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**Maureen Corrigan explains why 'Great Gatsby' is a literary miracle**

In her new book, NPR critic Maureen Corrigan takes apart Fitzgerald’s masterpiece and finds it nearly perfect.

**By** [**Laurie Hertzel**](http://www.startribune.com/laurie-hertzel/10645026/)Star Tribune

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Feed Loader F. Scott Fitzgerald in the late 1920s.

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You probably know Maureen Corrigan’s voice, if not her face. The sensible-sounding book critic on NPR’s “Fresh Air” has reviewed a lot of books over the years, but only one fully has her heart: “The Great Gatsby,” a novel that left her cold the first time she read it but which she now calls “a literary miracle.”

Corrigan’s new book, “So We Read On,” takes its title from the lyrical, memorable last line of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel. In her book, she examines Fitzgerald’s themes, language and biography — and makes a strong case that “The Great Gatsby” is the Great American Novel.

She will be at Macalester College on Tuesday for a free event sponsored by Common Good Books. Here, she talks about how Fitzgerald’s masterpiece bombed when it first came out, what readers usually get wrong about the book, and settles the debate: Hemingway or Fitzgerald?

Q: You call “Gatsby” the “one great American novel we think we’ve read but probably haven’t.” What do you mean?

A: We usually read “Gatsby” in high school when we’re too young to understand the regret and sense of loss that pervades the novel. Every character in “Gatsby” is stretching out his or her arms for someone or something eternally out of reach.

MAUREEN CORRIGAN

What: Will read from and discuss her new book, “So We Read On: How ‘The Great Gatsby’ Came to Be and Why it Endured.”

When: 7:30 p.m. Tue.

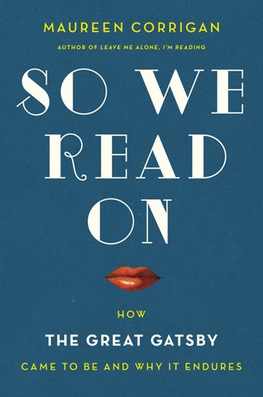
Where: Weyerhaeuser Chapel, Macalester College, St. Paul. Sponsored by Common Good Books and Fitzgerald in St. Paul.

Tickets: Free.

Gatsby stretches out his arms for Daisy (symbolized by that much-discussed green light at the end of her dock). Nick is reaching for his friend Gatsby, who’s dead at the beginning of this retrospective novel; Myrtle is reaching for Tom; Wilson is reaching for Myrtle, and on and on.

I think, as high school readers, we tend to be less alert to all this frustrated yearning and, instead, focus on the giddy exuberance of Gatsby’s parties and the obsessiveness of Gatsby’s love for Daisy.

We read the novel as a tragic romance rather than as a profound commentary on the slippery promises that America extends to its citizen-dreamers.

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"So We Read On: How the Great Gatsby Came to Be and Why it Endures," by Maureen Corrigan

Q: Idol worship, longing, the elusiveness of dreams — are those the elements that make Gatsby a peculiarly American novel?

A: Absolutely — it’s both our most American and un-American novel at once. The novel is ultimately pessimistic about Gatsby’s attempt to break free of the past, but it celebrates the doomed beauty of trying. Fitzgerald’s plot suggests that the American dream is a mirage, but his words make that dream irresistible.

Q: You’ve read “The Great Gatsby” 50 times? You also teach and review books for NPR and the Washington Post. How do you have time to read any book more than once?

A: Well, “The Great Gatsby” is short, after all! I try to get up early — 5 a.m., sometimes 4 a.m. — to have that golden time of uninterrupted reading. I love what I do and most people can’t say that about their jobs. I frequently think about my mother’s mother, who was a Polish immigrant and cleaned houses and offices day and night for most of her working life. I’m lucky that I get to read for a living.

Q: Are there other books that have captivated you in this way? Other books you reread?

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Maureen Corrigan

A: Oh, I reread a lot of books. Many of the novels I love to reread are the 19th-century British classics: “Jane Eyre,” “Pride and Prejudice,” “David Copperfield,” “Great Expectations,” “Bleak House.” I’ve never read any other novel, though, anywhere close to the number of times I’ve read “The Great Gatsby.”

Q: Why do you suppose the book didn’t take off when it was first published? And why did it later?

A: Fitzgerald thought that the fact that “The Great Gatsby” lacked sympathetic female characters hurt its reception, since (then as now) women drive the fiction market.

I think “Gatsby” was a hard sell in 1925 because, to be blunt, it’s a very weird novel that breaks almost all of the rules of good fiction writing: It “tells” rather than shows. It’s neither a plot-driven nor a character-driven story; rather, it’s that oddest of fictional creations — a voice-driven narrative. Nick’s voice is what pulls us readers in.

It came back after Fitzgerald’s death in 1940 partly because of the vigorous efforts of his literary friends who helped readers appreciate the poetry of Fitzgerald’s language and his nuanced verdict on the American dream.

Q: What things about this book do most people get wrong?

A: The elemental mistake is to think that “The Great Gatsby” simply revels in the wretched excess of the 1920s and all that jazz. The films compound that mistake with their focus on over-the-top costumes and glittering cars and home furnishings.

Fitzgerald liked the high life, but he also read Marx with enthusiasm. He envied the ease of the rich, but he also had a healthy contempt for their world.

Q: What did you learn when you looked at Fitzgerald’s own copy of “Gatsby” at the Princeton library?

A: I learned that Fitzgerald was even more of an obsessive rewriter than I already knew! That copy is filled with penciled-in changes of words or names. Even though the novel was already published, Fitzgerald was preparing for a second edition of Gatsby and still tweaking it!

Q: We are Minnesotans. Throw us a bone: Could Fitzgerald have written Gatsby if he hadn’t grown up in St. Paul?

A: You may want to bar me from the state, but I think so — maybe. Certainly his years on Summit Avenue gave Fitzgerald the perfect landscape to stoke his anxious attitudes about social class. (Fitzgerald and his parents rented houses on Summit Avenue, but never quite “belonged,” economically or socially, with the class of people whose beautiful mansions, even today, grace the neighborhood.) I think, though, there are other such landscapes that foster this insider-outsider self-consciousness in sensitive people.

By the way, I’m really looking forward to walking around in Fitzgerald’s footsteps on Summit Avenue.

Q: And I think I know the answer to this, but … Fitzgerald or Hemingway?

A: No contest: Fitzgerald, hands down. “The Sun Also Rises” and “A Farewell to Arms” are superb, but “The Great Gatsby” is a literary miracle.

Plus, Fitzgerald was a much more loyal friend than Hemingway. Fitzgerald was sometimes a mean drunk, but Hemingway didn’t need to be drunk to be mean. He was threatened by Fitzgerald’s great gifts and tried to undermine Fitzgerald’s confidence.

In biographical accounts of their friendship, Hemingway often comes off as a swaggering Tom Buchanan to Fitzgerald’s romantic Gatsby.

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