

SCOTT FITZGERALD:
A BIOGRAPHY

Jeffrey Meyers

HarperCollins / 400 pages / \$27.50

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD:
A LIFE IN LETTERS

Edited by Matthew J. Bruccoli

Charles Scribner's Sons / 503 pages / \$30

HEMINGWAY:
A LIFE WITHOUT CONSEQUENCES

James R. Mellow

Addison-Wesley / 704 pages / \$15 paper

reviewed by DONALD LYONS

I liked to walk up Fifth Avenue and pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that in a few minutes I was going to enter into their lives. Sometimes, in my mind, I followed them to their apartments, and they turned and smiled back at me before they faded through a door into warm darkness. At the enchanted metropolitan twilight I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes. . . . I felt a sinking in my heart. Forms leaned together in the taxis as they waited, and voices sang, and there was laughter from unheard jokes, and lighted cigarettes made unintelligible circles inside. Imagining that I, too, was hurrying toward gaiety and sharing their intimate excitement, I wished them well.

Language like this comprehends not just the flush of romanticism, but a grownup awareness of romanticism's limits. But Fitzgerald has learned from Joyce's *Portrait* how to blend the two tones. However he went on to play life's hand, this writer knew a great deal in 1925. And he was, through his knowledge, a superb critic, as the Bruccoli collection of letters shows. He knew what he was doing. As he wrote to his editor Maxwell Perkins in 1924 about *Gatsby*, "In my new novel I'm thrown on purely creative work—not trashy imaginings as in my stories but the sustained imagination of a sincere and yet radiant world. . . . This book will be a consciously artistic achievement." (We can see where Meyers found his insight.) When the book was done, he wrote to John Peale Bishop, about a certain vagueness in Jay Gatsby, "You are right about Gatsby being blurred and patchy. I never at any one time saw him clear myself—for he started as one man I knew and then changed into myself—the amalgam was never complete in my mind."

His June 1926 letter to his new friend Ernest Hemingway about an early version of *The Sun Also Rises* spots weaknesses that were to manifest themselves in every Hemingway opus: he points to Hemingway's "tendency to envelope [*sic* throughout Scott's poorly spelled letters] or (as it usually turns out) to *embalm* in mere wordiness an anecdote or joke that casually appealed to you," to his "condescending *casualness*," to his "24 sneers, superiorities, and nose-thumbings-at-nothing," to his "elephantine facetious-

The 1920s will stand as the century's best decade for American prose, but the time was its own worst enemy. Edmund Wilson casually posed the problem when he wrote, "I find I am a man of the twenties. I am still expecting something exciting: drinks, animated conversation, gaiety, brilliant writing, uninhibited exchange of ideas." Tellingly, he put the drinking before the writing. The decade's most characteristic writers metastasized much messy drinking and living into art; some recent writing about the period demetastasizes the art back into booze.

A case in point is Jeffrey Meyers, a prolific biographer who treats Scott Fitzgerald's writing as the excrescence of a misspent life. He makes a partial exception for *The Great Gatsby* (1925), where the author "uses fiction to tell his own story—reflecting on the superior

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and brutal qualities of the rich and on the impossibility of becoming one of them—but it is now truly *invented* fiction, not something carelessly cobbled together from diaries and letters and clever remarks." He gives the names of some "real-life models" for the characters but allows that the novel "transcends Fitzgerald's personal life and brilliantly expresses some of the dominant themes in American literature." After these patronizing bromides, Meyers turns happily to Fitzgerald's sins, his "worship of youth, his sexual naïveté, attraction to money, alcoholism, self-pity and lack of dedication to his art." With noises of disapproval, the rest of this dismal book chronicles every last erotic fumble and drunken nastiness of poor Fitzgerald, who died in 1940 at the age of 44 in the Hollywood he was in the act of capturing so well in the unfinished *Last Tycoon*.

After such lame praise and facile blame, it is well to summon up the sound of *Gatsby* to remind ourselves of the art of it, the joy of it. Here is the novel's narrator, Nick Carraway:

ness." He finds heroine Brett Ashley bookishly unreal and hero Jake Barnes less "like an impotent man" than "like a man in a sort of moral chastity belt." Fitzgerald is frequently accused of blindly hero-worshipping Hemingway's virile self-confidence; whatever the justice of that charge, it is clear that Fitzgerald the critic looked at Hemingway the writer without blinders.

It is no news that Fitzgerald wrote eloquent and beautiful letters; his late letters to his daughter are famous. But this remarkably copious and brilliantly edited collection, which includes letters to Fitzgerald, too, establishes something else: Fitzgerald was his own best chronicler. Literally, all one needs to know is here; with a minimum of ingenuity, a reader can construct his own interactive Fitzgerald biography, and he can do so while keeping company solely with the lovely language of Fitzgerald.

Of course, intelligent biographies, books that know what art is and what life is, are possible. James R. Mellow's book on Hemingway is such a book; it is the third in a trilogy of books about twenties modernists, the previous two centering on Gertrude Stein and on Fitzgerald. Mellow's snooty-sounding subtitle in fact comes from "Soldier's Home," a story about a Great War veteran finding life back with his parents difficult. It is one of the finest stories in Hemingway's first—and likely his best—book, the 1925 collection *In Our Time*.

In Paris in the early twenties—Paris was for Hemingway what New York was for Fitzgerald, a guiltless escape from the Middle West—Hemingway was looking back to his familial experiences in Illinois and to his wartime experiences in Italy and was chiseling them into art. He was an extremely conscious artist, a young writer in whom the Parisian weather and the lessons of Gertrude Stein about verbal sparseness and emotional indirection and the lessons of Cézanne about spatial geometries were fusing with his memories at an intense heat. What is surprising about Hemingway is how much of his writing is about writing. Mellow reminds us that Nick, the fisherman hero of "Big Two-Hearted River," the elusively beautiful story that concludes *In Our Time*, is not just a man escaping some unspecified

awful past and healing some unspoken wound, but is a writer. The hero of *The Sun Also Rises* is a writer, if a journalist (as was Hemingway, of course); more covertly, all the analysis of bullfighting is a metaphorical analysis of writing. And how much of later (and poorer) Hemingway is about writers and writing! *Green Hills of Africa* discourses at great length on the subject; *For Whom the Bell Tolls* has a writer for hero, and so forth.

Mellow sees that fiction is a "complex weave of life circumstances, stray knowledge, unbidden psychological motivations, old hurts, new fears, grievances real or imagined, mere coincidences, suppressed rivalries, the constructive urge." His is a wise, sane voice unwilling to reduce art to gossip, insisting that "it is in the distinctions between the life and work that one is more likely to find those clues that suggest a writer's motivations, the exercise of the creative mind." He reminds us, for instance, that literary epiphanies "have their origins in the mundane world, in the banalities of dusty journeys, cheap hotels, sweltering nights, noise, crowds, personal animosities." He is thinking of the differences between Hemingway's real discovery of bullfighting and that discovery as rendered in *Sun Also Rises*, but his generalization is richly useful. Reading Mellow is like reading a Victorian sage, like reading Elizabeth Gaskell on Charlotte Brontë or reading George Eliot on anything. Amid today's welter of tabloid biographies he offers a high pleasure.

But finally writers' biographies are a drug, the detoxifying antidote to which is to go back and read the writers themselves. In "The Three-Day Blow," one of the stories in *In Our Time*, Nick talks with his pal Bill about the edgy breakup he's had with his girl; it is one of Hemingway's characteristically elliptical pieces about tensions between the sexes; it begins:

The rain stopped as Nick turned into the road that went up through the orchard. The fruit had been picked and the fall wind blew through the bare trees. Nick stopped and picked up a Wagner apple from beside the road, shiny in the brown grass from the rain. He put the apple in the pocket of his Mackinaw coat.

From Turgenev and Joyce and Stein and Cézanne and from his own gift Hemingway found a way to make the crystalline words do the emotional work of the story. The whole sad picture is miraculously in that second sentence. This was Hemingway's modernism, but it was a modernism of the sketch; he had no architectonic knack and the traditional structures of his later novels rather imprison than enable his talent.

Nineteen-twenty-five was a good year for American writers other than these flamboyant presences. Willa Cather published a masterwork, *The Professor's House*, not only a great book but a great modernist book, for it tells its tale through discontinuity and juxtaposition. Gertrude Stein rang in with the huge *The Making of Americans*, but she had done her foundation-of-modernism work long ago in 1909 with *Three Lives*. John Dos Passos published his New York City novel, *Manhattan Transfer*. And there was a towering masterwork in a pre-modernist, full-throated, massive mode: Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*.

But the special oxygen in American prose in those years was that of modernism. Writers were fusing at intense heat their living and their reading. Another epic drinker, William Faulkner, achieved the decade's last great piece of American prose in *The Sound and the Fury* in 1929, and in talking about how he did it he summed up the flavor of a lot of the time's accomplishment:

The writing of it as it now stands taught me both how to write and how to read, and even more: It taught me what I had already read, because on completing it I discovered, in a series of repercussions like summer thunder, the Flauberts and Conrads and Turgenevs which as much as ten years before I had consumed whole and without assimilating at all, as a moth or a goat might. I have read nothing since; I have not had to. . . . That eager and joyous faith and anticipation of surprise which the yet unmarred sheets beneath my hand held inviolate and unfailing—will not return. . . . I shall never know it again. □

**CHINA WAKES:
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Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn

Times Books / 408 pages / \$25

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**THE RISE OF CHINA:
HOW ECONOMIC REFORM IS CREATING
A NEW SUPERPOWER**

William H. Overholt

Norton / 431 pages / \$25

reviewed by FRED BARNES

A funny thing happened to my family—two adults, four kids—as we ate dinner last summer at the penthouse restaurant of the Sheraton Hotel in Shanghai. Our waitress, a young woman who spoke perfect English, whispered to my wife Barbara how fortunate she is to have so many children. This is not what my wife is used to hearing. Back in the United States, having four kids is often seen as hopelessly backward and even ecologically harmful. Worse, for an upwardly mobile woman, a large family is viewed as a career wrecker. But our Chinese waitress was envious. She doted on my kids, especially my nine-year-old son. She said she yearns to get married, move to America, have lots of children.

That was my brush with the most coercive “family planning” scheme in the

world, China’s one-child policy. No, the waitress never mentioned the policy, but it had to be in the back of her mind. The one-child rule not only suppresses the natural desire of parents to have several kids, it does so through abortions (frequently forced), sterilization, and infanticide. And it has produced, writes Sheryl WuDunn, “a dramatic rise in the worst kind of discrimination: that which denies females even the right to exist.” Since peasants frequently want sons and 900 million of China’s 1.2 billion people are peasants—well, you can guess what happens. Parents don’t want to “waste” their only chance for a child if ultrasound tests show it’s a girl. So they choose an abortion instead. “Before the new family planning policy, a couple could afford to raise daughters and simply try again for a son,” according to WuDunn. “Now that is no longer feasible.” The policy, rigidly enforced since 1991, dramatically boosted the ratio of

male to female births, resulting in “more than 1.7 million missing girls annually.”

In truth, the world knows very little about the one-child policy, or about the role of modern technology in effectuating it. “It may well be that in China today, the modern machine that is having the most far-reaching impact on society is not the personal computer, the FAX or even the car, but rather the ultrasound scanner,” says WuDunn. “Of the 1.7 million missing girls each year, perhaps the largest number were simply detected before birth by ultrasound and then aborted.” Yet China experts and the press have scarcely broached the subject of zealous enforcement of the one-child policy. “We didn’t notice this extraordinary event,” admits WuDunn, who covered China for the *New York Times* from 1988 to 1993 along with her husband, Nicholas Kristof. “Neither did diplomats, scholars or Chinese intellectuals. It was one of the major policy decisions of that period, but because it happened in the Chinese countryside, nobody had a clue. That is a pretty good indictment of the state of China-watching today.”

The indictment stands. As Kristof and WuDunn point out, China watchers overlooked the tens of millions killed by Mao Tse-tung’s policies, and they aren’t much better now. On the right, the big story in China is the economic boom that has spurred a growth rate of nearly 10 percent for the past decade. For William Overholt, a managing director of Bankers Trust Company based in Hong Kong and author of *The Rise of China*, the boom’s blessings blot out unpleasant aspects of Chinese life, including the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 and the one-child policy. On the left, Tiananmen Square looms large, as does the unsavory side of the free market revolution that has obliterated the legacy of the left’s former hero, Mao. In *Mandate of Heaven*, Orville Schell, a prolific writer on China (seven books), treats environmental problems as far more disturbing than coercive abortions and sterilization. “The darkest side of this economic miracle,” he writes ominously, “was probably the exploitation of China’s natural resources and the degradation of its environment.” And the left wonders why it’s wound up on the dungheap of history!

Kristof and WuDunn—he’s a Harvard

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