

Signet Classics

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

THIS SIDE OF PARADISE

With a New Introduction by
Matthew J. Bruccoli



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*. . . Well this side of Paradise! . . .
There's little comfort in the wise.
—Rupert Brooke.*

Experience is the name so many people
give to their mistakes.
—Oscar Wilde.

SIGNET CLASSICS

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INTRODUCTION

No reader of *This Side of Paradise* in 1920—except F. Scott Fitzgerald—could have anticipated that his first novel would launch a career of intoxicating success for its twenty-three-year-old author, who had declared as a Princeton undergraduate that he wanted to be “one of the greatest writers that ever lived.” It is a flawed novel—episodic, self-indulgent, and loosely structured—written by a young man who didn’t know how to plan or write a novel. Five years later, the author of *The Great Gatsby* commented in his annotated copy of *This Side of Paradise*:

I like this book for the enormous emotion, mostly immature and bogus, that gives every incident a sort of silly “life.”

F. S. F. 1925

But the faked references and intellectual reactions + cribs from MacKenzie, Johnson, Wells, Wilde, Tarkington give me the pip.*

Timing can be crucial for the success of a novel, and the timing was right for *This Side of Paradise*. America was ready for it. In the spring of the first year of what Fitzgerald christened the Jazz Age, there was a large potential readership for a novel that seriously treated the concerns of youth: ambition, iconoclasm, idealism, and love. *This Side of Paradise* announced a revolt in

*Compton MacKenzie, author of *Sinister Street* (1913–14); Owen Johnson, author of *Stover at Yale* (1911); H. G. Wells, author of *The Research Magnificent* (1915); Oscar Wilde, author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891); Booth Tarkington, author of the Penrod stories (1914ff.).

sexual mores; and it introduced a new heroine to fiction—the brave, independent, intelligent, determined young American woman.

This Side of Paradise was a novel of firsts: the first realistic American college novel and the first in a series of mildly shocking college novels published during the Twenties.* Although it ends in 1919, it was the first American novel that examined the impending revolt of youth in the Twenties. *This Side of Paradise* seems tame after eighty-five years, but it was regarded as a sensational document of social history in 1920 because it published previously undisclosed realities about the generation of the Great War.

On the basis of *This Side of Paradise*, readers would have been justified in expecting Fitzgerald to produce a string of sensational flapper novels or to abandon fiction when he ran out of collegiate material. But examination of *This Side of Paradise* from the perspective of *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night* reveals defining elements that were to be developed in Fitzgerald's masterpieces. It was an extraordinarily rapid fulfillment. Within five years after *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald was able to write *The Great Gatsby*, the complexly planned novel that is now a contender for "The Great American Novel." There is no promise in *This Side of Paradise* of Fitzgerald's later technical achievements, but the ideas and emotions of his mature novels can be identified in his apprentice novel.

The major themes of Fitzgerald's greatest work are aspiration and commitment to ideals. Lionel Trilling described this quality better than any other critic: Fitzgerald "was perhaps the last notable writer to affirm the Romantic fantasy, descended from the Renaissance, of personal ambition or heroism, of life committed to, or thrown away for, some ideal of self." Amory Blaine, like Jay Gatsby and Dick Diver, manifests "a romantic readiness." Fitzgerald's heroes combine a sense of duty with concomitant guilt at their failure to fulfill the re-

*John F. Kramer's *The American College Novel* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004) identifies thirty-two such works published from 1920 through 1929.

quirements of their aristocratic egotism. Fitzgerald, who has been sloppily categorized as the celebrator of hedonism, was a moralist—in fact, a preacher.

The unexpected juxtaposition of characteristics and material in this novel, and in all of Fitzgerald's major fiction, melds realism and romanticism—accurate social observation combined with a heightened sensitivity to the possibilities of life. *This Side of Paradise* is a love poem to Princeton, and Amory's feelings about his college are documented through the data provided by Fitzgerald: the inside knowledge of the social system, the undergraduate codes of behavior and values. Readers' warm response to *This Side of Paradise* in 1920 was stimulated by their recognition that it was authentic. At the beginning of the great collegiate decade—when the Big Three really were the Big Three—it provided instruction on how to be a big man at Princeton when prominent Ivy Leaguers, not necessarily athletes, achieved national recognition. College success was regarded as preparation for worldly distinction. Amory combines the drive for success and recognition with a sense of his unique destiny. The original title of the novel was "The Romantic Egotist"—which Fitzgerald retained as the title of Book One of *This Side of Paradise*, taking Amory through his departure from Princeton in 1917. Princeton shapes Amory's ambition and ideals. The novel closes with the failed but still-aspiring Amory making a pilgrimage to Princeton, as to a shrine, seeking to renew his faith in his destiny.

This Side of Paradise does not regard Princeton as an educational institution. Nothing worthwhile happens in the classrooms—a Fitzgeraldian judgment that elicited a letter of protest from Princeton president John Grier Hibben after publication of the novel. The faculty is not regarded with respect, and no professor is credited with influencing Amory. Course work and academic requirements interfere with Amory's real education, which he acquires through unassigned reading, writing, and conversation—God, how he talks! For a novel that provides reliable advice on how to flunk out of Princeton, *This Side of Paradise* is a remarkably bookish book. In his *Notebooks*, Fitzgerald identified *This*

Side of Paradise as “a romance and a reading list.” The titles of sixty-four books or poems and the names of ninety-eight authors are mentioned, and many of them are meaningfully used.* The title-page epigraphs document Fitzgerald’s debts to his reading as well as the influence of English writers on his literary persona at that time. The title of the novel is taken from the poem “Tiare Tahiti,” by a romantic figure who died in the Great War. The Oscar Wilde epigram was from his decadent novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).

Amory’s Princeton career recapitulates Fitzgerald’s. There was nothing in the math or chemistry courses that Fitzgerald needed or wanted. He served his literary apprenticeship at Princeton by writing for *The Nassau Literary Magazine*, for *The Tiger*, and for the Triangle Club musicals. The reviewer in *The New Republic* described *This Side of Paradise* as “the collected works of F. Scott Fitzgerald,” which was more than a wisecrack. The novel is a grab bag and incorporates or recycles one play, one story, and three poems (“The Debutante,” “Babes in the Woods,” “Princeton—The Last Day,” “On a Play Twice Seen,” “The Cameo Frame”) from *The Nassau Lit.*

Much of the emotional quality of *This Side of Paradise* derives from the conditions of its composition. It was first written in haste as “The Romantic Egotist” in 1917 by an army lieutenant who expected to die in battle and wanted to leave a memorial to himself. Yet the novel omits the shaping event of Fitzgerald’s generation. To his lasting regret he did not “get over” during World War I. Since the author who wrote best from the emotions generated by personal experiences had no battle experience to draw upon, *This Side of Paradise* covers Amory’s war in two letters and a poem constituting the “Interlude” between Book One and Book Two. Fitzger-

**This Side of Paradise* is now an historical novel and is as remote to readers as Dickens’s or Fielding’s novels. An annotated edition is needed to identify and explain all the literary references, songs, college slang, Princeton customs, and topical references. See Dorothy B. Good, “‘A Romance and a Reading List’: The Literary References in *This Side of Paradise*, *Fitzgerald/Hemingway Annual*, 1976, 35–64.

ald revised "The Romantic Egotist" in 1918 and rewrote it in 1919 as *This Side of Paradise* after a time of misery resulting from his inability to marry Zelda Sayre. The published novel recapitulates the feelings generated in the author by the act of writing.

In the summer of 1919 Fitzgerald provided a preface for *This Side of Paradise*, which he or the publisher sensibly omitted from the book. This self-conscious statement by a self-conscious young writer begins:

Two years ago, when I was a very young man indeed, I had an unmistakable urge to write a book. It was to be a picaresque novel, original in form and alternating melancholy, naturalistic egotism with a picture of the generation then hastening to war.

It was to be naive in places, shocking in others, painful to the conventional and not without its touch of ironic sublimity. The "leading character," a loiterer on the borderland of genius, loved many women and gazed on himself in many mirrors—in fact, women and mirrors were preponderant in all the important scenes.

I completed it during the last gasp of a last year at college, and the intricacies of a training camp. Its epigrams were polished by the substitution of the word *one* for the word *you*; its chapter titles were phrased to sound somewhat like lines from Pre-Raphaelite poems, somewhat like electric signs over musical comedies; the book itself was a tedious casserole of a dozen by MacKenzie, Wells, and Robert Hugh Benson, largely flavored by the great undigested butterball of *Dorian Gray*.

This Side of Paradise was widely read because it was readable. A newspaper ad quoted a letter from Harry Hansen, literary editor of the *Chicago News*: "My, How That Boy Fitzgerald Can Write!" The writing combines clarity with wit, warmth, and charm. Fitzgerald was not an innovative or an experimental writer. The style and narrative of *This Side of Paradise* were based on nineteenth-century English models. Nevertheless it gave the impression of unconventionality or originality be-

cause Fitzgerald did not know how to structure a novel and had not yet mastered point of view. *This Side of Paradise* is unfocused. There are at least two points of view—Amory's and Fitzgerald's. The novel is related by the author—there is no narrator—who is mostly indistinguishable from Amory but who also intrudes to comment on Amory and to editorialize on Life. The amateurish interpolations—the scenes in dialogue and the poems set as verse or prose—were mistaken for modernism. Yet there is a surprising pre-Joycean stream-of-consciousness passage in “The Egotist Becomes a Personage” (Book Two, Chapter V):

One Hundred and Twentieth Street? That must have been One Hundred and Twelfth back there. One O Two instead of One Two Seven. Rosalind not like Beatrice, Eleanor like Beatrice, only wilder and brainier. Apartments along here expensive—probably hundred and fifty a month—maybe two hundred. Uncle had only paid hundred a month for whole great big house in Minneapolis. Question—were the stairs on the left or right as you came in? Anyway, in 12 Univee they were straight back and to the left. What a dirty river—want to go down there and see if it's dirty—French rivers all brown or black, so were Southern rivers.

Readers continue to be puzzled by the two supernatural occurrences in this realistic novel: the apparition of the dead Humbird in the showgirls' apartment, and the ghostly presence of Monsignor Darcy in the Atlantic City hotel room. Both connect sex with death, reinforcing Amory's—and Fitzgerald's—sense of evil or corruption; nonetheless, these scenes aren't effective or convincing. In November 1920 Fitzgerald responded to a reader's inquiry:

Several people have asked me about that chapter + I can only explain it by telling how it came to be written. It was part of my first draft of my novel begun three years ago when I was an ardent supernaturalist + believed that a “personal devil” could and often did materialize before humans. Since then as you can see thru the book I have become practically a materialist

so the incident becomes incongruous + out of place. You are right in saying that it was only a delirious apparition conjured up in Amory's drunken mind. Fred [Sloane] would not have seen him. You'll just have to take it as one of the numerous flaws in the book (Sotheby's, 15 December 1998).

This Side of Paradise is an autobiographical novel, as are all of Fitzgerald's novels; but he learned how to disguise or transmute the autobiographical material in his subsequent novels. The obvious—even blatant—personal quality of *This Side of Paradise* was in keeping with the Bildungsroman tradition to which it and many first novels belong: the novel that traces the struggles, sorrows, triumphs, and defeats of a potential genius. It is not the currently popular wishy-washy coming-of-age novel—a label attached to any work of fiction about an unhappy juvenile. Amory aims for and expects greatness: great achievement, great success, great fulfillment, and great love. His epic quest is unfulfilled and unfinished in the novel. It scarcely begins. *This Side of Paradise* doesn't end; it just stops.

This Side of Paradise made Fitzgerald an overweek celebrity. Influential reviewers welcomed him as a bright star of American fiction, praising the brilliance of the writing and its literary quality. H. L. Mencken, the most powerful critic in America, who was hard to please, identified it in *The Smart Set* as “a truly amazing first novel—original in structure, extremely sophisticated in manner, and adorned with a brilliancy that is as rare in American writing as honesty is in American statecraft.” Robert Benchley wrote in the *New York World* that “in spite of its immaturity, its ingenuousness and its many false notes, it is something *new*, and for this alone Mr. Fitzgerald deserves a crown of something very expensive.” Fitzgerald's fiction is characterized by rapid changes—up or down—in the careers of his heroes. The fame of *This Side of Paradise* validated the author's conviction of his genius as well as his belief in miracles. The reception of this novel resembled the plot of an F. Scott Fitzgerald story.

There were twelve American printings of *This Side*

of *Paradise* in 1920–21, totaling 49,075 copies.* It made Fitzgerald famous but not rich. The royalty of ten percent on the first five thousand copies of the \$1.75 book and fifteen percent thereafter brought the author \$12,445—probably \$120,000 in 2006 money—enough to launch him and his bride, Zelda, on a life of extravagance and debt. Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* was a much greater success, selling 295,000 copies in 1920–21. The real payoff from *This Side of Paradise* was that it made Fitzgerald's short stories salable to the mass-circulation magazines, especially *The Saturday Evening Post*, which shaped his career as a commercial writer.

A side effect of the novel's newspaper reception was to initiate Fitzgerald's reputation as an irresponsible or uneducated writer because the text was carelessly edited at Charles Scribner's Sons; it was pockmarked with risible misusages, misspellings, and factual errors. Fitzgerald later recalled the debacle in a passage that he deleted from "Early Success":

In a daze I opened the *Tribune* each morning to see if F. P. A. [Franklin P. Adams, who conducted "The Conning Tower"] had found any more misspellings in the book. He started with a list of thirty and eager contributors to his column sent in a hundred more. My God—did they expect me to spell? If I was this hot shot couldn't the proof-readers do the spelling?

This 1937 essay explains that the reception of *This Side of Paradise* not only made him famous at twenty-three; it made him a professional: "a sort of stitching together of your whole life into a pattern of work, so that the end of one job is automatically the beginning of another." Fitzgerald concluded: "The compensation of a very early success is the conviction that life is a romantic matter."

It is pointless to speculate about whether *This Side of Paradise* would be in print now if F. Scott Fitzgerald had not subsequently written masterpieces. Beyond its

*The novel was published in England but did not sell well, despite its debts to English authors.

contribution to American social history and to literary biography, this novel has endured because it is not fraudulent: flamboyant, certainly, but truthful.

—Matthew J. Bruccoli
University of South Carolina

EDITORIAL NOTE

F. Scott Fitzgerald was chagrined by the errors in *This Side of Paradise*. He sent Scribners lists of corrections—only some of which were made in reprintings of the first edition—and he carefully annotated his own copy of the novel. This new Signet Classics edition incorporates Fitzgerald's corrections and emendations; it also remedies the misspellings and typographical errors he didn't catch.

THIS SIDE OF
PARADISE

TO
SIGOURNEY FAY

