

# The GREATEST

**F. Scott Fitzgerald died a failure, but now *The Great Gatsby* sells a half-million copies a year (even when there's not a movie). In *So We Read On*, alumna and *Fresh Air* book-critic Maureen Corrigan explains how this happened—and why it's right that it did.**

BY JOHN PRENDERGAST

Maureen Corrigan Gr'87 doesn't remember exactly when the "light-bulb moment" happened with her and *The Great Gatsby*. Certainly not the first time she read the book—in high school, like most of us—when it struck her as a "boring novel about rich people," and "golden girl Daisy" seemed too much like "the mean girls in the cafeteria, flaunting their shining hair and their knowingness." And not on her first couple of re-readings, either, when she was assigned to teach the novel in survey courses while she was in graduate school at Penn or working at one of the adjunct positions that sustained her early in her professional career.

But somewhere along the line, maybe her fifth or sixth time through the text, she realized that F. Scott Fitzgerald's slender masterpiece (barely 50,000 words), which was published to mostly dismissive reviews and poor sales when it appeared in 1925, was not just great but "our Greatest American novel." She's since read it upwards of 50 times, always finding something new to admire, she says.





FRANCIS SCOTT KEY  
FITZGERALD

SEPTEMBER 24, 1896

DECEMBER 21, 1940

HIS WIFE

ZELDA SAYRE

JULY 24, 1900

MARCH 10, 1948



"SO WE BEAT ON, BOATS AGAINST  
THE CURRENT, BORNE BACK  
CEASELESSLY INTO THE PAST"—



*Gatsby* is as complexly designed as any work in the Modernist canon, gorgeously written but infused with elements of “hard-boiled” crime fiction, and offers profound insights on race, class (especially), and the American essence—and it’s funny, too, Corrigan insists. The problem is that, by this point, the book has become so familiar that readers no longer really see it, and more often than not mistake it for a sentimental romance, the tale of star-crossed lovers Jay and Daisy. (“Oh, such a beautiful love story,” she croons, mimicking this attitude. “Can we get off that dime?”)

“*The Great Gatsby* is the one Great American novel we think we’ve read but probably haven’t—at least, not enough,” Corrigan declares in the introduction to her new book, *So We Read On: How The Great Gatsby Came to Be and Why it Endures*. The book is an engaging mix of biography, criticism, reportage, and memoir in which Corrigan—book-critic for NPR’s *Fresh Air* radio program and critic-in-residence at Georgetown University—makes her case for why *Gatsby* repays devotion such as hers, recounts Fitzgerald’s labor over it and his crushing disappointment at the book’s initial reception, and investigates the process by which it went from forgotten to ubiquitous.

AT the time of Fitzgerald’s death from a heart attack in 1940, copies from *The Great Gatsby*’s second printing of 3,000 were still moldering in his publisher’s warehouse and the author’s last royalty check of \$13.13 was for copies that he had purchased himself. In 2013, the paperback edition of the novel was the second-best-selling book of the year overall, at more than 1.5 million copies. Admittedly, that was the year of the Baz Luhrmann-directed, Leo DiCaprio-starring *Gatsby* film (the fifth movie version so far), but even in an average year the book sells 500,000 copies.

“Anyone who loves Fitzgerald can’t help but wish that he could have had a glimpse into the future,” Corrigan writes, conjuring up the swelling legions of readers, the flow of adaptations, the ever-growing mountain of critical studies and biographies—not to mention the royalties: “How he would have reveled in the money.”

Corrigan has long taught *Gatsby* in her classes at Georgetown (including a very popular “New York Stories” course that

features a field trip to the Big Apple), and has lectured about the novel in cities and towns across the country as part of the National Endowment for the Arts’ Big Read program, but she hadn’t considered writing her own book about it until the first hours of Thanksgiving Day 2010.

At the time, she and her husband, Rich Yeselson G’86, were in a cab on their way to catch a late bus from Manhattan back to Washington, DC, where they live with their daughter, Molly. They had “lucked into” a pair of tickets to see *Gatz*—the seven-hour theatrical production by the Elevator Repair Service, in which the entire text of *The Great Gatsby* is read on-stage—at Joseph Papp’s Public Theater. Greyhound had been the only travel option available on “the Two Worst Travel Days of the Year,” and they wouldn’t get home until five a.m. Thanksgiving morning. But, she writes: “We had to see it; after all, it was *The Great Gatsby*.”

In the cab, listening to Corrigan rave about the book and the performance, her husband said that this should be the subject of her next book. (In 2005, she published a memoir, *Leave Me Alone, I’m Reading: Finding and Losing Myself in Books*.) At first, she was skeptical about the need for yet another book on Fitzgerald; then, after thinking about it, she put together a book proposal and her agent sent it out.

And the response?

“It was like the dream,” she says. All nine of the publishers who got the proposal wanted to bid on it, though the editors seemed less keen to talk about Corrigan’s book than to discuss *Gatsby*. “I had these conversations with editors, like, ‘Do you think Jon Hamm is a *Gatsby* character now?’ You could see everybody was an old English major.” As a lover of the book, she found this attitude understandable—and reassuring. “I was kind of thinking, ‘Oh, maybe everybody’s kind of *Gatsby*’d-out,’ especially because the movie was about to come out. But it didn’t seem like they felt the movie would cast the book into a shadow.”

In the end, while it certainly provided an immediate boost to sales of the novel, the movie was just the latest in a long line of cultural products profiting off *Gatsby*’s luster, which includes “restaurants, condo developments, computer games, custom-tailoring stores (those beautiful shirts!), beauty salons, Kate Spade clutch purses (made to look like hardcover editions of

the book), and hot tubs (really in poor taste when you consider the role of the swimming pool in the novel),” she writes.

On the whole, from the evidence in *So We Read On*, Corrigan thinks the movie seriously downplayed the book’s treatment of class (even to dropping the famous line about Daisy’s voice being “full of money”) and overplayed the material excess and wild-party material (no surprise there). She came to a more sympathetic view when she visited her old high school, though—the last and most personal in a series of reporting forays she undertakes. She plays the film’s trailer for a class she’s sitting in on, and they love it. “The students make me see that *Gatsby* has enough glitz in it to justify Luhrmann’s over-the-top treatment,” she writes, adding a bit later: “The kids ... have shown me something different: there’s another layer of the novel that’s all about obsession, insatiability, and ‘too-muchness.’

“There’s a *Gatsby* for when you’re older and more rueful, but there’s also a *Gatsby* for the young and reckless,” she concludes. “Maybe that’s the dimension of the novel that melts into the shadows for us older readers of the novel, who naturally gravitate toward Nick’s more measured and mournful voice.” (Despite her best efforts to convince them otherwise, the kids “didn’t much care for Nick,” considering him “passive, something of a sellout.”)

Corrigan’s own voice—observant and enthusiastic, erudite but always conversational—was a major selling point for the book. (English-major nostalgia can only take you so far.) It’s a style and delivery she’s been practicing for 25 years on *Fresh Air*, the hour-long nationally syndicated program hosted by Terry Gross, where she contributes weekly reviews. “Radio is great training if you want to put across ideas by telling stories,” Corrigan says, and that was the approach she took in *So We Read On*. “Tell stories about Fitzgerald and his life, the afterlife of this book—which is fascinating. I didn’t know some of this stuff when I got into it.”

THE book is built around a half-dozen long chapters examining different aspects of the story. Corrigan offers a sympathetic rendition of Fitzgerald’s familiar biography of eager striving, early success, and sad decline, sketching a portrait of a man whose personal behavior could be cringe-

worthy and worse, but who was also a serious artist and a painstaking, indeed obsessive, craftsman. “He could be a bastard, especially drinking and self-pitying and all that stuff. You wouldn’t want to live with him,” she says. “But so earnest. Maybe when he was drinking he was cynical, but he really believed he had something. He held on to that.”

In recent decades, biographers and critical partisans of Zelda Fitzgerald have taken a considerably darker view of Scott. Corrigan doesn’t share this take on the Fitzgeralds’ marriage or the couple’s relative merits as artists, but is respectful of their perspective.

Ernest Hemingway is another story. She compares him to a “bad middle-school girl,” who “never loses an opportunity to chip away at what confidence [Fitzgerald] has.” He told Fitzgerald that the *Gatsby* book jacket—one of the most recognizable cover images of all time—made it look like “bad science fiction,” and when the prominent critic Gilbert Seldes (later the founding dean of the Annenberg School for Communication) published one of the few rave reviews of the novel, Hemingway’s response was to suggest that such extreme praise would ruin Fitzgerald. “He really becomes the villain of the piece,” Corrigan says.

Other early admirers of the novel included Gertrude Stein and T.S. Eliot, but Fitzgerald’s friends were generally tepid in their response; the reviews, too, were mostly so-so, and sometimes outright hostile: “F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Latest a Dud,” went one headline, which the author preserved in a scrapbook.

Corrigan worries that a 1925 version of her reviewer-self might have missed the novel’s genius, just as she did in high school. “I honestly think that my first reaction upon ripping open the Scribner’s mailer and seeing a slim novel called *The Great Gatsby* might have been: *Oh, Another Fitzgerald*,” she writes. “Weary of his ‘flappers and philosophers,’” she could easily have given it a pass. She’s reasonably sure she’d have been hooked by Nick’s voice had she started reading. “But who knows? The assigning of literary merit is highly contingent.”

Fitzgerald had written his editor and friend Max Perkins about his desire to create an “intricately patterned” book in *Gatsby* (or whatever the novel would be called; he was never quite satisfied with

## “NOT THE VALLEY OF ASHES, BUT NOT EAST EGG EITHER”

**AT FITZGERALD’S GRAVE** | We don’t have any site in this country akin to Westminster Abbey—a sacred last resting place for our great writers and poets. Even so, Old St. Mary’s Cemetery is an especially unimpressive location for one of America’s greatest authors to be buried, given that it’s inches away from Rockville Pike, a busy major highway [in Maryland]. Fitzgerald couldn’t roll over in his grave; he’d be hit by speeding commuters. Old St. Mary’s Church, at least, has some historical significance: it was a stop on the Underground Railroad. But a newer church was eventually crammed in next to the tiny original structure. The modern church is a white eyesore that looks like a space pod. I visit Fitzgerald’s grave pretty frequently because it’s a few blocks away from the car dealership where I take my wheezing Mazda for service. That’s the kind of suburban wasteland that surrounds Fitzgerald’s final resting place: not the valley of ashes, but not East Egg either. I’ve visited in winter, when I’ve had to brush snow off the gravestone to read those last words of *The Great Gatsby*; I’ve walked over in the heat and humidity of summer, when the grass in the churchyard is brown and the air feels solid. I’ve never seen other people at the grave, but always there are tributes: flowers, coins, and miniature liquor bottles. This book, too, is a kind of tribute, though Fitzgerald, surely, would have preferred the booze.”

From *So We Read On: How The Great Gatsby Came to Be and Why it Endures*, by Maureen Corrigan. Copyright © 2014 by Maureen Corrigan; Little Brown and Company, 2014.

the title), and “he worked on it like mad,” Corrigan says. “You go online to Princeton’s archives [where Fitzgerald’s papers are held], and you can see the typescript there, where he’s fiddling with it.”

By way of demonstrating the pains that Fitzgerald took—and incidentally providing future student-readers with an invaluable cheat sheet—she parses the book’s staggering array of symbol systems. (Let’s just say the “green light” and the “eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg” don’t even scratch the surface). The most significant and surprising change—given the iconic place it has come to have in literature—is that the book’s “incantatory meditation on Dutch sailors and the ‘fresh, green breast of the new world’” was originally placed at the end of the first chapter. Fitzgerald “blew it” at first, she jokes. “He had his ending. He needed to push it back.”

Corrigan, who won an Edgar Award in Criticism from the Mystery Writers of America in 1999, also makes a case for *The Great Gatsby*’s links with “hardboiled” detective fiction that began to be published in the 1920s by Dashiell Hammett and other writers in *The Black Mask* magazine—edited, she notes, by Fitzgerald friend H.L. Mencken, to help support the

more high-brow *Smart Set*—and as a precursor of *film noir*, a genre that flourished in the post-World War II era but drew on many of those stories for its scripts.

With a bootlegger hero, no fewer than three violent deaths, and fast cars driven recklessly by dangerous women, “*Gatsby* has got it all,” Corrigan says. “We just get diverted, happily so, by all of that transcendent language. But this, it’s in there as well.” Most tellingly, especially as regards the dark, fate-haunted atmosphere of *film noir*, *Gatsby* is doomed from the start: “Nick tells us a story *that has already happened*. He’s ‘borne back ceaselessly into the past.’”

(*Gatsby*’s criminal history is mostly submerged in the novel, but it comes front and center in the 1949 film version—Corrigan’s favorite, naturally—starring Alan Ladd as *Gatsby*. Since Corrigan finished her book, the full movie is no longer available online, but you can still see the trailer on YouTube in which Ladd grimly guns down some rival gangsters from the seat of a speeding car, followed by the voiceover: “and out of the Twenties and all they were came Jay *Gatsby*, who built a dark empire for himself because he carried a dream in his heart.”)

**Some of the freshest and most entertaining material in the book** deals with Corrigan's adventures as a literary detective, ferreting out how and why the forgotten novel by the washed-up Jazz Age chronicler became the favorite text of high-school English classes across the generations. (Besides the fact that it's short.)

She visits the Library of Congress in an attempt to trace Fitzgerald's and *Gatsby's* extraordinary revival in the 1950s and '60s. Some of the "first stirrings" occurred as a direct result of his death, as his literary friends reacted to the wave of condescending or dismissive obituaries. (In the harshest, the "ultraconservative Hearst columnist Westbrook Pegler" wrote that Fitzgerald's demise "recalls memories of a queer brand of undisciplined and self-indulgent brats.") A number of essays reconsidering Fitzgerald's achievement appeared in the next few years, and the publication of his unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon*, in 1941, along with various other collections, put his work back in the public eye.

But the real mother lode turned out to be a collection of anthologies of American literature housed in the Library's basement, which Corrigan combed through with the aid of research librarian Abby Yochelson. ("She doesn't even like *Gatsby*," says Corrigan, "but she was game to find stuff.")

The experience, Corrigan writes, makes her "sentimental for lost illusions. The American canon as presented in these mid-twentieth century anthologies seems so stately and self-evident." In the 1940s apart from one mention, "Fitzgerald simply doesn't exist within the anthologies on the Library of Congress's shelves." Things start to pick up in the 1950s, and the '60s "volumes are so rich in mentions that they constitute a veritable Treasure of the Sierra Madre," she writes.

Another factor seems to have been the novel's inclusion in a massive program during and just after World War II that distributed some 123 million books to the armed services under the slogan "Books Are Weapons in the War of Ideas." Known as Armed Services Editions, or ASEs, these were tiny volumes, densely printed on cheap paper, designed so that they could fit in a soldier's pocket. Fitzgerald's inclusion (there was also an edition of *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz*) may have been the work of a Scribner's official who

was on the ASE book-selection committee, Corrigan speculates.

About 155,000 copies (each intended to be read seven times) of *The Great Gatsby* were distributed soon after the war's end in 1945, far outpacing Fitzgerald's highest hopes for sales (70,000 copies) when the novel was published. The book also launched "a mission that would be carried on by millions of English teachers" to assure readers they wouldn't be bored by what the back-cover blurb called this story of "Jay Gatsby, one of the first, and certainly one of the greatest, of the 'racketeers' in American fiction."

**It wasn't until possibly her 10th reading that Corrigan noticed** that her own family name appears in Chapter 4, the (often-skipped or skipped) listing of the people who came to Gatsby's parties that Nick says he "wrote down on the empty spaces of a time-table."

It was a late addition to the text, one of Fitzgerald's "fiddlings," she says. "He had a different name in there at first. He's so neurotic as a craftsman that he's even working on that list of names and changing them at the very end. But it's immigrant names. It's comic animal names. It's names that let you know the folks who are coming to this party, they're not the Upper Crust. They're nouveau all the way."

Corrigan grew up in Astoria, Queens—"the place Fitzgerald's characters have to drive through to get to someplace better," she writes. Still, that may have been "part of the reason I was interested in the book in the first place way back when," she says. "It's my hometown, it's the geography of my childhood."

Since high school is where *Gatsby* gets read most, Corrigan knew she wanted to sit in on some classes as part of her reporting. She'd kept in occasional contact with her high-school English teacher from freshman year, Mrs. Flood, who was still at the school—and who welcomed the idea of a visit when Corrigan sent her an email. ("She wrote back right away; she said, 'Stay with us.'") She also bonded with the teacher in whose class *Gatsby* was being covered.

"I'm not that great talking to high school kids," Corrigan admits. She was nervous at first, but talking about the *Gatsby* film loosened everyone up a bit. Besides coming to a better understanding of its virtues, she also received a

fresh insight into the book when a student proposed that Daisy cries in the famous scene when Gatsby shows her his "stockpile of rainbow-hued shirts"—a moment Corrigan confesses she has never figured out—"because she sees that Gatsby is just like Tom now. The poor boy she loved is gone."

And there were echoes of Nick Carraway's last words to Gatsby ("You're worth the whole damn bunch put together.") when she told one student, the daughter of immigrants, who had just been accepted at Harvard: "Don't let them psyche you out ... You're as good as they are."

"People were incredibly lovely. And it made me feel good about my old high school," she says. "I remember wanting to get out of there. I wanted to get to college. College was going to be nirvana."

Corrigan spent her undergraduate years at Fordham University, where one of her professors introduced her to the Victorian writers and thinkers about whom she would eventually write her dissertation at Penn. "I had one of those great professors who made me excited about John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle," she says. "Jim Doyle, who has since passed away—he really made it seem like it mattered to think about these big questions about literature and society and art."

Her memories of graduate school are less warm. In *Leave Me Alone, I'm Reading*, she writes, "One of the big life questions that sometimes gnaws at me at three in the morning is whether or not entering that program was a Major Wrong Turning." While grateful for the education and the fellowship that made it possible, she says, she never felt at home at Penn, frequently escaping into the detective novels of Hammett, Raymond Chandler, et al., as well as Kingsley Amis's iconic grad-school farce, *Lucky Jim*.

Her career as a book critic was launched when a friend newly hired by *The Village Voice Literary Supplement* offered her a shot at writing a review in gratitude for Corrigan's assistance with her take-home copyediting test.

This time the fit was perfect. "That was the greatest thing. I mean, to be able to be funny?" she says. "Back then, I don't know, maybe some people were doing it, but most of the scholarly writing I saw ... it



was the high point of [literary] theory.” Then ascendant figures such as Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida were less to Corrigan’s taste than “older voices” like Alfred Kazin and Lionel Trilling, she says. (She name-checks those two “mid-century public intellectuals,” along with H.L. Mencken, Mary McCarthy, and Edmund Wilson, as models for her approach in the introduction to *So We Read On*.)

Corrigan jumped at the opportunity “to be able to write and to show your enthusiasm,” she says. “And the *Voice* was so great. They would let somebody who’s ‘nobody’ go on and on if they thought it was good enough.

“And then *Fresh Air* happened because I was in Philly and listening to Terry religiously when it was a live show.”

*Fresh Air* actually turned her down the first time she sent in her VLS clips. Executive-producer Danny Miller told her she was too academic. He called back after she published a long piece that combined a review of a book about the Educational Testing Service with “this kind of exposé” about her experience as a grader for the Advanced Placement English exam. (“It really was like that episode of *I Love Lucy* with Lucy and Ethel in the candy factory, where the conveyor belt speeds up,” Corrigan recalls.)

Miller invited Corrigan to do the story on-air—only in 750 words rather than the 4,000 or so she’d had in print—and afterwards told her, “You know, you have a radio voice.” (Not a universal opinion, she adds, citing one listener’s online comment: “My idea of hell is being locked in a jail cell listening to her voice hour after hour.”)

That led to her becoming a reviewer on the program, once the regular critic, John Leonard, a former editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, had given his blessing. “He also is one of my gods,” she says of Leonard, who died in 2008. “He had it down. He could make all of these erudite allusions, but also open them out. And he was so generous. I doubt I would be that nice.”

Her involvement with the program, she adds, “gave me a life that I would never have had, as somebody who loves books. I mean, what better combination?”

Corrigan receives about 200 books a week from publishers, and she says one of the best things about *Fresh Air* is the breadth of material she’s free to cover.

“I’ve done everything from E.P. Thompson’s posthumous book on the Muggletonian religious sect”—a Protestant movement of the mid-1600s that has nothing to do with Harry Potter—“to the latest *Wimpy Kid* book,” she says.

She usually gets about four minutes of airtime, and within that constraint and her weekly deadline, strives to provide more than just a thumbs-up-or-down recommendation. “People are listening while they’re driving, they’re cooking. They need their memories jogged,” she says. “I always have to think, ‘Well, so what? Why should people care?’ Sometimes the answer is quoting from the book and saying, ‘Look how powerfully this person writes. Look at this scene that they’ve created.’ But sometimes it’s relating it to things that we might care about outside of the world of the book.”

“I REALLY DO GENERALLY BELIEVE IN THE MERITOCRACY. IT MAY NOT HAPPEN WHILE THE WRITER IS STILL ALIVE, BUT IT COMES BACK.”

Around the same time she started with *Fresh Air*, Corrigan landed at Georgetown University, having held various adjunct and staff positions at Haverford and Bryn Mawr. “I started as a full-time adjunct,” she says, which involves teaching two courses per semester and provides health and retirement benefits but not other faculty perks such as leaves. And not tenure; she’s still on a three-year contract, she says.

The arrangement has allowed Corrigan to write and—mostly—teach what she wants; the downside is “probably had I gone on the job market at a certain point, I’d be a full professor somewhere else,” she says.

The intellectual pretensions of tenure-track faculty sometimes rankle a bit as well. “When you start as an adjunct, there is that academic thing of, ‘What is it that you do? You must be a *popularizer*.’” Corrigan describes some colleagues reacting to the news of her *Gatsby* project as if she’d unwrapped an

American-cheese sandwich. “It’s not sexy enough. It sounds very traditional, and why do you need to do that? It’s like belles-lettres: I’m *appreciating The Great Gatsby*,” she says ruefully.

In the Fitzgerald collection at the University of South Carolina, gathered by the prolific Fitzgerald scholar and biographer Matthew Bruccoli, one of the artifacts Corrigan examines is Edmund Wilson’s scrawled response to a request concerning a planned volume of early Fitzgerald writings: “I am tired to the point of nausea of books on F. Scott Fitzgerald. Do tell Bruccoli to get interested in some other writer.”

Corrigan has some sympathy for this view, even if Wilson’s “nausea” was at least partly out of pique that Fitzgerald, the Princeton friend he had championed but also looked down on, had so clearly

surpassed him in literary fame. On the whole, though, she thinks Fitzgerald deserves all the attention—and more.

“I really do generally believe in the meritocracy,” Corrigan says. “It may not happen while the writer is still alive, but it comes back, you know? It came back because enough people looked at *Gatsby* and said, ‘Wow, you know, this is pretty extraordinary.’ And they recognize it.”

Fitzgerald had a habit of extravagantly humbling himself before other writers—prostrating himself at Edith Wharton’s feet, say, or offering to jump out a window for James Joyce, or, more depressingly, his comment that Hemingway talked with “the authority of success,” while he talked with “the authority of failure.”

“People should have been kneeling before him,” Corrigan says. “I am sure that somebody out there will criticize the book for being too adulatory of Fitzgerald. But if you’re going to worship somebody, he’s a good guy to worship.” ♦