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Kirk Curnutt, ed. *A Historical Guide to F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 285p.

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Regarding critical texts, I have simple needs. A critical work should illuminate its subject yet provoke questions about it; even as it draws upon previously published criticism, it should breathe originality; it should serve as a reference and as an index to further investigation; it should articulate complex ideas with elegant economy; it should put into context even as it particularizes, offering both panoramic and microscopic views of its subject; it should tap rich veins of interdisciplinary sources; it should reflect exhaustive contemplation while eschewing critical “paint-by-number” pomposity; it should serve as a compact resource for students. Also, pictures are nice.

*A Historical Guide to F. Scott Fitzgerald*, edited by Kirk Curnutt, satisfies the aforementioned needs. A part of Oxford University Press’ *Historical Guides to American Authors* series, the *Guide to Fitzgerald* takes its place alongside other *Guides*, which feature American heavies such as Emerson, Twain, Whitman, Dickinson, and Poe. Organized like other volumes in the series, *Guide to Fitzgerald* follows its introduction with a brief biography, in this case by Jackson R. Bryer, whose selection of an epigraph particularly charms me. Bryer, miraculously condensing a sea of Fitzgerald biography into a refreshing pool of relevance, quotes Fitzgerald: “There never was a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn’t be. He is too many people if he’s any good” (21).

The essays in the *Guide* promote new ways to consider Fitzgerald’s classics as well as his lesser-known works. In “Fitzgerald’s Flappers and Flapper Films of the Jazz Age: Behind the Morality,” for example, Ruth Prigozy discusses the era’s (and coincidentally, Zelda Fitzgerald’s) belief that the flapper’s “most attractive quality had been her spirited unconventionality—she was never boring” (136). Prigozy then proves valid Fitzgerald’s assertion that the real-life flapper “approximates a dumb-dora when she reaches the [silent] screen” (137). Realizing that some readers are not conversant in the filmmaker lingo necessarily employed in the essay, Prigozy thoughtfully supplies a glossary of film terms. The “round moving mask on film stock that can close down to end a scene... or open from darkness into an expanding circle within which is the image,” for instance, is referred to, appropriately enough, as an “iris” (157). Ultimately, Prigozy not only answers questions about the flapper, but also invites speculation about Fitzgerald’s fashioning of female characters. Furthermore, Prigozy’s observations resonate when we consider the portrayal of women in today’s films.

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Kirk Curnutt's brilliant "Fitzgerald's Consumer World" demonstrates the value, if not the necessity, of applying a historical perspective to the authors we investigate. After quoting a few lines from Fitzgerald's "Ten Years in the Advertising Business," Curnutt reveals the futility of deciphering the lines' meaning without "knowledge of the two biographical events [the quotation] conflates" (86). Fitzgerald's job as a writer of jingles for an advertising agency constitutes the first "event," and his involvement (with John Barrymore and Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jr.) in a beauty contest underwritten by Woodbury Soap, constitutes the second (86-87). But Curnutt doesn't simply explicate. He analyzes the passage's implications, noting that "just as [consumer] goods were made to be thrown away rather than preserved, so too, Fitzgerald insinuates, his willingness to cash in on his brand name compromises the durability of his work" (87). Tying Fitzgerald to his contemporaries John Dos Passos, Willa Cather, and Theodore Dreiser, Curnutt posits that "a dominant theme of American writing between 1900 and 1940 is the artist's need to work outside of marketplace constraints" (88). Curnutt goes even further by offering us insight after insight about Fitzgerald's life and times. For example, Curnutt points to the formerly popular and now neglected work by Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows*, which "treats Christ as a supersalesman, a go-getter, a man with a talent for business" (qtd. in Curnutt 92). Curnutt then explains that "Fitzgerald satirizes the entrepreneurial appropriation of the Gospels for which Barton would be become famous, yet... dramatizes how ingrained the business ethos was in modern ideas of selfhood" (93). Even though ostensibly discussing consumerism in the Roaring Twenties, Curnutt's observations shed light on the genesis of contemporary American culture's linking religion with business.

In "Fitzgerald and War," James H. Meredith, like Curnutt, focuses one aspect of Fitzgerald's time and writing, only to have that focus expand to a clearer view of our own time. In reminding us of Fitzgerald's thwarted ambitions to become a war hero, Meredith explains some puzzling aspects of *Gatsby*, including the "inexplicable" closeness of Nick and Jay. (Along the way, Meredith offers a plausible explanation of how the meaning of "hooker" developed during the Civil War.) Unlike some writers such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald was forced to "sit out" World War I, but Meredith convincingly argues that "[Fitzgerald's] discussions of [war] remind us that wars involve many forms and that the repercussions at home are every bit as compelling as those experienced in the trenches" (208-209). Indeed.

James L.W. West III's "F. Scott Fitzgerald, Professional Author" and Ronald Berman's "Fitzgerald's Intellectual Context" provide numerous and valuable perspectives that any Fitzgerald or Modern scholar cannot afford to miss. Additionally, the

“Illustrated Chronology” near the end of the *Guide* matches key events in Fitzgerald’s life with significant historical happenings and movements. The “Chronology” might save Fitzgerald scholars time and might spare some the embarrassment of making anachronistic claims. Albert J. DeFazio III’s “Bibliographical Essay: The Contours of Fitzgerald’s Second Act” not only lists significant Fitzgerald criticism, but also notes web sites and journals dealing exclusively with the author.

In a pinch, one could use the lucid and important *A Historical Guide to F. Scott Fitzgerald* as a secondary outline for a Fitzgerald seminar. Or one might use it simply as a riveting read. Bravo, Curnutt *et al.* ✱