



## Reading Group Guide

### Discussion Questions

1. When did you first read *The Great Gatsby*? How has your interpretation of the novel changed since then?
2. Popular culture has rendered Fitzgerald in archetypal terms: the great artist, the doomed lover, the tragic drunk, the abusive husband. *So We Read On* gives us a window into the life of the man before he became an icon, showing us the nerdy Minneapolis kid who never quite fit in, the teenager who got into Princeton but couldn't manage to graduate, the young man who enlisted in the army but never saw combat, the writer struggling to get himself noticed in the cruelest of cities (New York). How has Corrigan's book shaped your view of this much-mythologized writer? What connections might you draw between Fitzgerald and his (anti)hero, Jay Gatsby? What about his narrator, Nick Carraway? In what sense do you see the themes and concerns of his personal life mapped onto his greatest novel?

3. Corrigan mentions that an early version of *Gatsby* was told by an omniscient narrator. Why do you think Fitzgerald chose ultimately to tell the story in retrospect, through the eyes of Nick Carraway?
4. Fitzgerald himself thought that the sales of *Gatsby* were hurt by the fact that there are no sympathetic women characters in the novel. What do you think? What is the place of women in *Gatsby*? How does the novel regard the emancipated "flapper" figure of the 1920s?
5. Corrigan notes that, unlike most of its peers in the American canon, *Gatsby* is a novel that foregrounds class instead of race, and she calls *Gatsby* "America's greatest novel about class." Do you agree? What determines class and status in *Gatsby*, and are these qualities fluid or fixed, or some combination of the two? What does the novel ultimately think about "The American Dream" of rising up through hard work? How does *Gatsby*'s story comment on that dream?
6. *Gatsby* was written during a time when many native-born white Americans were concerned about the rising number of immigrants in the country as well as the rising population of African-Americans in big cities like New York. Where does the novel stand on issues of immigration and race? In the 1930s, with the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe, Fitzgerald was criticized for the character of Meyer Wolfsheimer. What do you think of that character?
7. The two most famous film adaptations of *Gatsby* (from 1974 and 2013) focus on the romance between Gatsby and Daisy. Are these two the leads in a great love story, in your reading, or does the novel take a darker view of the forces that draw them together?
8. When we first meet Gatsby at the end of Chapter 1, he's stretching his arms out to the green light at the end of Daisy's dock across Long Island Sound. Corrigan says that everyone in the novel is stretching out their arms for someone or something out of their grasp. Why? What are the principle characters reaching for?
9. Fitzgerald called *Gatsby* "a novel of New York life." How does America's premiere city of the 1920s figure in the novel?
10. What do the famous last words of *The Great Gatsby* mean? *So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past?*
11. Is there such a thing as "The Great American Novel"? Do you think *The Great Gatsby* qualifies? Why or why not?

## A Conversation with Maureen Corrigan

1. When/how did the idea for *So We Read On* occur to you, and how long did it take to finish?

I can tell you the exact time and place that inspiration struck: shortly before midnight on Thanksgiving Eve, 2010. My husband told me I should write a book on *Gatsby* as we were walking out of The Public Theater in New York. We had just seen a 7 hour production of *Gatz* performed by The Elevator Repair Service Theater Company and I was talking nonstop about the novel--how very funny it is and also what a strange and slippery reading of America it presents. My husband said right then and there that my next book should be on *Gatsby*. Once in a while he's right. I turned in the manuscript of *So We Read On* three years later.

2. You've devoted your life to the written word in more ways than one – as a critic, an English professor, and a writer (triple threat!). What were some of the early reading experiences that got you hooked?

When I was a first-grader in the early nineteen-sixties, I remember my father taking me to the book department of Macy's Department Store on 34<sup>th</sup> Street. (Department stores had separate book departments back in the olden days.) I'd asked him to buy me my own copy of the "Dick and Jane Reader" that we were using in school. (We kids had to leave our books in our desks everyday and I wanted to read ahead.) That's a powerful memory for me about the pull of stories. A couple of years later, I got my first Nancy Drew book, *The Ghost of Blackwood Hall*, in my Christmas stocking and got hooked for life on mysteries. I fell seriously in love with Dickens as a teenager; in fact, my dream for when I'm finally put out to pasture as a book critic and English professor is to sit on a

porch somewhere and read all of Dickens' novels slowly, in chronological order. Fitzgerald, by the way, revered Dickens too; his favorite Dickens novel was *Bleak House*.

3. It's rare to read a work of literary criticism (i.e. a book about books) that's accessible and personal in the way that yours is. Was that a difficult balance to strike? What writers do you look to for inspiration?

I started out as a book critic writing for *The Village Voice* in the 1980s and one of the things that was most freeing to me about writing for the *Voice* was that, if the review warranted it, I could be personal and funny and profane and enthusiastic--all the things most scholarly criticism back then disparaged. (I was completing a dissertation in nineteenth century British literature at the same time and, consequently, I was used to aping the impersonal jargon of critical theory.) *The Voice* was the greatest "writing school" back then: people like Ellen Willis, Nat Hentoff, Stanley Crouch, Joyce Johnson, and Jon Pareles were writing about books, politics, film, and music in critical essays infused with their own idiosyncratic, first-person voices. Later on, I went on to read the literary criticism of some of the great twentieth century public intellectuals--H.L. Mencken, Edmund Wilson, Alfred Kazin, Susan Sontag. While they didn't always write personally, they wrote accessibly, to that ideal audience of "educated non-specialists" that I imagine I'm talking to every week in my book reviews for *Fresh Air*, which are also often personal. The kind of criticism I most like to read is rooted in the critic's personality and experiences and, at this point in my career, I can't imagine writing about literature any other way.

The challenge I faced with *So We Read On* was juggling three stories within the main framework of the book: the story of how Fitzgerald came to write *Gatsby*; the story of the novel's incredible

“second act” after Fitzgerald’s death in 1940 (when copies of *Gatsby* were almost impossible to find); and the story of the surprising things I’ve discovered about the novel by rooting around in university library archives and through a lifetime of rereading it and lecturing on it to both college students and adults across the country.

4. What was the most surprising discovery you made over the course of your investigation into *Gatsby*? What was one of the craziest things you did in the name of research?

I had no idea, before I began seriously researching for *So We Read On*, that World War II played such a crucial role in *Gatsby*’s resurrection. During the war, the army and navy--in conjunction with authors, publishing houses, and paper manufacturers--arranged to print special paperback editions of books ranging from the Hopalong Cassidy cowboy stories to *The Odyssey*. *Gatsby* was one of the titles chosen for this series of “Armed Services Editions,” as they were called, which were distributed to the troops. That meant that 125,000 copies of *Gatsby* were distributed to soldiers and sailors overseas, in military hospitals, and even in prison camps. Quite a boost for a novel that never even sold out its second printing in 1925!

The craziest thing I did in the name of research was return to my old high school for the first time in nearly 40 years to sit in on classes reading *The Great Gatsby*. I wanted to go back to the place where I first read *Gatsby* and see what high school students today thought about the novel. The fact that my high school is in Astoria, which is a locale in *The Great Gatsby*, added to the allure of the adventure. It turned out to be a terrific experience--my sophomore English teacher is still at the school!--but when the students learned that I graduated high school in 1973, the stunned looks on their faces made me feel like Grandma Moses.

5. You mention a 2004 NEA report called “Reading at Risk” showing that fewer than half of American adults had ever read a work of literature in their leisure time. And yet, despite reading being at risk, it feels like the humanities have come under attack lately, with cuts in funding and growing anxiety about the value of the English Major in “the real world.” To put the question in a way I imagine Tom Buchanan might, “leaning aggressively forward”: What is the point of reading great literature?

In response to this Tom Buchanan-type question, I’ll paraphrase Nick Carraway: Nick says that Gatsby lived with a “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life.” Reading great literature develops our own “heightened sensitivities.” Dreamers like Gatsby pay a price for their dreams (just as English majors pay a price--in terms of shaky job prospects and lower salaries--for their choice of major), but given how limited our time on earth is, wouldn’t you rather spend it as a Gatsby rather than a Tom Buchanan?

6. Any advice for teachers trying to hook their high school students into *Gatsby*?

I think it’s a killer to try to persuade high school students to admire a book because of its language. That appreciation for the music, the sheer gorgeousness of *Gatsby*’s language comes to most readers later in their lives. I’d recommend quoting some of the 1920s reviews that I cite in my book that refer to *Gatsby* as a crime story. (Three violent deaths! Racketeers!) That approach also opens up the whole consideration of Daisy as a femme fatale and the backlash against emancipated women (those dangerous flappers) that also marked the Roaring Twenties. These days, the 1949

Alan Ladd film of *The Great Gatsby* is available on netflix and that's fun to watch (it's my favorite film version) because it's something of a film noir.

7. You cite many critics of the 20s and 30s who dismissed *Gatsby* without a second thought. As a book reviewer yourself (for NPR's *Fresh Air*), do you live in fear of pronouncing an unwise or short-sighted verdict?

I'd be a delusional idiot if I said that never once in the twenty-five years that I've been the book critic for *Fresh Air* have I erred in my judgment on a book, giving it either too harsh or too positive a review. But, that said, I think most of my reviews are right most of the time. My one area of certitude in life is literature. I second-guess myself about my judgments in most other areas, but I feel pretty confident that I'm usually right about the books I review.

8. I'm also curious about how you choose which books to review. (You must get so many!)

I get at least 200 books a week delivered to the front porch of my row house in Washington, D.C.. Inside, our basement and one bedroom have been totally taken over by thousands of books. It's a candy store for book lovers, and a vision of chaos for those who prefer their living spaces streamlined and Zen. At the start of each publishing season, I draw up a list of books to review culled from *Publisher's Weekly* and all the publishing catalogues I receive. My producer, Phyllis Myers, and I go through the list. Usually, if Terry Gross is interviewing an author, I won't review the book. (There are so many books, there's no need for duplication.) Things change, however, from week to week--that's one of the beauties of reviewing for *Fresh Air*. If I've been reviewing a lot of

non-fiction, for instance, or a lot of books published by the major publishing houses, I may try to break that streak by looking at small press fiction for the coming week. Also, surprises always continue to pop up in the mail. I've reviewed everything from the Twilight saga to scholarly books (years ago, I reviewed a posthumous book written by the English historian E.P. Thompson on William Blake and the Muggletonian religious sect). As long as I can make the review interesting to a wide audience, I can consider the book.

9. Fitzgerald came up with some pretty wacky titles for *Gatsby* and even asked Max Perkins for a last minute title change before publication – too late, mercifully. Did you consider any other titles for *So We Read On*, or did you settle on that (fabulous) title from the outset?

*So We Read On* was my first title and it's the most fitting title because the book is largely about reading and rereading *The Great Gatsby*--how America reread *Gatsby* in the 1940s and 50s and was knocked out by a novel that had garnered mediocre reviews and sluggish sales the first time round in 1925, and how that experience of rediscovery is replicated on an individual level every time someone who first read the novel in high school and thought it was just "okay" (that would be me) rereads it later in life and realizes what a masterpiece it is. Of course, I found myself neurotically tinkering with the title, mostly because my first book was entitled *Leave Me Alone, I'm Reading* and I worried about again having some form of the verb "read" in the title of this book. A friend suggested *Great Gatsby!* which I really liked for a week or so until I realized that the whole appeal of that title rested on an exclamation point. I also came up with a title every bit as bad as Fitzgerald's clunker, *Trimalchio in West Egg*. My alternative was: *Jay and the Americans*. I thought (briefly) that it was a witty way of signaling *Gatsby*'s centrality in the American canon by invoking



the name of a 1960s rock band. My agent wisely pointed out that no one under 50 would get the joke and even most people over 50 would be baffled.

10. You've certainly convinced me to give *The Great American Novel* another (and closer) read. Do you have recommendations for other great American novels that may have slipped my radar?

There are so many.

Willa Cather wrote more than one masterpiece, but I'd vote for *My Antonia*, a haunting novel about pioneers in Nebraska. It reminds me of *Gatsby* in that it's a "memory novel" in which the narrator reaches back for a person and time irrevocably lost. Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* is a novel I mention more than a few times in *So We Read On*. It's a mystery, sure, but as a mystery it's the equal of *Gatsby*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Waste Land* and other modernist texts in the way that it looks squarely and unsentimentally at a post-World War I world devoid of a benevolent God. And Hammett's language is as pared down and evocative as Hemingway's. Anyone who hasn't read Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* must do so, *now*. It's a great novel about class instability in America and the pressures of the marriage market as experienced by turn-of-the-last-century women of the upper classes. Fitzgerald, by the way, greatly admired all three of the writers I've just mentioned. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a brilliant novel that, like *Gatsby*, tells a seemingly realistic story with mythic overtones. Ellison charts the mid-twentieth-century coming-of-age of an ambitious (and deluded) young black man as he journeys from college in the South up to New York City. I think *Invisible Man* scares off some readers because it's so symbol-heavy, but I've found that students--once they crack its code--love its humor and are moved by its story of an American dream that's always deferred for its hero

To throw in a curiosity that might be more unfamiliar to most readers, I'd recommend Louisa May Alcott's *Work*. It's one of the few American novels I know of from the nineteenth century that describes the working life of a poor-but-educated woman and her scramble to keep body and soul together. Alcott herself held most of the jobs she describes: teacher, caretaker, nurse, and freelance writer. It's a bit like *Little Women* without the cozy uplift.

11. What are some of your favorite books about books? (Books that gave you deeper insight into certain authors, works, literary circles)

I love Amanda Vaill's *Everybody Was So Young* for its depiction of Fitzgerald, Hemingway and their circle on the Riviera in the late 20s, and I also love Gertrude Stein's memoir of Paris in the teens and twenties, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. I find almost everything Janet Malcolm writes is eye-opening, but *The Silent Woman*, her investigation into the many contradictory biographies of Sylvia Plath, is a book I've reread many times. Ron Rosenbaum's *The Shakespeare Wars* is terrific on Shakespeare and the latter day controversies that have shaped the publication and teaching of his work. Stephen Greenblatt's biography of Shakespeare, *Will in the World* and his latest book, *The Swerve*, about how the rediscovery of a poem by the Roman philosopher Lucretius helped kick-start the Renaissance are both revelatory reads. Sarah Bakewell's wonderful book on Montaigne, *How to Live*, is also a recent standout.

Some classic critical books written for a wide audience that influenced me to read more deeply are Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* (about nineteenth century female Gothic literature), and *Writing a Woman's Life* by Carolyn Heilbrun.

Finally, for anyone interested in the feminist and erotic subtext of those innocent-seeming Nancy Drew novels, I recommend Bobby Ann Mason's *The Girl Sleuth*.

12. If you could direct the ultimate, finally-going-to-get-it-right *Gatsby* movie, who would you cast as Gatsby? How about Daisy, Tom, Nick, Jordan, Myrtle? (actors can be from any era!)

Fitzgerald wanted Clark Gable to play the role of Gatsby--go figure! The best movie version of *Gatsby* I could imagine would be a film of *Gatz*, the amazing 7-hour performance of the novel by The Elevator Repair Service Theater Company that I saw twice in New York. *Gatz* is all about the astounding language of the novel and its casting was perfect: Jim Fletcher was just right as a Gatsby who's uncomfortable in his own skin (unlike the too smooth Leonardo DiCaprio) and Scott Shepherd has just the right meditative voice for Nick. It's the only dramatic "version" of *The Great Gatsby* I've ever seen that's worthy of the novel.