

Why ‘The Great Gatsby’ is the Great American Novel
By Joel Achenbach from the Washington Post March 20 2015

Sure, I knew that F. Scott Fitzgerald had an up-and-down career and a bad drinking habit and wound up dying at a young age while working as a script doctor in Hollywood. But until I read Maureen Corrigan’s terrific book, “So We Read On: How The Great Gatsby Came to Be and Why it Endures,” I had no idea that Fitzgerald’s books were out of print by the time of his death. He had fallen so low. At one point in the 1940s, his widow, Zelda, had to make ends meet by busing tables in a restaurant in between her stays at a sanitarium, Corrigan reports.

Fitzgerald had soared to stardom at a precocious age, with his 1920 novel “This Side of Paradise.” It was the kind of book that made him a cultural celebrity more than a literary titan: Scott and his dazzling wife did all the things that young, smart, fabulous people were supposed to do in the Roaring Twenties, like go to parties in Manhattan and on Long Island and then jump on a ship to Europe to hang out in Parisian cafes with other young ex-pat Americans, like that chap named Ernest Hemingway. They vacationed on the French Riviera. They spent boatloads of money, but Fitzgerald kept things together by cranking out short stories and commanding a fine price for them.

At some point in all this, he vowed to write a really great, modern novel, and he did just that circa 1924-25. It’s a short novel, just nine chapters, each built around a party scene — though the final “party” is, of course, a funeral.

“The Great Gatsby,” however, didn’t sell well. Few literary critics registered that there was something special about the book. Fitzgerald was dismayed by the reception, and then “Gatsby” and its cultural milieu were overtaken by events as the Jazz Age gave way to the Depression. All those glitzy characters gulping martinis and staying up too late didn’t resonate in a nation that suddenly hungered for grittier, dustier literary fare. Fitzgerald eventually produced another novel, “Tender is the Night,” but it was a relatively weak effort, and Fitzgerald wound up in Hollywood with a profound sense that he’d lost his magic touch as a writer. Meanwhile, Zelda had suffered a series of breakdowns; Scott was in charge of raising their daughter, Scottie.

The last royalty check he received from Scribner’s was for \$13.13, and apparently that was solely for books that the author himself had purchased. In May 1940, he wrote to his brilliant editor, Max Perkins:

“I wish I was in print. It will be odd a year or so from now when Scottie assures her friends I was an author and finds that no book is procurable. . . . Would the 25 cent press keep Gatsby in the public eye — or is the book unpopular. Has it had its chance?”

F. Scott Fitzgerald smokes a cigarette at the Algonquin Hotel in New York in 1937. (Carl Van Vechten/Library of Congress via AP)

Corrigan documents how, after Fitzgerald’s death just before Christmas in 1940, “Gatsby” came back, establishing itself as part of the modern American canon. The novel received a boost from the war: With millions of Americans in uniform overseas, the U.S. government developed a program to ship them compact paperbacks to read in their down time. “Gatsby” was one of the books selected for the Armed Services Editions. That resulted, Corrigan reports, in 155,000 paperback copies of “Gatsby” being shipped overseas in 1945. Meanwhile Fitzgerald’s friends and admirers worked diligently on the reputation-reclamation project. The sudden popularity of paperbacks coincided with the return of “Gatsby” to the mainstream of American letters. In 1949, Hollywood produced a version of “Gatsby” with Alan Ladd in the title role.

Rather quickly, in part because it’s a short novel and easy to read, “Gatsby”

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because a fixture in high school English classes. Corrigan pinpoints 1951 as the critical year of the Fitzgerald revival. That happened to be the year that J.D. Salinger published “The Catcher in the Rye,” in which Holden Caulfield notes that his older brother made him read “Gatsby.”

“I was crazy about *The Great Gatsby*,” Holden tells us. “Old Gatsby. Old sport. That killed me.”

I can’t emphasize enough how much fun Corrigan’s book is. This is what I read in recent weeks as relief from my research on hypothetical dystopian futures. Her book reminds me a lot of my friend Paul Hendrickson’s masterpiece “Hemingway’s Boat,” a similar effort at literary archaeology. (Paul was my colleague in the Style section back in the day.) Both books have the remarkable effect of making you understand why you like to read, and why literature can somehow grab you across great expanses of time and cultural differences, and how this human innovation known as writing — the rendering of life into symbols that can erupt in another person’s brain as a story — is the ultimate killer app. Yes, Plato was right to fear this technology.

What makes “Gatsby” the Great American Novel, Corrigan argues, is the combination of its extraordinary rendering of the American vernacular — it’s a “voice-driven novel” — and its success at capturing the aspirational (if borderline delusional) nature of the American psyche:

“Gatsby’s magic emanates not only from its powerhouse poetic style — in which ordinary American language becomes unearthly — but from the authority with which it nails who we want to be as Americans. Not who we are; who we *want to be*. It’s that wanting that runs through every page of Gatsby, making it our Greatest American Novel. But it’s also our easiest Great American Novel to underrate: too short; too tempting to misread as just a love story gone wrong; too mired in the Roaring Twenties and all that jazz.”

Her book explores the water themes everywhere in the novel (which I’m not sure I ever noticed) as well as way the book is almost absurdly over-structured, right down to the way Gatsby has his big reunion with Daisy Buchanan precisely in the center of the story.

In my own occasional stints as a writing teacher I have asked students to excise words from various difficult-to-cut literary passages (a McPhee* assignment, you know), and one of my selections is from “Gatsby.” Imagine trying to shorten this passage by two lines of type:

Already it was deep summer on roadhouse roofs and in front of wayside garages, where new red gas-pumps sat out in pools of light, and when I reached my estate at West Egg I ran the car under its shed and sat for a while on an abandoned grass roller in the yard. The wind had blown off, leaving a loud, bright night, with wings beating in the trees and a persistent organ sound as the full bellows of the earth blew the frogs full of life. The silhouette of a moving cat wavered across the moonlight, and turning my head to watch it, I saw that I was not alone — fifty feet away a figure had emerged from the shadow of my neighbor’s mansion and was standing with his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars. Something in his leisurely movements and the secure position of his feet upon the lawn suggested that it was Mr. Gatsby himself, come out to determine what share was his of our local heavens.

That, friends, is how it is done.

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And, of course, there’s that incomparable run of amazing writing at the end of the book, in which Gatsby is gone and the narrator, Nick Carraway, is pondering his friend’s tragic life and imagining what the Dutch sailors saw when they first came upon that part of the world. The very end is among the most famous passages in literature:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter — tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning —

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

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Now let’s hear from Corrigan. She teaches literature at Georgetown and is the book critic of NPR’s Fresh Air. I sent her a few questions by e-mail and she graciously replied.

Q: Why did Fitzgerald’s star fade so badly in his own lifetime? How much of that was cultural in nature – the coming of the Depression and a loss of interest in the Jazz Age? Were the critics just unable to see what was great about Fitzgerald’s writing?

Corrigan: I think Fitzgerald was seriously rattled by the fact that “The Great Gatsby” didn’t sell well. He expected it to outdo his two previous novels, and it turned out to sell fewer copies than “This Side of Paradise” and “The Beautiful and Damned” (about 21,000 copies). It took Fitzgerald a long time to write his fourth novel, “Tender is the Night,” and he had several false starts (including a murder story and a medieval tale). Of course, “Tender is the Night” didn’t sell very well either: Rich folks on the Riviera weren’t a popular topic during the Great Depression, even though the novel doesn’t glorify wealth. So, I think Fitzgerald’s quick decline was a combination of a loss of confidence and a perception by the American reading public that he was out of step with the proletarian times. That said, Fitzgerald wrote “The Crack-Up” essays during the ’30s, many brilliant letters and some wonderful short stories. Fitzgerald never stopped working as a writer; after all, he had to support Zelda (in private sanitariums) and their daughter Scottie (in private school and college). And, he never stopped trying to get “The Great Gatsby” republished and recognized as the masterpiece he knew it to be.

Q: Why was “Gatsby” so much better than his other work? He just found his zone and blocked out everything else?

Corrigan: Fitzgerald writes to his editor Maxwell Perkins in 1922 that he’s begun working on a third novel that’s going to be different: “simple and beautiful and intricately patterned.” “Gatsby” is more modern than the novels that came before: It’s tighter and much more consciously architectural in its design. (For instance, every chapter is centered on a “party” of sorts — including the failed “party” of Gatsby’s funeral at the end. With the exception of Daisy (the femme fatale), every major character in the novel is stretching out their arms for someone or something that’s out of their reach — Nick for Gatsby, Gatsby for Daisy, Tom for Daisy, Myrtle for Tom, George Wilson for Myrtle and so on. If you read Fitzgerald’s first two novels, they’re looser and, in the case of “Beautiful and Damned,” really verbose. Less was more for Fitzgerald — he was a poet,

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and he did better with tighter forms like the short story, the letter, the autobiographical essay and the short novel.

Q: What’s been the reaction to your book from the professional lit-crit folks and English professors?

Corrigan: Positive! I’ve gotten loads of approving letters from high school English teachers, and they’re the ones I value most because those teachers live with “Gatsby” year after year, as I do. Also, “Gatsby” scholars like Jackson R. Bryer and Morris Dickstein have been very complimentary. I’ve also had wonderful reception from Fitzgerald’s granddaughter, Eleanor Lanahan. The only person who out and out panned my book was Adam Gopnik in the New Yorker. Gopnik faulted me for not discussing John Galsworthy, Compton Mackenzie — writers whom Fitzgerald admired as a Princeton undergrad but outgrew by the time he was writing “Gatsby.” Go figure. I guess it’s good that there’s someone out there arguing for the importance of Galsworthy and Mackenzie.

Q: If you had to do a similar book about a different novel, which one would it be? Let’s just imagine you’re not the world’s biggest “Gatsby” fan. What other book deserves this kind of treatment?

Corrigan: Oh, that’s a tough question. I think “Moby Dick” deserves the kind of intense — some might say obsessive — attention I’ve given to “Gatsby”; also “Jane Eyre” and “Wuthering Heights” (although Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their classic critical work, “The Madwoman in the Attic” did a pretty fantastic job of close reading for those novels). Willa Cather’s “My Antonia” is a gorgeous American classic that deserves more attention.

Q: Are there any books written in the last 20 years that might plausibly be in the conversation about the Great American Novel?

Corrigan: Hmmm. I was one of the three Pulitzer Prize jurors who served on that ill-fated 2012 Pulitzer Prize committee — the one where the Pulitzer Board ended up not awarding the prize. We three jurors nominated “Train Dreams” by Denis Johnson, “The Pale King” by David Foster Wallace and “Swamplandia” by Karen Russell. I’d say out of those three excellent choices, “Train Dreams” is the one that might be eligible for Great American Novel status. I’m not sure that anything written in the last 20 years, however, beats out “Beloved” for Great American novel contender.