A Legitimate And Very Human Tragedy:

In the wake of World War I, a community of expatriate American writers established itself in the salons and cafes of 1920s Paris. They congregated at Gertrude Steins select soirees, drank too much, married none too wisely, and wrote volumes--about the war, about the Jazz Age, and often about each other. F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife, Zelda, were part of this gang of literary Young Turks, and it was while living in France that Fitzgerald began writing Tender Is the Night. Begun in 1925, the novel was not actually published until 1934. By then, Fitzgerald was back in the States and his marriage was on the rocks, destroyed by Zeldas mental illness and alcoholism. Despite the modernist mandate to keep authors and their creations strictly segregated, its difficult not to look for parallels between Fitzgerards private life and the lives of his characters, psychiatrist Dick Diver and his former patient turned wife, Nicole. Certainly the hospital in Switzerland where Zelda was committed in 1929 provided the inspiration for the clinic where Diver meets, treats, and then marries the wealthy Nicole Warren. And Fitzgerald drew both the European locale and many of the characters from places and people he knew from abroad. In the novel, Dick is eventually ruined--professionally, emotionally, and spiritually--by his union with Nicole. Fitzgerards fate was not quite so novelistically neat: after Zelda was diagnosed as a schizophrenic and committed, Fitzgerald went to work as a Hollywood screenwriter in 1937 to pay her hospital bills. He died three years later--not melodramatically, like poor Jay Gatsby in his swimming pool, but prosaically, while eating a chocolate bar and reading a newspaper. Of all his novels, Tender Is the Night is arguably the one closest to his heart. As he himself wrote, Gatsby was a tour de force, but this is a confession of faith.

I liked Tender is the Night even more than I expected to. As a fan of a few of his other works (notably The Great Gatsby, This Side of Paradise and The Collected Short Stories), I went into this book with a healthy enthusiasm. . . What I discovered was a story that was painful to watch
unfold and one that kept me engaged and interested in what was happening from the first page to the end.

It tells the tale of Dick Diver, his wife Nicole, and numerous other equally complicated individuals who sway in and out of their lives over the years following World War One and just prior to the rise of Adolph Hitler. Americans living in or around Paris and the resort spots of France, these are rich people, people so rich that their money has literally destroyed them. They have become those rare people who don't have to wish for anything physical, whether it comes in the dream of a mansion on a hill in some far away country, a group of friends that includes royalty and movie stars, or sexual conquests with anyone you can even momentarily desire. All their dreams have, or could possibly on a whim, come true. And so there is nothing in this life left for them . . .

It is a sad tale of likable people coming unglued, of seeing their lives destroyed and watching nobody care, regardless of their goodness. It is a story of absolute and utter desolation, finally, as the almost journalistic ending comes at you. It is like falling out of touch with someone who was once the most important person in your life, hearing vague stories about what they are up to and realizing they are getting fainter and fainter and fainter . . .

This was quite obviously a very personal book for its author, a disillusioned man who saw many of his own dreams come true early on and who was left to watch his own joy turn into boredom and finally complete indifference. This book is the nightmare that all of us hope never comes true. It is somewhat comforting, in the end, to realize that in spite of his own early death, his crazy wife and his alcoholism, F. Scott Fitzgerald's story isn't anywhere near as terrible as this one.

It is, among a multitude, one of the better books I have ever read.

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