

# The Beautiful and the Damned: F. Scott Fitzgerald in Baltimore

By Deborah Rudacille



In the dark, a man paces. He gazes out over the city, but a gray mist obscures all landmarks. Suddenly, a specter appears. “Like a broken-stringed bow upon a throbbing fiddle— I see the real horror develop over the roof-tops, and in the strident horns of night-owl taxis and the shrill monody of revelers’ arrival over the way. Horror and waste. Waste and horror— what I might have been and done that is lost, spent and gone, dissipated, unrecapturable.”

Asked which writer penned these despairing words in Baltimore, most would probably guess Edgar Allan Poe. But the ghostly echoes of pleasure-seeking gone sour point to the true author: F. Scott Fitzgerald. The laureate of the Jazz Age was only 36 when he came to Baltimore in 1932. But like the country, he had crashed. His wife and muse, Zelda, was mentally ill. He was drinking heavily. His income had plummeted. He hadn’t published a novel since “The Great Gatsby” in 1925, and he was struggling to finish “Tender is the Night,” a book he hoped would pull him out of debt and re-establish his reputation as the greatest writer of his generation. As it happened, neither of the tenuous hopes Fitzgerald nurtured on his arrival in Baltimore— that Zelda would be cured, that his new book would be a critical and commercial triumph— would be fulfilled.

Even so, Baltimore gave the peripatetic Fitzgerald family something they’d never really had before: a home. The nearly five years that Scott, Zelda and their daughter, Scottie, lived in Baltimore was the biggest chunk of time the family ever spent together in one location, says University of Maryland professor emeritus Jackson Bryer. “Five years in one place is a pretty long time for them,” he points out. Though Zelda was a patient at the Henry Phipps Clinic at Johns Hopkins and the Sheppard-Pratt Hospital for much of that time (with a short stint at Craig House outside New York City in between), “they had a stable life here,” says Bryer. “And the relative stability of Baltimore and having his family all in one place may have given Fitzgerald what he needed to finish ‘Tender is the Night.’”





Fitzgerald's Maryland roots go deeper than those of most writers who have spent time in Baltimore. Though born and (mostly) raised in St. Paul, Minn., Fitzgerald was descended on his father's side from a number of pre-Revolutionary Maryland families— Francis Scott Key was his second cousin, twice-removed. The Sage of Baltimore, H.L. Mencken, was Fitzgerald's first editor, publishing his story, "Babes in the Woods," in 1919. Soon afterward, Fitzgerald met Zelda Sayre, the Alabama teenager who would, for better or worse, change his life. For 10 years following their 1920 marriage, Scott and Zelda were A-list celebrities, behaving much like today's young stars who are blessed with fame and money but lack the maturity to handle either.

Both Scott and Zelda were genetically primed for terrible diseases— in his case, alcoholism, and in her case, schizophrenia. Their riotous Roaring '20s lifestyle— constant drinking, drama and departures— catalyzed those illnesses. "Nothing could have survived our life," Fitzgerald once wrote to Zelda.



By 1930, Scott was an alcoholic and Zelda had suffered the first of her multiple breakdowns, fighting her way back to sanity over 15 months in a Swiss clinic. After Zelda's release in September 1931, the couple and Scottie, then 10, returned to the United States, but five months later, Zelda fell apart again. When Fitzgerald wrote to Mencken for advice, the latter suggested the Phipps Clinic at Johns Hopkins, at that time the nation's premier institution for the treatment of the mentally ill. Phipps director Adolf Meyer advocated a scientific approach to psychiatry but believed that psychogenetic factors, not physical disease, caused most mental illness. He thought that people became mentally ill "by actually living in ways that put their mind and entire organism and its activity in jeopardy." The Fitzgeralds— whose marriage Meyer diagnosed as a "folie a deux"— seemed a living embodiment of his theories, which perhaps explains why they both detested him.



Zelda was admitted to Phipps in February 1932 and that spring, Fitzgerald rented a rambling Victorian cottage called La Paix from Baltimore architect Bayard Turnbull on the grounds of what is now St. Joseph's Hospital in Towson. "We have a soft shady place here that's like a paintless playhouse abandoned when the family grew up," Zelda wrote to a friend. "It is surrounded by apologetic trees and warning meadows and creaking insects."

When Fitzgerald's Baltimore secretary, Isabel Owens, was interviewed in later years about her memories of the author at La Paix, she describes him "nervously pacing up and down in his study, scribbling words at a stand-up bookkeeper's desk on large, yellow paper, and throwing the pages on the floor, or piling them up neatly for typing." When he was sober, Mrs. Owens said, "his handwriting was neat and contained. If drinking, he scrawled." In addition to her secretarial duties, Mrs. Owens acted as a foster mother to Scottie and companion to Zelda, who spent afternoons at La Paix with her family while a patient at Phipps. "Another one of my jobs was keeping the bill collectors happy," Mrs. Owens reported. "I had to pay a little here and there so they wouldn't bother Scott."

By 1932, Fitzgerald's income was half of what it had been two years earlier— \$15,832 vs. his 1930 earnings of \$37,599— and though he continued to churn out the short stories that had been his bread and butter for years, "some of those stories were terrible," Owens told Zelda's biographer, Nancy Milford. "We all knew it. He was convinced he was dead and buried." In a March 1933 essay for *The Saturday Evening Post* called "One Hundred False Starts," Fitzgerald describes "facing my sharpened pencils and block of legal-sized paper" with "a feeling of utter helplessness." Nonetheless, he soldiered on. While living at La Paix, Fitzgerald began his Notebooks, in which he recorded ideas and observations for stories and banked story fragments for later use.



Zelda, too, wrote in Baltimore. In her first two months at Phipps she finished an autobiographical novel, "Save Me the Waltz," which led to a marital crisis. Fitzgerald felt "personally betrayed and attacked" by the book, pointed out Baltimore-based novelist and Goucher College professor Madison Smartt Bell at the 10th International F. Scott Fitzgerald Conference, held in Baltimore in early October. But Fitzgerald was also worried about "the dilution of his brand," said Bell, and he accused Zelda of poaching on his material. Though he approved the publication of a revised version of the novel, Fitzgerald was adamantly opposed to Zelda continuing to write fiction, and the couple continued to argue over who had the greater right to use the raw material of their lives. A two-hour

session at La Paix with Phipps psychiatrist Thomas Rennie, in which the couple aired their grievances, was “the Armageddon of marital fights,” Bell said, and ended with both of them threatening to “go to law” (end the marriage). Soon afterward, Zelda switched to drama, writing a play called “Scandalabra,” which was produced by Baltimore’s Vagabond Junior Players in the summer of 1933.

Though most biographical accounts of Fitzgerald’s life treat the Baltimore years as unremittingly bleak, literary scholar Joan Hellman, an organizer of the conference who has long researched the author’s life in Baltimore, says that the Fitzgeralds “had a normal family life here for a while, until Zelda’s second breakdown.” Hellman, now retired from the Community College of Baltimore County, first became interested in Fitzgerald as a graduate student. “I never stopped reading about him and when I came to Baltimore in 1977, it hit me that La Paix was here,” she says. She went looking for the house, only to learn it had been torn down in 1961. As the centennial of Fitzgerald’s birth approached in 1996, Hellman sought out people who had known Fitzgerald during his Baltimore years, interviewing them and collecting photos. “People on the whole had funny stories to tell,” she says. “Everybody had a drinking story, which is sad.”



While the family was living at La Paix, from May 1932 to November 1933, they “went to parties and movies,” Hellman says, and were listed in the Baltimore Blue Book as “at home for visitors.” Related to the Ridgely family, Fitzgerald was invited to dine at Hampton Mansion in Baltimore County. Eleanor Turnbull, 9 years old when the Fitzgeralds arrived at La Paix, “and very taken with Fitzgerald,” says Hellman, recalled him taking Scottie and her and her siblings to the movies in Towson Town, a short walk down the lane, and swimming at Meadowbrook. Fitzgerald car-pooled with the Turnbells— Scottie attended first the Calvert School and then Bryn Mawr— and later wrote a story for The Saturday Evening Post called “The Family Bus” about the experience. “He wrote little plays for the children to perform and he’d put the kids in the car and go around the countryside,” says Hellman. Not that Fitzgerald was terribly skilled behind the wheel. In a 1960 interview, his chauffeur, Towson resident Aquilla Keating, told a Baltimore Sun reporter, “I remember that Mr. Fitzgerald was one real bad driver.” In his diary, H.L. Mencken describes Fitzgerald’s driving as “fearful and wonderful.”

In another diary entry from April 1932, Mencken describes the Fitzgeralds as they appeared shortly after their arrival in Baltimore. “F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife were here to lunch yesterday. Mrs. Fitzgerald is a patient at the Phipps Clinic. The poor girl went insane in Paris a year or so ago, and is still plainly more or less off her base. She managed to get through lunch quietly enough, but there was a wild look in her eye, and now and then she showed plain signs of her mental distress.” Fitzgerald, he added, “is a charming fellow, and when sober makes an excellent companion. Unfortunately, liquor sets him wild and he is apt, when drunk, to knock over a dinner table, or run his automobile into a bank building.”



Mencken's wife, Sara Haardt, was a childhood friend of Zelda, and the two couples socialized during the Baltimore years. In 1933, the Menckens went to a dinner at La Paix where the only other guests were three of Zelda's doctors from the Phipps Clinic. Calling it a "somewhat weird evening," Mencken described the "spookiness" of the house that is "not diminished by the fact that Zelda is palpably only half sane." Apparently, the Menckens were shown some of Zelda's paintings, which were, he said, "full of grotesque exaggerations and fantastic ideas." Fitzgerald, himself, said Mencken, "also begins to show signs of a disordered mind. Some time ago he had what he now calls a nervous breakdown, and was in the hands of the psychiatrists for a couple of months." In fact, Fitzgerald was hospitalized at Johns Hopkins nine times during the Baltimore years. Some of those visits were for "drying out" purposes. In June 1934, Mencken noted that "the case of F. Scott Fitzgerald has become distressing. He is a boozing in a wild manner and has become a nuisance."

It's not surprising that Fitzgerald's alcoholism had reached an acute stage in the summer of 1934. He was under enormous emotional and financial stress. A June 1933 fire at La Paix— caused by Zelda setting fire to some papers in an unused fireplace on the second floor of the house— led to Bayard Turnbull canceling their lease. Fitzgerald begged to be allowed to stay in the fire-damaged house until he finished his book and Turnbull agreed. Two months later, the family moved to a townhouse at 1307 Park Ave. At first, Zelda could come home to the Park Avenue house on the weekends with a nurse and she took painting classes at the Maryland Institute College of Art, says Hellman. Scottie's best friend from Bryn Mawr, Peaches Finney, told Hellman about play dates with Scottie on Park Avenue, where "Zelda would fix snacks for them." But soon after the move, Zelda got sicker and Fitzgerald paid for a stay at Craig House, an expensive sanitarium outside New York City. By May 1924, she was back in Baltimore at Sheppard Pratt Hospital, in worse shape than ever. Then, "Tender Is the Night" was published in April 1934, only to sell 13,000 copies and garner mixed reviews. The son of Fitzgerald's landlord told a Baltimore Sun reporter that Fitzgerald was financially stressed and that his father "often had to ask Scottie to speak to Scott about the rent."



The author's life was crumbling and he responded by drinking heavily throughout the spring and summer, according to his biographer Matthew Bruccoli. In November 1934, Fitzgerald wrote his editor Maxwell Perkins, "I have drunk too much and that is certainly slowing me up. On the other hand, without drink I do not know whether I could have survived this time." In his essay "Sleeping and Waking," published in December 1934, he describes his struggles with insomnia. "All is prepared, the books, the glass of water, the extra pajamas in case I wake in rivulets of sweat, the luminal pills in the little round tube..." Fitzgerald needed luminal (phenobarbital) to sleep and its use may have inspired the kind of night terrors described in the essay. "What if this night prefigured the night after death— what if all thereafter was an eternal

quivering on the edge of an abyss, with everything base and vicious in oneself urging one forward and the baseness and viciousness of the world just ahead. No choice, no road, no hope— only the endless repetition of the sordid and the semi-tragic.”

In October 1935, Fitzgerald gave up the Park Avenue house and moved to the Cambridge Arms Apartments just opposite Johns Hopkins University with Scottie, by then a teenager. “By the time Fitzgerald moved to the Cambridge Arms, Zelda is at Sheppard Pratt and there was probably no chance that she would recover,” says Hellman. Fitzgerald’s despair was nakedly revealed in a three-part essay he published in *Esquire* the next spring, “The Crack-Up.” In the essays Fitzgerald drops the mask of fiction to tell his story raw, sparing neither himself nor the reader certain brutal truths: that “I had only been a mediocre caretaker of most of the things left in my hands, including my own talent”; that he would always “cherish an abiding distrust, an animosity, toward the leisure class— not the conviction of a revolutionary, but the smoldering hatred of the peasant”; that “my political conscience had scarcely existed for 10 years save as an element of irony in my stuff.” He linked his own crash to the Depression, noting that “my recent experience parallels the wave of despair that swept the nation when the Boom was over.” Concluding that “life will never be very pleasant again,” Fitzgerald ended the series with a savage promise: “if you throw me a bone with enough meat on it I may even lick your hand.”



Most of Fitzgerald’s supporters and friends— including his editor and agent— thought he’d killed his career by publishing “The Crack-Up.” Perhaps he did. But in hindsight it seems as though he anticipated by about 30 years the corrosive commentary of his great admirer Hunter S. Thompson and other viciously insightful critics of the American dream. Throughout his career, Fitzgerald was exquisitely sensitive to the emotional tenor of the places he lived, whether Princeton, Long Island, the French Riviera— or Baltimore during The Great Depression. A little-noted fact about Fitzgerald is that he underwent a political awakening of sorts while living in Baltimore, reading Marx and frequently entertaining a man that Zelda acidly referred to as “the community communist,” identified by literary scholar Scott Donaldson as V.F. Calverton (George Goetz), a Marxist literary critic who lived on Pratt Street and whom Fitzgerald befriended in 1934. Though Fitzgerald had always called himself a liberal, Donaldson says, while in Baltimore “he turned way left and stayed there the rest of his life. He turned against the plutocrats.”

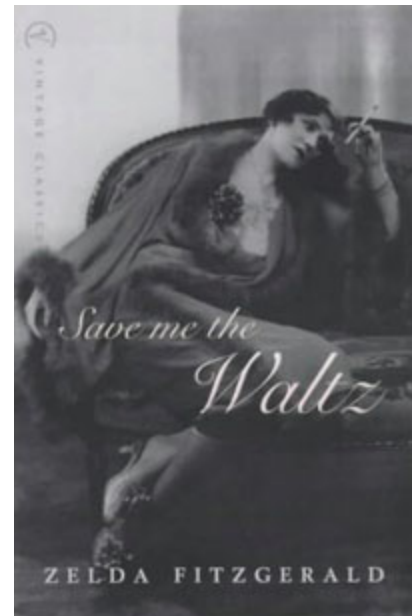
Fitzgerald’s La Paix landlords, Bayard and Margaret Turnbull, were quite conservative, as were most wealthy Baltimoreans of the time, but Eleanor Turnbull told Hellman that Fitzgerald “turned her mother’s life around,” Hellman says, “speaking often about a freer world.” Fitzgerald and Mrs. Turnbull were very close, but the author made many other friends in Baltimore and was far from being a recluse even in his darkest days. He drank at the Owl Bar with Baltimore newspaperman Louis Azrael— who later tried to help him curb his drinking— and befriended the group of young actors who put on Zelda’s play

"Scandalabra." He kept in touch with Princeton classmates living in the city like Edgar Allan Poe Jr. He wrote an introduction to "Historic and Colonial Homes of Maryland" for his friends Don and Rita Swann, whose son, Francis, he met at the Vagabond Players. Early in his Baltimore residence, he even attended a frat party at Hopkins, according to former Baltimore Sun reporter Carl Schoettler. And at one party in Homeland given by a host with the surname of Diver, Hellman says, Fitzgerald may have picked up the name of his tragic hero in "Tender is the Night." A parade of famous friends also visited the Fitzgeralds in Baltimore, including John Dos Passos, Gertrude Stein, Thomas Wolfe, Edmund Wilson and Malcolm Cowley.

In April 1936, Fitzgerald transferred Zelda to Highland Hospital in Asheville, N.C., and once again behind in his rent, he gave up the Cambridge Arms apartment that summer. Scottie, who was still at Bryn Mawr, lived alternately with the family of her friend Peaches and Mrs. Owens. In August Fitzgerald published a slightly happier story in Esquire, "Afternoon of an Author," describing a bus ride from his Cambridge Arms apartment to the barbershop. "When he woke up he felt better than he had for many weeks, a fact that became plain to him negatively—he did not feel ill," the nameless narrator of the story notes. Still, he takes the precaution of including "a small phial of luminal" in his pocket for the ride. "The perfect neurotic," the narrator mutters while contemplating his image in a mirror.

In December, while staying at the Stafford Hotel in Mount Vernon, Fitzgerald got blazing drunk at a formal party at The Belvedere he was hosting for Scottie and her friends. That debacle led to a binge, which led to another drying out at Hopkins. He left the city shortly afterward, never to return, though Scottie long considered Baltimore her hometown and married a Baltimore man, Jack Lanahan, after her graduation from Vassar. "We used to come here for all the holidays," Scottie's daughter, Cecilia Ross, said at the Fitzgerald conference in October 2009. "My sister did the whole Cotillion thing here." Cecilia attended the Oldfields School and her sister, Eleanor, graduated from St. Timothy's.

On Dec. 21, 1940, Fitzgerald died of a heart attack in Hollywood at the age of 44. Zelda held on for a few more years, dying in a fire at Highland Hospital in March 1948. An enduring myth suggests that Zelda set the fire; she did not. It started in the kitchen while Zelda slept in her room on the top floor. Nine women unable to escape their locked rooms died in the fire. The details of treatments for schizophrenia that Zelda endured at clinics in Europe and the U.S. in that pre-pharmacological age are horrible to contemplate. "Don't ever fall into the hands of brain and nerve specialists unless you are feeling very Faustian," Zelda once wrote to a friend.



Like many alcoholics, Fitzgerald was often consumed by self-loathing and regret, much of it well-earned. Yet, till the end of his life he worked hard to finance Zelda's very expensive psychiatric care and to provide Scottie with an excellent education. Zelda often thanked him for his enduring loyalty and devotion, as in a letter dated July 1939— "Nobody is better aware than I am, and I believe, so is Scottie, of your generosity, and the seriousness of your constant struggle to provide the best for us. I am most deeply grateful to you for the sustained and tragic effort that you have made to keep us going."



The Fitzgeralds— Scott, Zelda and Scottie— are buried at St. Mary's Church in Rockville, close by Scott's parents and other Maryland relations. Before her own death in 1986, Scottie fought to have her parents re-interred at St. Mary's; initially they were buried at Union Cemetery in Rockville when the Catholic Church refused permission for Fitzgerald to be buried at St. Mary's because he was not a practicing Catholic at the time of his death. Scottie felt that her father would have wanted to be buried with his ancestors, though Fitzgerald once expressed a different wish in a letter on Stafford Hotel stationery he wrote to his North Carolina secretary in 1936.

"I love Baltimore more than I thought— it is so rich with memories— it is nice to look up the street and see the statue of my great uncle & to know that Poe is buried here and that many ancestors have walked in the old town by the bay. I belong here, where everything is civilized and gay and rotted and polite. And I wouldn't mind a bit if in a few years Zelda & I could snuggle up together under a stone in some old graveyard here. That is really a happy thought and not melancholy at all."