VIDEO
Marking the centennial anniversary of 'Gatsby'
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Period costumes are displayed in front of a wall-size photograph of guests at a house party in Great Neck in 1922 at the "Gatsby at 100" exhibit in Stony Brook.

The '20s roar again

Long Island Museum exhibit salutes F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Jazz Age

BY MARY GREGORY
Special to Newsday

"Can't repeat the past?" he cried incredulously. "Why of course you can!"

That famous line was delivered by Jay Gatsby, the fictional protagonist of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby," indisputably one of the greatest American novels. The book was published in 1925, and in film, theater, graphic novels and now an exhibition at the Long Island Museum in Stony Brook, its past is coming to life again, just as Gatsby predicted. "Gatsby at 100" runs through Oct. 19, and includes artworks, photographs, archival documents and even Zelda Fitzgerald's ostrich feather fan to recreate a moment and conjure an era.

'Gatsby at 100'

WHEN | WHERE Through Oct. 19, 11:30 a.m.-7 p.m. Thursday; 12-5 p.m. Friday-Sunday, The Long Island Museum, 1200 Rte. 25A, Stony Brook
INFO $15, $7 ages 63 and older, $10 ages 6-17, free ages 5 and younger; 631-751-0066, longislandmuseum.org

THE GREAT FITZGERALD

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (named for his distant cousin, the composer of the national anthem) was the quintessential chronicler of Jazz Age Long Island. He cast his discerning eye from the garret above a garage in a rented house at 6 Gateway Dr. in Great Neck across Manhasset Bay to the lavish lifestyles of Gold Coast mansions and captured a story about love, money, dreams, ambition, greed, corruption and even murder.

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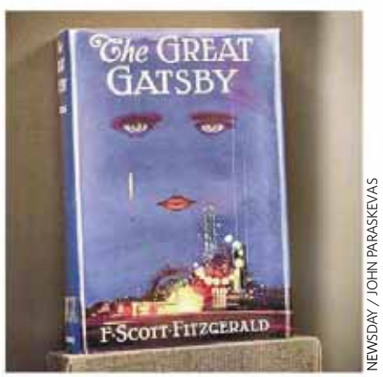
The "Gatsby at 100" exhibit runs through Oct. 19 at the Long Island Museum.



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A first edition copy of F. Scott Fitzgerald's now-classic novel on display at the Stony Brook museum.

It's a literary powerhouse.

"It's an American myth that keeps on living, because we all know it and people still have an appetite for it," said museum director Joshua Ruff, who organized the exhibition.

He hopes people who have read the book will enjoy the deep dive into its history, and those who haven't will be prompted to pick up a copy.

"For the writing, Fitzgerald is practicing at a very high level," Ruff said. "He's just a phenomenal painter of scenes and the dialogue between people. People have a chance to really see the story of the Jazz Age played out."

Though Fitzgerald named his fictional towns East Egg and West Egg, scholars point to Great Neck and Sands Point.

"Fitzgerald was very close friends with [author] Ring Lardner and spent multiple nights a week at Lardner's house where they would hang out on the porch," Ruff said.

He went to Lardner's old home near East Shore Drive and found from that spot, you can look right across Manhasset Bay to the site of Land's End, the mansion belonging to publisher Herbert Bayard Swope, who was known for holding boisterous parties. Through Ruff's wall texts, historic photographs and tableaux that give a sense of a bygone era, "you can somewhat retrace the path and some of the genesis of the novel's beginning," he added.

LETTERS, LAMPS AND LOTS MORE

Along with portraits of Fitzgerald and his wife, Zelda, there are letters from the author about writing "The Great Gatsby," first editions and copies of the book in several languages, a wall-sized photo of revelers at a Christmas party at the Fitzgerald home and Zelda's fan. Movie posters, film stills and documentation of a 1926 Broadway production give a sense of how enduring this tale has been, and Ruff and his team have included photographs and objects from the period, like beaded dresses and Tiffany lamps to suggest the pre-Depression era Gold Coast lifestyle, much of it now lost.

Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, both of whom were born far from New York, came to the city like so many others to make a name and a fortune. They ran with the in crowd, lived fast and both died young. Neither lived to see the fame "The Great Gatsby" brought.

Initially a commercial flop, the book came to prominence in later decades, especially after 155,000 copies were printed and distributed to troops during World War II. Ruff concludes the presentation with a photograph of the couple's grave in Rockville, Maryland, engraved with the poignant final line of the novel, "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

In the art museum's adjacent gallery, "Giants and Gems" highlights more than 100 of the largest and smallest works in the collection, offering viewers the chance to consider how size and scale influence artists and audiences. On Sept. 3, the museum will host "The Gatsby Gala" to celebrate the centenary and the exhibition.

"People can come dressed up in their own Gatsby way," Ruff said, proving that while you may not be able to repeat the past, you can revisit it.

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