

Michael K. Glenday, *F. Scott Fitzgerald*.

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REFERENCES

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Pp. 160.

- 1 Michael K. Glenday's book titled simply *F. Scott Fitzgerald* seeks to offer critical approaches to all of Fitzgerald's novels in a reader-friendly study. The book aims to provide new readings of the author's canonical works and to reassess the ideas and significance of Fitzgerald's major novels by exploring their core themes and positioning them within modern-day American culture. With the purpose of being reader-friendly, the book assumes no prior knowledge and is designed to provide a general introduction to Fitzgerald's fiction, bringing in selected short fiction and the important non-fiction, essays and letters, where appropriate, whilst approaching the author's work from original perspectives. As such, the book is written in an accessible style that generally favors situating the works biographically rather than in dense theoretical contexts.
- 2 The introduction to the book sets up this biographical base to Glenday's critical approach by articulating how he sees both the early novels (*This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and the Damned*) and the canonical *Tender is the Night* as being autobiographically based to various extents, although he does concede that *Tender* is also an historical novel as it takes as its focus "the larger disintegrative forces at work in European history between the two world wars" (9). Glenday also asserts that although the voice of *The Great Gatsby* "is ostensibly that of the narrator Nick Carraway... Fitzgerald did not efface himself completely, and the reader sense that the deepest, most compelling voice is a poet's – that of Fitzgerald's himself" (7). To this end Glenday looks to reveal Fitzgerald in the work, and the work in Fitzgerald's life. The introduction also summarizes the burgeoning field of Fitzgerald Studies in the 21st century to which Glenday's new book contributes,

including a good deal of new essay collections, critical introductions, biographies and primary-source collections. Glenday positions himself within this vast array of scholarship by building on it to provide “a gateway which will prove fruitful for readers requiring an intimate witness to Fitzgerald’s life and work” (13). Glenday approaches the major fiction chapter by chapter in chronological fashion, since he views Fitzgerald as a fundamentally historical author, whose body of work “manifests his acute sense of the challenges faced by American life and its values as the country tried to recover from the waste of war after 1918” (13). Implicitly, of course, this is also a classically modernist approach to the writer, a critical lens Glenday partially acknowledges when he comments on the novels’ consistent exploration of “a culture in febrile disarray” and “an American civilisation encumbered by... neurosis” (13). In response to the cultural and spiritual wreckage of World War I, Glenday sees the novels as inflected by an underlying Christian ethic, and seeking to explore the figure of the isolated hero standing “outside the neighbouring confusion” (13).

- 3 This heroic interpretation of the central protagonists of Fitzgerald’s major fiction is demonstrated in Glenday’s analysis of Fitzgerald’s most critically lauded work, *The Great Gatsby*. Glenday gives a very generous reading of Jay Gatsby arguing that he “stands for an idealism that personifies the best of us” (53). In this superlative assessment of the novel’s pivotal figure, Glenday’s language occasionally creeps into a register that smoothes over some of the ambiguities of the text, arguing that “Gatsby is one of those who strive after a well-nigh impossible dream; to all those who have tried and will try to set sail upon the sea of dreams in their own ‘little boats’” (54). A grand reading of his character such as this seemingly ignores the questionable morality of Gatsby’s pursuit of wealth and his almost maniacal single-minded desire to win Daisy Buchanan back as his lover. The darker aspects of the novel, such as violence, horror, brutality, exploitation and venality, are central to an appreciation of its message. Glenday does pay them some attention in his illuminating assessment of the novel’s Valley of Ashes scene. The chapter deftly interweaves biography with literary criticism, while providing historical context for the events of the novel, and offers close analysis of buried meanings held within some of the more challenging passages of the novel.
- 4 Glenday’s chapter on Fitzgerald’s last, unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon* (1941) also pursues a heroic reading of the novel’s protagonist, the motion-picture magnate, Monroe Stahr, who he sees as “a hero in the noble line of those whose fate is the greater for being chosen by them, Shakespearean rather than Sophoclean or, more specifically, a hero in the American grain, his origins, democratic, progressive rather than reactionary” (121). This chapter vividly illustrates the influence of Hollywood on the Fitzgerald who worked there as a screenwriter, and explores the ambiguity that the theme he chose for the novel – American commercial film production ☺ is also something he felt threatened by, since “Hollywood film... was regarded as a challenge to the dominance of book culture and the imaginative and cognitive skills necessary for the appreciation of literature” (117). Glenday shows how the novel offers many perspectives on and attitudes towards Hollywood, ultimately favoring a development of a deeper understanding of the film production center as the narrative unfolds, rather than simply dismissing it. Glenday acknowledges some of the formal weaknesses of the unfinished novel, but convincingly shows how the work can be read as an engagement with the origins of World War II contemporary to its writing through the figure of the hero.

- 5 In conclusion then, Glenday's book would serve the entry-level reader well as a general introduction to the life and work of Fitzgerald. The book is especially successful in showing how fiction and autobiography blend and interweave across his writing. Glenday's reading of Fitzgerald as a historical novelist who wrote in the shadow of the Great War and died a little over a year after the beginning of World War II is a productive way of organizing the major fiction. The focus on the heroes of Fitzgerald's novels, while providing a good introductory method to contrast and compare them, does have its limitations, as it sometimes resists a bleaker interpretation of these characters' complex engagement with the darker aspects of the chaos of modernity, but for a study of this kind this is an understandable approach.
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