The fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald serves as a compelling and incisive chronicle of the Jazz Age and Depression eras. This collection explores the degree to which Fitzgerald was in tune with, and keenly observant of, the social, historical, and cultural contexts of the 1920s and 1930s. Original essays from forty international scholars survey a wide range of critical and biographical scholarship published on Fitzgerald, examining how it has evolved in relation to critical and cultural trends. The essays also reveal the micro-contexts that have particular relevance for Fitzgerald’s work — from the literary traditions of naturalism, realism, and high modernism to the emergence of youth culture and prohibition, early twentieth-century fashion, architecture and design, and Hollywood — underscoring the full extent to which Fitzgerald internalized the world around him.

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F. Scott Fitzgerald at his desk, ca. 1921 (Princeton University Library).
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Preface

F. Scott Fitzgerald, defining as he did the Jazz Age, and creating and chronicling as he did the flapper in fiction, has become himself an important context virtually inseparable from two of the most exciting, complex, and turbulent eras in American history: The Jazz Age and the Great Depression. From the moment of his marriage to Zelda Sayre in 1920, Scott and Zelda became linked in the public consciousness as an idealized image of the glittering Jazz Age couple, and Fitzgerald’s writings came to represent postcards from the heart of the popular culture that had, often with the Fitzgeralnds’ help, constructed the image. As the Roaring Twenties moved toward the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed, the Fitzgeralnds, too, faded for a time from the public eye, riding the crest of the mid-decade wave of prosperity and seeking, as did many Americans, some personal “Carnival by the Sea,” then drifting aimlessly as they awaited a change for the better following the collapse of the stock market. Fitzgerald had sent public messages from time to time from Europe, where the Fitzgeralnds mostly were, and from a variety of spots in America, to which they sometimes returned, in the form of his popular magazine stories of the mid- to late 1920s that contained tales of exotically decadent, wandering expatriates in Europe. The Fitzgeralnds did not emerge again as cultural emblems until the publication of Zelda’s Save Me the Waltz in 1932 and Scott’s Tender Is the Night in 1934. Both novels told tales of personal failure, depression, and alcoholism, and when Scott and Zelda reentered the popular imagination it was as symbols of post-Crash loss and regret. As a writer Fitzgerald became a generational spokesman who wrote with what he himself called “the authority of failure.” In the end, of course, he spoke with an insider’s knowledge from Hollywood, where so many writers went to get rich quick or, as in Fitzgerald’s case, to die, even as he eulogized its Golden Age in the incomplete The Last Tycoon.

In the cases of both the Jazz Age and Depression eras Fitzgerald internalized and embodied, both reflected and shaped as well as recorded,
many aspects of the cultural and intellectual contexts of his time, crossing as he did many social and geographical boundaries in the process. Part of his success as a writer for “the youth of his own generation, the critics of the next and the schoolmaster of ever afterwards,” as he phrased it, came from his gift of being able to capture with absolute accuracy the subtleties within a wide variety of social and cultural contexts. In John O’Hara’s words, Fitzgerald was a writer who would “come right out and say Locomobile instead of high-powered car, Shanley’s instead of gay cabaret, and George, instead of François, the chasseur at the Paris Ritz. These touches guaranteed that the writer knew what he was talking about.”  

Part of the secret of what Malcolm Cowley labeled Fitzgerald’s “double vision” lies in his ability to enter many contexts with apparent ease, rendering them authentic, while at the same time retaining the capacity to see them objectively and often critically — in what Fitzgerald referred to when he characterized the “test of a first-rate intelligence” as “the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (Crack-Up 69). Fitzgerald himself, in fact, possessed the ability to hold in his mind many observed and imagined worlds in which the social and cultural contexts differed radically from each other. Again, as John O’Hara notes, he was “a sort of class secretary, except that the class included — at my guess 50,000 men and women” (O’Hara xi). F. Scott Fitzgerald in Context addresses the social, historical, and cultural contexts that are a part of Fitzgerald’s actual and fictional worlds, but it also addresses other contexts that were very much a part of the cultures of the Jazz Age and Depression eras, some of them signaled rather loudly, if in passing, in Fitzgerald’s writings, and many brought into high relief by their omission.

There has long been popular interest in the Jazz Age and Depression eras in America, an interest evident early in Frederick Lewis Allen’s Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties and in his history of the 1930s, Since Yesterday: The Nineteen-Thirties in America. More recently, fascination with the two decades has intensified, as is evident in the many cultural studies and popular culture articles and books on the subject, among them, Kate Drowne and Patrick Huber’s 2004 American Popular Culture through History: The 1920s, which includes comprehensive lists and discussions of many of the important contexts of the Jazz Age. The popular interest in historical and cultural contexts in Fitzgerald’s writing has been intense at least since the beginning of the Fitzgerald Revival in the early 1950s, but especially so since the mid-1970s. In response to a question as to why this has been true, Fitzgerald’s daughter, Scottie,
responded in this way in a 1974 article in *Family Circle*: “People read him now for clues and guidelines, as if by understanding him and his beautiful and damned period, they could see more clearly what’s wrong” – a comment that addressed her own belief that World War II had taken away an earlier sense of idealism that had existed in America, a lost idealism the causes of which, readers believed, Fitzgerald might help them understand.

Until a few years ago, the study of Fitzgerald, to the degree that it had concerned itself with contexts, had tended to work from the inside of Fitzgerald’s writings outward toward a construction of cultural contexts that could be inferred from his work. More recently, with *The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald*, edited by Ruth Prigozy, and Oxford’s *A Historical Guide to F. Scott Fitzgerald*, edited by Kirk Curnutt, a solid foundation has been established for considering from the outside inward many of the social, historical, and cultural contexts of Fitzgerald’s world, both those alluded to in his writings and those most notable in their omission. *F. Scott Fitzgerald in Context* contains careful analyses by established scholars of many, if not most, of the important social, historical, and cultural contexts of Fitzgerald’s time viewed through the window of the twenty-first century. The volume is divided into six sections. The first two sections, *Life and Works* and *An Author’s Formation*, are foundational: their purpose is not only to survey the critical and biographical scholarship that has been published on Fitzgerald’s life and works, but also to examine how and why it has evolved as it has in relation to critical and cultural trends. The following four sections – *Jazz Age Literary and Artistic Movements*, *Historical and Social Contexts in the Jazz Age*, *Popular and Material Culture in the Jazz Age*, and *The Depression Era* – examine elements of both high culture (in section III) and popular culture (in sections IV, V, and VI) in order to identify and analyze those contexts of the Jazz Age and Depression eras that have particular relevance to Fitzgerald’s work. As one of the most comprehensive collections of its kind, *F. Scott Fitzgerald in Context* is an indispensable resource for Fitzgerald scholars, as well as for instructors and graduate or advanced undergraduate students conducting research on Fitzgerald and/or the literature and culture of the Jazz Age and Depression eras.

I am deeply indebted to Ray Ryan of Cambridge University Press for his encouragement and continuing support from the beginning of *F. Scott Fitzgerald in Context* to the end. This volume would not have come into existence without his steady guidance and direction. I also want to thank Louis Gulino for his patience, generosity, and grace in responding to
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Notes

1 E. Wilson (ed.), *The Crack-Up* (New York: New Directions, 1945), 93–242. See 81. Subsequent references to this work are included in the text.


3 J. O’Hara, “Introduction” in *The Portable F. Scott Fitzgerald*, selected by Dorothy Parker (New York: Viking, 1949), xii. Subsequent references to this work are included in the text.


7 S. F. Smith, “Notes About My Now-Famous Father,” *Family Circle* 84 (May 1974), 118–120. See 120.


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Primary Source Abbreviations

ASYM  All the Sad Young Men, ed. James L. W. West III (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007)
Fitzgerald was a notoriously bad speller. Quotations in this volume taken from Fitzgerald’s letters and the Ledger preserve his misspellings without signaling them with the notation ‘sic.’ There are no silent emendations of quotations from Fitzgerald’s letters or the Ledger.