

Jay McInerney: why *Gatsby* is so great

F Scott Fitzgerald's novel set amid the riotous frivolity of the jazz age defines the American psyche, says author Jay McInerney



Tobey Maguire, Leonardo DiCaprio and Carey Mulligan in the forthcoming film version of *The Great Gatsby*. Photograph: Sportsphoto/Allstar/Warner Bros

Jay McInerney
The Guardian

The Great Gatsby seems to be enjoying a moment, what with the success of the New York production of *Gatz*, opening in London (described by America's leading theatre critic Ben Brantley as "The most remarkable achievement in theatre not only of this year but also of this decade"), and the release later this year of Baz Luhrman's \$120m film version. The book was little noticed on your side of the Atlantic on its initial publication. Collins, which had published the English editions of F Scott Fitzgerald's first two novels, rejected it outright, and the Chatto and Windus edition failed to arouse much enthusiasm, critical or commercial, when it was published in London in 1926. To be fair, the novel hadn't been a smash hit in the States the year before, selling less than his two previous novels and falling well short of the expectations of Fitzgerald and his publisher, despite some very good reviews. TS Eliot declared: "In fact, it seems to me the first step American fiction has taken since Henry James." And yet, many of the 23,000 copies printed in 1925 were gathering dust in the Scribner's warehouse when Fitzgerald died in obscurity in Hollywood 15 years later.

At that time, *Gatsby* seemed like the relic of an age most wanted to forget. In the succeeding years, Fitzgerald's slim tale of the jazz age became the most celebrated and beloved novel in the American canon. It's more than an American classic; it's become a defining document of the national psyche, a creation myth, the Rosetta Stone of the American dream. And yet all the attempts to adapt it to stage and screen have only served to illustrate its fragility and its flaws. Fitzgerald's prose somehow elevates a lurid and underdeveloped narrative to the level of myth.

In its barest outline, *The Great Gatsby* is a love story. Jay Gatsby, né Jimmy Gatz, is a poor boy from a humble midwestern family, who falls in love with Daisy Fay, the belle of Louisville, Kentucky, when he is stationed at the nearby army base as a young officer waiting to be deployed overseas in the months after the US entered the first world war. Implying that his background and circumstances are similar to her own, Gatsby wins Daisy's heart and her promise to wait for him, but, as the months of his deployment drag on, her devotion wavers and she eventually marries the obscenely wealthy Tom Buchanan of Chicago.

The novel opens in the summer of 1922; Gatsby has himself become rich, and bought a splendid house on Long Island Sound directly across the bay from the mansion which Tom and Daisy occupy. From his beach he can see a green light at the end of Tom and Daisy's dock. Gatsby gives lavish parties all summer, in the hope, it seems, of attracting the attention of Daisy, whom he has never stopped loving. Finally they are reunited through the agency of Nick Carraway, a childhood friend of Daisy's who happens to move in next door. Gatsby imagines that he can erase the past and win Daisy back; it becomes clear that the entire gaudy jazz-age facade he's created has all been in the interest of recapturing his dream of Daisy. It's gradually revealed that Gatsby's wealth comes from extralegal activities, including bootlegging – although Fitzgerald leaves the details extremely vague – a fact which Daisy's husband Tom uses against him. After a showdown in a Manhattan hotel room, Gatsby and Daisy jump in Gatsby's car and Daisy, who is behind the wheel, runs down a pedestrian, who just happens to be her husband's lover, driving back to Long Island. The aggrieved husband of the dead woman, imagining that Gatsby is the culprit, shoots him while he is lounging in his pool the next day, and Tom and Daisy retreat into the impregnable sanctuary of their vast wealth, while Nick Carraway, the narrator, returns to the midwest, repelled and disillusioned by what he's witnessed. Nick, the innocent bystander, is in fact integral to the story, not just as the witness and the moral conscience of the book.

Since the novel was published, there have been at least five English-language film adaptations, an operatic interpretation and numerous stage adaptations. None has been terribly successful

with the exception of *Gatz*, for the simple reason that *Gatz* presents the book in its entirety – every single word (over eight hours). Without Fitzgerald's poetry, without the editorial consciousness of Fitzgerald's narrator Nick Carraway, the story can seem threadbare and melodramatic. Telling the story from Carraway's point of view was the key to the delicate balancing act Fitzgerald performed in narrating his improbable love story. Nick is an outside observer who becomes emotionally involved in the story he is telling. Drunkenly taking in the proceedings at a party in a New York City apartment, Nick observes: "Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was with him, too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life."

Gatsby without Nick's voice, without his presiding consciousness, is like Bob Dylan's lyrics without music. Interesting, yes, but poetry? I don't think so. This is just one reason why I avoided the 1974 version starring Robert Redford and Mia Farrow, with a screenplay by Francis Ford Coppola. And why I will almost certainly be skipping Baz Luhrmann's film, starring Leonardo DiCaprio, much as I would love to see Isla Fisher in the role of Myrtle Wilson, the floozy mistress of Gatsby's rival Tom Buchanan. Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* is a very fragile creation, made of words and dreams. Fitzgerald tells us almost nothing of his appearance, and while this may seem like a fault in the book – one of which the author himself was aware – the actor who chooses to embody this famous cipher takes on a daunting task, further complicated by the fact that Gatsby's dialogue is the most wooden and formulaic language in the book, presenting a striking contrast to the rich, aphoristic style of Nick Carraway's narration. The prose surrounding Jay Gatsby is so good it allows us to share Nick's vision of his largeness of soul and the heroism of his quest, to celebrate "the colossal vitality of his illusion".

The enduring appeal of Fitzgerald's third novel, as with many great novels, is partly dependent on a benign misinterpretation on the part of readers, a surrender to fascination with wealth and glamor, and the riotous frivolity of the jazz age. Fitzgerald was by no means an uncritical observer, as some have suggested; the most villainous of these characters are the wealthiest, and Nick Carraway is something of a middle-class prig, who, much as he tries to reserve judgment, is ultimately sickened by all the profligacy and the empty social rituals of his summer among the wealthy of Long Island. "I wanted no more riotous excursion with privileged glimpses into the human heart," he says at the end. And yet Fitzgerald had a kind of double agent's consciousness about the tinsel of the jazz age, and about the privileged world of inherited wealth; he couldn't help stopping to admire and glamorize the glittering interiors of which his midwestern heart

ultimately disapproved. Gatsby's lavish weekly summer parties are over the top, ridiculous, peopled with drunks and poseurs, and yet we can't help feeling a sense of loss when he suddenly shuts them down after it's clear that Daisy – for whom the whole show was arranged in the first place – doesn't quite approve. We shouldn't approve either, and yet in memory they seem like parties to which we wish we'd been invited.

In *Gatsby* and his best fiction, Fitzgerald manages to strike a balance between his attraction and repulsion, between his sympathy and his judgment. As a middle-class, midwestern Irish Catholic from what Edmund Wilson called "a semi-excluded background" vis-a-vis the Ivy League and the world of eastern privilege, he seems capable of double vision, the appearance of viewing character, from inside and outside. Fitzgerald's best narrators always seem to be partaking of the festivities even as they shiver outside with their noses pressed up against the glass. In this manner, Nick Carraway doesn't entirely approve of Jay Gatsby, the party-giving parvenu with his pink suits and his giant yellow circus wagon of a car. But he deeply admires Jay Gatsby the lover and the dreamer, the man for whom the mansion and the bespoke clothes were only the means to reclaim his first love. Nick admires his fidelity to that first love and his ability to keep it pure and undefiled, even as he wades through the muck to pursue it, even if the object of that love isn't, in the flesh, worthy of such devotion.

Ultimately, Jay Gatsby's story mirrors Fitzgerald's, a poor boy who falls in love with the golden girl and performs heroic feats in order to win the hand of the princess. In Fitzgerald's case, the princess was Zelda Sayre of Montgomery, Alabama, whom he meets when he is stationed as an officer there. He is engaged to Zelda but eventually rejected when it seems clear that the aspiring writer can't support her; crawls home to St Paul, Minnesota, where he writes a novel which makes him rich and famous virtually overnight. In this story the hero gets the girl. Gatsby's love story seems almost plausible in light of Fitzgerald's. Although the vagueness of the source of his wealth is almost glaring, the Horatio Alger story, in which poor boys work their way up to wealth and power, was ingrained in the American psyche.

Fitzgerald conflates Jay Gatsby's act of self-invention with the promise of the new world, with the dream of a fresh start upon which the nation was founded: "And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his

breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate with his capacity for wonder. And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of the dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it."

To some, including many British readers over the years, this may seem like a lot of weight for the love story of a bootlegger and a southern belle to bear. But it seems to speak to a collective self-image dear to many American hearts – in spite of its unhappy ending. It's possible we Americans are not entirely rational about *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby becomes fabulously wealthy, but he doesn't care about money in itself. He lives in a beautiful mansion and dresses beautifully, but everything he does is for love. He invents a hero called Jay Gatsby and then inhabits this creation, just as we hope to reinvent ourselves, some day, any day now, almost certainly starting tomorrow.

- How does Fitzgerald use, as McInerney writes, Jay Gatsby's "act of self-invention with the promise of the new world," as a symbol for what could be called Americanism?
- Why do Americans consider *The Great Gatsby*, as McInerney writes, in an "irrational way" as part of our "collective self-image"?
- How is *The Great Gatsby* an autobiographical account for Fitzgerald?