

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

A Stubborn and Sturdy Love in the Letters of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald

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At 23, F. Scott Fitzgerald — a sudden celebrity with the success of his first book, “This Side of Paradise” — told the press that his ambitions were to write the greatest novel of all time and to stay in love with his wife forever.

Fitzgerald died young, at 44. In the years left him, however, he produced an abiding American classic, “The Great Gatsby,” and never stopped loving his wife, Zelda. And as St. Teresa of Ávila wrote, “There are more tears shed over answered prayers than over unanswered prayers.”

Despite their mutual preoccupation, the Fitzgeralds’ marital unhappiness was legendary, and proved to be the great quarry for Scott’s literary imagination. In photographs, the couple resembled each other, with soft faces, sulky mouths; they looked like bad, beautiful children — and behaved with joyless destructiveness, smashing up everything in arm’s reach. There were appalling scenes at airports, hospitalizations, suicide attempts. Their daughter was sent to live with Scott’s literary agent. Friends grew leery of giving the couple their home addresses. In 1930, Zelda was first hospitalized after a breakdown (the diagnosis was schizophrenia but there is now a prevalent belief that she suffered from bipolar disorder) and she would remain institutionalized for much of her life, dying in 1948, in a hospital fire.

Various versions of the couple’s letters have been published over the years, but “Dear Scott, Dearest Zelda” claims to contain the fullest collection of Zelda’s side of the correspondence. The editors, Jackson R. Bryer and Cathy W. Barks, write that “the new letters, placed chronologically with those collected previously, allow us to view their relationship in a more evenhanded manner than heretofore has been possible.”

Did your eye snag on “evenhanded,” as mine did? Suspicious little word; it’s only ever deployed with partisan intent. But there are only partisans when it comes to the Fitzgeralds’ marriage — or any marriage, for that matter. There is Hemingway’s opinion of Zelda as a succubus envious of her husband’s talent and determined to lead him to ruin. More recent perspectives on Zelda cast her as a proto-feminist heroine, one of the lost women of history, like Dorothy Wordsworth or Alice James, whose gifts were overshadowed by the famous man in her life. In the case of Zelda, there was outright appropriation — Fitzgerald famously lifted passages from her letters and diaries for his fiction — and when Zelda wanted to write a novel based on her breakdown (later published as “Save Me the Waltz”), the same territory he was exploring in “Tender Is the Night,” their marriage combusted.

This collection has been marshaled with the hope of rehabilitating Scott’s reputation, to portray him as a victim, too — of his alcoholism — and as more supportive of Zelda than commonly believed. The editors and the Fitzgeralds’ granddaughter Eleanor Lanahan, who contributes an introduction, want absolution for Scott, but where is he in this book? His letters are wan and few compared to Zelda’s, often dictated to a secretary. He was never a dazzling letter writer — far too querulous and carping and always, you sense, warming up to ask for a loan. His correspondence, Gore Vidal once said, ought to be preserved, not published.

Read this book for Zelda, even if you're weary of the cultural obsession with her. Better yet, if you're disinterested entirely, as I was, and perplexed by the cultural fascination (in recent years, there have been four novels based on her life, and three major biopics are in the works).

I had a vague sense of her as the prototype for Fitzgerald's lovely, reckless heroines, and that he had cribbed material from her, including Daisy Buchanan's line in "The Great Gatsby," upon learning she had given birth to a daughter: "I hope she'll be a fool — that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool." I was anticipating someone doleful, distracted — not this funny, hard-boiled observer of her own life whose letters read like short stand-up sequences. From an early note to Scott: "You know everything about me, and that's mostly what I think about. I seem always curiously interested in myself, and it's so much fun to stand off and look at me."

She remains this way: arch, amused, self-mocking, writing parodies of the kind of simpering love letters expected of young women. "Men love me cause I'm pretty — and they're always afraid of mental wickedness — and men love me cause I'm clever, and they're always afraid of my prettiness — One or two have even loved me cause I'm lovable, and then, of course, I was acting." She has no secondhand impressions or turns of phrase — everything she writes and thinks feels tart, original, lightly distressing.

A great many of these letters were written while Zelda was institutionalized. At first glance it seems obscene to deem them "love letters," these pleas for pocket money and visits, her desperation for meaningful work. "Lonesome," she writes four times in one short note, and again in letter after letter. "I'm so lonesome all the time." "It's desperate to be so alone." "Terribly lonely." She demands to be let out of the institution: "Please. Please let me out now." "Every day more of me dies." "The longer I have to bear this the meaner and harder and sicker I get."

But then, a mercurial shift in mood. "Do you still smell of pencils and sometimes of tweed?"

Ardor is her mode, and Scott her "sungod." "Don't you think I was made for you?" she writes. "I feel like you had me ordered — and I was delivered to you — to be worn. I want you to wear me, like a watch-charm." In these letters — mostly written from institutions in Switzerland, North Carolina and Maryland — she sat in her room, yearning for and conjuring up her husband: the way he held his cigarettes ("way down, wedged between your fingers"), his smell ("the delicious damp grass that grows near old walls"), the look of his wrist emerging from his sleeve.

Her life never creeps into the letters; little can be gleaned about the institutions in which she often made her home. She scarcely mentions her doctors or treatments, which were reportedly barbarous. She doesn't inquire about the world, the war, her friends. She croons only one song — "darling, my dearest"; "dearest, my love." "If you will come back I will *make* the jasmine bloom and all the trees come out in flower," she writes. There will be clouds to eat, and bathing "in the foam of the rain — and I will let you play with my pistol."

They never did very well when he did come back, however. Her symptoms, including intolerable eczema over her whole body, would worsen; there were bitter fights. Their love flourished mainly in these letters, full of her intense longing for nights of "soft conspiracy," for Scott at the seaside all "salty and sunburned," his legs sticking together in the heat.

It's a peculiar fact that "The Great Gatsby," a fairly bitter, even furious novel about class and disillusionment, murder, bootlegging and corruption, is so often remembered only for its parties and shimmering love story. Strange, too, is the misapprehension when it comes to Scott and Zelda. We recall their raucous early days, their extravagant unhappiness, but after reading these letters what strikes you is their steadiness, a shocking

word to apply to them. They could not handle early success, Bryer and Barks write, and after a point they did not live together. Fitzgerald took up with the writer Sheila Graham in his final years. But that bond with Zelda proved stubborn and sturdy, and survived it all. In their last letters, they are still loving and vexing and shoring each other up. “Happily, happily foreverafterwards,” Zelda once wrote. “The best we could.”