From Dazzle to Despair: The Short, Brilliant Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald
Oh, those Roaring Twenties—the decade of the flapper, the Charleston, speakeasies, and bathtub gin. Writer F. Scott Fitzgerald christened it the Jazz Age, then, drawing upon material from his own exuberant life, he immortalized the era in *The Great Gatsby, This Side of Paradise*, and his other celebrated novels and short stories.
It was the author himself and his ravishing wife, Zelda, who personified the best—and the worst—aspects of their time. They were beautiful, talented, self-indulgent, and notoriously reckless. And just like the free-wheeling age that embraced them, their soaring excesses would lead to a spectacular crash. The most famous couple in American literary history would end their days in despair, brought down by alcoholism and mental illness. Fitzgerald was only 44 years old when he died of a heart attack on Dec. 21, 1940, his career in tatters. His greatest writing, however, would live on.

From the day of his birth, on Sept. 24, 1896, Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald seemed destined for greatness. He was given that illustrious name in honor of the writer of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” a second cousin several times removed on his father Edward Fitzgerald’s socially distinguished side of the family. And promise could be found as well in the upper-crust Summit Avenue section of St. Paul, Minn., that Scott’s Irish Catholic parents called home.

But insecurity too had a hand in the author’s early years. Though rich in reputation, his father’s relations were poor in capital, and Edward Fitzgerald’s regular business failings kept his clan on the move throughout much of Scott’s childhood. His mother, Mary “Mollie” McQuillan Fitzgerald, relied on an income provided by her well-off, though considerably less prominent family to keep up the Fitzgeralds’ middle-class lifestyle. She alternately spoiled and fretted over Scott, understandably so, since her first two children, both girls, died only a few months before he was born. The arrival of Annabel would complete the family in 1901.

When he later looked back on his youth, Fitzgerald recalled being keenly aware that he was always the poorest boy living in the richest neighborhoods and attending the most exclusive private schools. This outsider status set him up for lasting feelings of inferiority that plagued him despite his intelligence, fair-haired good looks, and magical gift with words.

In 1913, despite a poor performance on his entrance exams, Fitzgerald managed to talk his way into Princeton University, which was known at that time, according to the author, as “the pleasantest country club in America.” Too slight to play college football like the gridiron
heroes he worshipped, and too lacking in discipline to succeed as a scholar, Fitzgerald decided to make his mark on campus as a writer for various student publications and, most notably, as the author of musicals for the school’s popular Triangle Club.

Fitzgerald’s social status at Princeton was assured after he won membership in one of the school’s most elite “eating clubs,” known as the University Cottage Club, and began dating the beautiful and much-sought-after society girl Ginevra King. With his limited financial promise, Fitzgerald’s on-and-off courtship of the Illinois debutante was destined to fail. Ultimately he would immortalize her as the ideal, unattainable girl found in much of his fiction, including perhaps his most famous female character, Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*.

While at Princeton, Fitzgerald also developed his famous taste for alcohol, an indulgence that helped account for his slumping academic performance. In his junior year he was placed on probation, and he left Princeton altogether in 1917 to join the Army.

Though he harbored notions of distinguishing himself on the battlefields of Europe, Fitzgerald’s military career turned out to be as fruitless as his days in the classroom. In fact, World War I ended before the young second lieutenant
The Fitzgeralds took New York by storm, riding on rooftops of taxis, splashing in public fountains, and, despite Prohibition, drinking heavily.

Among her most famous exploits: telephoning the local fire department to report a child stuck on a roof, then climbing atop the Sayre house to stage her own dramatic rescue.

After his release from the Army, Fitzgerald moved to New York City, anxious to begin his career as a writer. He proposed to Zelda, who refused to marry him until he could prove he was able to support her in style. Knowing that Zelda was not the kind of girl who would wait around for long, Fitzgerald put his plans for a new novel on hold, hoping to make quick cash by writing short stories and advertising copy. Though he sold a number of his stories, Fitzgerald was unhappy with the progress of his career, and in the summer of 1919 he moved to his parents' home in St. Paul, where he made a last-ditch effort to win Zelda's hand by focusing on the novel he hoped would make him a literary star.

Fitzgerald's gamble paid off. He delivered his manuscript to editor Maxwell Perkins in September 1919. When the publishing house where Perkins worked, Charles Scribner's Sons, rejected the book, the editor went to bat for the young author he believed in, threatening to resign if the company did not reconsider. Scribner's wise, and when This Side of Paradise was published the following March, the first edition sold out in days. The novel was a resounding hit with a public eager to read about upper-class life at an Ivy League college and the exciting Jazz Age that Fitzgerald and his characters had come to represent. News of Scott's triumph had the desired effect on Zelda; the couple were married at St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan, eight days after the book's publication.

The glamorous young newlyweds took New York by storm, riding on the rooftops of taxi cabs, splashing about in public fountains, and, despite Prohibition, drinking heavily. However, the endless partying took its toll; Fitzgerald was on the verge of becoming a serious alcoholic, and Zelda's outrageous behavior sometimes provoked Scott to engage in dangerous bar brawls and drunken fist fights. To pay for their extravagant lifestyle, Fitzgerald spent much of his time dashing off short stories for sale to magazines, which he considered a distraction from his serious novel writing. A number of these would be published in his first collection of stories, Flappers and Philosophers, in September 1920.
Fitzgerald traveled in the most elite circles of his day. In 1929 the author (right) charmed the ladies and Cornelius Vanderbilt (left).

Ernest Hemingway and his wife were among the set that Fitzgerald ran with in Paris; (right) later, after Zelda went mad, Fitzgerald courted Sheilah Graham.
The Last Years of Zelda

When F. Scott Fitzgerald died in December 1940, he and Zelda were living separate lives, yet she was clearly devastated when she learned that her great love would never visit her again with, as she wrote to author Edmund Wilson, "his pockets full of promise and his heart full of new refurbished hopes."

Zelda would survive her husband for seven and one half years. It was a time characterized by her biographer Nancy Milford as "years of quiet balance punctuated by spells of relapse." Her bursts of intense creativity continued, resulting in an incomplete, disjointed novel called Caesar's Things; the choreography for her own ballets; and a number of paintings and drawings good enough to be featured in two exhibits in her hometown of Montgomery in 1942. They included lyrical studies of dancers, striking portraits of friends and family, and a haunting series of self-portraits that seemed to underscore her odd, penetrating gaze. Two years later, after what she believed were direct communications from God, the former wild child became a religious zealot, dedicated to saving her friends from eternal damnation.

In November 1947, as her illness progressed, Zelda was forced once again to return to the place she had grown to know well over the years. Highland Hospital in the mountains of North Carolina. It would be the last time. At midnight on March 10, 1948, a fire started in the hospital's kitchen and quickly swept through the old wooden building, fatally trapping nine women inside their locked quarters, including Zelda, who was later identified by the charred remains of a slipper found under her body. The world's best-known flapper was dead. She would be buried next to her beloved Scott on St. Patrick's Day, March 17, 1948, in Maryland's Rockville Union Cemetery, D.C.

The next few years were a whirlwind of activity for the Fitzgeralds. The couple moved frequently, made their first trip to Europe, and on Oct. 26, 1921, Zelda gave birth to their only child, a daughter they called Scottie. Meanwhile, Fitzgerald nevertheless turned out an amazing amount of work, including another collection of short stories, Tales of the Jazz Age (September 1922); a stage play, The Vegetable (April 1923); and most important, another novel, The Beautiful and the Damned (March 1922), about a promising young couple destroyed by their dissolute lifestyle.

Despite this impressive output, Fitzgerald found himself in debt and forced to write more and more short stories to pay his bills. In May 1924, in an effort to concentrate on his next novel and to live more frugally, he and Zelda decided to move overseas. They rented a villa in the picturesque town of Valescure, France, and then an unattractive summer address on the French Riviera.

The change at first proved beneficial for the author, who made progress on what would be his masterpiece, The Great Gatsby. But disaster struck when Zelda, bored with the quiet life, began a dalliance with a dashing French aviator named Edouard Jozan. Whether she consummated her love affair with Jozan is not known for sure, but the episode put a serious strain on what was already a volatile marriage. It doubtless also colored Fitzgerald's tragic depiction of Jay Gatsby's romantic obsession with Daisy in The Great Gatsby. When the author finally published Archibald MacLeish, Dorothy Parker, and Ernest Hemingway. Over the years, the Murphys remained devoted to the Fitzgeralds, even when Scott's heavy drinking made him difficult for most others to tolerate, and especially to Zelda, even when her charming eccentricities gradually began to reveal themselves as signs of serious mental illness. They proved equally kind to Scottie, who often traveled with her parents and developed a crush on Gerald.

One famous example of Zelda's dangerous behavior took place on a dark night in 1926 when the two couples met for dinner at an outdoor restaurant in the hills high above the Mediterranean, where they happened to encounter Isadora Duncan. Zelda, angered when Scott began flirting with the legendary dancer, suddenly threw herself off the cafe's stone patio into the darkness. Luckily, she was saved from serious injury when a lower ledge broke her fall. Ernest Hemingway, whose own complex friendship with Fitzgerald suffered from a sometimes intense literary rivalry, always considered Zelda insane. He accused her of encouraging Scott to drink and of pulling such dangerous stunts out of a jealous need to distract her talented husband from his work. Their antagonism was mutual. Among other things, Zelda branded Hemingway a "phony," "a pansy," and a "professional he-man."

In December 1926, the Fitzgeralds returned to the United States. At first Scott...
played by Reese Witherspoon. If he fails, Kathryn gets his vintage Jaguar; if he succeeds, she must sleep with him.

"She is without a doubt the villain," says Kumble. "A less-talented actress would play it only one way, but Sarah brought many different levels to the role of Kathryn, which made it that much more frightening. Sarah's more interested in being a great actress than in being a personality."

With her movie career in high gear, Gellar says she has no intention of leaving *Buffy*. "I love this show. I know it's launched my movie career," she told *EW*. Yet as the movie offers roll in—(it's rumored she may star in the upcoming *X-Men* movie directed by *Apartment's* Bryan Singer—it's that superhero thing again!), Gellar might be accused of spreading herself too thin.

"I'm probably working myself into an early grave," Gellar said recently. "I'm tired and I complain sometimes, but this is my career and I love it." • *Anthony Duihnag-Cabreza is a segment producer with Good Morning America.*

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band's famous name commanded higher fees.

For the next three years, the Fitzgeralds traveled back and forth to Europe in pursuit of ballet teachers for Zelda and places for Scott, who was suffering from both writer's block and advancing alcoholism, to work. They were in France when the frenetic pace of their lives took its heaviest toll. On April 23, 1930, Zelda suffered her first major mental breakdown. She entered the Malmaison clinic outside Paris, and a few weeks later she was diagnosed as schizophrenic. As the Roaring Twenties crashed to a close in the Great Depression, the couple who seemed to best represent the era's values found their carefree days ending as well.

In September 1931, the Fitzgeralds returned to America for good. They settled near Zelda's family in Montgomery, but before long Scott was back in Hollywood, attempting to earn a better living. In February 1932, Zelda suffered her second breakdown and had to be institutionalized, beginning a pattern of costly hospitalizations that would last for the rest of her life (see sidebar). Meanwhile, Fitzgerald finished *Tender Is the Night*, which appeared in early 1934. The novel's themes reflected his efforts to make sense of Zelda's illness and his own artistic and personal failings.

The book was a minor financial success, but Fitzgerald needed additional funds to pay for Scottie's education, plus health care for both Zelda and himself. The author discovered that his lungs had been damaged by tuberculosis, and in February 1935 he moved to the mountains of North Carolina for treatment. His debts mounted, and in July 1937 he again turned to the film industry for a solution. Fitzgerald would live primarily in Hollywood for the rest of his life, writing for a number of movies, but receiving screen credit for only one film, an acclaimed adaptation of the Erich Maria Remarque novel *Three Comrades* (see sidebar).

While in Hollywood that July, Fitzgerald met the ambitious British gossip columnist Sheilah Graham and was struck by her resemblance to the young Zelda. Before long Fitzgerald, who was on the wagon at the time, had charmed Sheilah, who was unfamiliar with his life and work. Not knowing that her new beau was an alcoholic, and not yet having experienced one of his disastrous drinking binges, she broke off her engagement to an English marquis for Fitzgerald. Though they kept their relationship secret from the fragile Zelda, they became well known as a couple in Los Angeles.

In late November 1940, Fitzgerald suffered a heart attack and moved to Graham's apartment for his recovery. He was still staying there on the morning of December 21 when he was struck by a second attack—this time it was fatal. He had been writing steadily, and his final novel, *The Last Tycoon*, was near completion when he died. It was published in its unfinished form by his devoted editor, Maxwell Perkins, in October 1941, to almost unanimous praise. Critics concluded that had F. Scott Fitzgerald lived to finish it, *The Last Tycoon* would have rivaled his greatest work. • *Dorothy Rempalske is a contributing editor of this magazine.*

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vice). She also wants audiences to refocus their inner selves through a short daily segment titled "Remembering Your Spirit." But some viewers have been confused enough to complain on Oprah's online forums—and one critic worried that she was "not telling people how to live, though her "credentials as a theologian and therapist are lacking." *The New York Times* reported that the show loses nearly a million homes (in ratings) when a "change" topic is broadcast.

In a few interviews Oprah has tried to explain that her change-your-life shows simply reflect what viewers have told her for years: "I saw your show on child abuse