

# READING GROUP GUIDE

**About this Guide:** The following author biography and list of questions about *Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Z*.

## *Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald* by Therese Anne Fowler

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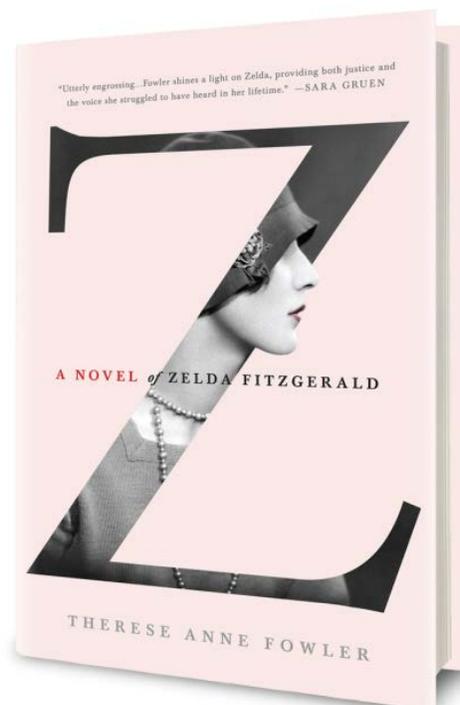
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## About the Book

*Picture a late-May morning in 1918, a time when Montgomery wore her prettiest spring dress and finest floral perfume—same as I would wear that evening . . .*

Thus begins the story of beautiful, reckless, seventeen-year-old Zelda Sayre on the day she meets Lieutenant Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald at a country club dance. Fitzgerald isn't rich or settled; no one knows his people; and he wants, of all things, to be a writer in New York. No matter how wildly in love they may be, Zelda's father firmly opposes the match. But when Scott finally sells his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, Zelda defies her parents to board a train to New York and marry him in the vestry of St. Patrick's Cathedral. Life is a sudden whirl of glamour and excitement: Everyone wants to meet the dashing young author of the scandalous novel—and his beautiful, perhaps even more scandalous wife. Zelda bobs her hair, trades in her provincial finery for daring dresses and plunges into the endless party that welcomes the darlings of the literary world to New York, then Paris and the French Riviera.

It is the Jazz Age, when everything seems new and possible—except that dazzling success does not always last. Surrounded by a thrilling array of magnificent hosts and mercurial geniuses—including Sara and Gerald Murphy, Gertrude Stein, and the great and terrible Ernest Hemingway—Zelda and Scott find the future both grander and stranger than they could have ever imagined.



## About the Author

**THERESE ANNE FOWLER** is an Illinois native and a graduate of North Carolina State University, where she earned a BA in sociology and an MFA in creative writing. She taught undergraduate fiction writing and was an editorial assistant for the literary magazine *Obsidian III* before leaving to write fiction full-time. Therese has two grown sons and two nearly grown stepsons, and currently lives with her husband in North Carolina. For more information visit: [ThereseAnneFowler.com](http://ThereseAnneFowler.com)

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## A note from Therese

Dear Reader,

Do you believe in ghosts? While I'd always allowed for the possibility of them and had experienced some things that assure me some kind of spiritual realm co-exists with "real" life, I'd never been directly influenced by a force beyond myself—until I was struck by the idea to write Zelda Fitzgerald's story.

Zelda grew up in the Deep South, where ghosts are, for many, as common and expected as Spanish moss. My upbringing was much different in the common-sense, show-me Midwest. Any discussion of an afterlife focused on either angels or the devil. I didn't believe in any of it.

But on a day when I was working out new story ideas in my journal and trying to decide which of them merited full-time attention for the next year of my life (the time it would take to write the book), I was literally stopped mid-sentence by the brand new, never-before-entered-my-mind thought of Zelda.

My first reaction: *No*. She was, I believed, F. Scott Fitzgerald's crazy, jealous wife. Selfish. Unstable. Unsympathetic. But...I was curious. After all, I'd been accosted, so surely that meant the idea merited some consideration. I went to my computer to look her up and found, first, the Zelda Fitzgerald Wikipedia page. Not until much later would I recognize how many inaccuracies the page contains; what got my attention that first day was this: Zelda and my mother both died during the overnight hours of the same date—many years apart, but even so, the coincidence was as uncanny as the inspiration had been. I was compelled to learn more.

The further I got into the research and writing process, the more I understood how mistaken my original impression of Zelda was and how badly the record needed to be set straight. At the same time, strange coincidences kept occurring—small things, but they gave me encouragement to press on despite my fear that I might fail utterly. It was when the manuscript was done, though, and my literary agent had sent it out to publishers in the US and abroad, that I began to truly believe I'd done right: the first publisher to buy the book did so on April 10—which is the same date *The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925.

Last fall, I visited the cemetery where Zelda and Scott and their daughter, Scottie, are buried alongside other Fitzgerald kin. It's a small, oak-sheltered churchyard bordered by busy roads and a commuter train track. No one else was there on that cool, damp morning, and I was glad, because unbidden tears were streaming down my cheeks.

I lingered a while despite the cold and drizzle, my mind filled with images from their lives. When I finally turned to leave, I felt a hand on my left shoulder, and heard Zelda's voice in my ear.

Was it her? Who can say for sure? But I do enjoy the idea that it might have been—and I hope you will enjoy the book.

Warmest wishes,  
*Therese Anne Fowler*

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## Discussion Questions

1. Many accounts of both Scott and Zelda contend that Zelda wouldn't marry Scott unless he was well off—a view they themselves encouraged in the early years of their marriage. How does this play into the flapper image Zelda embodied in the '20s? Overall, was it harmful or beneficial to her?
2. How much of Scott's success is owed to Zelda's manufactured breakup with him in 1919?
3. The first time Zelda thinks she may be pregnant she refuses to pursue an abortion. Why, then, does she choose differently later on?
4. Why does Zelda have so little regard for her parents' views and the standards by which she was raised?
5. Is Scott's alcohol abuse a cause or a result of the life he and Zelda led and the troubles they experienced?
6. How legitimate was it for Scott and his agent, Harold Ober, to sell Zelda's short stories under a joint by-line?
7. Which of Zelda's talents do you feel was her truest calling?
8. How do you feel about Scott's insistence on hiring strict nannies to care for Scottie? What benefit, or harm, may have come from this?
9. Modern psychiatrists have said that Zelda was probably troubled not with schizophrenia in its current definition but with bipolar disorder, which is characterized by dramatic mood swings and the behaviors that sometimes result. Where do you see evidence of Zelda's illness in the years before her breakdown in early 1930? How much, if any, of her vibrant personality might be tied to the disorder?
10. What does it say about Scott that he was so highly involved in Zelda's care during her episodes of hospitalization?
11. Why does Zelda tolerate Scott's infatuation with actress Lois Moran and, later, columnist Sheilah Graham?
12. When Zelda says Ernest Hemingway is to blame for the disaster she and Scott made of their lives, what exactly does she mean? What might have been different for them if Hemingway hadn't been Scott's close friend?

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13. Ernest Hemingway's sexuality has been the subject of scrutiny by literary scholars and curious readers alike. In what ways was Zelda's fear about the nature of Scott's friendship with Hemingway justified?
14. Owing greatly to Ernest Hemingway's account of her in *A Moveable Feast* (1964), Zelda has been seen as "F. Scott Fitzgerald's crazy wife." Why do you think Hemingway wrote so spitefully about her and so critically about Scott so many years after both their deaths?
15. Scott made almost all his money writing for the popular magazines ("the slicks") and from the movie industry—and making money was essential for the lifestyle he wanted to lead. Why, then, was he forever struggling to impress the critics with more serious work?
16. Alcohol abuse and infidelity were seen as common and acceptable during the Jazz Age and among the expatriates especially. How much have views changed since then?
17. How do Sara and Gerald Murphy influence Zelda? What about Zelda's friend Sara Haardt Mencken?
18. Despite her evolving interests and ambitions, Zelda never saw herself as a feminist. How might that view have affected her choices, both as a young woman and then later, when she aspired to dance professionally?
19. In what ways would the Fitzgeralds' public and private lives have been different if they'd lived in the 1960s? 1980s? Today?
20. *The Great Gatsby* is often said to have been modeled on the Fitzgeralds' time in Great Neck (Long Island), New York, with Gatsby's love for Daisy inspired by Zelda's affair with Edouard Jozan. Where in *Z* do you see evidence of this?
21. Scott turns Zelda's affair with Jozan into another Fitzgerald tale. What does this say about him? What does it say about Zelda that she allows it?
22. Though Zelda spends most of her adult life away from her family and the South, she doesn't escape their influences. Where do you see this most vividly?

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