

Balancing the Books

Ups and Downs

By Father John S. Kennedy

A writer who enjoyed phenomenal success and made large amounts of money in the 1920's, only to lose an audience almost completely in the 1930's, is seen close-up in a newly published book.

F. Scott Fitzgerald is obviously not the principal subject of "Zelda" by Nancy Milford (Harper and Rod. \$10). Rather, Miss Milford is focusing on his wife, Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald. But so inextricably was Fitzgerald involved in Zelda's life and fate that he dominates the book.

Zelda was a Southern belle, born in Montgomery, Ala., in 1900. It was there that Fitzgerald met her in 1918, when, at the age of 21, he was assigned to a nearby military camp. They were married two years later, when Fitzgerald secured a contract for the publication of his first novel.

They went to live in New York, and at once plunged into the drinking and the frenzy of the jazz age. They were a handsome couple, and were regarded as the epitome of sophistication, glamor, and daring. But actually they were already troubled and haunted.

Scott's books sold extremely well, and magazines paid high prices for his stories. The Fitzgeralds, therefore, had a very considerable income, but they squandered it. Every luxury, every pleasure they had to have. And their dissipation was costly in more ways than one.

Only four years after their marriage, Zelda made the first of several attempts at suicide. The restless couple went to live in Europe, returned to New York, moved to Hollywood, then to a country house in Delaware. They had no roots, and they had no peace.

There was tension and rivalry between them. Fitzgerald was early recognized as a writer of importance, and he so regarded himself. Zelda had writing ability, but not of the order of her husband's. Yet she was essential to what he produced.

Fitzgerald used Zelda, meaning that her life was the raw material of much, if not most, of his writings. Compare Miss Milford's biography of Zelda and the contents of Fitzgerald's novels and stories, and you see innumerable parallels.

But it is more than a question of parallels. Fitzgerald also used Zelda's ideas, he used her diary, he used her letters. Not a little in his work is taken direct from Zelda's utterance. Moreover, he put his own name, as collaborator, on pieces which Zelda wrote for magazines.

That Zelda should resent this, is hardly surprising. Moreover, when she produced and had published a novel of her own, "Save Me the Waltz," which had an autobiographical basis, Fitzgerald was furious. This was his material, he insisted, Zelda had no right to make any use of it.

Here is a marvelous example of the egotism of the artist, and its devastating effect on personal relations. Fitzgerald saw himself (correctly) as the professional writer, and Zelda as

something considerably less. He therefore concluded that the whole fabric of their life together was exclusively his for the feeding of his fictional creation. And he pitilessly exposed her in his novel "Tender Is the Night."

She was first hospitalized in 1930, and from then until the end of her life, in 1948, she spent most her time in one or another institution. Her father and her sister had suffered breakdowns, and her brother was shortly to commit suicide. From a belle and a beauty, she became a haggard caricature of herself.

Fitzgerald died in 1940. During the ten years that Zelda was hospitalized previous to his death, he supported her generously. Unsure of any income

and sometimes having to borrow, he somehow financed her care and treatment in clinics and other institutions which charged high fees. And at the end he was on the verge of destitution.

This strange, tumultuous, moving, yet at times exasperating story has been well told by Miss Milford. She has dug up sources and collated information which have not been used before. Some may hold that she has provided too much detail and written too lengthily. Is Zelda really so important as to justify such exhaustive treatment? There are indeed tedious passages in the book, but, at the end, one feels that a complete portrait has been achieved, and that everything included has contributed to it.

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