

Tender Is the Night, by F. Scott Fitzgerald recommended by Sydney Blair

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the “VABooks!” column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Sydney Blair—author of the novel *Buffalo*, for which she won the Virginia Prize for Fiction—recommends *Tender Is the Night* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



If you’ve read *The Great Gatsby* then you have already fallen under the spell of Fitzgerald’s prose, luscious as a peach and perfectly paced, with its heady suggestion of hope and endless possibility. Though already famous—in the Age of Jazz, Scott and Zelda were the Brad and Angelina of their time—publication of *The Great Gatsby* in 1925 galvanized Fitzgerald’s position as one of the most talented writers in a group that included John Dos Passos, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. Who can forget that last line? “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” Beautiful. Provocative. All too true.

For my money, though, *Tender Is the Night*, the novel that Fitzgerald published in 1934, a torturous nine years later, knocks the (literary) ball clear out of the park. Revised 17 times—risky and imperfect, passionate and pushy, time-frames and perspective shifting like sand—*Tender* is an ambitious, psychologically-driven story of tangled, dark love, tormented psyches, and restless, expatriate wandering.

Originally entitled *Richard Diver: A Romance*, the book opens with Dick and Nicole Diver presiding over a “bright tan prayer rug of a beach” on the Riviera; they’re bronzed, beautiful, at the top of their game. Nicole’s soaring passion is palpable, Dick’s intelligence razor-sharp. Some 300 pages later, we return to *la plage* where, naturally, things have changed.

Fitzgerald’s language is gorgeously musical and romantic: “It was pleasant to drive back to the hotel in late afternoon, above a sea as mysteriously colored as the agates and cor-

nelians of childhood, green as green milk, blue as laundry water, wine dark. It was pleasant to pass people eating outside their doors, and to hear the fierce mechanical pianos behind the vines of country estaminets. When they turned off the Corniche d’Or and down to Gausse’s Hotel through the darkening banks of trees, set one behind another in many greens, the moon already hovered over the ruins of the aqueducts. . . .” Other times it’s free-wheelingly modern, especially when the story is focussed on Nicole and her secrets.

“Fitzgerald was the only one of the younger writers who wrote naturally in sentences; . . . (he) will be read when many of his well known contemporaries are forgotten.” Thus spake Europe’s most famous literary expatriate, Gertrude Stein, in her memoir *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Still, when he died in Hollywood in 1940 at age 44, Fitzgerald had slipped well below the reading public’s radar; he was employed as a screenwriter and his books were out-of-print. His writer friends and colleagues immediately began working to set the record straight, documenting his talents in essays and articles, and pushing for his work to be reissued. Since then, his star has again ascended and rests now permanently in the heavens.

If you loved *Gatsby*, you owe it to yourself and to the great writer himself to read *Tender Is the Night*; onto this book Fitzgerald leveled every ounce of his considerable brilliance and artistry, producing a novel that, though flawed, is fearless in its search for the pure, unvarnished truth. And truth is, after all, unlike hemlines and hairdos, never out of fashion.