flush with burgeoning sexuality, heady with the certainty of our ascendency, the prospect of our future greatness shining off in the distance like a great green star.

It is easy for young people to see themselves in Gatsby. His earnestness is familiar. His ambition, twinned with desperation, resonates with any teenager who wants to journey off to college or move states away for work, in a bid to escape the boundaries of their youthful life. Poverty made Gatsby ravenously desperate for difference, for possibility. Some, perhaps from similar circumstances, will recognize that and see themselves. Others will empathize because they feel driven away by parents who don't understand them, by peers who underestimate or limit them, by the larger culture

that ostracizes them for one reason or another. Their hearts will be, as Gatsby's was, "in a constant, turbulent riot." The "instinct toward . . . future glory" leads them out into the world. They burn to flee, to grow beyond their birth circumstances. In some ways, adolescence is one great flight.

Teen readers are especially understanding of Gatsby's fixation on re-creating that moment in his life when it was most open to possibility, when he could become and do anything. When he believed that if he worked hard enough, he could remake himself. He could ascend to a different social class, a class where life seemed to be an enchanted necklace, each moment a pearl on an endless string. It seems to be a universal sentiment of youth: the belief that one can become anything, given the luxury of time and focus. Young readers walk down tree-lined Louisville streets with Gatsby and Daisy as the leaves fall. They see a ladder "mounted to a secret place above the trees . . . once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder." The young know that golden moment when anything can happen, and they understand its allure because they are living it.

By the end of the book, the reader's empathy has burned to love. Young readers fall for Gatsby's passion, his insistence that life should be relished, should be executed well. They have fallen in love with the persistence of his devotion to Daisy. I imagine they like to think they are capable of such a great love, one that smolders, lasting from year to year. They adore him so much, they feel a quiet disdain for those who do not possess his virtues: perhaps most of all for Tom, who embodies the worst excesses of the moneyed elite, the misogynistic, the racist. They pity Nick, too, because they understand he has fallen in love with Gatsby; readers

understand that Nick doesn't deserve Gatsby. Even though he insists he is not carelessly violent like Tom or Daisy, the young understand Nick is as much a product of his social class as Tom, that its backwardness and insularity marks him as much as it does Tom and Daisy.

But the experience I had while reading *The Great Gatsby* as an adult was very different. I would argue my older reading was deeper, more emphatically felt. While most young people admire Gatsby's youthful love for Daisy—for the possibility associated with her economic and social class, and for who he was with Daisy too—in that shining moment in time, there is much subtext that becomes clearer with age, subtext Fitzgerald must have been acutely aware of at the time he wrote *The Great Gatsby.*

One of the first great lessons of my adulthood was this: I change. As I grow, my dreams change as do my ideas about who I can be and what I want during the short time I am alive. Gatsby has not learned this. It is a lesson he has closed himself to. From the moment he meets Daisy, his ideas about who he is and what he wants and what he can become are immutable. It's ironic that he is so in love with the moment of greatest possibility in his youth, the moment he kissed Daisy, but his love for that moment has rendered all other avenues of possibility impossible, has fossilized him, sealed him in amber, turned him to stone. Made it possible for him to see only one version of himself. After years of underhanded dealing and shady business, he is wealthy, popular, feared, respected. On West Egg, he hosts glittering parties where old money and new money engage in raucous revelry together. He owns the newest, most exquisite cars and he has mannerisms and a wardrobe to match his new social station. When we meet Gatsby, he has

worked furiously to make himself into the man, who, on the surface, high society would have deemed a good match for Daisy. And in the end, this immutability, this blindness to change, to the fact that Gatsby can only picture himself as one thing, limits him.

It is almost as if Gatsby's inability to recognize opportunities for change in himself means he can't acknowledge it in others, either. When he meets Daisy again, he only sees the girl he fell in love with. He cannot understand that she isn't the same person she was because so much has occurred in her life; she has been married for a number of years, and she has borne a child. The accumulation of days spent shaping herself to her husband and caring in her careless way for her child have changed her from the girl she was. Nick sees this in her, in the way she speaks, with "fluctuating, feverish warmth." But Gatsby's love for her girlhood means he can only hear the youth in her voice, and he is deaf to the age in her words. Adults understand this, intrinsically, marked as they are by the years, time wreathing them in layers: an onion growing round and waxy in the earth. Likewise, I think this is why Gatsby underestimates the extent of Tom's malice, and the perfidy of the social class he has fought to become a part of.

And that, perhaps, was the idea most invisible to me as a young reader: that the very social class that embodied the dream Gatsby wanted for himself was predicated on exclusion. That Gatsby was doomed from the start. He'd been born on the outside; he would die on the outside. Hungry as I was to escape my own little nowhere country town, my own poor beginnings, as a teen I could only see Gatsby's yearning. I was too young to know his wanting is wasted from the moment he feels it. The seasoned heart aches for

James Gatz, the perpetual child, the arrested romantic, bound by one perfect moment to failure.

This is a book that endures, generation after generation, because every time a reader returns to *The Great Gatsby*, we discover new revelations, new insights, new burning bits of language. Read and bear witness to the story's permanence, its robust heart. Read and bear witness to Jay Gatsby, who burned bright and bold and doomed as his creator. Read.

FOREWORD

It is my great honor, as F. Scott Fitzgerald's granddaughter, to crack some literary champagne over this edition of *The Great Gatsby* and launch this Great American Novel in its purest form, masterfully restored, and as close as possible to Scott's original intentions.

I never met my grandparents: Scott died young, in 1940 at the age of forty-four. I was born in 1948. Zelda wrote my mother from Highland Hospital in Asheville, North Carolina, "I long to see the baby," but she perished in a fire a couple of months later. Fortunately, both of my grandparents left such a trove of intimate letters and blazingly honest essays that I feel I have come to know them.

By the time Scott began to write *The Great Gatsby*, he had already produced two highly autobiographical novels. In 1923 he wrote his editor at Scribner's, Maxwell Perkins, that he wanted his third novel to be different. "I want to write something *new*—something extraordinary and beautiful and simple & intricately patterned." Although *Gatsby* is a work of his imagination, Scott's

experiences, along with those of family and friends, are elemental to the book.

My mother, Scott and Zelda's only child, appears early in the story. When Daisy gives birth she says, "I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool." This is uncannily similar to what Zelda said in 1921 as she emerged from the ether of childbirth. "Isn't she smart—she has the hiccups. I hope it's beautiful and a fool—a beautiful little fool." Of course, my mother was no fool. She was christened Frances Scott Fitzgerald, and called Scottie.

"In my next incarnation," my mother wrote years later, "I may not choose again to be the daughter of a Famous Author. The pay is good, and there are fringe benefits, but the working conditions are too hazardous. . . . I suppose it is impossible [for writers] to form the habit of inventing people, building them up, tearing them down, and moving them around like paper dolls, without doing somewhat the same thing with live ones. Good writers are essentially nutcrackers, exposing the scandalous condition of the human soul."

Scott was a devoted and difficult father. He was virtually a single parent when my mother was a teenager. He tried to dictate what she read. He tried to supervise her manners, her interests, and her friends. Scottie wrote, "My father had a terrific sense of wasting his own life, his youth, and he was trying to prevent me from squandering my resources as he felt he had squandered his." She admitted that at Vassar College she sometimes didn't open his letters, but was wise enough to stash them in a drawer. "Isn't it odd," she continued, "that the letters he wrote me, so full of advice and wisdom, but to me, plain harassment, have taken their place alongside his more famous writings?"

As a teenager, my mother avoided talking about her father because his reputation was thoroughly tarnished by alcoholism. She ignored her parents' problems by forming a dramatic group at Vassar, immersing herself in a lively social life, and dating her future husband, Lt. Jack Lanahan. Scottie was twenty when Scott died suddenly in Hollywood. He was almost penniless, except for the seven hundred dollars hidden in his bookshelf, and a small veteran's pension for Zelda. *The Great Gatsby* was no longer available in bookstores.

The revival came slowly. His Princeton classmate, Edmund Wilson, edited Scott's notes for his partially completed novel, *The Last Tycoon*, and it sold respectably. The biggest boost for *The Great Gatsby* came when it was issued as an Armed Services Edition, a small pocket-size paperback, and given to one hundred fifty thousand soldiers during World War II. That introduced *The Great Gatsby* to all those young American men and their families.

By the mid-1960s Scott's books were being included in college curriculums. My mother hid from any reflected glory. We lived in Washington, D.C., where she wrote a column for the *Northern Virginia Sun* and later for *The Washington Post*. The only time Scottie allowed her identity as the "daughter of" to be disclosed was on the campaign trail, stumping for a favorite candidate, and knowing her father's name now opened doors. She claimed to have the hide of a rhinoceros when it came to hearing strangers' opinions about her parents' work or unsolicited diagnoses of her mother's mental illness, but she wanted to shield us children from any negative fallout of their legacy.

I wasn't encouraged to read *The Great Gatsby* and I don't think our mother wanted us to grow up feeling we were related to anybody special. When I was about nine, my

mother read us "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," which I loved. A couple of years later *Life Magazine* ran a story, "The Spell of F. Scott Fitzgerald Grows Stronger." We four grandchildren were photographed in the attic, playing with Zelda's turquoise ostrich feather fan and arranging Scott's battalion of lead soldiers. For the camera, we held up Zelda's brilliant paper dolls, each with a costume appropriate to the court of Louis XIV, King Arthur's Round Table, or the extravagant finery of fairy godmothers.

Eventually it became embarrassing to know nothing about my grandparents. I was seventeen when a young writer asked if I agreed that *The Great Gatsby*, more than any other novel of its era, had essentially lost nothing with the passage of time. I had no idea. In my freshman year of college, in self-defense, I read all five of his novels, along with a few stories and Arthur Mizener's biography.

I was especially awed by Scott's pitch-perfect use of language, as when Gatsby kisses Daisy. "He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning-fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her."

I can't account for all the reasons people love *The Great Gatsby*: perhaps for its champagne parties and of course for its glitz, elegance, gorgeous cars, enormous estates, and Gatsby's vast collection of shirts. I remember my mother telling me she thought *The Great Gatsby* was popular with college students because it is a short book and an easy read. It was popular in Russia too; she speculated they liked to use it as an example of capitalism gone awry. My mother didn't live long enough to explain Gatsby's popularity in Japan,

where the Takarazuka Revue staged an all-female performance. *The Great Gatsby* has been adapted to ballet and to opera, its symbols have been anatomized, its themes have been explicated, but Gatsby remains timeless. He stands in the dark, watching the green light on a dock across the bay.

At the age of twenty-seven, at Zelda's death, my mother became the sole guardian of her parents' estate. Thanks to her gift of her parents' personal papers, photographs, and manuscripts, Princeton University now boasts an extensive archive. That collection has largely made this volume possible. Herewith is the best possible reading of this American classic. Professor James L. W. West III contributed years of scholarship to these judicious emendations. And now, it's time to let Scott speak for himself.

—Eleanor Lanahan

THE GREAT GATSBY