



# Z: A NOVEL OF ZELDA FITZGERALD

by Therese Anne Fowler

## **A**bout the Author

- A Conversation with Therese Anne Fowler

## **B**ehind the Novel

- “Provenance and Products”  
An Original Essay by Therese Anne Fowler

## **K**eep on Reading

- Recommended Reading
- Reading Group Questions

For more reading group suggestions  
visit [www.readinggroupgold.com](http://www.readinggroupgold.com).

 ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN

*A  
Reading  
Group Gold  
Selection*



## *A Conversation with Therese Anne Fowler*

**Could you tell us a little bit about your background, and when you decided that you wanted to lead a literary life?**

I come from a family of five in which I was the youngest child and only girl. An avowed tomboy who played Little League baseball, rode skateboards, built tree forts, created mazes by knocking down cornstalks in the nearby cornfields, and never wanted to come indoors before full dark, I was also a voracious reader of novels.

“There were several points in my early adult life when I toyed with the idea of writing a novel, but I didn’t take myself seriously.”

The specifics of what makes a literary life—the reading, writing, discussing, critiquing, teaching, associating with other writers—always appealed to me, but for many years I had no idea how to access that world. I’d married right out of high school, had two children while in my mid-twenties, got divorced at thirty, and put myself through college, intending to then pursue a career in something practical. But that plan was derailed after I wrote a short story for my final paper in a science fiction lit class taught by award-winning author John Kessel. He told me I had genuine potential as a fiction writer, which was all I needed to hear in order to set myself on a new path, one that led to grad school and an MFA in creative writing and, ultimately, to Z.

**Is there a book that most influenced your life? Or inspired you to become a writer?**

As a girl reading Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House* series and Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, I became aware that these were two women whose lives had in many ways been defined by their desire to write stories—a desire I identified with even back then, in elementary school. In fact, I liked to imagine that I was Laura Ingalls Wilder reincarnate.



I was always writing little essays and poems and scenes, and I kept a diary that was filled mostly with nonsense about baseball and roller skating and movies and boys. There were several points in my early adult life when I toyed with the idea of writing a novel, but I didn't take myself seriously until I was in my thirties. That's the time I began to recognize fiction writing as an art, and my particular inspirations were Ann Patchett's *Bel Canto*, Nabokov's *Lolita*, and David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars*.

**Who are some of your favorite authors?**

This is a difficult question to answer, because I love so many books and admire so many writers that to single out even a few is, to my thinking, a disservice to all the rest. I will say, however, that one can't go wrong reading Edith Wharton and Anton Chekhov—and Ann Patchett.

**What was the inspiration for *Z*?**

The idea of writing a novel about Zelda Fitzgerald came as a surprise, a kind of sudden inspiration that I didn't take seriously at first. My usual path to a story is more of a meandering one in which the story grows the way a snowball does if you keep rolling it through wet snow.

Like so many people, I thought I knew who Zelda was, and, like so many people, I was wrong. When I realized this was true and recognized how she'd been misunderstood, misrepresented, and maligned, the prospect that I might be able to give her a say in her own defense became a mission. Beyond that, though, her life with Scott is simply a tremendously interesting story. I was intrigued by their relationship, the era, the people they knew, and of course the tragedies they both endured.

*About the  
Author*

*"[Zelda's] life  
with Scott is  
simply a tremen-  
dously interest-  
ing story."*

**In your research of Zelda's life, what was the most surprising thing you learned?**

Initially, I had quite a few misperceptions about who Zelda was, and I knew nothing about her talents as writer, artist, and dancer, so these aspects of her life all came as surprises. The biggest revelation, though, was discovering what an influential and damaging role Ernest Hemingway played in Zelda and Scott's lives, both individually and as a couple.



## *An Original Essay by the Author*

### **“Provenance and Products” by Therese Anne Fowler**

Do you believe in ghosts? While I’ve learned to allow for the possibility of them and have experienced things that assure me some kind of spiritual realm coexists with ordinary life, I’d never been directly influenced by anything that could qualify as otherworldly until I was struck by the idea to write *Zelda Fitzgerald’s* story.

Zelda grew up in the Deep South, a place where ghosts are, for many, as common and expected as Spanish moss. My upbringing in the common-sense, show-me Midwest was much different. In my experience, any discussion of an afterlife focused on either angels or the devil. But, having been raised by a Jewish mother and Episcopalian father, who neither practiced religion nor advocated it, I didn’t believe in any sort of afterlife. The corporeal world held more than enough mystery to satisfy me.

Then came that spring day in 2011 when I was working out new story ideas in my journal and trying to decide which of them merited full-time attention for the next year of my life (the time it would take to write the book). I was literally stopped mid-sentence by the brand-new, unbidden thought of writing about *Zelda*.

My first reaction: No. She was, I believed, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s crazy, jealous wife. Selfish. Unstable. Unsympathetic. But... I was curious. I’d been accosted, after all, so didn’t the idea merit consideration at least? I went looking for information and found, first, the *Zelda Fitzgerald* Wikipedia page. Not until much later would I recognize how many inaccuracies the page contained; what got my attention that first day was this: *Zelda* and my

Reading  
Group  
Gold



*Behind the  
Novel*

*“To my surprise, I saw a lot of myself in Zelda—and also in Scott.”*

mother both died during the overnight hours of the same date—many years apart, but even so, the coincidence was as uncanny as the inspiration had been. I was compelled to learn more.

The further I got into the research and writing process, the more I understood how mistaken my original impression of Zelda was. To my surprise, I saw a lot of myself in Zelda—and also in Scott. This gave me reason to imagine myself as an ideal interpreter, which was sufficient reason to pursue the project. A friend of mine who is a genuine believer in ghosts offered this theory: Zelda had chosen me personally.

Did I agree? Let’s just say I kept a healthy skepticism about it. And yet, a number of remarkable coincidences would occur, the most noteworthy of which are these: the book sold on April 10—which is the same date *The Great Gatsby* was published. The U.S. edition of *Z* was published on March 26, a date that coincides with the publication of Scott’s first novel, *This Side of Paradise*. On April 3, the date of Zelda and Scott’s wedding in New York City’s St. Patrick’s Cathedral, I walked through that church mere minutes before getting the news from my editor that *Z* was, in its first week on sale, a *New York Times* bestseller. In fact, I had just passed the Fitzgeralds’ Fifty-ninth Street address when my phone rang.

Some people in the literary world will scoff at all of this and find my admission unseemly. Rational, intelligent people aren’t supposed to indulge superstitious nonsense. And the fact is, no ghost guided my fingers as I typed. No spirits dictated scenes in my dreams. *Z* is the result of long, arduous months of research and thought and writing—and rewriting, and editing—all of which I accomplished



in the usual way. That said, rational, intelligent people (of which I am one) would be well to remember that the forces underlying inspiration and the creation of art are wonderfully mysterious—a truth our less cynical forebears embraced.

In late fall of 2012, I visited the cemetery where Zelda and Scott and their daughter, Scottie, are buried alongside other Fitzgerald kin. It's a small, oak-sheltered churchyard bordered by busy roads and a commuter train track. No one else was there on that cool, damp morning, and I was glad, because tears were streaming down my cheeks.

I lingered a while despite the cold and drizzle, my mind filled with images from the Fitzgeralds' lives. When I finally turned to leave, I felt a hand on my left shoulder, and heard Zelda's voice in my ear.

Was it Zelda? The skeptic in me scoffs. But I do enjoy the idea that it may have been.

*Behind the  
Novel*



## Recommended Reading

### *Save Me the Waltz* by Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald

A modernist, semiautobiographical novel about a tormented ballet dancer and her tormented artist husband. Published by Scribner's but heavily edited—first by F. Scott Fitzgerald, in order to “control the message”—it has moments of brilliance and begs for further care and development.

### *Loving Frank* by Nancy Horan

To be a woman of passion and ambition in the early twentieth century was to invite scandal, scorn, and personal anguish. Horan's 2007 novel gives us the real characters Martha Borthwick and her lover, Frank Lloyd Wright, as Borthwick struggles to balance her conflicting desires to be writer, mother, lover, and individual.

### *The Painted Girls* by Cathy Marie Buchanan

This recent novel imagines the belle époque lives of two sisters, including the girl who inspired Degas' sculpture *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. Here is the unglamorous side of Paris and art and aspiration and desire, and the lives of young women whose opportunities to even survive, let alone thrive, are few.





*The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton

Wharton's novel of desire and emotional tragedy prefigured the kinds of fraught stories F. Scott Fitzgerald would go on to tell in his novels. When society not only dictates but controls our behaviors, what is really to be gained from following the rules?

*The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

A Shakespearean novel most people know of but often don't actually know. Not a celebration of excess, nor a demonstration, entirely, of excess's "road to ruin," *The Great Gatsby* is a dark tale of how obsessive and unalterable hope can ruin even the most well-intentioned individuals.

*Rules of Civility* by Amor Towles

This debut novel from 2011 unfolds within the milieu of the Fitzgeralds' later lives—1930s New York—and shows how society came to reflect the vision put forth in *The Great Gatsby*. In Towles' bright, daring narrator, Katey Kontent, we get a version of Zelda that Zelda herself was never quite able to embody.

*Keep on  
Reading*



## Reading Group Questions

1. Many accounts of both Scott and Zelda contend that Zelda wouldn't marry Scott unless he was well off—a view they themselves encouraged in the early years of their marriage. How does this play into the flapper image Zelda embodied in the 1920s? Overall, was it harmful or beneficial to her?
2. How much of Scott's success is owed to Zelda's manufactured breakup with him in 1919?
3. The first time Zelda thinks she may be pregnant she refuses to pursue an abortion. Why, then, does she choose differently later on?
4. Why does Zelda have so little regard for her parents' views and the standards by which she was raised?
5. Is Scott's alcohol abuse a cause or a result of the life he and Zelda led and the troubles they experienced?
6. How legitimate was it for Scott and his agent, Harold Ober, to sell Zelda's short stories under a joint byline?
7. Which of Zelda's talents do you feel was her truest calling?
8. How do you feel about Scott's insistence on hiring strict nannies to care for Scottie? What benefit, or harm, may have come from this?
9. Modern psychiatrists have said that Zelda was probably troubled not with schizophrenia in its current definition but with bipolar disorder, which is characterized by dramatic mood swings and the behaviors that sometimes result. Where do you see evidence of Zelda's illness in the years before her breakdown in early 1930? How much, if any, of her vibrant personality might be tied to the disorder?



10. What does it say about Scott that he was so highly involved in Zelda's care during her episodes of hospitalization?
11. Why does Zelda tolerate Scott's infatuation with actress Lois Moran and, later, columnist Sheilah Graham?
12. When Zelda says Ernest Hemingway is to blame for the disaster she and Scott made of their lives, what exactly does she mean? What might have been different for them if Hemingway hadn't been Scott's close friend?
13. Ernest Hemingway's sexuality has been the subject of scrutiny by literary scholars and curious readers alike. In what ways was Zelda's fear about the nature of Scott's friendship with Hemingway justified?
14. Owing greatly to Ernest Hemingway's account of her in *A Moveable Feast* (1964), Zelda has been seen as "F. Scott Fitzgerald's crazy wife." Why do you think Hemingway wrote so spitefully about her and so critically about Scott so many years after both their deaths?
15. Scott made almost all his money writing for the popular magazines ("the slicks") and from the movie industry—and making money was essential for the lifestyle he wanted to lead. Why, then, was he forever struggling to impress the critics with more serious work?
16. Alcohol abuse and infidelity were seen as common and acceptable during the Jazz Age and among the expatriates especially. How much have views changed since then?

*Keep on  
Reading*

17. How do Sara and Gerald Murphy influence Zelda? What about Zelda's friend Sara Haardt Mencken?
18. Despite her evolving interests and ambitions, Zelda never saw herself as a feminist. How might that view have affected her choices, both as a young woman and then later, when she aspired to dance professionally?
19. In what ways would the Fitzgeralds' public and private lives have been different if they'd lived in the 1960s? 1980s? Today?
20. *The Great Gatsby* is often said to have been modeled on the Fitzgeralds' time in Great Neck (Long Island), New York, with Gatsby's love for Daisy inspired by Zelda's affair with Edouard Jozan. Where in *Z* do you see evidence of this?
21. Scott turns Zelda's affair with Jozan into another Fitzgerald tale. What does this say about him? What does it say about Zelda that she allows it?
22. Though Zelda spends most of her adult life away from her family and the South, she doesn't escape their influences. Where do you see this most vividly?