

GUESTS ON EARTH

A Note from the Author

Questions for Discussion



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

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*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 mountaintop hospital during a particularly brilliant winter sunset. The entire arc of the sky shone red behind the crenellated battlements of castle-like 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 this horrific event that 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?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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1. What does Evalina mean when she says (page 3), “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?” Do you think it is true that any story is always the narrator’s story? Why or why not? How does Evalina’s role as an accompanist help her to be a good narrator for this story?

2. Zelda shocks Evalina in an early scene by viciously destroying a paper doll after Evalina proclaims it a princess in a tower. Zelda tells the distressed girl, “It is far better to be dead than to be a princess in a tower, for you can never get out once they put you up there, you’ll see. You must live on the earth and mix with the hoi polloi” (page 33). *Hoi polloi* is a term of the day, from the Greek, referring to the common people. What do you think Zelda means by this statement? Is it prophetic?

3. What do you think of the charismatic Dr. Carroll and his methods of treatment? He prescribes medication and procedures such as rest cures and shock treatment, but also has a philosophy that involves a physically active and artistically creative life for the mentally ill. Does this regimen seem to work? What about his belief that introspection should be discouraged or his declared aim that women should be “re-educated toward femininity, good mothering, and the revaluing of marriage and domesticity”?

4. Why do you think that creative or extraordinary women were more likely to be diagnosed as “mad” in the 1930s and 1940s?

5. Mrs. Carroll is very kind to Evalina when she first arrives at Highland Hospital, but then seems to turn against her. Why? Discuss their relationship.

6. Dixie was a “belle” in the classic, old-South manner, much as Zelda Fitzgerald had been. The ideal belle was expected to be beautiful; rich; attractive to men; well-dressed; proficient in social skills; and cultured in arts such as dancing, singing, and piano, while remaining sexually and racially “pure.” What do you think of this ideal? In what ways might this belle system have been good for girls? In what ways could it have been damaging?

7. Jinx’s file describes her as an “over-sexed female adolescent of the high moron type; a moral imbecile . . . unmanageable . . . incorrigible.” She had been sent to a reform school where “necessary therapeutic sterilization was performed for the public good.” Today Jinx might be termed a sociopath. But Evalina says, “After all she has been through, who could blame her now for anything she did or said to save herself?” Do you agree with Evalina? What do you think of Jinx?

8. Do you think that there is any connection between mental illness and creativity? Discuss the portrayal of this theme in *Guests on Earth*.

9. Critic Ilana Teitelbaum has suggested that “as Evalina struggles with conflicting desires—art on the one hand, and domestic security on the other—it becomes apparent that for her, Zelda Fitzgerald serves as a dark mirror.” Do you agree with this statement? If so, how is it true? Is Zelda’s life foreshadowing Evalina’s fate?

10. The image of a kaleidoscope recurs throughout this novel. A snow-globe is used in a similar way. Why are these appropriate images to symbolize life at Highland Hospital?

11. F. Scott Fitzgerald has been widely accused of suppressing his wife’s creativity. Throughout their marriage, Scott co-opted Zelda’s personality and her life—and occasionally her actual writing—for his own fiction. At first she was flattered, even complicit, but finally declared, “Mr. Fitzgerald—I believe that is how he spells his name—seems to believe that plagiarism begins at home.” Later she would claim that he kept her from becoming a ballerina, too, though she had begun her study of dance too late, when she was already ill. Scott and Zelda’s marriage is essentially over by the time *Guests on Earth* begins, but their relationship will continue until death. How is this relationship portrayed in these pages? What is your impression of Scott?

12. Zelda Fitzgerald has become almost mythical of late, with a recent *Gatsby* film out and several books written specifically about her. What makes Zelda such a compelling character? In *Guests on Earth*, she is symbolized by the salamander. Why does this image work—or not work—for you?

13. Following the Christmas scene at the end of chapter 11 (page 249), Evalina looks down toward Asheville and says, “I had a sudden, overwhelming urge to plunge off down that mountainside and find Pan deep in his lair, beneath the smooth white sweep of snow, for he was my kind, and now I knew it.” What do you think she means by “my kind?” How does this moment relate to the final choices she will make in this novel?

14. The novel’s title comes from a quote by F. Scott Fitzgerald in a letter written to his daughter Scottie in 1940, concerning her mother. “The insane are always mere guests on earth, eternal strangers carrying around broken decalogues that they cannot read.” However, the author has said, “But we are all ‘guests on earth’ in a way, aren’t we; and most of us are a little bit crazy, too, one way or another. I hope my readers will think about that, as we all examine the very thin line between sanity and insanity. In this novel I especially want to show that very real lives are lived within these illnesses, and within such institutions . . . friendships, love affairs, learning, growth, and even transformations occur.” Do you think the author has succeeded in her aim?

15. *Guests on Earth* follows a long and important tradition of chronicling mental health and institutionalization in fiction and film—for instance, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* by Ken Kesey or the more recent *Silver Linings Playbook* by Matthew Quick. Do you have any favorite works of fiction, reportage, or film that deal with mental health to recommend to others? What makes them great to you? Why are they important?

SUSAN WOODLEY RAINES



LEE SMITH is the author of sixteen previous books of fiction, including the bestselling novels *Fair and Tender Ladies* and *The Last Girls*, winner of the Southern Book Critics Circle Award. Also the recipient of the 1999 Academy Award in Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she lives in Hillsborough, North Carolina.