



F. Scott Fitzgerald biography

SYNOPSIS

F. Scott Fitzgerald was born Sept. 24, 1896, in St. Paul, Minnesota. His first novel's success made him famous and let him marry the woman he loved, but he later descended into drinking and his wife had a mental breakdown. Following the unsuccessful *Tender is the Night*, Fitzgerald moved to Hollywood and became a scriptwriter. He died of a heart attack at 44, his final novel only half completed.

EARLY LIFE

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born on September 24, 1896, in St. Paul, Minnesota. His namesake (and second cousin three times removed on his father's side) was Francis Scott Key, who wrote the lyrics to the "The Star-Spangled Banner." Fitzgerald's mother, Mary McQuillan, was from an Irish-Catholic family that had made a small fortune in Minnesota as wholesale grocers. His father, Edward Fitzgerald, had opened a wicker furniture business in St. Paul, and when it failed he took a job as a salesman for Procter & Gamble that took his family back and forth between Buffalo and Syracuse in upstate New York during the first decade of Fitzgerald's life. However, Edward Fitzgerald lost his job with Procter & Gamble in 1908, when F. Scott Fitzgerald was 12, and the family moved back to St. Paul to live off of his mother's inheritance.

Fitzgerald was a bright, handsome and ambitious boy, the pride and joy of his parents and especially his mother. He attended the St. Paul Academy, and when he was 13 he saw his first piece of writing appear in print: a detective story published in the school newspaper. In 1911, when Fitzgerald was 15 years old, his parents sent him to the Newman School, a prestigious Catholic preparatory school in New Jersey. There he met Father Sigourney Fay, who noticed his incipient talent with the written word and encouraged him to pursue his literary ambitions.

After graduating from the Newman School in 1913, Fitzgerald decided to stay in New Jersey to continue his artistic development at Princeton University. At Princeton, he firmly dedicated himself to honing his craft as a writer, writing scripts for Princeton's famous Triangle Club musicals as well as frequent articles for the *Princeton Tiger* humor magazine and stories for the *Nassau Literary Magazine*. However, Fitzgerald's writing came at the expense of his coursework. He was placed on academic probation, and in 1917 he dropped out of school to join the army. Afraid that he might die in World War I with his literary dreams unfulfilled, in the weeks before reporting to duty Fitzgerald hastily wrote a novel called *The Romantic Egotist*. Although the publisher **Charles Scribner's** Sons rejected the novel, the reviewer noted its originality and encouraged Fitzgerald to submit more work in the future.

Fitzgerald was commissioned a second lieutenant in the infantry and assigned to Camp Sheridan outside of Montgomery, Alabama. It was there that he met and fell in love with a beautiful 18-year-old girl named Zelda Sayre, the daughter of an Alabama Supreme Court judge. The war ended in 1919, before Fitzgerald was ever deployed, and upon his discharge he moved to New York City hoping to launch a career in advertising lucrative enough to convince Zelda to marry him.

He quit his job after only a few months, however, and returned to St. Paul to rewrite his novel.

CAREER BREAKTHROUGHS

The novel's new incarnation, *This Side of Paradise*, a largely autobiographical story about love and greed, was centered on Amory Blaine, an ambitious Midwesterner who falls in love with, but is ultimately rejected by, two girls from high-class families. The novel was published in 1920 to glowing reviews and almost overnight turned Fitzgerald, at the age of 24, into one of the country's most promising young writers. One week after the novel's publication, he married Zelda Sayre in New York. They had one child, a daughter named Frances Scott Fitzgerald, born in 1921.

F. Scott Fitzgerald eagerly embraced his newly minted celebrity status and embarked on an extravagant lifestyle that earned him a reputation as a playboy and hindered his reputation as a serious literary writer. Beginning in 1920 and continuing throughout the rest of his career, Fitzgerald supported himself financially by writing great numbers of short stories for popular publications such as *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Esquire*. Some of his most notable stories include "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," "The Camel's Back" and "The Last of the Belles." In 1922, Fitzgerald published his second novel, *The Beautiful and the Damned*, the story of the troubled marriage of Anthony and Gloria Patch. *The Beautiful and the Damned* helped to cement his status as one of the great chroniclers and satirists of the culture of wealth, extravagance and ambition that emerged during the affluent 1920s—what became known as the Jazz Age. It was an age of miracles," Fitzgerald wrote, "it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire."

QUICK FACTS

NAME: F. Scott Fitzgerald

OCCUPATION: Author

BIRTH DATE: September 24, 1896

DEATH DATE: December 21, 1940

EDUCATION: St. Paul Academy, Newman School, Princeton University

PLACE OF BIRTH: St. Paul, Minnesota

PLACE OF DEATH: Hollywood, California

BEST KNOWN FOR

American short-story writer and novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald is known for his turbulent personal life and his famous novel *The Great Gatsby*.

Seeking a change of scenery to spark his creativity, in 1924 Fitzgerald moved to France, and it was there, in Valescure, that Fitzgerald wrote his greatest novel, *The Great Gatsby*. Published in 1925, *The Great Gatsby* is narrated by Nick Carraway, a Midwesterner who moves into the town of West Egg on Long Island, next door to a mansion owned by the wealthy and mysterious Jay Gatsby. The novel follows Nick and Gatsby's strange friendship and Gatsby's pursuit of a married woman named Daisy, ultimately leading to his exposure as a bootlegger and his death. With its beautiful lyricism, pitch-perfect portrayal of the Jazz Age, and searching critiques of materialism, love and the American Dream, *The Great Gatsby* is considered Fitzgerald's finest work. Although the book was well received when it was published, it was not until the 1950s and 1960s, long after Fitzgerald's death, that it achieved its stature as the definitive portrait of the "Roaring Twenties" and one of the greatest American novels ever written.

FINAL YEARS

After he completed *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald's life began to unravel. Always a heavy drinker, he progressed steadily into alcoholism and suffered prolonged bouts of writer's block.

His wife Zelda also suffered from mental health issues as they spent the late 1920s moving back and forth between Delaware and France. In 1930, she was briefly committed to a mental-health clinic in Switzerland, and after the Fitzgeralds returned to the United States in 1931, she suffered another breakdown and entered the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. In 1934, after years of toil, Fitzgerald finally published his fourth novel, *Tender is the Night*, about an American psychiatrist in Paris and his troubled marriage to a wealthy patient. Although *Tender is the Night* was a commercial failure and was initially poorly received due to its chronologically jumbled structure, it has since gained in reputation and is now considered among the great American novels.

After another two years lost to alcohol and depression, in 1937 Fitzgerald attempted to revive his career as a screenwriter and freelance storywriter in Hollywood, and he achieved modest financial, if not critical, success for his efforts. He began work on another novel, *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, in 1939, and he had completed over half the manuscript when he died of a heart attack on December 21, 1940, at the age of 44.

F. Scott Fitzgerald died believing himself a failure. None of his works received anything more than modest commercial or critical success during his lifetime. However, since his death Fitzgerald has gained a reputation as one of the preeminent authors in the history of American literature due almost entirely to the enormous posthumous success of *The Great Gatsby*. As perhaps the quintessential American novel, as well as a definitive social history of the Jazz Age, *The Great Gatsby* has become required reading for virtually every American high school student for the past half century, and had a transportive effect on generation after generation of readers.

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