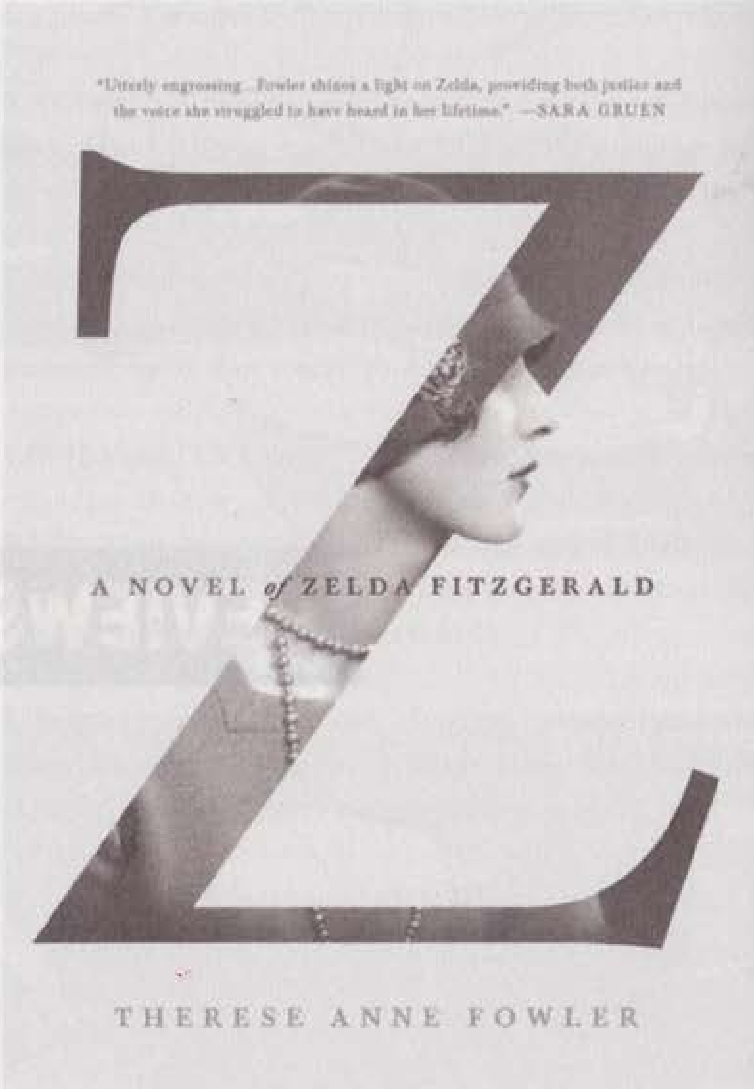

BEAUTIFUL AND DAMNED

The Myths of Zelda Fitzgerald

Rebecca Howden

She was the original It Girl, a Southern belle turned glamorous flapper turned broken-down mental patient. Overflowing with charm and wit, Zelda Fitzgerald was the perfect heroine for a story of Jazz Age decadence. As the wife of the great novelist F Scott Fitzgerald, she became an icon of the decade, of everything extravagant and scintillating and beautiful and reckless. Scott wrote about such 'flapper' girls, with their bobbed hair, slinky dresses and sassy attitudes, and the more he did, the more his wife came to embody the symbol.

Together, they were American literature's first celebrity couple: Scott and Zelda, the novelist and his muse. They were beautiful and volatile and constantly making a scene – dancing on tables, taking a drunken swim in the Plaza fountain, playing pranks and leaving a glittering trail of feathers and champagne glasses behind them. Their lives seemed to be the stuff of fiction, a seductive story of sudden success and sharp decline. As Scott himself told his biographer, Malcolm

Cowley: 'Sometimes I don't know whether Zelda and I are real or whether we are characters in one of my novels.'

Their story almost seems like a cautionary tale, with uncanny parallels to Scott's *The Beautiful and Damned*. As beauty, wealth and youth slipped away from them, Scott and Zelda rapidly descended into a life filled with jealousy and resentment towards each other. Scott turned to alcohol, while Zelda suffered multiple nervous breakdowns. And, of course, the saga ends in tragedy, with both dying young – Scott at age 44 after a heart attack, and Zelda at 47 during a fire at the mental institution where she was a patient.

The spotlight on Scott and Zelda never seems to dim completely, and the release of Baz Luhrmann's adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* has brought all things Fitzgeraldian back into fashion. And with this comes the question: where does Zelda really fit in to the story, and what does she represent to us?

To many of their contemporaries, Zelda was at best a pretty and amusing bauble dangling from her husband's arm; at worst a hysterical, demanding madwoman. It was well known that she provided inspiration for some of Scott's more vapid and contemptible female characters, and some critics – notably, Scott's friend and rival Ernest Hemingway – accused her of ruining her husband both creatively and financially. For years, the image endured: Zelda the crazy, disruptive harpy, who spent all her husband's money, used his connections to get her own mediocre work published, drove him to drink and then went insane.

Modern criticism, however, has challenged this perception of Zelda and what she represents in popular culture. There

has been an impulse to rescue her somehow, to salvage her story and reframe her as a feminist heroine. After all, Zelda had creative ambitions of her own – as a writer, a painter and a ballerina. Although her work was largely dismissed at the time (in 1934, *Time* magazine ran a somewhat mocking article about her artistic pretentions titled 'Work of a Wife'), many have suggested that in a different era, one more supportive of women's ambition and more sophisticated in dealing with mental illness, she may have been recognised as an artist in her own right. Nancy Milford's 1970 biography looked at Zelda through this recuperative lens, framing her as a talented artist who was stifled by her alcoholic husband and a sexist medical establishment. Since Milford's biography was published, there have been over twenty books dedicated to this dramatic and complicated woman, attempting to get inside her head and reshape her image as a wife and an artist.

This year, three new novels based on Zelda's life have been released. With the freedom that fictional space provides, each imagines her creative ambitions, her mental illness and her relationship with Scott from a different perspective. In *Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald*, Therese Anne Fowler follows Zelda's life from just before she meets Scott at a country club dance in Alabama to just after his death. Erika Robuck's *Call Me Zelda* focuses on Zelda's time in a Baltimore mental institution, told from the perspective of a fictional nurse who becomes her friend and confidante. Compressing the time frame even further, R Clifton Spargo's *Beautiful Fools* centres on a trip the couple took to Cuba in 1939 that marked the last time Scott and Zelda ever saw each other.

In Fowler's novel, Zelda is relatable and down-to-earth, with a tight group of girlfriends and growing feminist convictions. For Robuck, Zelda becomes a broken, childlike woman who suffers from a debilitating madness, and whose spirit and creative talent are constantly crushed by a drunken, jealous husband. In the most human portrait of the three, Spargo's Zelda is unstable, unpredictable and selfish, but filled with devotion to her husband. She clings to the hope of somehow repairing their marriage. Each novel filters what we know from history through a different lens and creatively embellishes on what we cannot possibly know – and each adds a new layer to the myths we continue to amass about this woman, 65 years after her death.

Zelda Sayre was 17 years old when she met Scott at a country club dance in her hometown of Montgomery, Alabama. It was 1918, and she was the belle of her small town, a vivacious girl who starred in ballet recitals, defied her parents by running around without her corset and stockings, and caused a scandal by parading around a swimming pool in a flesh-coloured bathing suit. At one dance, she tied a sprig of mistletoe to the back of her skirt, then bent over and shook her derriere at the stuffy organisers who had scolded her for dancing on a table.

This is the Zelda we meet at the beginning of Therese Anne Fowler's *Z*. Framed as Zelda's middle-aged memoirs, the story begins when Scott's first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, is published in 1920 and the couple quickly become New York celebrities. This is largely a biography masquerading as fictional autobiography, covering familiar episodes in the life of the Fitzgeralds, focusing on their shared experiences and glossing over the bleaker periods Zelda spent in sanatoriums. What emerges is an image of Zelda as a frustrated artist, forever fighting against her husband's attempts to stifle her creativity.

Throughout the novel, Zelda grows increasingly frustrated with her role as Scott's wife. 'There's no need for you to be a professional dancer, writer, anything,' Fowler imagines Scott writing to Zelda in the hospital. 'Be a mother. Be a wife. I've made a good life for you, Zelda; stop rejecting it.' Over time, the word itself is enough to grate on her: 'That was it, W-I-F-E, my entire identity defined by the four letters I'd been trying for five years to overcome.' At a salon in Paris, she finds herself among a roomful of smart, accomplished women and she realises: 'I couldn't ignore the little voice in my head that said maybe I was supposed to… do something significant. Contribute something. Accomplish something. Choose. Be.'

Fowler shapes Zelda into an immensely likeable woman, smoothing out the more erratic and exasperating aspects of her personality. This Zelda is level-headed and easy to relate to, and importantly, she never seems all that 'insane'. Although in 1930 she was diagnosed with schizophrenia, modern psychiatry and feminist criticism suggest that at the time this was largely a catch-all label for a range of emotional troubles, often applied to any woman who exhibited signs of erratic behaviour, depression or exhaustion. When Zelda is hospitalised in *Z*, her condition seems to be very much the natural response

of an intelligent and ambitious woman beaten down by the repressive times she lives in.

The Zelda of Erika Robuck's *Call Me Zelda*, in contrast, is a fragile, hysterical mess, in need of constant care. Focusing on Zelda's time at the Phipps Psychiatric Clinic in Baltimore where she was admitted in 1932, Robuck invents a nurse named Anna to tell Zelda's story. Although sources such as Nancy Milford's biography suggest that the real Zelda was largely indifferent to female companionship, in this novel she forms a close, intimate bond with her nurse. Here, Zelda is a woman who suffers terribly, but whose suffering is also therapeutic for others. Anna has her own troubles, and finds solace in sharing her story with 'the only person who would not judge', who listens to her with 'large, adoring eyes'. In being needed so desperately by Zelda, she finds the strength and confidence she needs to 'learn how to love and take risks again'.

Much of *Call Me Zelda* is trite and unconvincing, but what it does achieve is to bring Zelda's pursuits as a writer – and Scott's attempts to repress them – to the heart of the story, stirring up simmering literary controversies. Scholars and biographers have long debated the scope of her influence on Scott's work. Plenty of evidence suggests that he regularly used Zelda's diaries, letters and dialogue in his writing – some of her letters appear almost verbatim in *The Beautiful and Damned* and *Tender is the Night*, and parts of her diaries may also appear in *This Side of Paradise*. Scott kept notes about every short story he published and what he was paid in his ledger, which is archived at Princeton, and his records note which stories

were in fact written by Zelda. According to Sally Cline's 2002 biography, she agreed to publish under her husband's name as it would bring them more money, though Cline describes how Zelda saved a clipping of one of these stories, 'Our Own Movie Queen', and crossed out Scott's name and wrote in her own.

One of the couple's ongoing conflicts was about who had the right to fictionalise their relationship. During Zelda's stay at Phipps, she wrote an entire draft of her novel *Save Me the Waltz* within a matter of weeks and sent it to Scott's publisher, Scribner, without his consent. The novel is highly autobiographical, detailing her marriage troubles and her struggles with mental illness – subjects Scott was writing about in *Tender is the Night*. In a 114-page transcript of an argument they had over Zelda's manuscript (preserved in her medical records and related by Cline in her biography), Scott describes his wife's writing as 'third rate', while she accuses him of relying on the 'crumbs' of her life as material for his work. 'Everything we have done is mine,' he insists. 'I am the professional novelist, and I am supporting you. This is all my material. None of it is your material.'

Robuck recreates this exchange, with Scott in a thundering, 'gin-soaked' rage as he lashes out at both Zelda and Anna:

> 'This is my material, my material,' he insisted, as he smoked and paced around the office. 'How could she go behind my back with your doctor and submit to my editor before I had a chance to read it? I've been working on my novel for years,

> stopping over and over to shit out these short stories to pay the bills and keep her in comfort, and not only does she steal my material, but you help her to do it?' He shoved a chair, rocking it dangerously until it settled back on its four legs.

Zelda, in this novel, is most definitely 'insane' – but Scott is presented as every bit as unstable as his wife. He frequently 'explodes' with anger and dissolves into racking sobs, and seems to be constantly drunk. There is no glimmer of hope for happiness in this marriage, so Zelda instead seeks fulfilment in female friendship, describing Anna as her 'greatest gift. A true friend.'

In *Beautiful Fools*, the most accomplished novel of the three, R Clifton Spargo takes a close, intimate look at the end of Scott and Zelda's love, focusing on a few days in April 1939, when they took a trip to Cuba as a last effort to salvage their marriage. It is a holiday that is hardly documented, allowing Spargo the space to imagine the famous couple away from their familiar context. The result is a refreshingly human portrait of a couple taking one last chance on each other. They are ruined and dysfunctional, but real. There is no glamour here, just the wistfulness and tension of two troubled souls who can't quite let go of the life they once had together. 'Being in love with you,' Zelda tells Scott, 'is like being in love with one's own past.'

In 1939, the Fitzgeralds were living apart – Zelda in a sanatorium in Asheville, North Carolina, and Scott in Hollywood, struggling to ease his debt and to write a novel that might bring back his former glory. He was in a relationship with a gossip columnist named Sheilah Graham, but a part of him always remained loyal to Zelda. *Beautiful Fools* picks up the story with Scott impulsively surprising his wife with the trip to Cuba, a vacation she has been longing for. Spargo's Zelda is impulsive, demanding and difficult to control, but she is filled with genuine love for Scott and finds solace in the hope that their marriage can be saved and they can live together again happily.

From the beginning of the trip, the outlook is not good. On their first night in Havana, they witness a crime in a nightclub and flee to a beach resort outside the city. Yet, even in this sultry, languid atmosphere, there is a threat of something violent and unknown, and they cannot escape the tensions of their relationship. Scott's tubercular cough racks his sickly, wrecked body, and he continues to drink heavily. Zelda is shaken up by a fortune teller, who recognises the 'great sorrow' within her. As they cling desperately to their memories of the 1920s, the trip exposes their lost youth. They know it is hopeless, but they still attempt to imagine a life they might forge together after Zelda's release from the sanatorium. Even as they frustrate each other, there is a romantic tenderness right to the end.

When we talk about Zelda Fitzgerald, we talk about a series of images, rotating in a spinning wheel: a wife, a muse, a society girl, an artist, a writer, a ballerina, a mental patient. How these images fit together is something popular criticism has never quite reconciled, and we are unlikely to ever know enough to be able to say just who Zelda truly was. But with fictional accounts adding their interpretations to the mix, we may perhaps come closer to

developing a new kind of truth – one that imagines Zelda not simply as a flapper or a madwoman, but as a complex person with ambitions and talents and flaws. In doing so, we might begin to find a new place for this dramatic, alluring woman in our collective imagination.

Rebecca Howden is a Melbourne-based writer and editor. She blogs about books, gender, fashion and pop culture at rebeccahowden.com.au and has a cat named Gatsby.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

50 Years of *Doctor Who*

Julia Tulloh

Doctor Who is a television series that understands the danger of plot spoilers. Throughout the series' fifty-year duration, the Doctor has discouraged all of his time-travelling companions from visiting their past or future selves. To do so is called 'crossing your own time stream,' and is very, very bad. Discovering 'spoilers' about your future life (or spoiling the future by talking to your past self) causes a time paradox, creates a rift in both time and space and can actually lead to the destruction of the universe (or of all universes – yes, there are many). The word 'spoilers' became somewhat of a catchcry during the series' most recent seasons, as the character River Song said it to the Doctor every time he inquired about his own future.

Of course, characters in *Doctor Who* end up crossing their own time streams regularly and generating all sorts of catastrophes from which they then need to save the world. The series demonstrates again and again the hunger people have to discover their future or change the past.