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## THE REAL MRS FITZGERALD; As the film of *The Great Gatsby* approaches, F Scott Fitzgerald's wife is taking centre stage. Patricia Nicol unravels Zelda's enigmatic appeal

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Even her death provoked controversy.

In the midnight hours of March 10-11, 1948, Zelda Fitzgerald was killed by a fire that swept through the upper floors of the North Carolina mental hospital where she had committed herself three months earlier. Throughout her stay, her fifth-floor room had remained unlocked, but on that evening she had been both bolted in and sedated. It took until March 12 for her remains to be identified "by their location, her dental records and a single charred slipper beneath her body". It was as ignominious an end, at only 47, as is imaginable for a woman who had been billed "the original flapper girl", muse to one of the 20th century's greatest writers and the high-living embodiment of her sex's apparent new-found freedoms.

A few weeks later, after Zelda's ashes had been buried in the extended Maryland burial plot of her late husband, the writer Scott Fitzgerald - he had died in 1940, of a heart attack, in the Hollywood home he shared with his lover, Sheilah Graham - their daughter, Scottie, wrote to her maternal grandmother: "Seeing them buried there gave the tragedy of their lives a sort of classic unity." It was "reassuring to think of their two high-flying and generous spirits being at peace together at last. I have simply put out of my mind all their troubles and sorrows and think of them only as they must have been when they were young."

What Zelda and Scott, the It couple of the jazz age, must have been like when they were young, and why things went so cataclysmically off-kilter later, is the subject of intense cultural speculation this year, for both fiction and nonfiction writers. Just out is a novel, *Z*, by Therese Anne Fowler, a sympathetic portrait written from Zelda's imagined first-person perspective. It travels from her initial encounter with Scott as a Southern belle debutante, through their rackets party years in New York and the modernist hotspots of Europe, then painfully depicts the fallout of those years: his descent into alcoholism, hers into mania then mental collapse, the widening rifts in their once solid relationship, their everyday apparently dogged by financial worries.

In May, ***Beautiful Fools***, the first novel from the fledgling shortstory writer R Clifton **Spargo**, fleshes out "a missing chapter" within that time frame in the couple's lives. **Spargo's** novel imagines the holiday to Cuba that Scott and Zelda took in April 1939, which turned out to be the last time they spent together. The couple were scrupulous self-documenters - he carried a ledger everywhere; she kept a diary and was a great letter writer - but little is known of the trip, except that Scott had to be hospitalised in New York on his return. "This idea for me had a timeless, universal scenario," says **Spargo**, an arts fellow at the Iowa Writers Workshop, a celebrated American creative-writing programme.

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"What if any one of us was fated to take a trip with someone we had loved for 20 years, without knowing these would be our last chances and last words?" Also next month comes Erika Robuck's *Call Me Zelda*, written from the imagined perspective of a nurse who encounters Zelda at the Phipps Clinic, in Baltimore, where she was a patient in the early 1930s and wrote her only novel, the selfconsciously modernist, autobiographical *Save Me the Waltz*. This was the period of the Fitzgeralds' most vicious disagreements, often over who had the right to write their lives. At a crisis summit in May 1933, mediated by Zelda's psychiatrist and meticulously documented by a stenographer, an angry Scott declared: "You have one power. You can ruin us... I am the only person in the world who can make us... Everything we have done is mine... I am the professional novelist and I am supporting you... None of it is your material."

And in October, Lee Smith's *Guests on Earth* will focus on the widowed Zelda's final years in and out of the institution where she died.

Zelda is a nonfiction subject, too, one of the women studied in Judith Mackrell's *Flappers: Six Women of a Dangerous Generation*, out in late May. The following month, in *Careless People: Murder, Mayhem and the Invention of The Great Gatsby*, the academic Sarah Churchwell shows how Scott drew on contemporary news sources and the speeded-up lives of the party crowd he and Zelda led to create his first literary masterpiece. On May 15, Baz Luhrmann's film of *The Great Gatsby* appropriately opens this year's festival in Cannes, the area the Fitzgeralds and the rest of the Riviera set reinvented as a summer celebrity destination.

Why Zelda? And why, specifically, now? All these novels are part of a wider fashion for historical fiction and, within that, an emerging subgenre that takes a sideways look at the lives of great men by examining them from their wife's or companion's perspective. The *Paris Wife* by Paula McLain, about Ernest Hemingway's first wife, Hadley, published in 2011, was a bestseller. Nancy Horan's *Loving Frank*, about the woman who gave up everything to be Frank Lloyd Wright's of contention between the couple in her novel. She, too, felt "on a mission to overturn those myths in popular culture, partly perpetrated by Hemingway, that Zelda was a crazy woman who had ruined her husband's career".

Go back to their fascinating, brilliant letters, and Scott and Zelda seem highly contemporary to us, a cautionary celebrity tale that today would be splashed across *Grazia*. This is *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* for the Left Bank crowd. At first Zelda loved being Scott's muse, encouraged his lifting of her letters, diary entries and phrases, and played up to the public image he had created of her as a feckless, spendthrift flibbertigibbet. Later, however, she chafed at her secondary role and sought to find a creative outlet of her own, throwing herself into obsessive bouts of painting, dancing and, later, writing. Scott, plagued by status anxiety his whole life, recognised their currency as a couple, all but talking of brand identity when he expressed anxiety about how Zelda's more wayward autobiographical writings might tarnish their image. After insisting on two key passages being deleted from *Save Me the* as one of the more "flamboyant symbols of the [feminist] movement... the classic 'put-down' wife, whose efforts to express her artistic nature were thwarted by a typically male chauvinist husband... Finally, in a sort of ultimate rebellion, she withdrew altogether from the arena; it's a script that reads well, and will probably remain a part of the 'Scott and Zelda' mythology for ever, but is not, in my opinion, accurate." She instead believed her father had been encouraging to her mother until a point when it threatened her fragile health - as with the nearsuccessful attempts to become a professional dancer in her late twenties that arguably brought on her first breakdown - or would have a negative impact on his straitened financial and literary position, as when she proposed to draw on biographical material he had already included in *Tender Is the Night*, when he was banking everything on the book being a commercial hit.

Does Zelda deserve to be regarded as a great writer in her own right? Probably not: her fiction, though patchily brilliant, lacks the luminous clarity of her husband's.

Her letters, though, demonstrate mistress, was another notable success.

It was writing her novel *Hemingway's Girl* that inspired Robuck to pursue Zelda as a subject.

"I became so fascinated by Hemingway's animosity for her," she says. "He wrote of her being jealous of Fitzgerald's work and trying to distract him with drink, but when I started researching Zelda, I felt that a different picture emerged. It became clear she was so much more than just a muse for Scott, that he used her writing and quoted her all the time, that she was an integral part of his writing process." Fowler makes Hemingway's friendship with Scott the greatest bone Waltz, he complained to a mutual friend: "My God, my books made her a legend and her single intention... is to make me a nonentity."

Both Fowler and **Spargo** believe it was no coincidence that their literary interest in the Fitzgeralds came as America faced its worst economic crisis since the Depression.

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"Scott and Zelda in a very interesting way mirror the 20th century," **Spargo** says. "She, born in 1900, is the same age as the century. They define the Roaring Twenties, then they crash at the moment the country does. And what I really admire about them is how they endure their 1930s."

It is how they endured as a couple, despite all their troubles, that frustrates attempts to paint Zelda as the only victim here. "I left my capacity for hoping on the little roads that led to Zelda's sanitarium," a broken-hearted Scott once wrote. He bought his wife the best psychiatric treatment, often putting himself in hock to his publisher for years to fund it.

In 1974, Scottie wrote of her misgivings about her mother having been taken up both her felicity with words and the strength of her love for Scott.

**Spargo** contends they were "imperfect allies to the end". He says: "They paid a higher price for the frivolity of their younger days than almost anyone I can think of in history. And this is when they were at their bravest - when they are toughing it out way beyond their allotted 15 minutes of fame." c Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald by Therese Anne Fowler, Two Roads, £17.99 (£14.99); Call Me Zelda by Erika Robuck, New American Library, May 7, \$16 (£12); **Beautiful Fools** by R Clifton **Spargo**, Duckworth, May 23, £16.99 (£14.99); Flappers: Six Women of a Dangerous Generation by Judith Mackrell, Macmillan, May 23, £20 (£16); Careless People: Murder, Mayhem and the Invention of The Great Gatsby by Sarah Churchwell, Virago, June 6, £16.99 (£14.99). To buy for the price in brackets, inc p&p, call 0845 271 2135 or visit [thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop). The Great Gatsby opens on May 16