

Romantic nostalgia of 'Gatsby' inspired by Louisville

Matt Frassica, The (Louisville, Ky.) Courier-Journal 8:22 p.m. EDT May 10, 2013

F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel sets grand scenes at the city's historic Seelbach Hotel.



(Photo: AP)

In Baz Luhrmann's new film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, which opens this weekend, a computer-generated version of Jazz Age New York plays a leading role.

But the movie — and F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel — isn't just a story about New York in the Roaring Twenties. The book's most unabashedly romantic scenes, the nostalgic past that Gatsby spares no expense to recapture, take place in Louisville. (<http://www.courier-journal.com/article/20130509/FEATURES/305090047/F-Scott-Fitzgerald-s-The-Great-Gatsby-captured-pieces-of-Louisville-s-romantic-past>)

Fitzgerald was stationed near Louisville as a young Army officer at Camp Zachary Taylor for a month in 1918. And although he didn't write *The Great Gatsby* until 1924, some scenes are just specific enough that you feel you could go to Louisville and find the places he mentions.

When myth blends with history

In the book, we're told that Jay Gatsby's lost love, Daisy, and her meathead of a husband, Tom Buchanan, were married in the Grand Ballroom of the Muhlbach Hotel, which pretty obviously stands in for the Seelbach, now a Hilton hotel. The June day they wed was so hot that somebody fainted.

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In a volume on the history of the Seelbach, concierge and amateur historian Larry Johnson wrote that Fitzgerald got to know the Seelbach quite well while stationed in Louisville.

"On weekend passes, (Fitzgerald) would visit the Seelbach, like so many other soldiers," Johnson wrote. "It was during three of his visits that, after an evening of bourbon and expensive cigars, he had to be restrained and kicked out of the hotel."

Fitzgerald's fondness for alcohol and high times is well documented. It's easy to imagine Fitzgerald enjoying himself in the well-appointed luxury of the Seelbach — he had just left Princeton, and his private eating club there, to join the military. As Johnson points out, the catacomb-like Rathskeller, a "Bavarian-inspired beer hall" below the hotel, served as the official USO for Camp Taylor.

But Johnson isn't sure just where this anecdote about Fitzgerald getting kicked out came from. He might have gotten it out of an old newspaper clipping. Or he may have heard it from a bellman who had worked at the hotel since the 1920s. "I started collecting stories back when I became bell captain," in the 1980s, Johnson said.

All the same, the story about Fitzgerald is part of Seelbach lore. According to the hotel's website, a Cincinnati mobster named George Remus, who frequented the hotel along with such notorious figures as Al Capone and Lucky Luciano, was the inspiration for Gatsby.



Carey Mulligan as Daisy Buchanan in 'The Great Gatsby.' (Photo: Matt Hart, Warner Bros. Pictures)

Finding Miss Daisy

Another of the book's settings, Daisy's childhood home, calls out for Gatsby-spotting. In the book, Gatsby describes visiting Daisy's house with other officers from the camp: "There was a ripe mystery about it, a hint of bedrooms upstairs more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms."

Where in Louisville would Daisy have grown up? "Local lore seems to point to Cherokee Road as the probable setting for where Daisy lived," said Michael Johmann, assistant professor of humanities at the University of Louisville. "Cherokee Triangle does match the neighborhood in the book."

In a Courier-Journal article from 1987, writer Ira Simmons speculated that Daisy's family might have lived in that section of town — he even named an address, 2427 Cherokee Parkway, which could have served as the basis for Daisy's house.

The only problem with this reverie: There's no evidence to prove that Fitzgerald ever visited that house, or any other in Louisville. It was common for civilians and officers to mix at social events — there just isn't any record of Fitzgerald on the scene.

We do know, however, that Fitzgerald got around socially in Montgomery, Ala., where he was stationed in the summer of 1918. It was in Montgomery that he met Zelda Sayre, who wouldn't consent to marry him until after the publication of his first novel, two years later.

As for the June wedding and the cool bedrooms, Fitzgerald was stationed at Camp Taylor in March, during an infamously cold winter. Andrew Turnbull's 1962 biography describes Fitzgerald marching his company through town in a blizzard. Fitzgerald had to raise his arm to shield his face from the blowing snow, and he failed to salute a passing general — earning his entire regiment another march into town.

The allure of Louisville

So if Fitzgerald experienced Montgomery in the summer heat — and if he had his own memories of falling in love with an enchanting local girl there — why didn't he set the backstory between Gatsby and Daisy in that city?

"Have you stayed at the Seelbach?" asked Michael Crain, the humanities chair at duPont Manual High School in Louisville, when I asked him this question. "You stay there and you get a real sense of what Louisville was like 60, 70, 80 years ago. I don't think Montgomery is going to give you that old Southern glamour."

Louisville, Crain went on, was an important cultural and commercial hub. The name would have had romance attached to it for Fitzgerald's readers.

Generations of high school students have read *The Great Gatsby*. And, like its haunted protagonist, Crain's students are likely to look back on their youth in Louisville with wistful longing.

"When you're young you tend to romanticize this beautiful past," he said. "You can get trapped by that and think that's all life is, and that's not all life is."

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