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Book review: 'Paradise Lost: A Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald' by David S. Brown

David Brown's biography, ‘Paradise Lost,’ is detailed account of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s life and work

By Glenn C. Altschuler  Jul 2, 2017
In 1940, the year F. Scott Fitzgerald died, only 72 copies of his novels were sold. Fitzgerald was still earning good money as a Hollywood screenwriter but had yielded pride of place as a preeminent figure in American letters to Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and John Steinbeck.

Starting in the 1950s, however, Fitzgerald made a comeback. Many critics now view “The Great Gatsby” as a contender for the greatest American novel.

In “Paradise Lost,” David Brown, a professor of history at Elizabethtown College, provides a detailed account of Fitzgerald’s often turbulent personal life and tries to explain the appeal of his fiction to modern readers.

“Thick with fallen heroes,” martyrs to a mythology of social mobility, Brown indicates, Fitzgerald’s fiction is embedded with the “disquieting notion that we have drifted far from our inheritance as the children of pioneers to fashion a culture that teaches its young to love too much the privileges and protections of wealth.”

Brown’s assessments of Fitzgerald’s novels and short stories do not differ all that much from the
judgments of modern literary critics. The principal contribution of “Paradise Lost,” he asserts, is its analysis of the impact of the experiences of Fitzgerald’s parents (a rising immigrant and a vanishing Southern aristocrat) and of contemporary social critics and historians (Frederick Jackson Turner, Thorstein Veblen and Charles A. Beard, among others) on his understanding of the downside of “The American Dream.”

The biography does, indeed, make a compelling case that the foundations of Fitzgerald’s fiction were laid in a home “haunted” by the pretentiousness and social ambition of Mollie McQuillan, as she saw her family fortune “slowly ebb away,” and the Confederate sympathies, patrician values and traditional ethical code of Edward Fitzgerald. At Princeton University, Brown indicates, Scott learned to covet “the privileges, ease and self-confidence” of his classmates without embracing their materialist values.

And so, Brown argues, that Fitzgerald developed an essentially pre-capitalist worldview, accompanied by an attraction for merchant princes with tragically romantic sensibilities.

Brown’s discussion of the influence of historians, social critics and novelists on Fitzgerald’s work, however, is too vague to be useful. He acknowledges that Fitzgerald did not read Veblen or Turner. All likelihood, Fitzgerald, like so many writers of fiction, drew on ideas that were in the air (including conspicuous consumption, the significance of the frontier in American history and “The American Dream”).

Brown’s claims that Edith Wharton’s “new woman” anticipated Fitzgerald’s “golden girls” and Scott’s “Crack-Up” essays anticipated George Orwell’s “1984” are also insufficiently concrete to illuminate any of the works he mentions.

Despite these caveats (and Brown’s misleading characterization of Fitzgerald’s “comparative poverty”), “Paradise Lost” succeeds in capturing its subject as a fascinating and flawed human being.

And the biography reminds us that his novels, “The Great Gatsby” and “Tender Is the Night,” set as they are in “lost cities, decades, and generations,” contain candid appraisals of “The American Dream,” delivered in exquisite prose, that continue to resonate with readers “ensnared in their own struggles to establish ‘higher’ goals.”

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