

COVER STORY

# Why Gatsby is great



With a stage adaptation arriving in the West End and a new film version in the works, US author **Jay McInerney** explains why F Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel – set amid the riotous frivolity of the jazz age – became a defining document of the American psyche, while on the following pages we trace its remarkable ascent to the heights of literary greatness

**T**he *Great Gatsby* seems to be enjoying a moment, what with the success of the New York production of *Gatz*, opening in London this week (described by America's leading theatre critic Ben Brantley as "The most remarkable achievement in theatre not only of this year but also of this decade"), and the release later this year of Baz Luhrman's \$120m film version. The book was little noticed on your side of the Atlantic on its initial publication. Collins, which had published the English editions of F Scott Fitzgerald's first two novels, rejected it outright, and the Chatto and Windus edition failed to arouse much enthusiasm, critical or commercial, when it was published in London in 1926. To be fair, the novel hadn't been a smash hit in the States the year before, selling less than his two previous novels and falling well short of the expectations of Fitzgerald and his publisher, despite some very good reviews. TS Eliot declared: "In fact, it seems to me the first step American fiction has taken since Henry

James." And yet, many of the 23,000 copies printed in 1925 were gathering dust in the Scribner's warehouse when Fitzgerald died in obscurity in Hollywood 15 years later.

At that time, *Gatsby* seemed like the relic of an age most wanted to forget. In the succeeding years, Fitzgerald's slim tale of the jazz age became the most celebrated and beloved novel in the American canon. It's more than an American classic; it's become a defining document of the national psyche, a creation myth, the Rosetta Stone of the American dream. And yet all the attempts to adapt it to stage and screen have only served to illustrate its fragility and its flaws. Fitzgerald's prose somehow elevates a lurid and underdeveloped narrative to the level of myth.

In its barest outline, *The Great Gatsby* is a love story. Jay Gatsby, né Jimmy Gatz, is a poor boy from a humble midwestern family, who falls in love with Daisy Fay, the belle of Louisville, Kentucky, when he is stationed at the nearby army base as a young officer waiting to be deployed overseas in the months after the US entered the first world war. Implying



Jay McInerney: 'Gatsby is a very fragile creation, made of words and dreams.' Getty

that his background and circumstances are similar to her own, Gatsby wins Daisy's heart and her promise to wait for him, but, as the months of his deployment drag on, her devotion wavers and she eventually marries the obscenely wealthy Tom Buchanan of Chicago.

The novel opens in the summer of 1922; Gatsby has himself become rich, and bought a splendid house on Long Island Sound directly across the bay from the mansion which Tom and Daisy occupy. From his beach he can see a green light at the end of Tom and Daisy's dock. Gatsby gives lavish parties all summer, in the hope, it seems, of attracting the attention of Daisy, whom he has never stopped loving. Finally they are reunited through the agency of Nick Carraway, a childhood friend of Daisy's who happens to move in next door. Gatsby imagines that he can erase the past and win Daisy back; it becomes clear that the entire gaudy jazz-age facade he's created has all been in the interest of recapturing his dream of Daisy. It's gradually revealed that Gatsby's wealth comes from extralegal activities, including bootlegging –

although Fitzgerald leaves the details extremely vague – a fact which Daisy's husband Tom uses against him. After a showdown in a Manhattan hotel room, Gatsby and Daisy jump in Gatsby's car and Daisy, who is behind the wheel, runs down a pedestrian, who just happens to be her husband's lover, driving back to Long Island. The aggrieved husband of the dead woman, imagining that Gatsby is the culprit, shoots him while he is lounging in his pool the next day, and Tom and Daisy retreat into the impregnable sanctuary of their vast wealth, while Nick Carraway, the narrator, returns to the midwest, repelled and disillusioned by what he's witnessed. Nick, the innocent bystander, is in fact integral to the story, not just as the witness and the moral conscience of the book.

Since the novel was published, there have been at least five English-language film adaptations, an operatic interpretation and numerous stage adaptations. None has been terribly successful with the exception of *Gatz*, for the simple reason that *Gatz* presents the book in its entirety –

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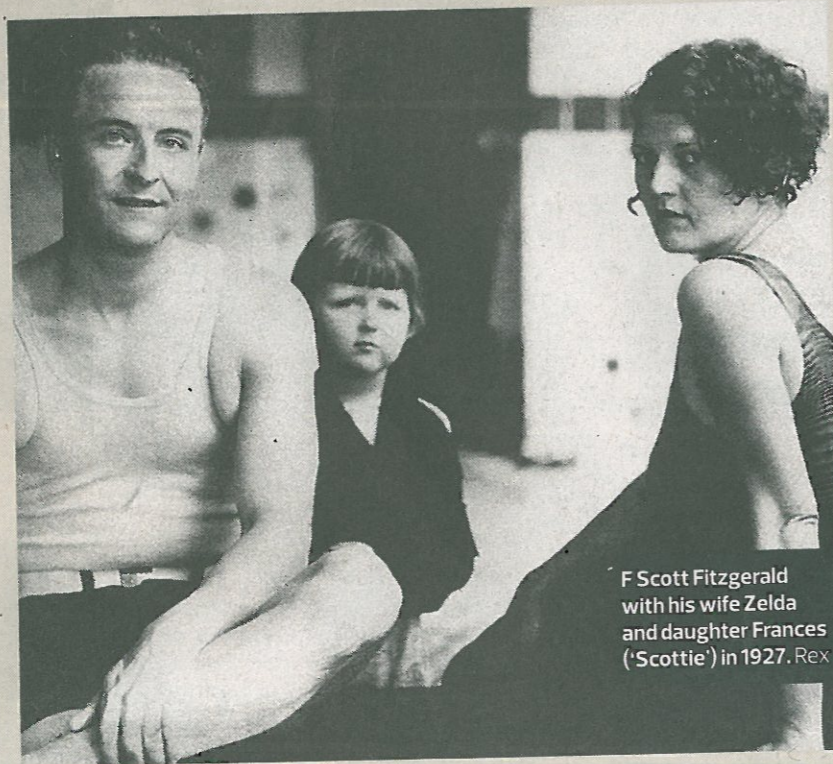
## COVER STORY

# 10 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE GREAT GATSBY

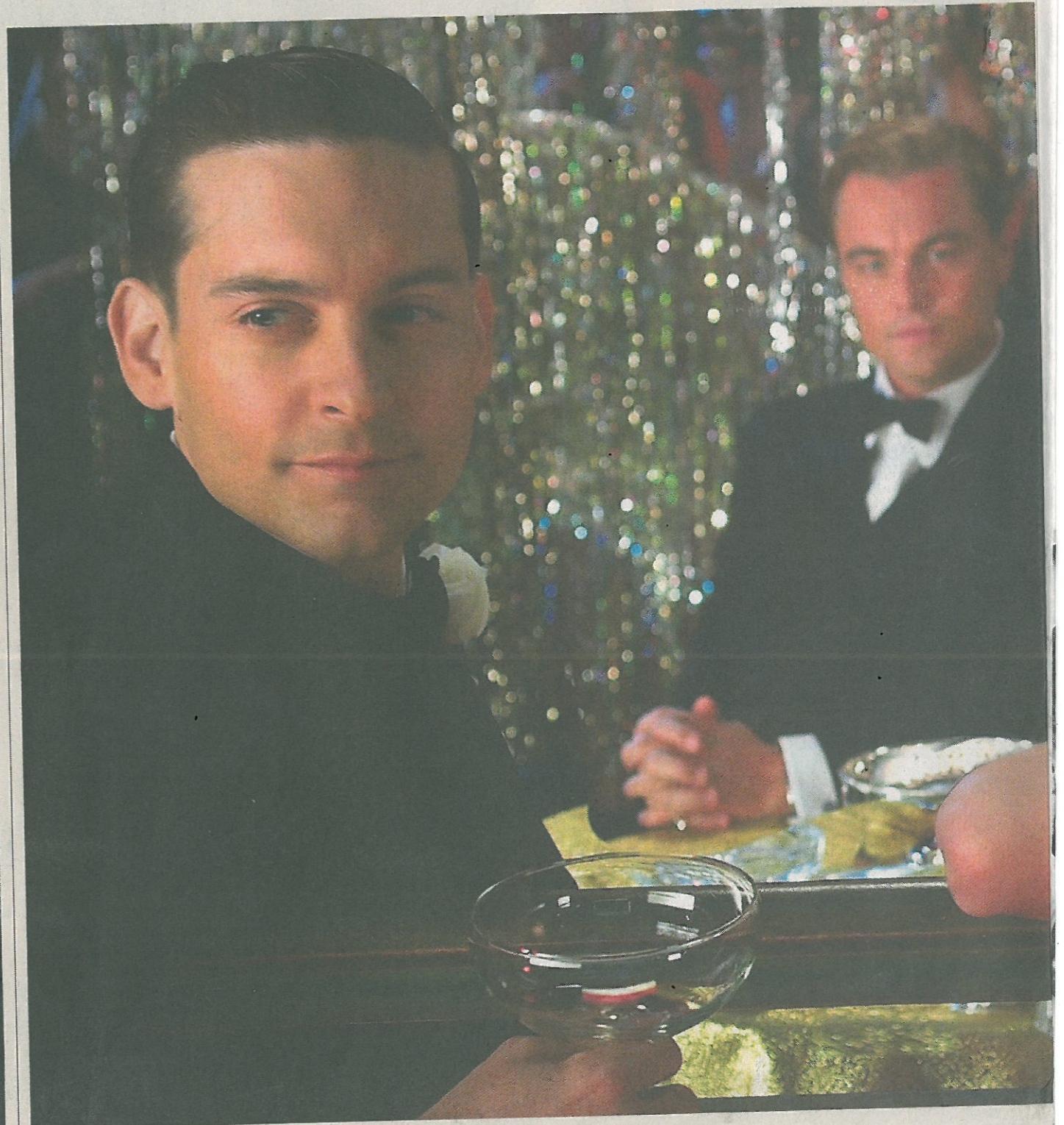
### 1 ART IMITATES LIFE

Several of the novel's main characters are said to have been based on real people. There are parallels between Gatsby's romance with Daisy and Fitzgerald's own youthful love affairs with Ginevra King and Zelda Sayre. In both cases, Fitzgerald was deemed too poor to be considered a viable suitor. It was only after the success of his first novel that Zelda agreed to

marry him. Gatsby's shady associate, Meyer Wolfsheim, closely resembles the Jewish gangster Arnold Rothstein who, like Wolfsheim, was reputedly involved in fixing baseball's 1919 world series. Fitzgerald told his editor that the golfer Edith Cummings, a friend of King, was the inspiration for Jordan Baker, Carraway's irresponsible girlfriend in the novel.



F Scott Fitzgerald with his wife Zelda and daughter Frances ('Scottie') in 1927. Rex



## 2 AMERICANS ABROAD

Fitzgerald started *The Great Gatsby* in America but had written very little – probably only the first chapter – when he and Zelda moved to the south of France. He wrote the bulk of the novel on the Riviera, in spite of their fractious

relationship and his heavy drinking, and worked on revisions of the book in Rome during the winter of 1924/5. The Fitzgeralds were en route to Paris when the novel was published, on 10 April 1925.

## 3 CRITICAL REACTION

Upon its publication, *Gatsby* was praised by fellow writers such as Edith Wharton, Willa Cather and TS Eliot, who called it "the first step the American novel has taken since Henry James". However, critics were less kind – HL Mencken felt it was "no more than a glorified anecdote" – and the book fell into relative obscurity until after Fitzgerald's death. It was reassessed in the late 1940s and is now widely considered a masterpiece. *The Great Gatsby* featured on Time magazine's all-time 100 greatest novels list.



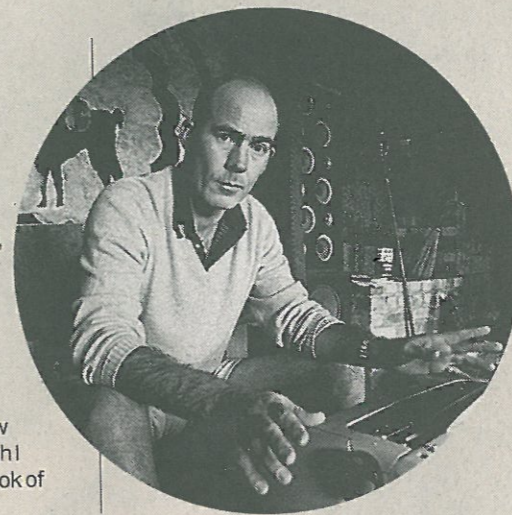
## 4 TITLE FIGHT

Fitzgerald was never completely happy with the title; shortly before publication he made several attempts to change it – to Trimalchio in West Egg; Gold-Hatted Gatsby; and Under the Red, White and Blue – but was overruled. Other titles

considered included Among Ash-Heaps and Millionaires and The High-Bouncing Lover. The title he eventually went with (which owes a debt to Alain-Fournier's 1913 novel *Le Grand Meaulnes*) was, he felt, "only fair, rather bad than good".

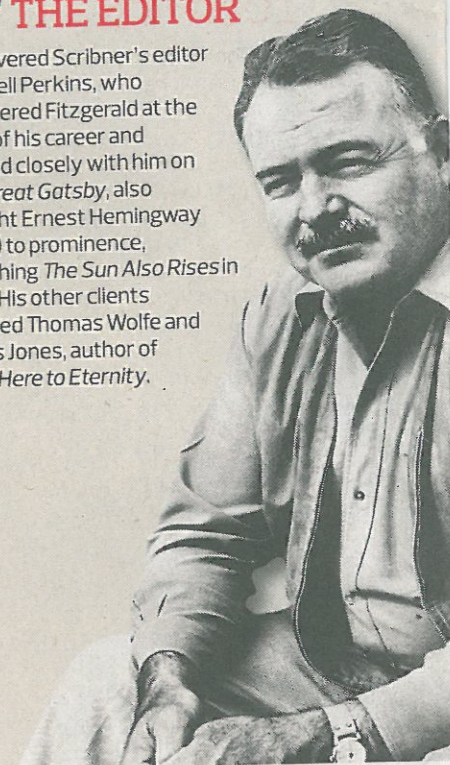
## 5 HUNTER HOMAGE

Hunter S Thompson (right) used to type out *The Great Gatsby* to experience what it was like to write "possibly the Great American Novel, if you look at it as a technical achievement. It's about 55,000 words, which was astounding to me," he said in an interview with *Rolling Stone*. "Not a wasted word. Shoot, I couldn't match 55,000 no matter how I chopped. There are few things that I read and say, 'Boy, I wish I could write that.' Damn few. The Book of Revelation is one. *Gatsby* is one."



## 6 THE EDITOR

The revered Scribner's editor Maxwell Perkins, who discovered Fitzgerald at the start of his career and worked closely with him on *The Great Gatsby*, also brought Ernest Hemingway (right) to prominence, publishing *The Sun Also Rises* in 1926. His other clients included Thomas Wolfe and James Jones, author of *From Here to Eternity*.



# 'The novel that defines the American psyche'

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every single word (over eight hours). Without Fitzgerald's poetry, without the editorial consciousness of Fitzgerald's narrator Nick Carraway, the story can seem threadbare and melodramatic. Telling the story from Carraway's point of view was the key to the delicate balancing act Fitzgerald performed in narrating his improbable love story. Nick is an outside observer who becomes emotionally involved in the story he is telling. Drunkenly taking in the proceedings at a party

in a New York City apartment, Nick observes: "Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was with him, too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life."

*Gatsby* without Nick's voice, without his presiding consciousness, is like Bob Dylan's lyrics without music. Interesting, yes, but poetry? I don't think so. This is just one reason why

I avoided the 1974 version starring Robert Redford and Mia Farrow, with a screenplay by Francis Ford Coppola. And why I will almost certainly be skipping Baz Luhrmann's film, starring Leonardo DiCaprio, much as I would love to see Isla Fisher in the role of Myrtle Wilson, the floozy mistress of *Gatsby*'s rival Tom Buchanan. Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* is a very fragile creation, made of words and dreams. Fitzgerald tells us almost nothing of his appearance, and while this may seem like a fault in the book – one of which the author himself was aware – the actor who chooses to embody this famous cipher takes on a daunting task, further complicated by the fact that *Gatsby*'s dialogue is the most wooden and formulaic language in the book, presenting a striking contrast to the rich, aphoristic style of Nick Carraway's narration. The prose surrounding Jay

*Gatsby* is so good it allows us to share Nick's vision of his largeness of soul and the heroism of his quest, to celebrate "the colossal vitality of his illusion".

The enduring appeal of Fitzgerald's third novel, as with many great novels, is partly dependent on a benign misinterpretation on the part of readers, a surrender to fascination with wealth and glamour, and the riotous frivolity of the jazz age. Fitzgerald was by no means an uncritical observer, as some have suggested; the most villainous of these characters are the wealthiest, and Nick Carraway is something of a middle-class prig, who, much as he tries to reserve judgment, is ultimately sickened by all the profligacy and the empty social rituals of his summer among the wealthy of Long Island. "I wanted no more riotous excursion with privileged glimpses into the human heart," he says at the

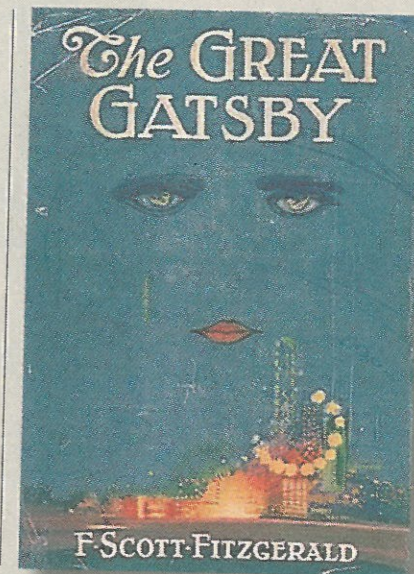
end. And yet Fitzgerald had a kind of double agent's consciousness about the tinsel of the jazz age, and about the privileged world of inherited wealth; he couldn't help stopping to admire and glamorise the glittering interiors of which his midwestern heart ultimately disapproved. *Gatsby*'s lavish weekly summer parties are over the top, ridiculous, peopled with drunks and poseurs, and yet we can't help feeling a sense of loss when he suddenly shuts them down after it's clear that Daisy – for whom the whole show was arranged in the first place – doesn't quite approve. We shouldn't approve either, and yet in memory they seem like parties to which we wish we'd been invited.

In *Gatsby* and his best fiction, Fitzgerald manages to strike a balance between his attraction and repulsion, between his sympathy



## THE DUST JACKET

The art deco cover of the 1925 first edition, in which a woman's eyes and lips float above an illuminated city skyline at night, was designed by little-known illustrator Francis Cugat before the final manuscript was submitted. Delighted by it, Fitzgerald wrote to his editor Maxwell Perkins saying, "For Christ's sake don't give anyone that jacket you're saving for me. I've written it into the book." There is some debate about what he meant by that. Was it a reference to the eyes of Dr TJ Eckleburg on a giant billboard in the valley of ashes? It's more likely he meant Nick Carraway's description of Daisy as the "girl whose disembodied face floated along the dark cornices and blinding signs" of New York at night.



## FALSE POET

The epigraph at the start of the novel, a four-line poem entitled *Then Wear the Gold Hat*, is credited to a certain Thomas Parke D'Invilliers. No such poet ever existed; D'Invilliers is a character from Fitzgerald's first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, although he was modelled on

a real-life poet called John Peale Bishop, a friend of Fitzgerald's at Princeton. The epigraph reads: "Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her; / If you can bounce high, bounce for her too, / Till she cry 'Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover, / I must have you!'"



WALD GRANT ARCHIVE

## 7 LOCATION, LOCATION

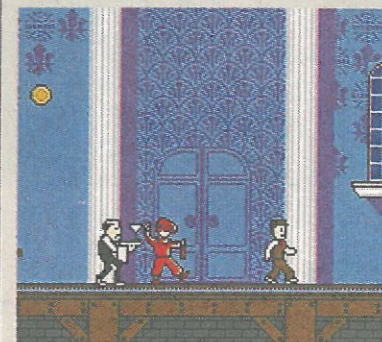
In the novel, Tom and Daisy Buchanan live in East Egg, home to Long Island's aristocratic set, while Nick Carraway and Gatsby live across the water in the more nouveau riche West Egg. East and West Egg are fictional counterparts of Cow Neck and Great Neck, which jut out into Long Island Sound and are divided by Manhasset Bay. The valley of ashes where George and Myrtle Wilson run their garage was Fitzgerald's term for the Corona ash dump in Queens, a large repository for ashes from coal-burning furnaces which was cleared for the 1939-1940 World's Fair and is now Flushing Meadows-Corona Park.



## 10 ADAPTATIONS

In addition to the forthcoming Baz Luhrmann version (starring Leonardo DiCaprio as Gatsby and Carey Mulligan as Daisy Buchanan – main picture above left with Tobey Maguire as Nick Carraway), *The Great Gatsby* has been adapted for the screen five times. The earliest adaptation, filmed without sound in 1926, a year after the book was published, has been lost: only the trailer and publicity photos (Neil Hamilton is pictured right as Carraway) remain. A 1974 version, scripted by Francis Ford Coppola, starred Robert Redford (above) and Mia Farrow as Gatsby and Buchanan. The novel has also been staged numerous times – three separate adaptations in London this year alone – and, in 1999, it was performed as an opera at the Met in New York. It has even inspired a computer game (greatgatsbygame.com, right), in which Carraway must dodge flappers and evil butlers in his quest to locate Jay Gatsby.

Killian Fox



and his judgment. As a middle-class, midwestern Irish Catholic from what Edmund Wilson called “a semi-excluded background” vis-a-vis the Ivy League and the world of eastern privilege, he seems capable of double vision, the appearance of viewing character, from inside and outside. Fitzgerald's best narrators always seem to be partaking of the festivities even as they shiver outside with their noses pressed up against the glass. In this manner, Nick Carraway doesn't entirely approve of Jay Gatsby, the party-giving parvenu with his pink suits and his giant yellow circus wagon of a car. But he deeply admires Jay Gatsby the lover and the dreamer, the man for whom the mansion and the bespoke clothes were only the means to reclaim his first love. Nick admires his fidelity to that first love and his ability to keep it pure and undefiled, even as he wades through

the muck to pursue it, even if the object of that love isn't, in the flesh, worthy of such devotion.

Ultimately, Jay Gatsby's story mirrors Fitzgerald's, a poor boy who falls in love with the golden girl and performs heroic feats in order to win the hand of the princess. In Fitzgerald's case, the princess was Zelda Sayre of Montgomery, Alabama, whom he meets when he is stationed as an officer there. He is engaged to Zelda but eventually rejected when it seems clear that the aspiring writer can't support her; crawls home to St Paul, Minnesota, where he writes a novel which makes him rich and famous virtually overnight. In this story the hero gets the girl. Gatsby's love story seems almost plausible in light of Fitzgerald's.

Although the vagueness of the source of his wealth is almost glaring, the Horatio Alger story, in which poor boys work their way up to wealth and power, was ingrained in the American psyche.

Fitzgerald conflates Jay Gatsby's act of self-invention with the promise of the new world, with the dream of a fresh start upon which the nation was founded: “And as the moon rose higher

**Gatsby's story mirrors Fitzgerald's – a poor boy who performs heroic feats to win the hand of a princess**

the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate with his capacity for wonder. And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of the dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it.”

To some, including many British readers over the years, this may seem like a lot of weight for the love story of a bootlegger and a southern belle to bear. But it seems to speak to a collective self-image dear to many American hearts – in spite of its unhappy ending. It's possible we Americans are not entirely rational about *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby becomes fabulously wealthy, but he doesn't care about money in itself. He lives in a beautiful mansion and dresses beautifully, but everything he does is for love. He invents a hero called Jay Gatsby and then inhabits this creation, just as we hope to reinvent ourselves, some day, any day now, almost certainly starting tomorrow.

*Gatz is at the Noël Coward theatre, London, until 15 July. Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* will be released at the end of the year*