

## **Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald**

by Therese Anne Fowler (2013)

There was no bigger literary figure in the 1920s than Scott Fitzgerald. His writing excited people but so did his lifestyle and a major part of that was his wife, the remarkable and rebellious Southern Belle, Zelda Sayre. They truly were a golden couple: literate progressive thinkers with impressive family connections and famous friends.

This novel is superbly written in the first person by Zelda. In an afterward, the author explains it is a fictional autobiography but her extensive research including reading the scores of letters Scott and Zelda wrote to, and about each other, over the years allowed her to come up with explanations and interpretations of the actual events in their lives, for instance, how Zelda fell out with Hemingway. This is a powerful story of romance but also paints a marvellous portrait of the exotic 1920s world of great writers, artists, and musicians against a backdrop of glamorous parties, excessive wealth, and the promise of dreams-come-true as it roams through New York during Prohibition, Paris, Rome and the French Riviera. Most important, it tells what it was like to be a woman of that time with dreams of her own but married to a man, whose dreams and expectations consumed her.

If you liked Woody Allen's 2011 film, "Midnight in Paris," you will love this book. Zelda is full of charm and wit and promise. She meets Scott before the publication of his first novel and marries him against the wishes of her father. Their first years together in New York are a whirlwind of social engagements, all-night clubbing and unending media and public attention: the cult of celebrity we recognise so well today. Then the pressures mounted and things fell apart. Some Fitzgerald scholars believe Zelda ruined Scott's life while others say the opposite. In Z, Fowler lets her readers decide.

Even when apart, the bond between Scott and Zelda persists. Her increasingly erratic behaviour leads to a diagnosis of schizophrenia, although bipolar disorder is much more likely in retrospect and substance abuse may well have been a major contributor. While she spends the second half of her short life in and out of institutional care in Europe and the US, Scott runs amok and ends up dying of a heart attack at just 44 having abused alcohol and cigarettes impressively and never out of debt despite a vast income. I always believed Fitzgerald modelled Nick Carraway on himself but now I think he was really Jay Gatsby. Read this fascinating and entertaining novel.

Five stars

Robert Hitchins April 2013

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