

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 298

### “The Lost Generation”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

*But his heart was in a constant, turbulent riot. The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night. A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the wash-stand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor. Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene with an oblivious embrace. For a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing.*

F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby*.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 298. The Lost Generation.

I'm reserving today's episode for a whirlwind tour of the most important English-language writers of the Jazz Age. There was a lot going on in the world of letters at this time, and truly I could pick any of these writers and do a whole episode just on them, but I've decided instead to do a survey of the important writers of the era. Think of this as an orientation tour. And I'll begin with the writer who is most emblematic of the age.

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born on September 24, 1896 in St. Paul, Minnesota. As you may have guessed, he was named after the American poet Francis Scott Key, best known for the poem, “The Star-Spangled Banner,” who was a distant relative. The younger Francis would eventually make his own name in the world of letters, as F. Scott Fitzgerald.

His family was of Irish descent, were Catholic, and struggled to maintain a middle-class life, not least because his father struggled with alcoholism, as would Scott himself as a grown man. He enrolled in Princeton University in 1913, and had ambitions of becoming a writer. While in college, Scott fell in love with a 16-year-old debutante named Ginevra King. They pursued a

long-distance relationship for about three years—in those days, a long-distance relationship meant you wrote a lot of letters. But Ginevra had other suitors, from much wealthier backgrounds than struggling college student F. Scott Fitzgerald. Her father told him, “Poor boys shouldn’t think of marrying rich girls,” and that was that.

Scott became depressed, then suicidal, then the US entered the Great War. Scott enlisted, was commissioned a second lieutenant. He was stationed at Fort Leavenworth, under the command of Captain Dwight Eisenhower, where he quickly wrote a novel, titled *The Romantic Egotist*, in just three months, based on his own college experiences. Scott aspired to get the novel published, then fall in battle, leaving behind his novel as his legacy. The romantic egotist, indeed.

He fulfilled neither of these ambitions. He submitted the novel to Charles Scribners’ Sons, but they rejected it, although the editor there saw merit in the project and advised Scott to revise it and resubmit.

He never went to Europe to fight, either, although in 1918 he was posted to Camp Sheridan near Montgomery, Alabama, where he fell for a Southern belle named Zelda Sayre. When Scott heard that Ginevra married a wealthy Chicagoan, he confessed his feelings to Zelda. They began a relationship, but once again Scott Fitzgerald had fallen for a woman above his station. She refused to marry him unless he could, as the expression goes, support her in the manner to which she was accustomed. And she was accustomed to a lot.

After the war ended and Scott was discharged from the Army, he moved to New York City, where he worked in an advertising agency by day and wrote short stories by night. Alas, his short stories collected over a hundred rejections against only one sale, which earned him exactly \$30. In despair once again, he gave up on New York and moved back into his parents’ house in St. Paul, where he focused on his novel, which he revised and resubmitted to Scribners under a new title: *This Side of Paradise*.

Scribners accepted the revised novel, and it was published in March 1920 to instant acclaim. Suddenly, F. Scott Fitzgerald was the hottest new writer in the United States. Magazines now offered him top dollar for the same stories they had rejected two years ago. Scott and Zelda were married in St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City just five days after his novel hit the shelves.

Everyone in American letters wanted to meet Scott and Zelda. They were famous, as much for their frequent partying, wild antics, and heavy drinking, even though this was the era of Prohibition. They treated New York City as if they were children and the town was an amusement park. They slid down banisters, rode on the roofs of their taxis, and went round and round and round in the revolving doors.

Another Minnesota writer, Sinclair Lewis, had a good year in 1920 as well. His novel *Main Street*, an examination of American small-town life, appeared in the autumn of that same year and became a huge bestseller. He followed that with 1922’s *Babbitt*, a satire of American

middle-class consumerism and conformity. In 1925, he published *Arrowsmith*, in 1927, *Elmer Gantry*, a novel about a hypocritical fundamentalist preacher, probably inspired by Billy Sunday, and in 1929 *Dodsworth*. In 1930, Sinclair Lewis was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first American to win that award. Several of his novels were adapted as plays and films.

Meanwhile, while Lewis was cranking out these novels, all of which were well received, F. Scott Fitzgerald was not doing so well. Despite their shared public hijinks, privately Scott and Zelda argued constantly. They had a daughter, their only child, in 1921 and named her Frances Scott Fitzgerald. Scott published a second novel, *The Beautiful and Damned* in 1922, as well as a short story collection titled *Tales of the Jazz Age*, and it is from this collection that the era gets its name, The Jazz Age, which I've also been using for this period. But, credit where credit is due, Fitzgerald called it first.

The Fitzgeralds were living in Great Neck, Long Island by this time. Scott adapted one of his short stories, "The Vegetable," into a play, which opened on Broadway in November 1923. He was hoping this would be the start of a lucrative career as a playwright, but the play bombed, badly, leaving Scott Fitzgerald in debt. He wrote short stories to make money and partied with the Long Island elite, whom he disdained for their privileged and corrupt lifestyles. This gave him the idea for his third novel.

In 1924, the Fitzgeralds moved to Europe. They would spend much time in Paris, where Scott would hang out among the expatriate American literary community, hobnobbing with figures such as Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and Ernest Hemingway. I spoke about this crowd, dubbed by Gertrude Stein "the lost generation," in episode 245.

Ernest Hemingway was born in Oak Park, Illinois, in 1899. During the Great War, like Walt Disney, he tried to enlist in the US Army, was refused—in Hemingway's case, because of bad eyesight—and signed up to be an ambulance driver for the Red Cross instead. Unlike Walt Disney, Hemingway actually made it to Europe before the war ended; Italy to be precise, where he was wounded by mortar fire while delivering cigarettes to soldiers on the front lines. Despite his own injury, he helped Italian soldiers escape the attack, which won him a medal from the Italians. His leg wounds were substantial; he was six months in the hospital afterward. He was just 18 years old at the time.

After the war, Hemingway landed a job writing for the *Toronto Star*, first in Canada, then as a freelancer in Chicago. Writer and fellow Chicagoan Sherwood Anderson, whose story collection *Winesburg, Ohio* had made a splash in 1919, recommended Paris to Hemingway and his new wife, Hadley Richardson, as a place where a young writer could meet stimulating people without busting the budget, Paris being a surprisingly economical place for Americans to live at the time, as we have already seen.

It turned out to be a spectacularly good idea for Hemingway. He was able to continue working for the *Star* as a foreign correspondent, while mingling among the crowd of writers, artists, and

American expatriates who hung out in Gertrude Stein's salon. In 1922, Hemingway covered the Greek withdrawal from Anatolia and the burning of the city of Smyrna, episode 196. In 1923, Hemingway, an athletic and outdoorsy type, visited the city of Pamplona, in Spain, where he was introduced to bullfighting and to Pamplona's famed running of the bulls. He took a great interest and returned to Pamplona again for the running of the bulls in 1924 and 1925.

When F. Scott Fitzgerald arrived in Paris in 1924, he and Hemingway hit it off at once, although Hemingway was put off by Zelda Fitzgerald, whom he described as "insane." In truth, Zelda was struggling with some kind of mental illness; she was diagnosed with schizophrenia. She and Scott continued to quarrel, accusing each other of infidelity. Zelda attempted suicide a few times, and belittled her husband's penis size and accused him of being gay, which in 1924 was considered a devastating slur.

I should mention a famous exchange between Fitzgerald and Hemingway, which did not take place in a face-to-face conversation, as it is usually depicted. In the opening paragraphs of his 1926 short story, "The Rich Boy," Fitzgerald wrote, "Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me." Hemingway's riposte came ten years later, in his 1936 short story "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," in which he wrote, "The rich were dull and they drank too much or they played too much backgammon. They were dull and they were repetitious. He remembered poor Julian and his romantic awe of them and how he had started a story once that began, 'The very rich are different from you and me.' And how someone had said to Julian, 'Yes, they have more money.'" Julian being a thinly disguised F. Scott Fitzgerald.

For the record, Fitzgerald wrote to Hemingway afterward and denied being in romantic awe of the rich, although he was certainly seen that way by many of the critics. It was during this period in Paris that Fitzgerald wrote and published his third novel, *The Great Gatsby*, about a nouveau riche millionaire who deploys his wealth and lavish lifestyle to win back the woman of his dreams, who had left him to marry a man with old money. The book was well received by fellow writers, including Hemingway and Edith Wharton and Willa Cather and T.S. Eliot, but did not sell very well and was criticized for its supposed materialism and dismissed as not being up to the standard Fitzgerald had set in his earlier works.

The Fitzgeralds would return to the United States, but his career would never recover. He wrote popular short fiction with happy endings to pay the bills. He suffered from alcoholism, and Zelda's mental state deteriorated to the point where she was hospitalized. He took a stab at writing for Hollywood, but that didn't work out. When the Great Depression came, his interest in the American moneyed classes looked shabby and out of step with the times; a nostalgic relic of the Roaring Twenties. He died in 1940, at the age of 44, from arteriosclerosis.

Ernest Hemingway had encouraged Fitzgerald during the writing of *The Great Gatsby*, and was inspired to write his own second novel. It was a semi-autobiographical tale of a group of American and British expatriates visiting, you guessed it, the running of the bulls at Pamplona.

The novel was *The Sun Also Rises*, and it was acclaimed upon its publication in 1926. This is the book I mentioned before, in which Gertrude Stein's remark about Hemingway being part of a "lost generation" is included as an epigraph. No less so than *The Great Gatsby*, *The Sun Also Rises* is a portrait of the lives of young people—the lost generation—of the Jazz Age, and is often cited as Hemingway's greatest work. He would go on to write *A Farewell to Arms*, published in 1929, about an American in the ambulance corps in Italy during the Great War, perhaps the most important American novel about that conflict. In 1937 came *To Have and Have Not*, a novel about fishing in the Florida Keys, another favorite sport of Hemingway's, which is really about Cuban revolutionaries and economic injustice.

In the late 1930s, Hemingway would go to Spain as a journalist to cover the Spanish Civil War. From that experience came 1940's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, about an American volunteer fighting for Republican Spain.

Ernest Hemingway would be awarded the 1954 Nobel Prize for Literature.

William Faulkner was born in New Albany, Mississippi in 1897, and published 13 novels and many short stories during the Jazz Age. He made his name beginning with 1929's *The Sound and the Fury*, and is generally regarded as the greatest writer ever to come out of the American South. Faulkner would also succumb to the temptation to write screenplays for Hollywood. It was an unhappy experience for Faulkner too, for the most part, although he did develop a close relationship with director Howard Hawks, and Faulkner would have a hand in the screenplays for two of Hawks' more notable films, 1944's *To Have and Have Not*, adapted from the novel by Ernest Hemingway and starring Humphrey Bogart, Walter Brennan, and Lauren Bacall, and 1946's *The Big Sleep*, also starring Bogart and Bacall, adapted from the novel by Raymond Chandler.

William Faulkner was awarded the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature.

And then we have John Steinbeck, born in Salinas, California in 1902. Steinbeck first attracted critical attention with his third novel, 1935's *Tortilla Flat*, but it is his 1937 novel *Of Mice and Men* and his 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath* for which he is best known. If F. Scott Fitzgerald was the writer who best captured the atmosphere of America in the Roaring Twenties, Steinbeck had a firm grasp of the lives of America's downtrodden during the Great Depression and the Dustbowl. That his novels struck a chord with Depression-era America can be seen in how they were both quickly adapted into motion pictures—by competing studios at the same time, in fact—and so we have 1939's adaptation of *Of Mice and Men*, directed by Lewis Milestone, who also directed the film adaptation of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and starring Burgess Meredith, Betty Field, and Lon Chaney, Jr. and released through United Artists, and 1940's adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath*, directed by John Ford and starring Henry Fonda, Jane Darwell, and John Carradine.

*The Grapes of Wrath* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the Novel, and Steinbeck was awarded the 1962 Nobel Prize for Literature.

Pearl Sydenstricker was born in 1892 in Hillsboro, West Virginia. Her parents were Presbyterian missionaries, and just months after her birth, they returned to China, where Pearl lived her entire childhood and adolescence, mostly in and near the city of Nanjing.

Her father, Absalom Sydenstricker, was not like most missionaries. He taught his daughter that the Chinese were her equals. Pearl grew up learning English from her parents and Chinese from the children she played with. She would later describe Chinese as her first language. In her teen years she was appalled to discover that the children of other missionaries in China didn't speak Chinese and regarded Chinese people and their culture with disdain.

She returned to the US for college, earning a Phi Beta Kappa at Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, Virginia. She returned to China in 1914, now a Presbyterian missionary herself, where she married another missionary, John Buck; she would write under the name Pearl Buck.

From 1920 to 1933, the Bucks both taught at the University of Nanjing. Pearl taught English literature and hobnobbed with Chinese writers, who encouraged her in her own ambition to become a writer. In 1930, her first novel was published in the United States, titled *East Wind: West Wind*, about a Chinese woman who enters into an arranged marriage, and her brother, who marries an American woman despite his family's disapproval.

The following year, 1931, Pearl Buck published her second novel, and the one by which she is best remembered: *The Good Earth*, which follows the fortunes of a humble Chinese farmer named Wang Lung. *The Good Earth* was the best-selling novel in the United States in 1931 and in 1932. It won a Pulitzer Prize in 1932, and Pearl Buck was awarded the 1938 Nobel Prize in Literature, the first American woman to win that prize. The Nobel committee would credit her writing with helping to break down racial barriers.

Pearl Buck would go on the question the role of missionaries in China in an essay in *Harper's Magazine* titled "Is There a Case for the Foreign Missionary?" The reaction to this article was so severe it led to her resigning from the missionary society. She left China for the last time in 1934, fully expecting to return within a few years, though circumstances changed dramatically in China over the remaining 39 years of her life, and she was unable ever to visit China again, to her everlasting regret.

Novels by white, Western authors that sympathetically portrayed non-white, non-Western protagonists were few and far between in those days, and Pearl Buck's novels have to be credited as one of the reasons for the sharp tilt of US sympathy toward China and away from Japan during the 1930s.

And while I'm mentioning American women authors, I should give at least a shout-out to Edith Wharton, whose 1920 novel *The Age of Innocence* won her the first Pulitzer Prize awarded to a woman, and actor/screenwriter Anita Loos, author of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes: The Intimate Diary of a Professional Lady*, published in 1925, the same year as *The Great Gatsby*, and like that novel, a meditation on Roaring Twenties materialism, but presented as comedy rather than tragedy. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* would be made into a stage musical in 1949, and a film musical in 1953, starring Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe, and directed by Howard Hawks. There's that name again.

[music: MacDowell, "From Uncle Remus" from *Woodland Sketches*]

In the realm of English-language poetry, I'll mention once again the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, whom we've met before. The year 1920 saw the publication of one of his most noted poems, "The Second Coming," which is not really about the Second Coming. Informed by the Great War, the 1918 influenza pandemic, and the bloody struggle for Irish independence, it's about the shape of the postwar world. This is the poem that includes the lines about how "[t]he best lack all conviction, while the worst/are full of passionate intensity," which from the vantage point of the 21<sup>st</sup> century sounds downright prophetic.

William Butler Yeats was awarded the 1923 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Thomas Stearns Eliot, better known today as T.S. Eliot, was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1888 to a Unitarian family with New England roots. He earned a bachelor's and a master's at Harvard College, traveled to Europe, where he studied at the University of Paris and then at Oxford University. He married an Englishwoman in 1915, and that same year published one of his most notable poems, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The poem is superficially the musings of a middle-aged man, although Eliot was only 22 when he wrote it, but that's like saying James Joyce's 1922 novel *Ulysses* is about a stroll through Dublin.

*The Times Literary Supplement* dismissed "Prufrock," by claiming "the fact that these things occurred to the mind of Mr. Eliot is surely of the very smallest importance to anyone, even to himself."

What *The Times* missed was that even as the Great War was just getting started, so was the post-war Modernist movement in literature, well exemplified by works like "Prufrock" and *Ulysses*, and Eliot's poem "The Waste Land," published the same year as *Ulysses*, and 1925's "The Hollow Men," which concludes with the famous lines: "This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper."

Eliot would become a British citizen in 1927, and an Anglican as well—he really got into it. In the late Thirties and early Forties, he wrote four poems collected under the title *Four Quartets*, which led to him being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948.

Later in his life, T.S. Eliot devoted himself to writing plays in verse and literary criticism. He also published in 1939 a collection of humorous poems titled *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, "Old Possum" being a nickname bestowed upon Eliot by Ezra Pound. In 1981, Andrew Lloyd Webber created a stage musical based on the collection, with the title shortened to simply *Cats*.

Novels like *Ulysses* and poetry like Eliot's were early harbingers of post-war Modernism, a literary movement that broke sharply with pre-war literary ideals of realism and objectivity in favor of a world-view in which everything is subjective and filtered through human perception in spare prose, so you get works with interior monologues and streams of consciousness and unreliable narrators.

I mentioned the American poet Ezra Pound in connection with T.S. Eliot. The older Pound was an early champion of Eliot's poetry and helped make his literary career, and was similarly an early booster of James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway. Alas, Pound moved to Italy in 1924 and became a committed Fascist.

American poet Edward Estlin Cummings, better known as E.E. Cummings, no capital letters usually, volunteered for an American ambulance corps during the Great War, like Ernest Hemingway and Walt Disney. Cummings is as well known for his free verse, idiosyncratic grammar, and his experimental use of capitalization and punctuation as anything else. Maybe I should say the absence of capitalization and punctuation. In subject matter, his poems run the gamut from traditional romance to biting satire.

One other poet I should mention, also influenced by Pound, was American Hilda Doolittle. Her father was an astronomy professor at the University of Pennsylvania, where she met Pound, who was a student there. Pound fell in love with her and they became engaged, though they later called it off. Hilda, like Pound and like Eliot, moved to England shortly before the Great War, and Pound began promoting her poetry, as he had done for Eliot, which was published under the pen name of simply H.D.

She married English poet Richard Aldington, though the marriage was an unhappy one, and they eventually divorced. H.D. took an interest in Japanese and ancient Greek poetry, especially that of Sappho. She became close to D.H. Lawrence and had romantic relationships with several men and women. She wrote novels that explored gender and sexuality and the role of women artists in a male-dominated world. After Adolph Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, H.D. became anxious over fears of another world war, which led her therapist to refer her to Sigmund Freud himself, who was still practicing psychoanalysis in Vienna, to help her deal with what many at the time would have dismissed as a paranoid obsession.

H.D. is remembered today as an early feminist and lesbian literary figure, writing at a time when such topics were barely tolerated, or not tolerated at all, similarly the case of English writer David Herbert Lawrence's 1928 novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which was also transgressive in



its treatment of women's sexuality, here a heterosexual sexuality, that the book could only be published in an abridged form. When it was finally published in full in Great Britain in 1960, the publisher was prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act.

Likewise the English writer Virginia Woolf, who published three notable novels in the 1920s, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Orlando*, which in one way or another examine the status and role of women in society. In 1929, she published a groundbreaking essay on women's role in society and the challenges facing women seeking to express themselves in the arts, titled *A Room of One's Own*. The title refers to her assertion that "[a] woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Like H.D., Woolf had both men and women lovers and is regarded in our time as a pioneering feminist writer and critic.

And while I'm talking about British writers, I should give a mention to John Galsworthy, whose writing career began in Victorian times, but he is best remembered for 1922's *The Forsyte Saga*, which was actually a set of three short novels and two shorter bridge works, all previously published but collected in one volume here for the first time. There followed a sequel collection with the same structure, 1929's *A Modern Comedy*. He was awarded the 1932 Nobel Prize in Literature, though he was too ill to attend the ceremony, and died just a few weeks later at the age of 65. In the decades following, *The Forsyte Saga* was mostly forgotten, until the BBC adapted it for television in 1967, reviving interest in Galsworthy and his work.

I need hardly mention H.G. Wells, another British writer who began his career in Victorian times, but was still very much active in the Twenties and Thirties. I've talked about him a lot, haven't I? I told you about Wells' 1936 *The Shape of Things to Come* in episode 284, where I also talked about Olaf Stapledon's 1930 *Last and First Men*. Both of these speculative novels imagine a future in which a terrible war brings down civilization as we know it, but it works out all right in the long run, as a newer, more advanced civilization rises to replace it.

These utopian sentiments inspired Aldous Huxley to challenge them. Huxley, born in 1894, was the grandson of Thomas Huxley, the zoologist whose spirited defense of Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution by natural selection earned him the nickname "Darwin's bulldog." The younger Huxley hung out with Bertrand Russell, D.H. Lawrence, Anita Loos, and Christopher Isherwood, just to name four other writers whose names have come up on the podcast. In 1937, he moved to Hollywood and made a good living as a screenwriter, but he is best remembered today as the author of 1932's *Brave New World*, a seminal work of what is now called dystopian fiction. Huxley was in some sense parodying the utopian speculations of his contemporaries Wells and Stapledon, setting out a vision of a future world just as advanced, just as peaceful, and just as prosperous as any of theirs, but beneath this placid surface lie dark and disturbing undercurrents.

Some find the social order dark and disturbing; others find it amusing, which brings me to Pelham Grenville Wodehouse, born in Guildford in 1881. He was already established as a writer

by the 1920s, famed for his comic novels and short stories. In the US, he would contribute to Broadway musical shows and dabble in Hollywood screenwriting, but P.G. Wodehouse is best remembered for a lengthy series of humorous stories and novels that began in 1915 and continued through the Roaring Twenties about a young and well-to-do upper-crust English gentleman and airhead named Bertram Wilberforce Wooster, who frequently blunders into awkward or inconvenient social difficulties—often an engagement to a young woman he has no desire to actually marry—but is rescued every time by his supremely capable valet, Reginald Jeeves. Wodehouse’s work was popular in his own time and remains popular in our time. Wodehouse died in 1975 at the age of 93.

And by the way, Bertie Wooster’s favorite writer was Agatha Christie, born in Torquay in 1890. Christie published the first of her 66 detective novels in 1921. Titled *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, it introduced her most famous character, Belgian detective Hercule Poirot. Poirot would figure in 33 of her 66 novels, although as was the case with Arthur Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes, Christie soon tired of the character, whom she thought “insufferable.” She kept writing Poirot stories but also developed other crime solvers, notably Miss Jane Marple. She published her most famous work in the Twenties and Thirties, including 1926’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, 1934’s *Murder on the Orient Express* and 1937’s *Death on the Nile*, all three of which feature Poirot, and 1939’s *And Then There Were None*, which is one of only four English-language novels to sell more than a hundred million copies. If you’re interested, the other three are Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, published in 1859, J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, published in 1997, and J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, published in 1937. (We’ll get to *The Hobbit* in a future episode, I promise.)

Christie also wrote short stories and plays. Her murder mystery play *The Mousetrap* opened in 1952 and has run continuously ever since then except for an interruption during the Covid-19 pandemic, and is still running today, far and away the longest run ever for a stage production.

Christie’s novels were regularly bestsellers. She is the most-translated individual author of all time and Guinness World Records lists her as the best-selling fiction writer of all time. Her works are frequently adapted into other media and she is routinely described as the “Duchess of Death” or “Queen of Crime” or such.

Agatha Christie died in 1976 at the age of 85, though she left two manuscripts that were published posthumously. One presents Hercule Poirot’s last case, the other Miss Marple’s.

Well. That was meant to be my list of the most important English-language writers of the Jazz Age. I meant it to be exhaustive; putting it together was certainly exhausting. Before I ruminate on what it all means, though, I want to slip in one author and one novel not originally written in English: Czech writer Jaroslav Hašek’s 1921 satirical novel *The Fateful Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk During the World War*. The title is often shortened to simply *The Good Soldier Švejk*. It tells the story of Josef Švejk, a simple Czech man living in Prague who volunteers for

the Austrian Army at the beginning of the Great War. Švejk is so enthusiastic about the war that he leaves those around him, including the reader, wondering whether this is some kind of sly mockery or if he really is that stupid.

*The Good Soldier Švejk* has to rank right up there with *All Quiet on the Western Front* as one of the most important novels about the Great War. Its absurdist take on the absurdity of war has inspired many other writers, notably American author Joseph Heller, whose post-World War II novel *Catch-22* is more or less an American version of *The Good Soldier Švejk*. Alas, Hašek died in 1923, after completing only three of a planned six volumes. Nevertheless, the story was completed by another author, Karel Vaněk. It is the most translated work of Czech literature, and the story of Švejk has been adapted many times in film, on stage and television, as a musical, as an opera, and in comic books. Statues of Švejk and monuments to him can be found in many Eastern European cities, including Przemysł in Poland, Omsk and St. Petersburg in Russia, and Kyiv and Lviv in Ukraine.

You can see in the literature of this period a clear break with the pre-war world. You'll find a similar break in music and in the visual arts. It's tempting to point to the Great War itself as inspiring this artistic reset that took place in the Twenties and Thirties, although if you look closely, you will see examples of post-war trends emerging even before the end of the war; even before the beginning of the war. It might be more accurate to say that the war accelerated a literary, artistic, and creative tendency that was already developing in Western culture.

And what was that tendency? At the top of the list of its attributes, you would have to put rejection of authority. You see a questioning and rejection of authorities in government, in society, and in religion, and you also see writers and artists rejecting the accepted wisdom of older authority figures within their own artistic realms.

Surely the loss of credibility traditional authority figures suffered during the war played an important role in this. All the older and wiser heads that young people had been taught to look up to kept insisting the war was a great and noble cause that justified the horrific violence and loss of life, even though those same authority figures struggled to articulate why the war was being fought, let alone why it was worth dying for.

But there was more going on than this. As Westerners became better acquainted with non-Western cultures, especially those of Africa, India, China, and Japan, it became harder to argue the supremacy of Western art, Western music, Western culture. Margaret Mead's anthropological work demonstrated that Westerners had a thing or two to learn from non-Western traditions, and Western artists began looking around the world for inspiration.

Sigmund Freud, who was still very much active in Vienna in the Twenties and Thirties, demonstrated the degree to which the internal processes of the human mind shape thoughts and perceptions of the world around it, which had powerful influence on literature in particular, moving writers away from objective description and into storytelling filtered through the

perceptions of its characters, known as literary Modernism, analogous to what the Impressionist painters were already exploring.

Similarly, Albert Einstein's work on relativity, which demonstrated that different ways of observing the world were equally valid, and that there was no one truly objective viewpoint further undermined authority figures and encouraged the exploration of subjectivity. Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem suggest there is no such thing as perfect knowledge. And if there is no perfect knowledge, then no authority can be the final arbiter of it, now can they?

This period, the Jazz Age, the Twenties and Thirties, is the time when you see the Western world of letters and visual arts and music begin to absorb the lessons of the twentieth century. And this question—what does it mean to be an individual in this society, in this culture, in a world of relativity and uncertainty?—will be *the* question for Western culture for the rest of the twentieth century. And beyond.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Samuel and Robert for their kind donations, and thank you to Steven for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Samuel and Robert and Steven help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we return to the topic of the unfolding war in Spain. Foreign intervention tilts the war toward the generals, as does foreign non-intervention. The Spanish Civil War, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century American writer John William De Forest was the first to use the term "the Great American Novel," referring to a hypothetical novel written by an American that best expresses the character of the American nation and its people. De Forest thought that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe was a contender. Other 19<sup>th</sup>-century American novels sometimes proposed include *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fenimore Cooper, *The Scarlet Letter* by

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville, *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain.

By the 1920s, some American writers, notably Sinclair Lewis, were consciously trying to write the Great American Novel that satisfied De Forest's criteria. Later in the century, the concept became something of a joke, with struggling writers frequently depicted in literature, film, and television as striving for this mythic accomplishment: the Great American Novel.

Several of the writers and works I've discussed today also get cited as candidates for the Great American Novel, including Anita Loos' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* But the novel of this time cited most often would be F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

This is heavily ironic, because *The Great Gatsby* was being dismissed as a period piece by the 1930s, and when Fitzgerald died in 1940, he himself believed he and his work would soon be forgotten. The book was dismissed for displaying an obsession with Twenties wealth and decadence that made it very much of its time, an obsession that became obsolete the day the stock market crashed.

But *The Great Gatsby* might better be thought of as obsessed with the obsession with wealth, which makes it very much an examination of the American psyche. Within a few years of his death, Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby* experienced a revival. By the 1970s, it was frequently taught in American high schools and universities, hailed as a masterpiece and as, yes, the Great American Novel. It was adapted for film four times, for television three times, and as a graphic novel three times. *The Great Gatsby* entered the public domain in 2021, encouraging even more adaptations and reimaginings.

[music: Closing Theme]