

The Great Gatsby: What it says to modern America

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BBC News, Washington DC

Published

10 August 2011



Image caption, Robert Redford and Mia Farrow starred in a 1974 version

A new film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio, begins shooting in Australia in the coming weeks. As the US struggles with a sense of its own decline, is this story of thwarted ambition the perfect tale for modern America?

Eighty-six years after being published, *The Great Gatsby* is undergoing a revival. Hollywood stars Leonardo DiCaprio and Carey Mulligan are preparing to fill the shoes - brogues and high heels, no doubt - of Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan, in a new adaptation directed by Baz Luhrmann. Filming is due to start in late August or early September, with a 2012 cinema release.

Gatsby-mania has been going on for months. A new spin-off novel that traces the fortunes of Daisy's daughter Pamela has not long arrived in bookshops. It follows the success of *Gatz*, a six-hour-long off-Broadway hit at the end of last year.

And there was a musical appreciation provided by the Madison Symphony Orchestra performing *The Gatsby Suite* in Wisconsin.

As the US's first small steps out of recession appear to falter, with 9% unemployment, the lowest rate of home ownership for decades, a downgrading of its credit rating and a

growing Chinese challenge to US global supremacy, this tale of frustrated ambition, lost love and death seems to strike a chord.

Glittering with lyrical prose, F Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel tells the story of 1920s high society in Long Island, the golden age of excess before the Depression.

Narrator Nick Carraway is caught up in the social whirl of parties, afternoon cocktails and fast cars. And in the midst is his neighbour, the mysterious Gatsby, whose efforts to recapture the heart of an old flame, Daisy, end in tragedy.

In one interview, Luhrmann said he wanted to hold up a mirror to his audience, but from another time because they would be more willing to accept it.

So what is the message that modern readers and filmgoers must digest?

"It does speak to contemporary America," says David Dowling, author of a students' guide, *The Great Gatsby in the Classroom*. "Especially that so-called American Dream, that stereotype that everyone can succeed if you try hard enough.

"That isn't always true and although Gatsby's heart is in the right place, the way he goes about achieving his dream brings about his downfall.

"Trying to buy that love shows the failed thinking of Gatsby and the shallowness of Daisy."

It's interesting to consider the novel in light of the financial crash of recent years, says Mr Dowling, who teaches 16 to 18-year-olds the novel at a school in Portland, Maine.

Gatsby's mansion is the venue for riotous, all-night parties, filled with hedonists getting drunk on the host's money. Yet by the end of the story, the home is - like many foreclosed properties across the US today - empty and neglected.

After the boom comes the bust, says Mr Dowling, and the book asks how much we want money to play a role in our lives and what is really important to us.

"The novel asks that basic question. Hopefully reading it [today] can reshape the American Dream for this century."

It is telling that Nick closes the book by moving back to the Midwest, back to his roots, to a simpler life, says Mr Dowling. He turns his back on stockbroking and returns to his family, to the homespun values of yesteryear.

But Fitzgerald is eager to point out the allure of Gatsby's dream as well as its flaws, says Lee Mitchell, professor of English at Princeton University in New Jersey. For all its faults, he says, the novel still celebrates his impulse.

"What's wonderful about the novel, about Nick's fiction, is his ability to see not only the limitations of Gatsby's dream but the possibilities of it.

"It's a dream of starting over and making things over a second time. Who wouldn't want that? We don't need the Murdochs telling British Parliament that that's what they want, to realise it's a universal one."

The novel is not really about the end of the American Dream but the opening up of it, says Keith Gandall, a professor at City University of New York.

In World War I, the US had allowed "ethnic Americans" like Gatsby, who is of German parentage, to become Army officers and this enabled him to climb the social ladder, although he is never accepted.

This equality did not extend to black Americans, but it was a blip in history when the war opened up some opportunities beyond the Wasp elite, says Mr Gandal, before an institutional backlash.

"Gatsby's failure to enter the highest class in social terms and move into that class isn't about money but the Wasp elite pushing back in the 1920s against ethnic Americans." Not only do they close ranks against outsiders like Gatsby but they destroy him and escape punishment for it, says Mr Gandal, which is a very modern theme.

"Tom and Daisy just skip off and that resonates more than anything else.

"There's a sense [today] that it's the super-rich on Wall Street who made this happen. I'm sure that resonates terrifically with middle-class Americans."

The debate about what the novel really means will continue for decades.

But there are times when society reaches out to that hot summer in New York's Jazz Age, looking for ways to understand the present.

As Fitzgerald's famous last line puts it:

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