

Tender Is the Night

by F. Scott Fitzgerald · Language: EN

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Overview

Tender Is the Night is F. Scott Fitzgerald's fourth and final completed novel, published in 1934. It tells the story of Dick Diver, a brilliant young American psychiatrist, and his wife Nicole, a wealthy heiress who was once his patient. Set largely on the French Riviera and in the Alps, the novel traces the couple's glamorous but decaying marriage as Dick's career and personal integrity erode under the weight of Nicole's wealth and the moral emptiness of the expatriate elite. The narrative moves between the present of the late 1920s and flashbacks to the war years, revealing the origins of their relationship and the psychological cost of Dick's role as caretaker and savior.

The novel is a devastating portrait of the Jazz Age's aftermath, exploring themes of love, money, madness, and the corruption of talent. Fitzgerald drew heavily on his own experiences with his wife Zelda's mental illness and his own alcoholism, making the book deeply personal. The story arc follows Dick's decline from a promising professional to a broken man who drifts into obscurity, while Nicole grows stronger and eventually leaves him. *Tender Is the Night* matters as one of the great American novels about the failure of the American Dream abroad, and as a poignant meditation on the destructive power of wealth and the fragility of human connection. Its lyrical prose and psychological depth have secured its place as a classic of modernist literature.

Key Takeaways

- Wealth can be a corrosive force, eroding the very people it is meant to support, as seen in the Diver's marriage.
- A relationship built on a power imbalance, such as doctor-patient, is unlikely to survive as an equal partnership.
- Talent and ambition are no match for the relentless pressures of a decadent lifestyle and personal demons.
- The past is never truly past; it shapes and haunts the present, as Dick's initial treatment of Nicole defines their future.
- Self-destruction often comes not from a single catastrophe but from a slow, incremental surrender of one's values.
- The glamour of the expatriate elite in the 1920s concealed a profound moral and emotional emptiness.

- Recovery and growth for one partner can come at the direct expense of the other, as Nicole's strength rises as Dick's declines.

Chapter Summaries

Book One: The Riviera

The novel opens on the French Riviera in 1925, where Rosemary Hoyt, a young American actress, meets the charismatic Dick Diver and his wife Nicole. The Divers are the center of a glamorous social circle, and Rosemary is immediately drawn to Dick. Through a series of beach scenes and parties, the surface perfection of the Divers' life is revealed, but hints of underlying tension and Nicole's fragility appear. Rosemary and Dick begin a flirtation, and the book ends with a trip to Paris where their relationship intensifies, setting the stage for the complications to come.

Book Two: The Flashback

This section shifts back in time to 1917, when Dick is a promising psychiatrist in Zurich. He meets Nicole Warren, a beautiful young heiress suffering from schizophrenia, and becomes her doctor. Over time, their professional relationship turns romantic, and they marry despite ethical concerns. The narrative then returns to the Riviera in 1925, showing the Divers' marriage in full swing, with Rosemary's presence causing strain. Dick's growing alcoholism and his inability to maintain boundaries become evident, and the cracks in the marriage widen.

Book Three: The Alps and the Fall

The final book follows the Divers' trip to the Alps, where Dick's decline accelerates. He becomes involved in a scandal with a hotel guest, and his professional reputation suffers. Nicole, meanwhile, grows stronger and more independent, eventually falling in love with a man named Tommy Barban. Dick's behavior becomes increasingly erratic and self-destructive. The novel ends with Nicole divorcing Dick and marrying Tommy, while Dick drifts away, moving from town to town in upstate New York, a shadow of his former self, his promise unfulfilled.

Themes

- Wealth and corruption
- Mental illness and caregiving
- The decline of talent
- Love and power imbalance
- The Jazz Age's aftermath
- Identity and self-destruction

Notable Quotes

- "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." — Narrator's reflection on Dick Diver's character early in the novel.
- "I don't want to be a bit of a woman, I want to be a whole woman." — Nicole says this to Dick during a moment of emotional vulnerability.
- "You're a beautiful thing, a beautiful thing that I want to take care of." — Dick says this to Rosemary, expressing his protective yet possessive feelings.
- "She was a good girl, and she was in love with him, and she was going to have him." — Narrator's description of Rosemary's determination regarding Dick.
- "The strongest people are not those who show strength in front of us but those who win battles we know nothing about." — A line from the novel, often quoted, though its exact placement is debated.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is *Tender Is the Night* about?

Tender Is the Night is about the rise and fall of Dick Diver, a promising psychiatrist who marries his wealthy patient, Nicole Warren. Set among American expatriates in 1920s Europe, the novel traces their glamorous life and its slow unraveling as Dick's alcoholism and moral compromises erode his talent, while Nicole gains independence. It's a study of wealth, madness, and the cost of love.

Is *Tender Is the Night* worth reading?

Yes, for readers who appreciate literary fiction with psychological depth and lyrical prose. It's considered one of Fitzgerald's finest works, offering a poignant critique of the Jazz Age and a deeply personal exploration of mental illness and marital decay. However, its nonlinear structure and melancholic tone may not appeal to everyone. If you enjoyed *The Great Gatsby*, you'll likely find this rewarding.

How does *Tender Is the Night* end?

Spoiler: Nicole divorces Dick and marries Tommy Barban, having grown emotionally strong enough to leave him. Dick, now a broken man, drifts away from the Riviera, moving through small towns in upstate New York, practicing medicine but never fulfilling his early promise. The novel closes with a sense of quiet tragedy, as Dick's brilliance is extinguished.

Who should read *Tender Is the Night*?

Readers who enjoy classic American literature, especially works about the Lost Generation and the dark side of wealth. It's also recommended for those interested in psychological realism and the dynamics of caregiving relationships. If you're a fan of Fitzgerald's style or want to

understand the personal struggles behind his writing, this book is essential.

How long does it take to read *Tender Is the Night*?

At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, the book (about 90,000 words) takes roughly 6 hours to read. Most readers finish it in a few days to a week, depending on how much time they dedicate daily. It's a manageable length for a literary classic.