

February 20, 2008

Gatsby's Green Light Beckons a New Set of Strivers

By SARA RIMER

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BOSTON — Jinzhao Wang, 14, who immigrated two years ago from China, has never seen anything like the huge mansions that loomed over Long Island Sound in glamorous 1920s New York. But F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel, "The Great Gatsby," with its themes of possibility and aspiration, speaks to her.

She is inspired by the green light at the end of the dock, which for Jay Gatsby, the self-made millionaire from North Dakota, symbolizes the upper-class woman he longs for. "Green color always represents hope," Jinzhao said.

"My green light?" said Jinzhao, who has been studying "Gatsby" in her sophomore English class at the Boston Latin School. "My green light is Harvard."

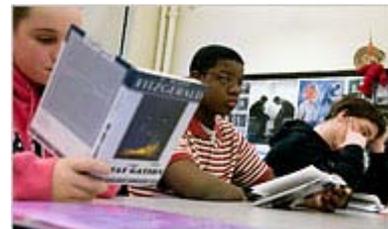
Some educators say the best way to engage racially and ethnically diverse students in reading is with books that mirror their lives and culture. But others say that while a variety of literary voices is important, "Gatsby" — still required reading at half the high schools in the country — resonates powerfully among urban adolescents, many of them first- and second-generation immigrants, who are striving to ascend in 21st-century America.

"They all understand what it is to strive for something," said Susan Moran, who is the director of the English program at Boston Latin and who has been teaching "Gatsby" for 32 years, starting at South Boston High School, "to want to be someone you're not, to want to achieve something that's just beyond reach, whether it's professional success or wealth or idealized love — or a 4.0 or admission to Harvard."



Jodi Hilton for The New York Times

Meredith Elliott of Boston Latin and other teachers say students can see themselves in "Gatsby."



Jodi Hilton for The New York Times

Shannon Murphy, left, Maxson Izidore-St. Louis and Jamie Banks studying "The Great Gatsby" at the Boston Latin School.

The novel had fallen into near obscurity by the time Fitzgerald died in 1940, said Charles Scribner III, whose great-grandfather signed the author with the family publishing company in 1919. It was revived in the 1950s and '60s when Mr. Scribner's father, Charles Scribner Jr., started publishing a paperback version and a student edition for colleges and high schools.

Its popularity soared after Robert Redford played Gatsby in the movie in 1974. In more recent years, a musical version made its debut at the New York Metropolitan Opera and the novel has been turned into a hip hop movie, "G," set in the Hamptons. The book now sells more than half a million copies a year, with high schools and colleges making up the biggest share of the market, Mr. Scribner said.

Jinzhao's teacher, Meredith Elliott, and other teachers at Boston Latin and other urban schools, say their students see in "Gatsby" glimmers of their own evolving identities and dreams. The students talk about the youthful characters — Gatsby; Daisy Buchanan, the married woman he loves; Tom, Daisy's husband and a onetime Yale football star; and the narrator, Nick Carraway — as if they were classmates or celebrities.

"I see Tom as this really mean jock," said Vimin To, a 15-year-old Boston Latin sophomore who is in Kay Moon's American literature class. "When he was in high school, he was king of the hill. He had it all. He was higher than everyone, even the teachers."

As for Daisy, in Vimin's view: "She's turned into an empty person. Like Paris Hilton."

Vimin's father works in a restaurant — "not very glamorous," Vimin said — and came to the United States as a refugee from Vietnam. Vimin relates to the story of Gatsby's rise from the backwoods of North Dakota to New York. "It's a very inspirational tale, especially when you're from a background such as Mr. Gatsby," he said.

His version of Gatsby's dream: "My goal is to make my parents proud of me. I've always been told to succeed, to take advantage of the opportunities they've given me — just to be financially stable, to be able to support your family."

At the nearby Fenway School, some of Fran Farrell's seniors, who read "Gatsby" this year as part of their study of the American dream, found different lessons in Gatsby's life and violent death.

“I think this American dream is an interpretation of a white poor man’s dream,” Nicole Doñe, 17, whose family is from the Dominican Republic, said during a lively class discussion. “For me the American dream is working hard for something you want. It’s not about having money. My dream is to get an education that I can’t get in the Dominican Republic, to live comfortably.”

Several of her classmates disagreed. “The American dream has a lot to do with money,” said Harkeem Steed, 17, who compared Gatsby to his hero, Jay-Z.

“Everything in this life is about money,” said Melanie Nunez, whose family is from the Dominican Republic. “How are you going to get to college?”

These teachers take pains to present the book with a great deal of social and historical context, and they say it crystallizes for many students questions about both the materialism of Gatsby’s dream and the possibility of attaining their own versions of the dream, especially in today’s highly stratified economy.

“Here’s Gatsby out of nowhere in this mansion, having these lavish parties and really and truly fulfilling the American dream, and that’s very compelling for them,” Ms. Moran said. “But it’s a cautionary tale, too.

“The culture sells the American dream so hard and so relentlessly, but they’re wary, and they should be,” she continued. “One reason students appreciate the book is that there is a level of honesty that they value. They need these honest stories to perhaps balance what is otherwise presented as this shining possibility for everyone.”

During a recent discussion with several other students in Ms. Moon’s class, Will Murphy, 16, whose father works two jobs as a firefighter and an E.M.T., was relating Gatsby’s accumulation of enormous wealth to his own chances of hitting it big in today’s economy. “Getting rich seems so far out of the picture,” said Will, who has a part-time job scooping ice cream. “Everybody thinks about it, but the older you get, the less possible it seems.”

“In other countries, people say, ‘Oh, if you go to America, everything is going to be better,’ ” Will went on. “It’s better, but it’s not as good as you think it will be. You won’t instantly become rich.”

One of Will’s classmates, Ashley Waters, 16, who helps her father with his antique consignment business, agreed. “The American dream is possible, but it’s just really hard,” she said. “Everything is so expensive — the price of college, housing. Look at the price of gas. The economy is going down.”

Shauna Deleon, 16, whose family is from Jamaica, nodded. “The American dream is not open to everyone,” she said. “There are certain pathways, certain gateways.”

For Shauna’s parents, as for the parents of her classmates, one of those gateways is the four-century-old Boston Latin, with its rigorous entrance exams and alumni who include five signers of the Declaration of Independence.

As a sophomore working to meet the school’s demands, Shauna sometimes feels as if her mother’s green light is her. “She puts all her hopes in me,” said Shauna, who talks about becoming a thoracic surgeon. “I have all this weight and responsibility. Sometimes I can’t live up to it.”

A couple weeks later, Ms. Moon and Ms. Elliott wrapped up “Gatsby” and, with “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” “The Joy Luck Club” and “Ethan Frome” also behind them, moved on to the next novel on the sophomore list: “Their Eyes Were Watching God” by Zora Neale Hurston.

Jinzhao Wang, meanwhile, has been reflecting more deeply about the meaning of the green light. “I’m not an American citizen, so when I apply to college I will be competing with all the top students in Asia,” said Jinzhao, whose parents are teachers and who lives in the Allston neighborhood, across the river from Cambridge and the red brick buildings of Harvard. “I have to set an even higher standard.”

Here, too, she had found inspiration in “Gatsby.” “The Dutch settlers went all the way across the ocean to this new land — America,” Jinzhao said, referring to Nick’s bittersweet reflections that end the book. “America appears to the Dutch settlers as Daisy appears to Gatsby. Gatsby’s hopes and dreams are American ideals. His effort is the real ideal of the American dream.”

“I really want to go to Harvard,” she said. “But if I don’t get into Harvard, I will not die, right?”

“The journey toward the dream is the most important thing,” she said.

And, she added, “There is a green light beyond the green light.” For her that green light is China, where she hopes to use a Harvard education to help the country develop even faster.

Published in the National section on February 17, 2008.

"Gatsby's 'Green Light' Beckons a New Set of Strivers" by Sara Rimer. "In Fiction, A Long History of Fixation on the Social Gap" by Charles McGarth. "Encounters with Class" -- New York Times Website. "Girls will Be Girls" by Peggy Oerenstein. W.11.2a Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information so that each new element builds on that which precedes it to create a unified whole; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension. W.11.2b Develop the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic. The green light at the end of Daisy's dock is the symbol of Gatsby's hopes and dreams. It represents everything that haunts and beckons Gatsby: the physical and emotional distance between him and Daisy, the gap between the past and the present, the promises of the future, and the powerful lure of that other green stuff he craves—money. In fact, the color green pops up everywhere in *The Great Gatsby*. Long Island sound is "green"; George Wilson's haggard tired face is "green" in the sunlight; Michaelis describes the car that kills Myrtle Wilson as "light green" (though it's yellow); Gatsby's per Gatsby believed in the green light. Green also has connotations of life, growth and fertility, as in the Dutch sailors' discovery of the "fresh, green breast of the new world", suggesting that hopes and dreams for the future are necessary for life. Colour. In addition to green representing hope and vitality, other repeated references to colours have symbolic significance. And she's written a new book, it's called "So We Read On: How *The Great Gatsby* Came To Be And Why It Endures." Let's take a short break, then we'll talk some more. This is FRESH AIR. You know, there was an article a few years ago in *The New York Times* that was headlined, Gatsby's green light beckons a new set of strivers. And it followed a class in which the students - and a lot of them were first or second-generation immigrants - were talking about, what is their green light? And one of the students said, her green light was Harvard. And another student said, my goal is to make my parents proud of me. And I thought, like, you really can't turn Gatsby into that type of inspirational novel - of, like, pursue your dream, and you will achieve it.