

Booker Prize 1979:

Penelope Fitzgerald (1916 –2000)

Offshore

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Publication information:

Offshore (London: Collins, 1979; New York: Henry Holt, 1979)

Introduction

Penelope Fitzgerald's *Offshore* was not a typical Booker winner. The year after Fitzgerald's triumph, in a more usual battle, two literary lions – Anthony Burgess and William Golding – fought for the honour with novels of heft and importance, replete with portentous titles: *Earthly Powers* and *Rites of Passage*. In comparison, Fitzgerald's work is, at first glance, slight: brief, and focused entirely on the domestic affairs of a small group of people, the novel nevertheless manages to evoke an era – the sixties - that, even in 1979, was rapidly becoming a faded memory.

Fitzgerald's rivals in the 1979 shortlist comprised an eclectic, multicultural group:

Confederates by the Australian Thomas Keneally was a solidly researched historical novel set in the American Civil war; *A Bend in the River* by the Trinidadian-Indian V.S. Naipaul concerned the efforts of a young Indian businessman to make a success of life in a newly independent central African state; *Joseph* by the English author Julian Rathbone, was an ambitious epic tale set in the Spanish peninsular war of the early nineteenth

century; and *Praxis*, by the British feminist Fay Weldon, was a *Bildungsroman* charting the progress of the eponymous heroine through the events of the twentieth century.

Fitzgerald's understated tale of the lives of the barge-dwellers at Battersea Reach in the Thames estuary is, in contrast, a novel with no apparent pretensions beyond the examination of the ordinary and domestic. Even so, there are some startling passages, and an ending which is, in some respects, deeply ambiguous. So, although *Offshore* is much less flamboyant than the fiction of her rivals, it is not quite the quintessentially English comedy of middle class manners that some of its critics made it out to be.

Reactions

The chairman of that year's Booker panel was Lord (Asa) Briggs, the noted historian. His view of the winner was that it was "wholly original in matter and manner. A supremely honest novel, written with a sense of perception in no way derived from other writers or other sources." This notion of originality was a key element in reactions to the novel. Although Fitzgerald is routinely described as a miniaturist, most at home in delineating the foibles of English domestic life, *Offshore* was sufficiently unusual in its setting to appeal to both the judges and the reading public as an examination of a world normally closed to others. Fitzgerald's 1980 novel, *Human Voices* treated a similarly enclosed world, that of the BBC during the Second World War. Hermione Lee's opinion was typical of the critical response: the novel was written with "beautifully stylish restraint" and evoked the quality of Thames-side living without "degenerating into fictionalised documentary."

The restraint mentioned by the critics extended to the author's reaction. She did not make an acceptance speech, leaving her publisher to accept on her behalf.

The Winning Novel

In *Offshore*, Penelope Fitzgerald once again used the material of her varied and interesting life as the basis of a novel. *The Bookshop* (1978) drew upon her experience of running a bookshop with her husband in a small provincial town. This was a pattern that was to be repeated in later novels such as *Human Voices* (1980) based on her experience of working for the BBC during the war, and *At Freddie's* (1982), which reflected her time as a teacher in a theatrical school. In the case of *Offshore*, the author clearly makes use of her sojourn on a Thames barge, which she and her family left only when it sank for the second time.

The novel's motto is a quotation from Dante's *Inferno* Canto XI and refers to those sinners of the marshlands, now captured in one of the circles of hell outside the city of Dis, who are punished for the sin of incontinence. This surprisingly sombre reference sets the subsequent account of the lives of these modern day estuary dwellers in an ominous light.

The opening of the novel uses the device of a meeting instigated by the former Royal Navy reservist, Richard Blake, to which the other inhabitants of a collection of Thames

houseboats at Battersea Reach are called, to introduce the main characters. These characters are presented in turn, and Richard's keynote of correctness in all things is indicated in the opening exchanges by his insistence on using the nautical convention by which people are addressed by their crafts' names. On this occasion, *Rochester*, *Grace*, *Bluebird* and *Maurice* are gathered to debate a request from *Dreadnought* on board Richard's vessel, a converted minesweeper called *Lord Jim*.

It is significant that the meeting has been called to discuss how far the members of the group can support Willis, owner of the *Dreadnought*, in his wish to fool prospective buyers about the extensive leaks from which his boat suffers. Richard, ever punctilious and correct, has doubts about this dishonesty, but the pragmatic and generous views of Maurice, a homosexual prostitute, prevail. Thus, the opening of the novel, indeed the first sentence, focuses on deceit, and its accommodation in the lives of the protagonists. It is clear from the opening that the characters are all, to some degree, living lives of deception or self-deception. Maurice, the confidant of most of the boat-dwellers, spends his evenings picking up men in the local pub. His boat is used by a criminal friend as a convenient storage place for stolen goods. Willis, the desperate owner of the *Dreadnought* (Fitzgerald uses an uncharacteristically heavy irony in the name) is clinging to the shreds of his former position as a well-respected marine artist. Richard, although outwardly the most confident and successful of the protagonists, with his city job at a firm of investment bankers, is obliged to cope with his unhappy wife, Laura, who longs for a comfortable home counties life on land. The owner of the *Rochester*, Woodie, is one of the few inhabitants who is "managing nicely... an odd thing to do at the north end

of the reach” (p.30) following his company’s voluntary liquidation. Even so, his domestic situation, like that of the others, is complicated. His wife, Janet, lives mainly in their house in Purley and sometimes in their caravan in Wales, making only occasional appearances on board the boat. Like the other couples encountered in the novel, the marriage is characterised by its fragmentary, makeshift nature. Nenna, the heroine of the novel, lives in the dilapidated *Grace* (another ironic name) with her children: her husband, lately returned from a failed job in Panama, lives in a bed-sit with an old school-friend and his friend’s mother, having rejected life on the river. Nenna is stricken by a kind of inertia, so that she is unable to make the effort to see her husband, and cannot supervise her old-beyond their-years children. Collectively, then, the inhabitants of Battersea Reach are portrayed as having failed to achieve normality, and are thus marginalised by society. Of course, their marginalisation is geographical too, and Fitzgerald rarely loses an opportunity to underline the precarious nature of their existence. Early in the novel, for example, at the conclusion of the opening meeting, Fitzgerald establishes the instability of their physical environment:

At that moment *Lord Jim* was disturbed, from stem to stern, by an unmistakeable lurch. Nothing fell, because on *Lord Jim* everything was properly secured, but she heaved, seemed to shale herself gently, and rose. The tide had lifted her.

At the same time an uneasy shudder passed through all those sitting at the table. For the next six hours – or a little less, because at Battersea the flood lasts five and a half hours, and the ebb six and a half – they would be living not on land, but on

water. And each one of them felt the patches, strains and gaps in their craft as if they were weak places in their own bodies. (p. 12-13)

The provisional nature of their shelter is reflected in their relationships and their uncertain (Richard excepted) means of earning a living. These people are truly living at the margins of society, their lives apparently becalmed, caught between the land and the water.

Having so artfully and economically introduced her cast of eccentrics in the opening section, Fitzgerald develops her narrative around the figure of Nenna. Nenna – the name connotes, perhaps, a sense of anonymity - is one of Fitzgerald's unassuming heroines. She is humble, deferring not only to authority figures such as Richard, but to her own children as well. These children, Martha and Tilda, are rather solemn, admonitory presences on board the *Grace*, where they have become perfectly adapted to the semi-nautical life, at the expense of their schooling. Their absence from school provides one of the few occasions in the novel where an outsider penetrates the inner sanctum of one of the houseboats. This is when the priest attached to the local Catholic school where Tilda and Martha are nominally enrolled, Father Watson, arrives to encourage them to take up attendance again. He is ineffectually rebuffed by the flustered Nenna, who reveals the extent of her dependence on her children in this episode. Fitzgerald lends the description of Martha's domestic competence a portentous note, presaging an unhappy future, perhaps:

‘I’ve got the supper, Ma,’ said Martha, when Nenna returned to Grace. Nenna would have felt better pleased with herself if she had resembled her elder daughter. But Martha, small and thin, with dark eyes which already showed an acceptance of the world’s shortcomings, was not like her mother and even less like her father. The crucial moment when children realise that their parents are younger than they are had long since been passed by Martha.

‘We’re having baked beans. If Father Watson’s coming, we shall have to open another tin.’

‘No, dear, he’s gone home.’

Nenna felt tired, and sat down on the keelson, which ran from end to end of the flat-bottomed barge. It was quite wrong to come to depend too much upon one’s children. (23-24)

Nenna’s inability to cope with the exigencies of living on the barge extend to being unable to motivate herself to read her post, significantly cutting herself off from communication with the land-based world. Martha reads the mail on her behalf, and is thus aware of the school’s concern for the children, and also the anxieties of her mother’s Canadian family regarding Nenna’s position.

The school, in the person of the priest, bases its concern on the absence of a father in the lives of the children. It emerges in the conversation between a weary Nenna and the precocious Martha that the children’s continuing absence from school is as a result of a tiny incident, which has now escalated to the point where the children cannot attend since

they are now, embarrassingly, the focus of the earnest prayers of the nuns. The episode illustrates the faintly ludicrous nature of the family's existence:

Pressed by the nuns to complete a kettleholder in cross-stich as a present for her father [Tilda] had replied that she had never seen her father holding a kettle and that Daddy had gone away.

The fact was that she had lost the six square inches of canvas allocated for the kettleholder when it was first given out to the class. Martha knew this, but did not wish to betray her sister.

Tilda had at first elaborated the story, saying that her mother was looking for a new Daddy, but her observation, quick as a bird's flight, showed her that this was going too far, and she added that she and her sister prayed nightly to Our Lady of Fatima for her father's return. (p.40-41)

The story, once announced to the nuns, takes on a life of its own, so that soon the whole school is involved in public worship at "the life size model of the grotto of Lourdes" (p.41) reciting a special prayer written by the Mother Superior for the return of the "non-Catholic father of thy little servants, Martha and Matilda." (p.41) In the face of such devotion, so falsely placed, the sisters are unable to bring themselves to attend school. As Martha puts it to her mother, they will go in "when the situation warrants it," (p.40) by which she means when her father returns.

This episode illustrates Nenna's failure to fulfil the basic social requirements of motherhood, and confirms the reader's impression of her as a vulnerable, helpless individual, whose life is shaped by external forces rather than by her own will. In a revealing passage, which serves to inform the reader about the history of Nenna's marriage, Fitzgerald presents an interior monologue in which Nenna sees herself as on trial: her crime is being a bad wife. Already presented to the reader, in Fitzgerald's direct way, as a "faulty" character (p.16) it is in the interior monologue – or dialogue, actually, as the prosecuting counsel's words are presented directly - that Nenna reveals her dominant personality trait, a chronic lack of self-esteem, and the strange inertia that ensures she stagnates at Battersea Reach:

'Mrs James. Did your husband, or did he not, complain that the houseboat *Grace*, apart from being damp, needed extensive repair, and it was difficult if not impossible for you to resume any meaningful sexual relationship when your cabin acted as a kind of passageway with your daughters constantly going to and fro to gain access to the hatch, and a succession of persons, including the milkman, trampling overhead? You will tell me that the milkman has refused to continue deliveries, but this only adds weight to my earlier submission that the boat is not only unfit to live in but actually unsafe.'

'I love him, I want him. While he was away was the longest fifteen months and eight days I ever spent. I can't believe even now that it's over. Why don't I go to him? Well, why doesn't he come to us? He hasn't found anything at all that we could all of us live together. He's in some kind of rooms in the north-east of London somewhere.'

‘42b Milvain Street, Stoke Newington.’

‘In Christ’s name, who’s ever heard of such a place?’ (p.36)

When Nenna does, in a rare burst of decisiveness, make the journey to Stoke Newington – presented as a major undertaking - in order to confront Edward, the episode quickly disintegrates into farce, as she first insults Edward’s host and then embarks on an argument with her husband in which “the marriage that was being described was different from the one they had known, indeed bore almost no resemblance to it, and there was no one to tell them this.” (p.94) When Nenna runs from the house, having left her purse behind, she is subject, in a rather sinister encounter, to a kind of assault by a passer by in the street, and makes it home only through the kind offices of a cab driver. This episode is the only occasion in the novel where Nenna takes the initiative, and the results are disastrous. The encounter with the passer-by is also an indication of the dangers of the unknown world outside the confines of Battersea Reach. Nenna’s sense of isolation in the drab streets of north London is not just a geographical one. Fitzgerald goes to some lengths to portray the solid ground of the city as alien territory to Nenna, a threatening environment in comparison to the haven of the houseboat:

Nenna set out to walk. A mile and a half down Green Lanes, half a mile down Nassington Green Road, one and a half miles the wrong way down Balls Pond Road, two miles down Kingsland Road, and then she was lost. As is usual in such cases, her body trudged on obstinately, knowing that one foot hurt more than the other but deciding not to admit this until some sort of objective was reached, while her mind, rejecting the situation in time and space, became disjointed and childish. It came to

her that it was wrong to pray for anything simply because you needed it personally. Prayer should be beyond self, and so Nenna repeated a Hail Mary for everyone in the world who was lost in Kingsland Road without their bus fares. (p.95-96)

This passage also illustrates Fitzgerald's characteristic use of bathos. Just as her characters achieve some sort of unselfish perspective, the author often undercuts the seriousness of the moment with a joky reminder of their continuing self-centredness.

Nenna's inertia is taken advantage of, probably subconsciously, by Richard following his wife's desertion. Fitzgerald has already established a bond between Richard and Nenna, when she is asked to stay behind after the meeting which opens the novel. Typically, Nenna finds herself apparently by chance in a dinghy with Richard, which he pilots expertly upstream before switching off the engine and drifting with the tide back to the Reach. The act of drifting is an apt metaphor for Nenna's life, and one used frequently by Fitzgerald. Nenna's liaison with Richard, far from marking a decisive break with the listless drifting of her life on board *Grace*, signals instead a continuing state of indecision, now complicated by her feelings for Richard, who is similarly uncertain about the status of their relationship, which ends with the crashing blow Richard receives from the spanner wielded by Maurice's friend Harry.

All too accepting of her fate, Nenna requires direction from others, and it is only the appearance of her sister, like some *deus ex machina*, which resolves the issue of her future by paving the way for her to return to Canada with the children. This family intervention

in her life in effect returns her to her original, pre-marital state, though now with the addition of her wise children, ending the impasse represented by the state of stasis that living at Battersea Reach involves. The barge, caught between land and water, can only ever be a temporary dwelling place, as the practical Richard asserts in his discussion with Nenna about repairing the *Grace*:

....I'm doubtful about the wisdom of making endless repairs to these very old boats. My feeling, for what it's worth, is that they should be regarded as wasting assets. Let them run down just so much every year, remember you low outgoings, and in a few years' time have them towed away for their break up value. (p.18)

Richard's comments emphasise the provisional nature of the barges as homes, and once again, as so often in the novel, the precarious nature of existence at Battersea Reach is underlined. Indeed, Richard, the only inhabitant, it seems, with a regular source of income, represents, in his craft and his person, the main instance of solidity in the community. Even he, though, is undermined by his wife's desire to escape to home-counties respectability and conventionality in the form of a comfortable home on the land.

The end of Richard's hegemony over the community comes as a comic, but shocking, surprise when he is casually half-murdered by the amoral Harry, who uses Maurice's boat to store stolen property. Significantly, it is not one of the inadequate adults who finds him and effectively saves his life by organising medical aid, but the resourceful daughter of Nenna, Martha. Richard's hospitalization forcibly removes him from the community

of the houseboats, and allows his wife to put into place her plan for their relocation to the comfort of suburban life.

At one point in the novel, when she has her encounter with Richard, Nenna says that she talks to Maurice “all day and half the night, sometimes” about “Sex, jealousy, friendship and music.” (p.103) Maurice is presented as a shadowy presence throughout, never really revealing his true feelings to anyone, and acting as confidant to all the more inadequate members of the community. Maurice’s sexuality places him apart from the other central characters, as does his amorality. Maurice’s paradoxical ability to be a sympathetic friend as well as an aloof stranger is described in Fitzgerald’s initial portrait:

He was incurably sympathetic. His occupation, which was that of picking up men in a neighbouring public house, with which he had a working arrangement, during the evening hours, and bringing them back to the boat, was not particularly profitable. Maurice was not born to make a profit, but then, was not born to resent this, or anything else. Those who felt affection for him had no easy way of telling him so, since he seemed to regard friend and enemy alike. For example, an unpleasant acquaintance of his used part of Maurice’s hold as a repository for stolen goods. (...) And yet Maurice appeared to be almost proud, because Harry was not a customer, but somebody who had demanded a favour and given nothing in return. (p. 12)

The aimlessness and futility of Maurice's life is clearly delineated in this account, but he nevertheless is established at this early stage as a kind of sounding board for the other members of the community. When, because of the sinking of Willis's boat, the removal of Richard, and the imminent departure of Nenna, that community falls apart, Maurice descends into a whisky-fuelled depressive state, as his status as the group's intimate disappears, and perhaps with it his *raison d'être*.

The only episode in the novel where the reader witnesses Maurice as Nenna's confidant is a significant one, as it crystallizes both his and the community's lack of decisiveness. Maurice tells Nenna that he is to leave, but expresses it in such vague terms that the reader is left in no doubt that it is fantasy:

'I may be going abroad myself quite soon,' said Maurice casually.

'Oh, you didn't tell us.'

'Yes, I met someone the other night who made a sort of suggestion about a possible job of some kind.'

It wasn't worth asking of what kind: there had been so many beginnings. (p.44)

Later, when Maurice is approached by Nenna for advice as to whether she should attempt a reconciliation with Edward, his response is ambiguous, and its ambiguity encapsulates the dominant mood of the house boat community:

Decision is torment for anyone with imagination. When you decide, you multiply the things you might have done and now never can. If there's even one person who might be hurt by a decision, you should never make it. They tell you, make up your mind or it will be too late, but if it's really too late, we should be grateful. You

know very well that we're two of the same kind, Nenna. It's right for us to live where we do, between land and water. You, my dear, you're half in love with your husband, then there's Martha who's half a child and half a girl, Richard who can't give up being half in the Navy, Willis who's half an artist and half a longshoreman, a cat who's half alive and half dead...'

He stopped before describing himself, if, indeed, he had been going to do so.

(p.47)

This paean to inertia acts as Maurice's self-justification as much as advice to Nenna. Moreover, thanks to the author's sly coda to his speech, the reader is left in no doubt that Maurice, for all his apparent dedication to the imagination, has tacitly admitted that he is most at home where he is not required to commit himself to any decisive course of action. His analysis of his fellow boat-dwellers' characters chimes with the reader's. As the novel progresses, however, all the people mentioned by Maurice experience life-changing events. Significantly, though, none of these changes are initiated by the characters themselves: instead, they are directed by external forces. Nenna's life is reorganised by her family; Richard's injury leads to his leaving the Reach; Willis sees his home sink in the estuary, and Martha's access to maturity is facilitated by her encounter with the sophisticated Heinrich.

Moreover, Maurice's speech makes explicit the relationship between the characters and the environment they inhabit, stressing the correspondence between the temporary nature of their dwellings and the insecurity of their lives. He confirms what Fitzgerald has already shown – that these characters are marginalized, quite literally offshore, and

constitute a kind of closed society, emphasised by the specialised language they use, and the customs such as referring to each other by the names of their craft. When they do collide with “normal” society, the results are usually disastrous.

In contrast to the sharp particularity of her usual prose style, Fitzgerald employs the river as an metaphor for the lives of her characters, often referring to the ebb and flow of their existence. The river provides not just a backdrop to the action, but also an evocative setting, usually redolent of past times when the Thames was a working river. The description sometimes suggests a Dickensian gloom:

By now the flood was making fast. The mist had cleared, and to the north-east the Lots Road Power Station discharged from its four majestic chimneys long plumes of white pearly smoke which slowly drooped and turned to dun. The lights dazzled, but on the broad face of the water there were innumerable V shaped eddies, showing the exact position of whatever the river had not been able to hide. If the old Thames trades had still persisted, if boatmen had still made a living from taking the coins from the pockets of the drowned, then this was the hour for them to watch. (p.25-26)

Passages such as this, and one where Tilda recalls seeing a visiting Dutch bargeman drown in an absurd incident, presage danger, albeit obliquely, that the novel’s oddly ambivalent conclusion might be deemed to fulfil.

The history of the Thames is also evoked when Tilda and Martha demonstrate their expert knowledge of the treasure that may be revealed at low tide. They retrieve valuable tiles by the Arts and Crafts potter William de Morgan from the site of a sunken barge, and then sell them in an antique shop whose owner is quickly initial patronising attitude to the girls soon gives way to grudging respect and the payment of a decent price. Significantly, however, the girls spend their money on meretricious ephemera from Woolworth's. As is the case with their mother, once out of their element, they lose sight of what is worthwhile in their lives.

The near-fatal attack on Richard is one of several events in the narrative, such as the account of the drowning of the Dutch sailor, in which random, even absurd occurrences have unexpected and far-reaching consequences. The most dramatic of these is saved for the ambiguous conclusion of the novel. The reader never discovers what has impelled Nenna's estranged husband Edward to visit the barge: presumably, he feels guilty at the unsatisfactory outcome of their previous encounter in his bedsit, and wishes to make amends. In her absence, he falls into a heavy drinking bout with the morose Maurice, and as the literal and metaphorical storm clouds gather over the Thames estuary, the two men end clinging desperately to *Grace* (the name gathers ever more resonance as the novel progresses) and are left to an uncertain, though probably terminal, fate. Typically of Penelope Fitzgerald, the ending is not the cathartic conclusion one might expect from the presence of the storm. Instead, we are left not knowing whether Maurice and Edward are swept to their deaths. The ending is almost Hardy-esque in its deployment of an apparently malevolent fate, but postmodern in its avoidance of closure. Instead, the

reader is left with a sense of inconclusiveness and uncertainty. Loose ends remain untied, like the boats breaking loose from their moorings and drifting to oblivion, lacking, like the characters who have inhabited them, adequate anchorage.

Relation to Fitzgerald's career

Penelope Fitzgerald's career was unusual in the lateness of its beginning: she was sixty before publishing her first novel, *The Golden Child*, in 1977. Before that, she had published, to general acclaim, several biographies, most notably *The Knox Brothers*, an account of the lives of her father, who edited *Punch* and his brothers the cryptographer Dillwyn Knox and the priests Wilfred and Ronald Knox. The last named was also a prolific writer of detective stories in the golden age of detective fiction, so it is perhaps not surprising that *The Golden Child* is in that genre.

This first novel is not typical of Fitzgerald's later style, but does contain several elements which become familiar traits. The action, clearly based on the ground-breaking British Museum Tutankhamen exhibition of the time, concerns the dilemma faced by the director of the exhibition when the major exhibits are discovered to be fakes. Unlike *Offshore*, and indeed many of Fitzgerald's other novels, this narrative stays true to its genre origins and finishes neatly, with a central irony being played out as the public admire an ancient artefact actually constructed the day before. The tone is, despite the presence of such genre elements as murder and espionage, largely comic, with a climactic shoot-out within the museum itself adding a touch of surreal humour. The characters are shown as fallible, vain, shallow and self-obsessed, much as the inhabitants of Battersea Reach in *Offshore*.

The novels that followed *The Golden Child* can be grouped together as a fairly coherent series. Each focuses on a small English community and concerns the quotidian existence of a group of (largely) middle class people, and each has its origins in Fitzgerald's own life experiences. *The Bookshop* (1977), which was shortlisted for the Booker, concerns the struggle of a middle-aged woman, Florence Green, to make a success of a bookshop in a small Suffolk village. She is thwarted by the vested interests of influential local people, and loses everything. This rather downbeat and shabby world is similar to the milieu of *Offshore*. As in the later novel, the aspirations of the protagonists are dashed by a combination of bad luck and an indifferent fate. Fitzgerald's prose style in *The Bookshop* is also recognisably that which she employs in *Offshore*. The evocation of the petty jealousies of a somewhat suffocating environment is done in the same rather deadpan, darkly humorous style employed in *Offshore*.

Offshore was followed in 1980 by *Human Voices*, set in the BBC's Broadcasting House during the Second World War. As in *Offshore*, one of the themes is the difficulty of telling the truth about life, here made more complex by the exigencies of war. As in *Offshore*, one of the main protagonists suffers an absurd death: the intervention of violence in the lives of ordinary people never seems far from the surface in Fitzgerald's novels.

The final novel in this sequence of English domestic life is *At Freddie's* (1982) which concerns the lives of a group of theatrical types at a school for young actors in London's

Covent Garden. Once again, the focus is on the flawed humanity of the characters, and their often hopeless aspirations. Fitzgerald's irony is to the fore once more, as the proprietor of the school looks forward to a solid future, exemplified in various symbols of an unchanging London, such as the market at Covent Garden and Lyon's Corner House tea shops – both, of course, already memories by the time of the novel's publication. The school is forced to engage with the gritty realities of commercial life in modern Britain, just as Florence Green must in *The Bookshop*. As in the other novels in this phase of Fitzgerald's career, her characters find themselves, as Jean Sudrann puts it, in “a flawed, untrustworthy, mutable world...where worn-out good intentions and lofty aims wither into the deadly sins of pride, jealousy and vanity, while the generous who refuse to learn from experience are in for some nasty shocks.”

The second phase of Fitzgerald's novel-writing career saw her expand her horizons from the narrowly English focus of her earlier work. *Innocence* (1986) is set in twentieth-century Florence, but uses the device of a medieval family legend to frame the story of the decaying Ridolfi family. The legend – which at one point involves amputation and blinding for entirely whimsical purposes – casts a shadow of ancient barbarism over the actions of the contemporary characters, who are also touched by acts of casual savagery, as in an incident where a street thief cuts off two fingers of a girl's hand to secure the rings she is wearing. The matter and scope of the novel seems more ambitious than in Fitzgerald's previous work, and the theme, announced in a title significantly much more abstract than the specificities of her previous titles, is explored in a variety of resonant episodes.

Having ventured to Italy for her previous novel, Fitzgerald set her next in pre-revolutionary Russia. *The Beginning of Spring* examines the effect of unexpected passion on the lives of an English printing-press director in Moscow and his circle of friends and acquaintances. The plot focuses on the relationship between the Englishman Frank Reid, and the Russian woman Lisa, whom he employs to look after his children following the desertion of his wife. The two protagonists represent a collision between the practical and the spiritual, as a result of which the Englishman may have learned some important lessons. Typically, the ending of the novel does not resolve the situation, and holds out the possibility that Frank may return to his wife. The clash of cultures in the novel's setting provides the opportunity for some exploration of metaphysical questions, as the central characters argue about their faith. Despite this, the novel maintains a lightness of touch in keeping with Fitzgerald's previous work, and manages to combine an exotic location with convincing domestic detail.

Fitzgerald set her next novel, *The Gate of Angels* (1930) in the same immediate pre-First World War period as her previous work, but returned to England for the setting, a fictional Cambridge college. The novel's major characters, Fred and Daisy, are thrown together by accident (literally – their bicycles are in collision) and there is a somewhat farcical element to the progression of the narrative, which depends on a series of comic misunderstandings. The matter is complicated by Fred's celibate status, and Daisy's involvement with a disreputable journalist. Once again, the capacity of people to conspire against the possibility of their own happiness is examined. More mysteriously, the

spiritual life is also foregrounded in this novel: the title refers to a door in the college wall which has opened only twice before in the college's history. Daisy's act of Christian charity ensures it opens again, and also sets up the novel's enigmatic conclusion. In a conventional romance, all would be resolved at the end, but characteristically, Fitzgerald offers a more ambivalent ending.

Fitzgerald's final novel, *The Blue Flower* (1995), for which she received the National Book Critics' Circle Award, is also her most ambitious. Once again using a historical (and non-English) setting, this time late eighteenth century Germany, Fitzgerald uses real historical figures as characters for the only time in her fiction. The central character is Novalis, (Friedrich von Hardenburg) the Romantic poet, and the narrative gives an account of the transforming relationship he formed with a twelve-year-old girl, Sophie, who dies two years later of tuberculosis. The novel uses the published work of the poet and his circle as a documentary resource for a tour-de-force of historical reconstruction. Major literary and philosophical figures such as Goethe and the Schlegels, feature in supporting roles. The novel is ambitious in its structure, too, consisting as it does of fifty-five very short chapters, often only a couple of pages long, each with a heading, sometimes descriptive, sometimes enigmatic – “What is Pain?” or “The Nature of Desire”. This is perhaps her most complete achievement, and can be seen as the culmination of the spare, compressed style that she deployed in the early novels.

Whilst, in retrospect, *The Blue Flower* is probably Fitzgerald's most acclaimed work, the award of the Booker prize for *Offshore* signalled her arrival as a novelist of significance,

and rewarded a quiet, controlled and plain prose style at a time when the rococo excesses of the magic realists were becoming fashionable. She remains a unique voice in late twentieth century English fiction, wide-ranging in her settings and terms of reference, but retaining a reticence and economy of wit that might be compared, not unfavourably, with Jane Austen.

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