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**Editorial Observer; Jay Gatsby, Dreamer, Criminal, Jazz Age Rogue, Is a Man for Our Times**

By ADAM COHEN  
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The image of Jay Gatsby as a mysterious Prohibition-era bootlegger is so fixed in our minds that it's startling, rereading ''The Great Gatsby'' today, to realize how he was actually making his money in the end. When the narrator, Nick Carraway, picks up the phone in the final pages of the novel, he accidentally hears a message intended for Gatsby. ''Young Parke's in trouble,'' the caller says urgently. ''They picked him up when he handed the bonds over the counter.'' Not illegal liquor, it turns out, but shady corporate debt. If Gatsby were around today, he would probably be in the upper echelons of Enron.

Gatsby's powerful ability to speak to our times is driven home by the latest issue of Book magazine, in which a panel of literary experts, asked to name the Top 100 fictional characters since 1900, decisively chose F. Scott Fitzgerald's jazz-era rogue as No. 1. There are purer characters on the list, like Atticus Finch (No. 7), the crusading small-town lawyer at the heart of ''To Kill a Mockingbird,'' and more accessible ones, like Holden Caulfield (No. 2), the teenage Everyman of ''The Catcher in the Rye.'' But it is the elusive Gatsby, the cynical idealist, who embodies America in all of its messy glory.

http://nytimes.perfectmarket.com/pm/images/pixel.gif

http://nytimes.perfectmarket.com/pm/images/pixel.gifGatsby has, as a television talk-show psychologist would put it, all of our issues. Long before there were late-night Abdominizer infomercials, Gatsby was a fervent believer in the gospel of self-improvement. One of the most telling glimpses into his psyche is provided by his boyhood schedule, sadly produced by his father after his death. It could have been torn from the pages of O: The Oprah Magazine, or Men's Health -- Rise at 6 a.m., ''dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling,'' work, and ''study needed inventions.'' On the same page, the young Gatsby had scrawled his ''General Resolves,'' which included, ''Save $5.00 [crossed out] $3.00 per week,'' and, ''No more smokeing or chewing.''

In the great American tradition of self-invention, Gatsby decided at an early age precisely who he wanted to be. He dropped his father's clunky, foreign-sounding name, Gatz, in favor of Gatsby, and James for the swankier Jay. A poor runaway from the Midwest, Gatsby has worked his way up to a sprawling Long Island mansion, where he gives boozy, jazz-filled parties for New York high society and drunken flappers. He dresses lavishly, claims to have been born to money and refers to everyone with the upper-crust affectation ''old sport.''

Beneath the carefree exterior, however, Gatsby understands just how sad and dark a place the world can be. Fitzgerald, who was writing in the same bleak post-World War I literary environment that produced T. S. Eliot's ''The Waste Land,'' suggests that Gatsby served in the carnage-filled battlefields of France. When Gatsby returned from the war, he made his fortune the old-fashioned way: he stole it. Gatsby's partner in crime, quite literally, was the sinister Meyer Wolfsheim, the man who fixed the 1919 World Series and wore cufflinks made of human molars.

In today's increasingly disturbing world, home to Al Qaeda cells and suicide bombers, offshore sham partnerships and document-shredding auditors, the grim backdrop against which Gatsby's life plays out feels depressingly right. It's no wonder that the last ''Great Gatsby'' revival was in 1974, tied to the release of the movie starring Robert Redford, in a country shaken to its core by the revelations of Watergate.

What saves Gatsby, and what makes him a masterful literary achievement rather than a two-bit criminal, is the driving force behind his well-orchestrated rise: that years earlier, he was a poor boy, jilted by the most popular young girl in Louisville in favor of a wealthier suitor, and he has spent a lifetime working to get her back. The callow Daisy, whose voice is ''full of money,'' may not be a worthy goal. But Gatsby's longing for her, and his willingness to sell his soul to pursue her, are the purest things in this sordid tale.

The most important image in ''The Great Gatsby'' is the color green. It is the color of America, Fitzgerald tells us, when the Dutch first landed here; the color of money, certainly; and the color that says ''go,'' that most American of injunctions. At the edge of Daisy's dock, famously, there is a flashing green light, which Gatsby can see from his mansion. When Nick first encounters Gatsby, he is alone, holding his hands up toward that light, the bright, shining embodiment of his ideal of Daisy.

The novelist Sue Miller, one of the judges in the Book magazine contest, explained that Gatsby was ''an American dreamer of a certain crass kind.'' Gatsby undeniably has his crass qualities. But the emphasis should be on the American dreamer. Jay Gatsby's world-weary idealist, who knows how messed up life can be but still soldiers on in pursuit of his ideals, is the great American type. It showed up again in Rick Blaine of ''Casablanca,'' who seemed to have bitterly put himself on the sidelines but ultimately couldn't stop himself from doing his part for the anti-Nazi cause.

And it is the United States today. We are a land of Enron and Global Crossing, and of the reformist impulse to rewrite our securities and pension laws. We have the corruption of the campaign finance system and Beltway lobbying, and a new campaign finance law, passed to try to clean it up. And we are the nation that after the debacles of Vietnam and Somalia, still views itself as having a calling to wage war on terrorism worldwide. Americans have some of Holden Caulfield's allergy to phoniness, and of Atticus Finch's unidimensional moral fervor. But mainly we are Gatsby, flawed in a flawed world, but unable to resist the pull of the green light.

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