

## **Bridgewater Novel Echoes 'Gatsby'**

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By Jack Coraggio

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BRIDGEWATER — The parallels between the literary classic “The Great Gatsby” and Bridgewater author Robert Crooke’s new book, “Sunrise,” are obvious.

Most obviously, both are prototypical American tales that take place on Long Island’s lavish East End. But under the surface, each deals with complex ethical and moral concerns of characters hoping for reconciliation during this country’s more restless eras.

According to Mr. Crooke, paying tribute to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s signature piece was not his intent.

“The [Gatsby comparisons] kind of developed over the course of multiple drafts,” explained Mr. Crooke. “I knew there was a similarity there with Long Island and its locale, but as I was writing it and redrafting it, suddenly I felt one of my favorite books coming to the forefront. I did it subconsciously, but if I’m going to pay homage to someone, why not one of my favorite authors.”

“The Great Gatsby,” of course, is a tale of the celebratory “Roaring 20s,” in which the elite prospered. On Long Island, narrator Nick Carraway watches as little attention is given to the laws of prohibition, or for that matter, morality. Written more than 80 years ago, it has since become standard text in undergraduate English classrooms across America.

Following a similar arc, “Sunrise” is mostly situated in the same locale, but flashes back to a different time—the turbulent 60s and 70s. The story begins in present day Paris, post-Sept.11, as the narrator, American expatriate and recovering alcoholic Stephen Dahl, tries to deal with his home country’s recent tragedy. Shortly afterward, he finds himself back in his suburban New York home, called there by the death of his former best

friend, whose widow happens to be an ex-lover of Stephen's. From there, readers are brought back to his youth and learn of a past laden with complex questions of personal and national responsibilities.

"He has tremendous tragedies in his life, and he has dealt with none of them too successfully. He's burdened with sadness, and some of the decisions he has made he would like to have back," said Mr. Crooke, avoiding any important plot revelations.

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—Robert Crooke, Bridgewater author

But Mr. Crooke considers this element highly relevant to modern America, and the general consensus many have about our current political state.

"I have a sense that most Americans today would take back some of the decisions made back in 2002," said Mr. Crooke. "I think those were decisions made under great duress."

He noted that wasn't a point he wanted to "hammer, but make subtle, insinuating comparisons." Either way, as a self-professed child of the 60s, Mr. Crooke admitted a kinship with Stephen, including the fact that, like his main character, Mr. Crooke is from Long Island.

Though this is only his second book, he has a history of writing, having been a sports reporter and columnist for the Long Island Press and a North American press spokesperson for Reuters, an international news group. Semi-retired, he and his wife have been in Bridgewater since 1993.

His first book, "American Family," was published in 2004. Mr. Crooke has been piecing "Sunrise" together ever since. Printed through self-publishing company iUniverse, copies will be available at all local independent bookstores by next week, along with area Barnes and Nobles.

"Sunrise" was named part of iUniverse's "Publisher's Choice," and has already received critical acclaim from Kirkus Reviews, which has a

reputation for harsh critical assessments. Mr. Crooke believes he received such accolades in part because of the believability of his characters and how their personal issues relate to the world at large.

“We live in a time when there is a lot of public discussion about religion, morality and politics all wrapped together,” said Mr. Crooke. “I wanted to write a story about characters concerned with their own morality, and distance it from [cultural] correctness.”