

Washington Post Aug. 20, 1995

SCOTTIE: THE DAUGHTER OF . . .; THE LIFE OF FRANCES SCOTT FITZGERALD LANAHAN SMITH

By Eleanor Lanahan

HarperCollins. 625 pp. (24 pages B&W photos)

Scottie Fitzgerald, along with Sheilah Graham the other resilient woman of F. Scott Fitzgerald's final phase, is poorly served in her daughter Eleanor's biography.

There's much to admire about Scottie. Daughter of the alcoholic Scott and anguished Zelda, she grew into a stable adult (thanks largely to the solid Scarsdale foster home provided by Scott's agent, Harold Ober) with enough talent to write for *The New Yorker*, *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. Even the turbulence of two divorces, one son's suicide and another's arrest for smuggling 325 pounds of marijuana into Arizona couldn't steer Scottie's life as reporter, charity fundraiser and Democratic Party loyalist off course.

Lanahan's pedestrian account, however, suffers grave problems. The story of someone of public interest solely as "the daughter of . . .," the book trudges through swamps of detail few will care about. Lanahan muddies the waters further with cathartic digressions unburdening her own conflicted feelings toward her mother. Lacking gifts for character, scene and transition, Lanahan's tedious chronology lets Scottie become vivid only in passages quoting her own words.

There lies the most disappointing twist of all, for Scottie's words reveal curious perceptions ("[Adlai Stevenson] was the absolute Democratic Elvis Presley") and an inaccurate memory. Scottie compliments her own vivid recollection of "the story by Maupassant about the woman who spent her life replacing her fake pearls," yet the necklace in question was diamond. She fondly recalls the "sonorous litany" of the conductor's chanting the stops on the New York Central 6:07 but recalls those stops out of sequence. Equally imprecise, Lanahan places Ashville, N. Car. in the Allegheny Mountains.

Touching on the tragic life of one of our greatest writers, this book is worth reading, yet proves neither absorbing nor trustworthy.