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INTIMATE LIES: F. SCOTT FITZGERALD AND SHEILAH GRAHAM; HER SON'S STORY

By Robert Westbrook

HarperCollins. 512 pp. (16 pages B&W photos)

That F. Scott Fitzgerald emblemized the Jazz Age has long been a literary commonplace. Less clear, however, is just what his Twenties were roaring about. Was it the raucous joy of a decade-long party, spirits flying upward with women's hemlines, or the desperate debauchery of the first generation facing exhausted frontiers, fresh witnesses to the horror of 30 million deaths from the entire world at war and a devastating global plague? Was it a chorus of brash energy or the wail of faith-shaken dreams crumbling into alienation, disillusion and despair?

Fittingly named for the ancestor who wrote our national anthem, Frances Scott Key Fitzgerald captured not only the tune of his times but the birth of modern America, rising from the ashes of its youthful hope. Like Gatsby, Fitzgerald bloomed out of "his Platonic conception of himself" and listened "for a moment to the tuning fork that had been struck upon a star," describing that moment in prose of celestial grace. And then it was gone, leaving him a fallen angel sinking in gin and debt, borne back ceaselessly into his past to recapture quicksilver dreams, new horizons and the love of belles whose voices sound like money.

Like his isolate Gatsby, Fitzgerald possessed the trait which made him both tragic and able to soar above the paler souls around him: boat against the current, he bore the character and dignity of someone who believed in something. In Robert Westbrook's absorbing and skillfully written "anatomy of a love affair," this is what drew the lovely Sheilah Graham to the shell of a man she met at Robert Benchley's party in July, 1937. For Graham, too, had the gift of dreaming and reinventing herself.

To the book's great advantage, novelist Westbrook, Graham's son, possesses a masterful sense of narration and his mother's reams of letters and journals. In these revisionist days when Zelda, as the principal woman in Fitzgerald's life, is often portrayed as by definition the principal victim of that life, Westbrook describes his mother with a refreshing candor.

Unlike Zelda, Graham emerges less like a Fitzgerald heroine than a Fitzgerald hero. Born Lily Shiel in London's East End to Jewish parents who'd fled Cossack persecution in Kiev, Lily lost her father at age 10 months. Her destitute, illiterate washerwoman mother put Lily into an orphanage at six. After a decade of privation, the sickly, scrawny girl blossomed into a young beauty. She came home from the orphanage to nurse her mother through the final stages of cancer, then escaped to London's West End, then America where she redefined herself as Sheilah Graham. Like Fitzgerald, whose first word as an infant was reportedly "up," but of a more practical bent, Graham climbed toward success with her pen, becoming a syndicated gossip columnist in

America's last repository of glitter, Hollywood, where, as Dorothy Parker noted, "the streets are paved with Goldwyn."

There, too, was Fitzgerald, who'd lost faith in his life but not his talent, desperate to pay for his daughter's schooling and wife's institutionalization with studio hack work. Though engaged to the Marquess of Donegall, Graham found the wounded romantic irresistible. She broke her engagement. With a reportorial vividness extraordinary in a son, Westbrook describes the couple's early dates, lovemaking and growth of trust. There were stormy moments--with an alcoholic genius, how could there not be--but each offered the other things they sorely needed. Unlike all the men who'd never seen past her face, Fitzgerald seemed excited by Graham's intelligence. He helped her fight professional battles, wrote her love poems and guided her education. She, in turn, brought Fitzgerald back to life. She helped him fight alcohol, found him tranquil places to live and work, inspired him, sought loans to buy him writing time and was at his side when he bolted to his feet, clutched her mantelpiece and fell dead of a heart attack.

Perhaps because her poor origins disappointed Fitzgerald's patrician aspirations or, more likely, because his crippled self-esteem shrouded in his low regard anyone who would want him, Fitzgerald sometimes treated Graham cruelly. He leaned on her and gave what little he had left, yet he could demean and betray, call her prostitute and reveal her secrets. She stayed with him through it all. Fitzgerald's daughter, Scottie, said of Graham, "She was immensely loyal and devoted.... Without her, I can't imagine how he would have survived Hollywood." In this fascinating glimpse of a time when people had love affairs rather than relationships, Graham plays the hero of the final chapter of Fitzgerald's life.