

# Film Adaptations: The Great Gatsby

## The Book

**Author:** F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940)

**First published:** 1925

## The Film

**Year released:** 2013

**Director:** Baz Luhrmann (b. 1962)

**Screenplay by:** Baz Luhrmann, Craig Pearce

**Starring:** Leonardo DiCaprio, Tobey Maguire, Carey Mulligan, Joel Edgerton, Isla Fisher

## Context

Entertainment in the United States has often been marked by a degree of nostalgia for earlier decades and cultural moments, and the decade of the 1920s in particular has long attracted the attention of both creators of popular entertainment and their audiences. A tumultuous period in US society, the 1920s saw the introduction of new design and fashion aesthetics, the invention and extensive development of key technologies, political and cultural shifts related to marginalized populations such as women and African Americans, and the enforcement of nationwide alcohol prohibition and an associated rise in organized crime. Such topics have been fruitful sources of inspiration for filmmakers, enabling them to tap into longstanding nostalgia for the so-called Roaring Twenties in both original works and adaptations of literature from that era. Among the most frequently adapted works associated with the 1920s is the novel *The Great Gatsby*, a major work in the twentieth-century American canon that returned to the screen yet again in 2013.

The third published novel by writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925 and set three years earlier, in the summer of 1922. The book received mixed reviews and had a poorer reception among readers than was expected for a new book by Fitzgerald, who had become a major contemporary writer. In the decades following Fitzgerald's death, however, *The Great Gatsby* experienced a surge in popularity and would remain in print throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. In addition to being read by general audiences, the novel particularly endured in schools, where it became a common feature of high school–level curricula. *The Great Gatsby* likewise inspired several film adaptations during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, beginning as early as the year after its publication with the 1926 silent adaptation directed by filmmaker Herbert

Brenon. Later adaptations included a 1974 feature film directed by Jack Clayton and adapted by the acclaimed filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola as well as a 2000 television film directed by Robert Markowitz.

The 2013 feature-film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* was directed by Baz Luhrmann, an established filmmaker best known for films such as *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), a modernized adaptation of William Shakespeare's sixteenth-century tragedy, and *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). Luhrmann cowrote the screenplay for *The Great Gatsby* with Craig Pearce, who also worked with Luhrmann on several of his earlier films, including feature-length debut *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) and *Romeo + Juliet*. The film likewise marked the second collaboration between Luhrmann and actor Leonardo DiCaprio, who had previously starred in *Romeo + Juliet* and went on to play the title role of Jay Gatsby seventeen years later. Also starring Tobey Maguire, Carey Mulligan, Joel Edgerton, and Isla Fisher, *The Great Gatsby* premiered in the United States on May 1, 2013.

## Film Analysis

In adapting *The Great Gatsby* for the screen, director-screenwriter Luhrmann and cowriter Pearce faced a significant challenge often encountered when adapting novels into films or television projects: that of translating a highly interior first-person narrative into the visual medium. The novel is written in the first-person point of view of protagonist Nick Carraway, and the characters and events of *The Great Gatsby* are thus seen through Nick's eyes and interpreted through his own limited understanding of them. Forms of visual media such as film, however, make inhabiting a character's point of view more difficult and require filmmakers to adjust their adaptations accordingly. When adapting first-person narratives for the screen, filmmakers at times choose to replace the first-person point of view with a third-person limited one, following the central character or characters closely while expressing viewpoint characters' inner thoughts through dialogue, physical acting choices, and thematically appropriate cinematic techniques. In other cases, filmmakers who seek to retain the spirit, and often the words, of the original first-person narration accomplish this through strategies such as the creation of a framing narrative explaining why and how the character is telling that story and the use of voiceover narration.

For *The Great Gatsby*, Luhrmann and Pearce take the latter approach. *The Great Gatsby* begins with voiceover narration by Nick (Tobey Maguire), whose opening monologue is a modified version of the opening of the original novel. As the

scene progresses, the film reveals that Nick is living in a sanatorium, where he is telling a doctor (Jack Thompson) about his experiences in the summer of 1922. Nick tells the doctor that after taking a job on Wall Street, he moved to a small cottage in the Long Island community of West Egg, where he lived next to a mansion owned by a man known as Jay Gatsby (Leonardo DiCaprio). Nick goes on to explain that the events of the summer truly began when he visited his cousin Daisy Buchanan (Carey Mulligan) and her husband, Tom (Joel Edgerton), who lived in the neighboring community of East Egg. Nick continues to narrate as the film depicts his reunion with Daisy and Tom, first meeting with golfer Jordan Baker (Elizabeth Debicki), and discovery that Daisy and Tom's marriage is an unhappy one due in part to Tom's infidelity. The scene then returns to the sanatorium, where Nick tells the doctor that he feels incapable of talking about the events that followed. The doctor encourages him to write about his memories instead, and Nick does so.

Following the film's opening, the bulk of *The Great Gatsby* is presented as Nick's writings about his past experiences, while the portion of the film taking place in the sanatorium forms a framing narrative that surrounds it. That strategy not only enables Luhrmann and Pearce to retain portions of Nick's commentary from the novel but also allows the film to emphasize the extent to which the other characters are seen through the lens of Nick's personal experiences. The film briefly revisits the sanatorium on several occasions, allowing Nick to clarify or expand upon the points he has made in his narrative, before returning for a longer scene at the film's conclusion. While Nick is presented as unable to talk about or truly cope with his past experiences at the start of the film, the process of writing and discussing his memories grants him a degree of closure, and the film ends only after he has both completed his manuscript and given it its decisive title.

Despite the emphasis on Nick through the narration and the film's overall fidelity to the events of Fitzgerald's novel, Luhrmann's *Great Gatsby* nevertheless diverges somewhat from the novel at times, shifting its focus from Nick to other characters on rare occasions. Perhaps the most notable departure from the novel occurs late in the film, after Gatsby claims responsibility for a car accident, truly caused by Daisy, that resulted in the death of Tom's mistress, Myrtle Wilson (Isla Fisher). In the novel, Gatsby's murder at the hands of Myrtle's husband occurs while Nick is not present and therefore is not depicted in the text; rather his body is discovered in his swimming pool by his employees and Nick some time after he is shot, and Nick learns of the events leading up to the murder only by speaking to other characters, who fill in limited details. The film, however, depicts Gatsby's death onscreen: after Gatsby exits his swimming pool to take a phone call, which he believes to be from Daisy but is truly from Nick, George Wilson (Jason Clarke) shoots Gatsby and then himself. Fatally injured, Gatsby falls backward into his pool while Nick, having heard the gunshots over the telephone, frantically asks if everything is all right. While the film's treatment of Gatsby's death diverges from the novel in its presentation and its break from Nick's narrative perspective, those changes prevent the title

character's death from occurring off-screen and thus enable the filmmakers to bring Gatsby's story to a conclusion that feels more final.

## Significance

Luhrmann's *Great Gatsby* premiered in New York City on May 1, 2013, and opened in theaters throughout the United States on May 10. The film likewise played in numerous international theaters and became the first film to be screened at that year's prestigious Cannes Film Festival. Following its release, *The Great Gatsby* proved to be a moderate financial success, ranking second in the United States during its opening weekend and ultimately grossing more than \$144 million domestically. The film was Luhrmann's highest-grossing film to that point in US theaters and exceeded the US gross of his previous film, 2008's *Australia*, by nearly \$100 million. *The Great Gatsby* also grossed more than \$200 million outside of the United States, with particularly strong performances in Luhrmann's native Australia as well as in the United Kingdom, Russia, and Germany.

The critical response to *The Great Gatsby* was mixed, with critics generally disagreeing on whether the visual excess that is a hallmark of many of Luhrmann's films meshed well with the 1920s decadence represented in the original narrative or detracted from it. Reviewers' opinions of the film's acting likewise differed, with some praising stars such as DiCaprio and Mulligan for their performances and others arguing that the actors failed to give their characters adequate depth. Critics generally found the film to be a largely faithful adaptation of the original novel, with the exception of the added framing narrative. However, reviewers such as the *Telegraph's* Charles Moore argued that the film's faithfulness to the novel is ultimately detrimental, as the filmmakers present the events of the novel in a straightforward manner but lose sight of its thematic focus.

Despite its varied critical reception, *The Great Gatsby* was nominated for a variety of awards following its release. The film was widely acclaimed for its production design and costuming, winning Academy Awards and British Academy of Film and Television Arts Awards in those categories. In addition, *The Great Gatsby* was particularly well received by Australian award-granting bodies, winning awards including best film and best direction from the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts and nominations from groups such as the Australian Film Critics Association. The soundtrack to the film likewise attracted significant critical acclaim, earning multiple Grammy Award nominations.

## Further Reading

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