

The greatness of 'Gatsby' at 75

The Star-Ledger, (Newark, NJ) - Sunday, April 30, 2000

By Amy Ellis Nutt

"All good writing," said F. Scott Fitzgerald, "is swimming under water and holding your breath." When the author of "The Great Gatsby" wrote these words to his daughter in the last year of his life, he was 44, broke and an alcoholic. Writing, he said, "is an awfully lonesome business. The conclusion is: It will not win you financial independence or immortality."

As it turned out, Fitzgerald was only half right.

This month marks the 75th anniversary of the publication of "The Great Gatsby," a novel whose themes of idealism, disillusionment and loss still reverberate. The stock speculations that spawned many American dreams in the 1920s, an era Fitzgerald called "the most expensive orgy in history," bears more than a passing resemblance to the junk bond '80s and dot-com '90s. And certainly post-Fitzgerald novelists have speculated in similar thematic turf, from John O'Hara ("Appointment in Samarra") to Jay McInerney ("Bright Lights, Big City") to Brett Easton **Ellis** ("American Psycho").

Literary critic Edmund Wilson, who edited Fitzgerald's posthumously published, unfinished novel "The Last Tycoon," recognized the potential impact of "Gatsby" on American letters:

"... Fitzgerald will be found to stand out as one of the first-rate figures in the American writing of this period," Wilson wrote a year after the author's death. "The last pages of 'The Great Gatsby' are certainly, both from the dramatic point of view and from the point of view of prose, among the very best things in the fiction of our generation."

T.S. Eliot read "The Great Gatsby" three times upon receiving the book, then wrote to Fitzgerald to tell him he thought the novel "was the first step forward American fiction has taken since Henry James."

In addition to his breaking new ground as a writer of a truly modern American novel of ideas, Fitzgerald's particular brilliance was in how he honed his prose and, like a diamond-cutter, carved out images of intense, even blinding, beauty. "Gatsby" is a celebration of craft, an apotheosis of style. It is a novelist's novel, with language so lyrical yet so carefully distilled it often reads like poetry.

And yet in 1925 "Gatsby" was a commercial failure. Fitzgerald had a reputation as a

playboy and a partyer and by the time "Gatsby," his third novel, was released, readers were doubting the 28-year-old author's ability as a serious creative artist. Many of the critics agreed:

"F. Scott Fitzgerald's Latest a Dud," was a headline in the New York World.

"(There is) not one chemical trace of magic, life, irony, romance or mysticism in all of "The Great Gatsby,"" wrote a reviewer in the Brooklyn Eagle.

Only 23,000 copies of "Gatsby" were printed by Scribner's, and 15 years later there still were copies gathering dust in the publisher's warehouse. Fitzgerald's last royalty check before he died amounted to \$13.13. Only after Fitzgerald's death, when Scribner's folded "Gatsby" into a collection of Fitzgerald's stories and "The Last Tycoon," did the public ever-so-slowly begin to take notice. Today more than a quarter-million copies of "Gatsby" are sold each year. If immortality can be achieved in as short a period as 75 years, then Fitzgerald, who once remarked that "there are no second acts in American lives," has earned his.

He earned it first through the kind of hard work only a writer who is also an excellent self-editor is capable of producing. Despite his undisciplined extravagances in lifestyle, Fitzgerald was a meticulous and assiduous re-writer of his own work. He revised constantly; between the galleys and the final manuscript of "Gatsby" he made 70,000 changes, including the removal of 1,059 commas. The result was a short, spare, nine-chapter-long novel written in prose both haunting and musical, precise yet easy-flowing:

It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again. Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth - but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered "Listen," a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour.

Not surprisingly, Fitzgerald acknowledged his indebtedness to the art of poetry. He became a master of rhythm and cadence - a writer who had perfect pitch. In another letter to Scottie, Fitzgerald provided a key to his lyrical style:

"About adjectives: all fine prose is based on the verbs carrying the sentences. They make sentences move."

And Fitzgerald's do, as in this description of a party at Gatsby's mansion in West Egg:

The lights grow brighter as the earth lurches away from the sun and now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music and the opera of voices pitches a key higher. Laughter is easier, minute by minute, spilled with prodigality, tipped out at a cheerful word. The

groups change more swiftly, swell with new arrivals, dissolve and form in the same breath - already there are wanderers, confident girls who weave here and there among the stouter and more stable, become for a sharp, joyous moment the center of a group and then excited with triumph glide on through the sea-change of faces and voices and color under the constantly changing light.

Fitzgerald knew from the first that he was on to something with "The Great Gatsby" - which, by the way, was one of nine possible titles considered by the author right up until three weeks before publication. In fact, three years before the novel's publication, when it was still germinating in Fitzgerald's mind, he wrote to his editor at Scribners, Maxwell Perkins, that he wanted "to write something new - something extraordinary and beautiful and simple + intricately patterned."

When he was close to finishing his original manuscript in 1924, he wrote to Perkins:

"In my new novel I'm thrown directly on purely creative work - not trashy imaginings as in my stories but the sustained imagination of a sincere yet radiant world. So I tread slowly and carefully and at times in considerable distress. This book will be a consciously artistic achievement."

Fitzgerald was still confident when he wrote Perkins that he was sending him the completed manuscript: "I think that at last I've done something really my own."

That his greatest work - the novel which was and remains most truly his own - should have fallen, almost literally, on deaf ears, was a brutal blow to Fitzgerald. Eight months after the release of "Gatsby," he plaintively wrote his friend and editor, "Is Gatsby dead? You don't mention it. Has it reached 25,000? I hardly dare to hope so."

It didn't, of course, and Fitzgerald's death of a heart attack in the apartment of his lover, Hollywood gossip columnist Sheila Graham, in December of 1940 was a tragic coda to a life almost too imitative of art.

In one of his last letters, Fitzgerald wrote what could certainly have been his own epitaph:

"Poetry is either something that lives like fire inside you ... or else it is nothing, an empty, formalized bore 'The Grecian Urn' is unbearably beautiful, with every syllable as inevitable as the notes in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, or it's just something you don't understand. It is what it is because an extraordinary genius paused at that point in history and touched it."