

WEST, III, JAMES L. W. *BUSINESS IS GOOD:
F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, PROFESSIONAL
WRITER*. PENNSYLVANIA STATE UP, 2024.
188 PP. ISBN: 978-0-271-09487-8. \$39.95,
HARDCOVER

JUAN IGNACIO GUIJARRO GONZÁLEZ
Universidad de Sevilla
jiguijarro@us.es

Received 5 February 2025

Accepted 20 May 2025

The year 2025 marks the celebration of the centennial of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a text often regarded as “the great American novel” of the twentieth century. Despite its lukewarm original reception in 1925, and after a fascinating process of gradual critical reevaluation, the story of Jay Gatsby's rise and fall has ended up becoming a literary text taught and studied all over the world.

This commemoration was already anticipated with the publication of *Business Is Good: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Professional Writer*, penned by the leading expert on the writer from Minnesota, James L. W. West, III. From 1994 to 2019, this Emeritus Professor from Pennsylvania State University acted as the General Editor of the Cambridge Edition of the Works of F. Scott Fitzgerald. He has been studying the author of *The Great Gatsby* since 1970, as he acknowledges in the opening sentence of *Business Is Good*, a collection of eleven essays, six of which are new, while the other five have been thoroughly revised and expanded. He devotes each chapter to exploring specific topics he encountered as he worked, for decades, on the ambitious Cambridge project.

All these essays—partly written under the sudden limitations imposed by the COVID pandemic—do provide rewarding insights both on Fitzgerald's life and work. As is often the case in essay collections, some texts do merit special attention. Chapter 3, “*The Great Gatsby*, Broadway 1926” (32-58), is the longest piece and might well be considered the most comprehensive analysis of the dramatic adaptation of Fitzgerald's canonical novel, written by Owen Davis and

directed by a future Hollywood star, George Cukor. Issues as diverse as the cast, the critical reception, or the dramatic context in Broadway at the time are amply discussed in these pages. The three acts of the Owen Davis adaptation are scrutinized in depth, paying special attention to his “many liberties with Fitzgerald’s story line” (42). For example, George Wilson is now called Buck Wilson and works as Tom Buchanan’s chauffeur, and the play ends when he shoots both his wife Myrtle and Gatsby, who dies at the feet of Daisy Buchanan calling her name, in a most romantic fashion. West emphasizes that the play was well received in 1926 and that, in his memoirs, Owen Davis recalled it as “the best work I did” (56). This Broadway script is set to be published in the Spring of 2025 by Cambridge University Press, edited by West himself in collaboration with Margaret Daniel.

Chapter five, entitled “The Ledger as Autobiography” (70-86), offers a suggestive close reading of the different sections of one of Fitzgerald’s most difficult texts to assess, defined in these pages as “a unique literary work, unclassifiable by genre” (70). West unhesitatingly states that the ledger “can be read as the autobiography Fitzgerald never published” (70), and he immediately establishes illuminating connections with the different essays the Minnesota author wrote exploring his own life, such as the posthumous “The Death of My Father,” or “Early Success”; many of these autobiographical essays were included by Fitzgerald’s longtime friend Edmund Wilson in *The Crack-Up*, the collection he edited in 1945, five years after the author’s untimely death in Hollywood. Obviously, the links between the private and the public spheres are especially strong in this chapter and West notes that, paradoxically enough, “Fitzgerald seems to have been happiest when he was writing, but the money he earned from his work did not necessarily bring satisfaction” (84). It is worth recalling that, in 2011, West had already edited a volume entitled *F. Scott Fitzgerald. A Short Autobiography*, which included all the author’s personal essays.

In chapter seven, “Punctuating by Ear” (96-111), the author of *The Business Is Good* shows his impressive command of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s characteristic style when discussing major problems which recur in the writer’s manuscripts, such as his inconsistent use of capitalization, his preference for British writing rules (deriving from the so-called “Oxford Style”), and—quite obviously—his use of punctuation. Having spent so many years working with texts by Fitzgerald, West concludes that the author “punctuated by ear. He was pitch-perfect when it came to the rhythms of American prose, but he

had a sketchy knowledge of grammar and punctuation. His spelling might be called inspired” (99). This subtle euphemism underscores the fact that, throughout the entire volume, Professor West has decided to avoid stating that the man who wrote such moving Keatsean prose in texts like *The Great Gatsby*, *Tender Is the Night*, or “The Crack-Up” had grave spelling problems, and he even wrote incorrectly the names of close friends of his such as ‘Gertrude Stien’ or ‘Ernest Hemminway’ [sic].

Arguably, the most fascinating chapter is the last one, “The Cambridge Edition and the Cambridge Plumber” (166-180), which West devotes to discussing some of the major challenges he faced for years while preparing sixteen of the eighteen volumes in the complete works. These fifteen pages turn out to be highly illuminating, since in what he honestly terms “some afterthoughts about the Cambridge Edition” (166), he reveals problems of textual scholarship that most literary critics tend to be unaware of, thus clearly demonstrating that editing a text by a contemporary author like F. Scott Fitzgerald can be much more challenging than one might expect. West, who in 2012 published a book entitled *Making the Archives Talk. New and Selected Essays in Bibliography, Editing, and Book History*, first discusses the question of whether this already ambitious Cambridge project should have been a collected edition or a selected one. After much careful examination, the decision was finally made to include all texts available written by Fitzgerald, excepting nine short stories which the author’s daughter, Scottie, decided that “were so far below the standard that her father had set with his other work that they should never be reprinted” (170). The titles of these nine texts (all of which were published between 1934 and 1941, that is, in Fitzgerald’s late years), are listed in one of the extremely useful footnotes that appear throughout *Business Is Good*. It is worth highlighting that one of the texts unearthed in the Cambridge edition is an intriguing essay entitled “The High Cost of Macaroni,” a bitter work probably meant to close a trilogy with two other well-known non-fiction pieces, as “How to Live on \$36,000 a Year” and “How to Live on Practically Nothing a Year,” both published in 1924 in the *Saturday Evening Post*, the weekly which made Fitzgerald a household name all over the country and paid him quite generously.

Another crucial decision to be made was whether the Cambridge edition ought to be either “intentionalist” or “documentary.” For those of us not in the know regarding such editorial terminology, West clarifies that the aim of the former is “to

recapture an author's *active* intentions—the author's desire to be read and understood in a particular way" (174). In order to achieve this goal, which poststructuralist critics might obviously object to, "all surviving evidence must be examined and compared" (174). On the other hand, in a "documentary" edition "a single text, usually the first edition or the first magazine appearance, is presented without emendation" (175). Given the problems presented by many first editions of Fitzgerald's texts, West decided to provide an "intentionalist" edition.

A third major topic discussed in this final chapter has to do with the use of footnotes and the major development of technology in recent years. West clarifies that, with the gradual growth of online sources, finding information about the hundreds of references in Fitzgerald's texts has become less of a burden than it used to be in the 1990s. As an experienced textual scholar, he suggests that in the near future a website might easily host all information regarding these allusions and references. Furthermore, in the closing paragraph of the book, he wisely predicts that "the next Fitzgerald edition will be a combination of print and digital technology, or will be altogether digital" (180).

In conclusion, in *Business Is Good: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Professional Writer* James L. W. West, III offers many invaluable insights on the complex life and career of the man who authored *The Great Gatsby* one hundred years ago. West's long experience as the editor of the massive Cambridge Edition surfaces on every page of this suggestive volume, which forcefully demonstrates that—as is always the case with great artists—there are still many topics left to explore regarding the complex and fascinating figure of F. Scott Fitzgerald.

WORKS CITED

- WEST, III, James W. L., ed. *F. Scott Fitzgerald. A Short Autobiography*. Scribner, 2011.
- . *Making the Archives Talk. New and Selected Essays in Bibliography, Editing, and Book History*. Pennsylvania State UP, 2012.
- WILSON, Edmund, ed. *The Crack-Up* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. New Directions, 1945.