

# Why Do We Keep Reading *The Great Gatsby*?

By [Wesley Morris](#) January 11, 2021  
The Paris Review



F. SCOTT FITZGERALD IN 1937. PHOTO: CARL VAN VECHTEN. PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Why do we keep reading *The Great Gatsby*? Why do some of us keep *taking our time* reading it? F. Scott Fitzgerald kept it short. A week is unwarranted. It should be consumed in the course of a day. Two at most. Otherwise, all the

mystery seeps away, leaving Jay Gatsby lingering, ethereal but elusive, like cologne somebody else is wearing.

I have read *The Great Gatsby* four times. Only in this most recent time did I choose to attack it in a single sitting. I'm an authority now. In one day, you can sit with the brutal awfulness of nearly every person in this book—booooo, Jordan; just boo. And Mr. Wolfsheim, shame on you, sir; Gatsby was your *friend*. In a day, you no longer have to wonder whether Daisy loved Gatsby back or whether “love” aptly describes what Gatsby felt in the first place. After all, *The Great Gatsby* is a classic of illusions and delusions. In a day, you reach those closing words about the boats, the current, and the past, and rather than allow them to haunt, you simply return to the first page and start all over again. I know of someone—a well-heeled white woman in her midsixties—who reads this book every year. What I don't know is how long it takes her. What is she hoping to find? Whether Gatsby strikes her as more cynical, naive, romantic, or pitiful? After decades with this book, who emerges more surprised by Nick's friendship with Gatsby? The reader or Nick?

In this way, *The Great Gatsby* achieves hypnotic mystery. Who are any of these people—Wilson the mechanic or his lusty, buxom, doomed wife, Myrtle? Which feelings are real? Which lies are actually true? How does a story that begins with such grandiloquence end this luridly? Is it masterfully shallow or an express train to depth? It's a melodrama, a romance, a kind of tragedy. But mostly it's a premonition.

Each time, its fineness announces itself on two fronts. First, as writing. Were you to lay this thing out by the sentence, it'd be as close as an array of words could get to strands of pearls. “The cab stopped at one slice in a long white cake of apartment-houses”? That line alone is almost enough to make me quit typing for the rest of my life.

The second front entails the book's heartlessness. It cuts deeper every time I sit down with it. No one cares about anyone else. Not really. Nick's affection for Gatsby is entirely posthumous. Tragedy tends to need some buildup; Fitzgerald dunks you in it. The tragedy is not that usual stuff about love not being enough or arriving too late to save the day. It's creepier and profoundly, inexorably true to the spirit of the nation. This is not a book about people, per se. Secretly, it's a novel of ideas.

Gatsby meets Daisy when he's a broke soldier and senses that she requires more prosperity, so five years later he returns as almost a parody of it. The tragedy here is the death of the heart, capitalism as an emotion. We might not have been ready to hear that in 1925, even though the literature of industrialization demanded us to notice. The difference between Fitzgerald and, say, Upton Sinclair, who wrote, among other tracts, *The Jungle*, is that Sinclair was, among many other things, tagged a muckraker and Fitzgerald was a gothic romantic, of sorts. Nonetheless, everybody's got coins in their eyes.

This is to say that the novel may not make such an indelible first impression. It's quite a book. But nothing rippled upon its release in 1925. The critics called it a dud! I know what they meant. This was never my novel. It's too smooth for tragedy, *underwrought*. Yet I, too, returned, seduced, eager to detect. What—*who?*—have I missed? Fitzgerald was writing ahead of his time. Makes sense. He's made time both a character in the novel and an ingredient in the book's recipe for eternity. And it had other plans. The dazzle of his prose didn't do for people in 1925 what it's done for everybody afterward. The gleam seemed flimsy at a time when a reader was still in search of writing that seeped subcutaneously.

The twenties were a drunken, giddy glade between mountainous wars and financial collapse. By 1925, they were midroar. Americans were innovating

and exploring. They messed around with personae. Nothing new there. American popular entertainment erupted from that kind of messy disruption of the self the very first time a white guy painted his face black. By the twenties, Black Americans were messing around, too. They were as aware as ever of what it meant to perform versions of oneself—there once were Black people who, in painting their faces black, performed as white people performing them. So this would've been an age of high self-regard. It would have been an age in which self-cultivation construes as a delusion of the American dream. You could build a fortune, then afford to build an identity evident to all as distinctly, keenly, robustly, hilariously, terrifyingly, alluringly American. Or the inverse: the identity is a conjurer of fortune.

This is the sort of classic book that you *didn't* have to be there for. Certain people were living it. And Fitzgerald had captured that change in the American character: merely being oneself wouldn't suffice. Americans, some of them, were getting accustomed to the *performance* of oneself. As Gatsby suffers at Nick's place during his grand reunion with Daisy, he's propped himself against the mantle "in a strained counterfeit of perfect ease, even of boredom." (He's actually a nervous wreck.) "His head leaned back so far that it rested against the face of a defunct mantelpiece clock." Yes, even the clock is in on the act, giving a performance as a timepiece.

So again: Why this book—for ninety-six years, over and over? Well, the premonition about performance is another part of it, and to grasp that, you probably *did* have to be there in 1925. Live performance had to compete with the mechanical reproduction of the moving image. You no longer had to pay for one-night-only theater when a couple times a day you could see people on giant screens, *acting like people*. They expressed, gestured, pantomimed, implied, felt. Because they couldn't yet use words—nobody talked until 1927 and, really, that was in order to sing—the body spoke instead. Fingers, arms, eyes. The human gist rendered as bioluminescence. Often by people from the

middle of nowhere transformed, with surgery, elocution classes, a contract, and a plainer, WASPier name, into someone new. So if you weren't reinventing yourself, you were likely watching someone who had been reinvented.

The motion picture actually makes scant appearances in this book but it doesn't have to. Fitzgerald was evidently aware of fame. By the time *The Great Gatsby* arrived, he himself was famous. And in its way, this novel (his third) knows the trap of celebrity and invents one limb after the next to flirt with its jaws. If you've seen enough movies from the silent era or what the scholars call the classical Hollywood of the thirties (the very place where Fitzgerald himself would do a stint), it's possible to overlook the glamorous phoniness of it all. It didn't seem phony at all. It was mesmerizing. Daisy mesmerized Gatsby. Gatsby mesmerized strangers. Well, the trappings of his Long Island mansion in East Egg, and the free booze, probably had more to do with that. He had an aura of affluence. And incurs some logical wonder about this fortune: How? Bootlegger would seem to make one only so rich.

A third of the way into the book, Nick admits to keeping track of the party people stuffed into and spread throughout Gatsby's mansion. And the names themselves constitute a performance: "Of theatrical people there were Gus Waize and Horace O'Donovan and Lester Meyer and George Duckweed and Francis Bull," Nick tells us. "Also from New York were the Chromes and the Backhyssons and the Dennickers and Russel Betty and the Corrigan and the Kellehers and the Dewars and the Scullys." There's even poor "Henry L. Palmetto, who killed himself by jumping in front of a subway train in Times Square." This is a tenth of the acrobatic naming that occurs across a mere two pages, and once Fitzgerald wraps things up, you aren't at a party so much as a movie-premiere after-party.

Daisy's not at Gatsby's this particular night, but she positions herself like a starlet. There's a hazard to her approximation of brightness and lilt. We know the problem with this particular star: She's actually a black hole. Her thick, strapping, racist husband, Tom, enjoys playing his role as a boorish cuckold-philanderer. Jordan is the savvy, possibly kooky, best friend, and Nick is the omniscient chum. There's something about the four and sometimes five of them sitting around in sweltering rooms, bickering and languishing, that predicts hours of the manufactured lassitude we call reality TV. Everybody here is just as concocted, manifested. And Gatsby is more than real—and less. He's symbolic. Not in quite the mode of one of reality's most towering edifices, the one who became the country's forty-fifth president. But another monument, nonetheless, to the peculiar tackiness of certain wealth dreams. I believe it was Fran Lebowitz who called it. Forty-five, she once said, is “a poor person's idea of a rich person.” And Gatsby is the former James Gatz's idea of the same.

Maybe we keep reading this book to double-check the mythos, to make sure the chintzy goose on its pages is really the golden god of our memories. It wasn't until reading it for the third time that I finally was able to replace Robert Redford with the blinkered neurotic that Leonardo DiCaprio made of Gatsby in the Baz Luhrmann movie adaptation of the book. Nick labels Gatsby's manner punctilious. Otherwise, he's on edge, this fusion of suavity, shiftiness, and shadiness. Gatsby wavers between decisiveness and its opposite. On a drive with Nick where Gatsby starts tapping himself “indecisively” on the knee. A tic? A tell? Well, there he is about to lie, first about having been “educated at Oxford.” Then a confession of all the rest: nothing but whoppers, and a tease about “the sad thing that happened to me”—self-gossip. Listening to Gatsby's life story is, for Nick, “like skimming hastily through a dozen magazines.”

This is a world where “anything can happen”—like the fancy car full of Black people that Nick spies on the road (“two bucks and a girl,” in his parlance) being driven by a white chauffeur. Anything can happen, “even Gatsby.” (Especially, I’d say.) Except there’s so much nothing. Here is a book whose magnificence culminates in an exposé of waste—of time, of money, of space, of devotion, of life. There is death among the ash heaps in the book’s poor part of town. Jordan Baker is introduced flat out on a sofa “with her chin raised a little, as if she were balancing something on it which was quite likely to fall.” It’s as likely to be an actual object as it is the idea of something else: the precarious purity of their monotonous little empire.

We don’t know who James Gatz from North Dakota is before he becomes Jay Gatsby from Nowhere. “Becomes”—ha. Too passive. Gatsby tosses Gatz overboard. For what, though? A girl, he thinks. Daisy. A daisy. A woman to whom most of Fitzgerald’s many uses of the word *murmur* are applied. But we come back to this book to conclude her intentions, to rediscover whether Gatsby’s standing watch outside her house after a terrible night portends true love and not paranoid obsession. And okay, if it is obsession, is it at least mutual? That’s a question to think about as you start to read this thing, whether for the first or fifty-first time. Daisy is this man’s objective, but she’s the wrong fantasy. It was never her he wanted. Not really. It was America. One that’s never existed. Just a movie of it. *America*.