

Who is Tom Fitzgerald?



Although ambulatory at nine months, Tom showed no such precociousness in the cognitive arts. In the first grade, for example, he had such trouble understanding oral instructions, and became so anxious as a result, that on one occasion he wet his pants. In the second grade, called upon at a parent-teacher night to point out the right answer on the chalkboard, Tom jumped up from his chair and pointed to the wrong answer, his mother watching. In the third and the fourth grades, he failed arithmetic and was promoted to the next grade only on condition he complete a summer-long regimen of one-on-one tutoring.

A dud at learning, Tom tried his hand at delinquency. Fortunately, however, his slide into perdition was nipped in the bud. At age three, in punishment for refusing to share his toys with his birthday guests, he was forbidden from having another birthday party ever. And never did. At age ten, as a result of kicking the village priest in the shins, he was hauled off to a shrink.

Tom languished in grades 5 through 7, but then in eighth grade something very strange happened. One day the teacher moved Tom's desk closer to her own—almost within reach—and from that day on always seemed to have an eye on him, even when she was reading aloud from *The Healing Woods* or *Cheaper by the Dozen*. By the end of the year, the dud had turned into a dynamo.

In high school, Tom aced algebra and then geometry. He took the trigonometry regents exam four months early and scored 100 on it. He took advanced algebra with the seniors and bested them all. He graduated valedictorian of his class with an average of 96.4. He was accepted into MIT, RPI, and Clarkson. He was awarded a General Motors scholarship to study physics.

By the end of his second year of college, however, Tom realized he wasn't a 'lab rat.' After barely surviving the next two years, he lurched into law school with the loose intention of getting into politics. After no more than a week at Cornell Law, he knew he had made a mistake. He left after two months.

He was at sea.

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Fortunately, he knew how to swim. He swam 21 miles across the eastern end of Lake Ontario, and then stroked his way to Vietnam as a Navy UDT/SEAL. He saw no action, but lost several friends. On his return, Tom experienced a malfunction on his third qualifying jump at Fort Benning, survived, and was assigned to a Top Secret weapons group. (He still shivers.)

On the death of his father (at 51), Tom left the Navy to manage the sale of his father's troubled business. The business finally sold, Tom worked for a year with developmentally disabled children and adults. With *The Healing Woods* ever murmuring in his ear, Tom attempted to launch a writing career, starting with nonfiction. His first project was a fitness book based on the UDT/SEAL conditioning program he had undergone. *Get Tough!* was quickly picked up by Grosset & Dunlap, but then cancelled only weeks before publication.

While making a first attempt at writing a novel (*The Mother, the Daughter and the Holy Cow*), Tom heard a radio segment about a single white man who had adopted a young black boy. *Chocolate Charlie* was published two years later. The movie rights were optioned shortly thereafter. Elizabeth Taylor inquired. A screenplay was written. The project was cancelled. *Different Strokes* appeared on TV. "Never give up your day job," Bertha Klausner, a wise and wizened literary agent, had admonished him.

Hoping to use teaching as his "day job," Tom enrolled in a graduate program in English at Iowa State. With a wife and three babies to support, he carried a full load of courses in order to maximize his VA benefit; he wrote and sold a mystery novel (*A Matter of Scents*) to make a "quick buck;" he taught freshman English courses to get his tuition waived; and he conducted writing workshops across the State of Iowa under the NEA's Writers-in-the-Schools program.

After receiving his degree, Tom took a communications position with a health-care company in Illinois. During stolen moments, he wrote a sequel to *Chocolate Charlie*. Hankering for home after five years of corn fields, pig farms, and 87% humidity, Tom moved his family back to the Northeast and took up technical writing in the high-tech industry. Over the next 15 years, he moved from Wang Labs to Digital Equipment Corporation to Bell Labs. In the spring of 1993, after working a full-time job and up to two part-time jobs simultaneously to put three sons through private colleges and his wife through graduate school, Tom decided to try to revive a writing career gone perilously moribund.

On July 1, 1993, Tom began a one-year sabbatical financed by his meager retirement fund. As part of his regime, he would read in the backyard for a few hours each afternoon. While reading Ben Franklin's *Autobiography* one balmy September afternoon, he heard a whisper from his muse: "What if Ben came back?" He made a mental note.

At the end of his sabbatical, largely squandered on developing a thriller (*The Malthus Agenda*) his then-agent wanted him to write, Tom returned to technical writing. In parallel, he attempted to pursue the thriller project, in hopes it might spring him free, but his heart wasn't in it. He stopped writing altogether; he plunged deep into despair.

In August of 2001, as fate would have it, Tom was laid off from a job he loathed. While looking for a new job to loathe, he found himself with a little time on his hands, and who should "appear" one mid-August afternoon to lay claim, in the backyard no less, but the good Doctor himself!

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What if Ben Franklin had to come back?

The early vision was for a light read of about 250 pages. Ben would play foil to the absurd and the ridiculous in modern life, not to mention the bizarre. The overall tenor would be toward the satirical. It would take about a year to write. It would be money in the bank!

Nine years and 640 pages later, what emerged was what one reviewer has called, “perhaps the most finely wrought fictional rendering of an historical personage since Tolstoy’s Napoleon;” and another has called, “an astonishing feat of imagination;” and another has called, “one of the most insightful looks at the full depth of Franklin available.”

Fitzgerald is that rarest of birds: a great writer and a great soul. He has summoned from unfathomable depths of despair an imagining of the greatest of Americans that is not only better than the original but also worthy of his own remarkable spirit.

– Michael Zuckerman

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