

Lee Smith

{ IN HER WORDS }

*Nobody has ever measured, not even poets,
how much the heart can hold.*

—Zelda Fitzgerald

Like so many other girls in other small towns all across boring small-town America, I was in love with that golden couple, the Fitzgeralds. I was in love with *both* of them, the brilliant novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald and his glamorous, flamboyant wife, Zelda—our “First Flapper”—immortalized in the quintessential novel of the 1920s, *The Great Gatsby*, which I read over and over again. I also read everything about them, our first truly American celebrity couple, quivering at Zelda’s declaration: “I want to love first, and live incidentally.” Well, *me too!* I was fascinated by Zelda’s zaniness, her frank sexuality and utter disregard of custom, as they lived uproariously in hotels and rented rooms in several countries. Ring Lardner said, famously, “Mr. Fitzgerald is a novelist and Mrs. Fitzgerald is a novelty.” But she was more than that. Scott drew upon Zelda’s own writings as well as her personality, to the extent that she remarked, “In fact, Mr. Fitzgerald—I believe that is how he spells his name—seems to believe that plagiarism begins at home.”

The gilded life turned dark, then darker, as alcoholism, infidelity, and mental illness took their toll. Though schizophrenia forced Zelda to give up her long-cherished dream of becoming a professional ballerina, she published her poetic novel, *Save Me the Waltz*, in 1932, two years after her first hospitalization, and continued to write, choreograph, and exhibit her remarkable paintings throughout many ensuing hospital stays, notably at Highland Hospital in Asheville, North Carolina, which she entered in April 1936 and never really left.

She died there twelve years later in the tragic and mysterious fire of

March 9, 1948, one of nine women patients who burned to death in a locked ward on the top floor of the hospital's Central Building, where they had been placed for their own safety because they were undergoing a series of insulin shock treatments. Zelda's body was identified only by her charred ballet slipper.

Here it is that my book *Guests on Earth* takes place, for I also have my own personal knowledge of the landscape of this novel. It turned out that both my parents suffered from mental illness, and my father was a patient at Highland in the 1950s. Decades later, my son, Josh, spent several helpful years there in the 1980s, in both inpatient and outpatient situations, as he battled schizophrenia. Though I had always loved Zelda Fitzgerald, as I have told you, it was during those years that I became fascinated by her art and her life within that institution, and by the mystery of her awful death.

I remember the exact moment when I realized I was going to write this book.

My son and I were walking up Zillicoa Avenue toward the mountain-top hospital during a particularly brilliant winter sunset. The entire arc of the sky shone red behind the crenellated battlements of castlelike Homewood, one of Highland's most interesting older buildings. Of course I was reminded of the fire, perhaps the most horrendous hospital fire ever to occur in this country.

But some of Scott Fitzgerald's words came back to haunt me, too: "I used to wonder why they kept Princesses in towers," the romantic young officer had written to his Alabama beauty, Zelda Sayre, repeating the image he was obsessed with, wanting to keep her for himself. She replied, "Scott, I get so damned tired of being told that—you've written that verbatim, in your last six letters!"

Okay, I thought, I'm going to write that novel—whenever I can stand it. So here it is, finally, ten years after my son's death, and sixty-five years after Zelda's.

The title comes from a letter Scott Fitzgerald wrote to his daughter, Scottie, in 1940: "The insane are always mere guests on earth, eternal strangers carrying around broken decalogues that they cannot read." This novel intends to examine the very thin line between sanity and insanity. Who's

“crazy” and who’s not? What does that even mean? I’m especially interested in women and madness—and in the resonance between art and madness. I also want to show that very real lives are lived within these illnesses.

In *Guests on Earth* I propose a solution to the mystery of the fire, with a series of plausible events leading up to the tragedy, and a cast of characters both imagined and real. These are the stories of doctors and staff as well as patients such as Dixie, a damaged belle from the deep South whose husband has sent her to Highland in hopes that Dr. Carroll can turn her into a more “suitable wife”; the shell-shocked veteran and tobacco heir Charles Gray Winston III; Pan, the feral boy now employed as a hospital groundskeeper; the dangerous, sociopathic beauty Jinx, who has already been judged a “moral imbecile” and sterilized by the state; and the idealistic young psychiatrist Dr. Freddy Sledge, who makes the mistake of falling in love with a patient.

My narrator is a young patient named Evalina Toussaint, daughter of a New Orleans exotic dancer. Evalina is a talented pianist who connects to Zelda on many levels as she plays accompaniment for the concerts, theatricals, and dances constantly being held at Highland Hospital. As Evalina tells us at the beginning of this novel, “I bring a certain insight and new information to that horrific event which changed all our lives forever, those of us living there upon that mountain at that time. This is not my story, then, in the sense that Mr. Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* was not Nick Carraway’s story, either—yet Nick Carraway *is* the narrator, is he not? Is any story not always the narrator’s story, in the end?”

And are we not all “mere guests” upon this whirling earth?