

Zelda Fitzgerald

by Erin E Templeton

Zelda Sayre was born with the new century in July 1900. A Southern belle through and through, she grew up with a generation of young women who strove to be independent and audacious, reckless and rebellious. She fell in love with F Scott Fitzgerald, a lieutenant in the Army, who was stationed just outside her home town of Montgomery, Alabama just as he was about to be sent overseas to fight in the Great War. When the Armistice was signed on the cusp of his deployment, there was both relief and disappointment. The young couple's grand wartime romance fizzled out under the banality of a regular job as his dream of becoming the Next Great American Novelist was frustrated by multiple manuscript rejections. Meanwhile, Zelda continued to flirt and dance and date eligible men from across the South.

Charles Scribner's and Sons accepted *This Side of Paradise* for publication in October 1919. Only then did Zelda hear from her former beau: the soldier turned ad-man turned author-to-be. He asked if he might come south to visit her. She agreed to see him, and before the weekend had ended, the couple had renewed their romance and were once again engaged to be married. Zelda's family, however, would not formally announce the engagement of their youngest daughter until the following spring, in early March 1920. From that point forward, Zelda's life changed quickly and completely. *This Side of Paradise* was published on 26 March and a week later, on 3 April, Zelda Sayre married F Scott Fitzgerald in the rectory of St Patrick's Cathedral, New York, having left her beloved South for the first time just days earlier. She was nineteen years old.

Soon there were stories of fountain diving, taxi-roof rides through the city, and endless spins in revolving doors. The champagne flowed and the parties lasted into the early hours. *This Side of Paradise* was all the rage as its author and his new bride were hailed as ambassadors for the new generation. The 1920s had started to roar; the Jazz Age had begun, and the Fitzgeralds were at the centre of it all. Between the late-night revelries and resultant hangovers, Scott was trying both to write short stories, which paid the bills, and to write his next novel; both were a struggle. Meanwhile Zelda grew increasingly restless and homesick for the South.

They began to travel both domestically and abroad, and by February 1921, Zelda was pregnant. Their daughter Frances Scott Fitzgerald arrived on 26 October, but parenthood did little to change the Fitzgeralds' lives or the frenetic pace at which they lived. The family travelled to Paris in 1924, and they were to stay abroad for several years, but travel did little to ease Zelda's unhappiness. She missed her family and her friends, and since they had a nurse to care for Scottie, there were long periods of time when she had nothing to do.

Meanwhile, her husband struggled to balance the demands of his writing with the family's steadily mounting expenses and the high life that he and Zelda enjoyed. He longed to write the Great American Novel, but the couple's extravagant lifestyle demanded that he sell short stories. Bored and lonely, Zelda had an affair with a French pilot; her husband reciprocated with an affair of his own with a young American actress. Despite their infidelities, the Fitzgeralds stayed together, but the marriage grew ever more strained as the couple continued to live a life of excess, often spending beyond their means.

Zelda, moreover, was increasingly frustrated by the lack of a creative outlet. She had written a few short celebrity pieces in the early years of her marriage, but she lived in a world where married women were expected to be content in their roles of wife and mother. Satisfaction eluded Zelda until she decided to start taking ballet lessons again. She studied with notable teachers in both the United States and France, most famously with well-known Russian ballerina Lubov Egorova. 'Madame', as her students referred to her, had danced with the Imperial Russian Ballet and for Sergei Diaghilev in the *Ballets Russes* in Paris.

Zelda was twenty-five when she resumed her ballet studies, and within two years, at the age of twenty-seven, she had decided to become a ballerina, in her own words 'a Pavlova, nothing less.' Physically demanding, the ballet became Zelda's primary focus. She purchased a large mirror with a gilt frame for their house and installed a barre in front of it where she spent hours each day practicing. For three years, she devoted all of her time to the dance, often at the expense of her marriage and her relationship with her daughter.

In the autumn of 1929, she received an invitation to dance professionally with the San Carlo Opera Ballet Company in Naples, Italy. She was offered a solo role in *Aida* as her debut and promised additional solos during the season. She was offered a monthly salary to dance the full season, but inexplicably, she declined the offer.

Friends noted that Zelda's behaviour was becoming increasingly erratic; within months, she collapsed in Paris after experiencing visual and auditory hallucinations, anxiety attacks, severe depression, suicidal tendencies and exhaustion. She was first hospitalised just outside Paris, but desperate to return to the ballet studio, she left the hospital against the advice of her doctors. Within weeks, she had relapsed, and the anxiety attacks and hallucinations returned. This time she went to a hospital in Switzerland, but the facility was intended for physical illnesses, and her doctors suspected that Zelda would require psychological treatment. By 1930, psychiatrists also had begun to suspect a genetic component to the disease though there was no such history reported in Zelda's family. The Fitzgeralds' marital difficulties, Zelda's frustrations with a lack of creative outlet, her dedication to her dance, and her reluctance towards traditional female domesticity were all considered part of her pathology. Writing *Save Me the Waltz* gave her a much-needed outlet, but her husband's opposition to her writing made her give up on a second novel.

She would spend the rest of her life in and out of sanatoriums and hospitals in Europe and the United States. She became a devout Christian, and died in a fire at Highland Hospital in Asheville, North Carolina at the age of 48.

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