

# The Poet of the Jazz Age

F. Scott Fitzgerald was as famous for his lifestyle as his writing.

It was the wildest of parties. And it lasted a decade. Ten years of dancing until dawn, non-stop spending, and bootleg gin. It was the Roaring '20s, when America was awash in prosperity and rebellion. And no one represented the times better than author F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Today, Fitzgerald, the author of four novels and 160 short stories, is revered as a great American writer. But he had a very different reputation during his lifetime. He and his glamorous wife, Zelda, were the consummate party couple. Everywhere they went, they spent until their last dollar was gone, and drank until the bottles were empty. When the Great Depression of the 1930s ended the party, Fitzgerald's star crashed like the stock market.

Born in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1896, Fitzgerald entered a family with a modest claim on history. His father was a furniture salesman. His distant relatives included Francis Scott Key, the "Star Spangled Banner" writer after whom Fitzgerald was named, and a woman who was hanged for her role in the assassination of President Lincoln.

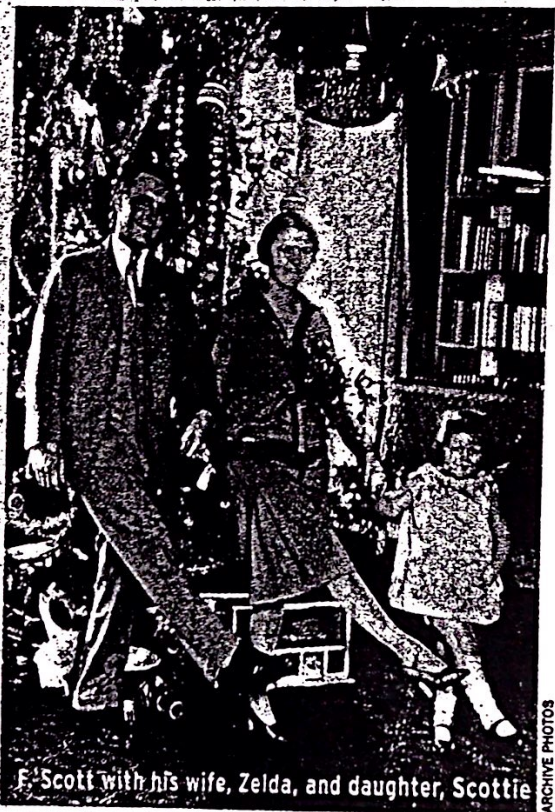
As a young man, Fitzgerald was eager to join high society. He attended Princeton University and threw himself into drama clubs and social circles. But he neglected his studies and flunked out. He then enlisted in the army and was stationed in Montgomery, Alabama. There he fell in love with Zelda Sayre, one of the wealthiest and most desirable girls in the state. He wanted to marry her, but when Zelda learned his new job in advertising paid just \$90

a month, she rejected his proposal.

Fitzgerald set out to write a book that would make him rich enough to win Zelda. And he succeeded. His first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920), was a hit, especially among young people. Though the teens in the book do little more than kiss, drink too much, and talk rudely, that was enough to brand them as rebels, and make Fitzgerald a star.

In 1924, F. Scott and Zelda, now married, moved to Europe. In Paris, Fitzgerald rubbed elbows with great literary figures as well as an unknown young writer named Ernest Hemingway. It was also in Paris that Fitzgerald wrote his finest novel, *The Great Gatsby*. Although a financial disappointment, critics trumpeted *Gatsby* as a great work. *Gatsby* displayed Fitzgerald's signature outlook on wealth—what one critic called his "double vision." With a mixture of admiration and disdain, Fitzgerald describes *Gatsby*'s pink suits and lavish parties. But he also depicts the consequences of a life in which real values are sacrificed for money.

The America that the Fitzgeralds came home to in 1930 was very different from the one they had left. The Depression had devastated the country, and Fitzgerald's next book, *Tender is the Night* (1934), was a flop. In the midst of hard times, nobody wanted to read about wealthy young people cavorting on the Riviera.



F. Scott with his wife, Zelda, and daughter, Scottie

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Things got worse. Zelda was diagnosed with schizophrenia, and her medical bills mounted. Fitzgerald turned to writing Hollywood scripts, but without success. The man who was once the highest paid author in the country, earned just \$13.13 from his writing in the last year of his life.

Then, in 1940, Fitzgerald suffered a heart attack and died at the age of 44. His death was hardly noted. The few newspapers that carried his obituary got the titles of his books wrong. Barely 30 people attended his funeral.

Musing on the fleeting nature of fame, Fitzgerald once wrote: "There are no second acts in American lives." But, perhaps he has been proven wrong. Since his death, Fitzgerald's star has risen. He is now cast alongside Hemingway and Faulkner as one of the great writers of his time. *Gatsby* remains one of the most widely read American novels, and was listed as one of the great books of the century. Fitzgerald's second act may never go out of style.

—JOHN DI CONSIGLIO