

## 'Gatsby' for Today

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Sometimes it is hard to be the hero of your own story. For Nick Carraway, the narrator and principal character in F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby," there is no center for himself. He is a spectator/participant determined not to judge the other players in the eastern Long Island romances that surround him.

He swears not to be their judge, but that is all he can be, really, when push comes to shove.

Similarly, the narrator of this story, "Sunrise," a second novel by author Robert Crooke — whose earlier excursion into fiction, "American Family," I reviewed in these pages back in 2005 — is a man whose judgment of his friends and associates comes with difficulty, and although he would seem to be narrating the story of his best friend, of his girlfriend, of their lives, he is really telling his own story; he is the hero, but he is not a hero whose position in this book comes without challenges.

Stephen Dahl is a writer, living in Paris, uncomfortable in his own skin. While visiting his agent in New York, he receives a message that his best friend from college has died and this man's wife would like to see him, has invited him to the funeral in Montauk.

With curiosity and a certain reserve about him, he goes to the tip of Long Island to see what is left of the life he knew there in the 1960s and '70s. His discoveries — his revelations, in fact — bring him closer to the truths he has ignored or shut out of his memory for most of his adult life.

This book, like "Gatsby," is one in which the narrative voice fails to understand himself and his nature. The Fitzgerald characters surface into the late 20th-century atmosphere and blossom there in these new characters. Dahl's friend Tom Westlake is a new-fangled compendium of Gatsby himself and Tom Buchanan. There is much about him to question and little to like. Even so, he emerges finally as the reluctant hero of a tale

in which he is difficult to know but seems socially repugnant most of the time. Alex Westlake, Tom's widow, is the one love of Stephen's life, a Daisy Buchanan married to the wrong man. Her oddness and her quirks mark her as dangerous — but in reality, we find, she is the savior of men's reputations.

In this book, few people are who they seem to be. This style of creation was seen in Crooke's earlier work, but not with the close-up definitions we get here. The story is so familiar that it is hard not to believe, somehow, that the reader will find himself somewhere in these pages. Perhaps it is that constant borrowing from "The Great Gatsby" that makes it seem so, or perhaps it is just that the period has become so familiar to us that we instantly define ourselves as a part of it. Whatever it is, the fact of the matter is that we do identify here, and we do recognize the urgency of the folks in their situations. While the years are important to the story, the nature of the people — clearly, stretching from the newly wealthy in the 1920s, through the eagerly social-conscious of the late 1960s, to the manic and emotional middle-aged years of the present — is what emerges first and foremost. We are universal, they say. Our story could be your story.

Having the book in hand almost makes it your story. In a novel from the early part of this century, a narrator says "The novel, named for me, is not my own story."

Similarly, in "Sunrise," the narrator here is not telling his own story, but in the course of time he is learning the details of his own past. He is the hero and the villain, and the villain is the villain and the hero.

Crooke has brought us a slice of real life, covered in fine dialogue and vivid characterizations, living characters and situations that smack us across the face with the back of a familiar hand. It is a compelling read.