

A Reader's Guide



Gatsby's Girl

by Caroline Preston

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"Preston employs immaculate research and a rich imagination . . . A fascinating rendering of the tragedy that was Fitzgerald's life and of the young woman who was the catalyst for so much of his glorious body of work." — *Library Journal*, starred review

About the Book

She was two months past her sixteenth birthday, a rich man's daughter who had been told she was pretty far too often for her own good. He was nineteen years old, a scholarship student at Princeton. They met at a country club dance in St. Paul, Minnesota, in January 1916.

Ginevra was F. Scott Fitzgerald's first love, but the relationship wouldn't last. After throwing him over with what he deemed "supreme boredom and indifference," she would become the model for many of Fitzgerald's fictional heroines, including Isabelle in *This Side of Paradise* and Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*.

In this wholly captivating novel, Caroline Preston deftly imagines Ginevra's sometimes charmed, sometimes troubled life, from her sparkling youth in Chicago high society during the Jazz Age through marriage and motherhood and turns of fate.

"A wonderfully elegiac novel that evokes the tenor and times of the 'Lost Generation' . . . marvelous." — *Denver Post*

"Should be read by anyone interested in Fitzgerald's work [or] the times in which he lived." — *Book Page*

About the Author

Caroline Preston is the author of two previous novels, *Jackie by Josie*, a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year, and *Lucy Crocker 2.0*. A graduate of Dartmouth College, she earned her master's degree in American civilization at Brown University. She has worked as a manuscript librarian at the Houghton Library at Harvard and the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts.

Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups as well as provide a deeper understanding of *Gatsby's Girl* for every reader.

1. For the epigraph of *Gatsby's Girl*, Caroline Preston offers a line from F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel *The Great Gatsby*: "He talked a lot about the past and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy . . ." How does Fitzgerald's comment on Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan also bring to mind Preston's account of the relationship between Fitzgerald and Ginevra Perry? How might Fitzgerald's fiction writing have been a way for him to recover something of his own past?
2. As Preston explains in her author's note, the character of Ginevra Perry is based partly on F. Scott Fitzgerald's first real-life love, Ginevra King, and partly on his fictional creation Josephine Perry. Why do you suppose Preston chose fiction as a way to examine the romance between Ginevra and Scott? What artistic freedom does fiction offer that nonfiction does not? How might this have been a different book had it been history rather than historical fiction?
3. *Gatsby's Girl* follows Ginevra Perry from her early teenage years through late life. What is your impression of her at the beginning of the book, during her friendship with Scott? How does your perception of Ginevra change over time? How would you describe her life? Are there elements of tragedy in it?
4. Ginevra Perry is the daughter of a successful Chicago businessman. What privileges do her father's status and money afford her? Alternatively, what privations are inherent in her upbringing? How are both Ginevra and Scott shaped by their perceptions of social class?
5. Why does Ginevra Perry throw Scott over? Can the end of their romance be ascribed simply to the fickleness of youth, or does Preston present other factors that may have contributed to their breakup?
6. The interplay between fact and fiction figures prominently in Preston's novel: Scott reinvents Ginevra as various characters in his novels; Ginevra's son Avery envisions his mother as a real-life version of the film star Myrna Loy; the novel itself offers fictional recreations of actual events. How does Preston balance reality and imagination in the novel?

7. Preston gives fascinating details about Chicago society in the 1920s and the effervescent optimism of the Jazz Age. What comment does the novel make on the legacy of the Jazz Age? How does the book work as a commentary on the literary legacy of F. Scott Fitzgerald?
8. Ginevra marries the aviator Billy Granger, who seems to her to be heroic in ways that Scott is not. Do you understand her choice? Would you have chosen the same? Do you feel Ginevra's later attitudes toward Billy are justified?
9. Consider Ginevra's relationships with Scott, Billy, Julian, and John. Is any single relationship wholly fulfilling? What does each offer her? Which man do you suppose sees her most clearly, understands her best, and why?
10. Ginevra considers herself a bad mother who is responsible for her son Avery's psychological problems. Do you agree with her opinion? Do you think Ginevra is changed by Avery's struggles?
11. When Ginevra and Scott finally meet again at the Beverly Wilshire in Los Angeles, Scott says to her, "I've faithfully avoided seeing you all these years . . . I wanted to keep my illusion of you perfect." Do you think Ginevra was ultimately worthy of his prolonged interest and attention? Why has Scott so carefully preserved his memory of her? Is he more interested in who she was or what she symbolized?
12. At the end of the book, Ginevra's daughter says that her mother was "mute on the subject of F. Scott Fitzgerald." Why do you think that Ginevra hid Scott's letters and refused to talk about their romance? What regrets do you think Ginevra felt at the end of her life?
13. If you have read F. Scott Fitzgerald's own work, what similarities are there between Ginevra Perry and Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* or Josephine Perry in Fitzgerald's *The Basil and Josephine Stories*? What differences are there?
14. How have your perceptions of F. Scott Fitzgerald and his works changed after reading Preston's novel? In what ways could *Gatsby's Girl* be considered a response to *The Great Gatsby*?

A Conversation with Caroline Preston

What prompted you to write a novel based on F. Scott Fitzgerald's romance with Ginevra King?

The inspiration for *Gatsby's Girl* came in the summer of 2001 when I was at Ragdale, an artists' colony in Lake Forest, Illinois. I was flipping through a history of Lake Forest and came across a photograph of an elegant Georgian mansion dropped in the middle of a treeless prairie. The caption read: Home of banker Charles King. F. Scott Fitzgerald was smitten by his daughter, Ginevra, and made an unhappy visit there in 1916. She later provided the inspiration for Daisy Buchanan.

I found myself thinking about Ginevra King for the rest of the day. Who was she, and what happened to her after she broke off her relationship with Fitzgerald when she was seventeen? How did she feel about appearing again and again in Fitzgerald's fiction? I called the archivist at Lake Forest College and left a voicemail message asking if he had any information about Ginevra King. Two hours later, I heard a knock on my studio door, and there was the archivist with a stack of books and magazine articles. I felt as if the idea for a novel had literally been delivered to my doorstep.

How did you research *Gatsby's Girl*?

I started with the Fitzgerald novels and short stories that had characters who were based on Ginevra King. In addition to Isabelle in *This Side of Paradise* and Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*, there is Marjorie in "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" and Judy Jones in "Winter Dreams." Also, Fitzgerald wrote the Josephine stories in the early 1930s, a series of stories about a spoiled Lake Forest girl named Josephine Perry, who was inspired by his memories of Ginevra.

Fitzgerald was a fanatical record keeper. His letters, scrapbooks, and diaries at the Princeton library were a wonderful source of information. There are two pages in his scrapbook dedicated to Ginevra, with photographs, one of her handkerchiefs, a clipping about her visit to St. Paul in 1915, and the invitation to her 1918 wedding to William Mitchell. At the bottom of the page he wrote, with typical self-irony, "The End of a Once Poignant Story."

My mother grew up in Lake Forest, and she was able to provide some juicy details about the social life there in the 1920s.

Were you able to read their love letters?

That's an interesting story. Fitzgerald asked Ginevra to destroy his love letters in 1917, after she had jilted him. Ginevra wrote Fitzgerald that she had disposed of them, adding callously, "I never did think they meant anything." It's really tragic that his love letters didn't survive —there were dozens of them, and some of them were thirty pages long.

Fitzgerald not only kept Ginevra's letters but had them typed and bound into a notebook that was over two hundred pages long. It's almost as if he had her letters turned into a novel he could pull off the shelf and read. In 1950, when Fitzgerald's daughter, Scottie, was organizing his papers to donate them to Princeton, she found the notebook of Ginevra's letters and returned them to her.

For the next forty years, the whereabouts of Ginevra's love letters were unknown. Then, in 2003, the notebook turned up. Ginevra King's daughter and granddaughters had donated it to Princeton.

So after working on my novel for two years and imagining what her letters had said, I finally read them.

Were they a surprise?

Yes and no. I got more of a sense of her personality — she was irreverent and smart. The letters are filled with details about her daily life — her friends, schoolwork, clothes, the parties she went to, the music she listened to, the slang she used. I also got a sense of Fitzgerald's letters to her. He frequently accused her of flirting with other boys and asked her nosy questions about how much she weighed or whether she smoked in public. You could tell that she enjoyed his attentions for a while but then started to think he was a pest.

So is *Gatsby's Girl* a factual account of Ginevra King's life?

Once again, the answer is yes and no. The heroine of *Gatsby's Girl* is named Ginevra Perry, inspired by both Ginevra King and Josephine Perry.

The romance between Ginevra Perry and F. Scott Fitzgerald in my novel is based on the actual events of his relationship with Ginevra King. There is the meeting at the St. Paul country club, the letters, his disastrous visit to her parents' house in Lake Forest in 1916, and the breakup. There is also the visit with Zelda to the World's Fair in 1933, and Ginevra's final meeting with Fitzgerald at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in 1937.

But the rest of Ginevra Perry's story is my invention. Ginevra King had no interest in Fitzgerald's novels and seems barely to have read them. Ginevra Perry, on the other hand, searches Fitzgerald's writings obsessively for descriptions of herself.

Ginevra Perry's life is much messier and more complicated than her namesake's. There is an unhappy early marriage, a child with mental illness, and a love affair that inflicts terrible damage on her family. Messes and complications are what make good novels, after all.

***Gatsby's Girl* isn't the first time you've written about real people in novel form. Your first novel, *Jackie by Josie*, is about a graduate student doing research on the life of Jackie Kennedy. What attracts you to using real people in your novels?**

I studied American history in graduate school and worked for fifteen years as an archivist. When I was cataloging papers, I would often fall into a reverie, imagining what the writer had looked like, what real stories were hidden in a bundle of yellowed letters. Finally I decided to quit my library job and write those stories down.

Why is the novel called *Gatsby's Girl*?

I think Jay Gatsby's romanticism and yearning for the indifferent and unobtainable Daisy Buchanan were based on Fitzgerald's feelings for Ginevra King.

The epigraph for *Gatsby's Girl* is from *The Great Gatsby*: "He talked a lot about the past and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy." In the same way, Fitzgerald seemed to revisit his relationship with Ginevra again and again in his fiction, as if he were trying to recapture his younger self.

For Further Reading

The following books may be of interest to readers who enjoyed Caroline Preston's novel, *Gatsby's Girl*:

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Basil and Josephine Stories*

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up* (featured in [The Best American Essays of the Century](#))

[Monique Truong, *The Book of Salt*](#)

[Penelope Fitzgerald, *The Blue Flower*](#)