

# The American dream

**I**N F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *Tender is the Night*, the charismatic psychiatrist Dick Diver falls for a beautiful heiress, Nicole Warren. He marries her but they don't live happily ever after. Why not? One reason is that Nicole has a secret: she is subject to bouts of madness. Zelda Fitzgerald, Scott's rich and beautiful wife, suffered a mental breakdown, and the story can be seen as a reflection of Fitzgerald's own problematic marriage. But it is much more than that.

Dick meets Nicole when he is working in a Swiss asylum; in fact, she is his patient. The seduction, when it occurs, breaks the doctor-patient boundary. Dick knows this, for the head of the clinic warns him of Nicole's infatuation for him. But Dick ignores the warning. The marriage, instead of being a great coup – for Nicole is enormously rich as well as beautiful – is the start of Dick's decline. Nicole's madness proves hard to manage. Dick gives up his psychiatric work and takes to drink. Nicole leaves him for another man. The handsome, charismatic Dick Diver ends up a sad figure. We last hear of him at the end of the book, drifting from one relationship to another in various unnamed, small American towns.

Why should psychologists be interested in this story? It is not so much that Fitzgerald is writing about psychiatry, though that is certainly interesting. The book was published in 1934 and is set in the period from the end of the First World War through the 1920 – the time of 'the great Freud', as Dick refers to him. Dick comes to an Oxford as a Rhodes scholar where he studies psychiatry. He is bright and successful. He writes a book: *A Psychology for Psychiatrists*, as it happens. He goes to work at a prestigious clinic in Switzerland where he tells the director that his only ambition is 'to be a good psychologist – maybe the greatest one that



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ever lived'. The clinic is more a sanatorium than a lunatic asylum; it's a place where the rich can be ensconced and treated. In truth, Fitzgerald gives us relatively little insight into madness or its treatment. But there are two psychological truths that this book reveals.

## **What every therapist should know**

At the age of 16, Nicole Warren is brought to the clinic by her father because she was getting 'crazier and crazier' and he doesn't know what to do. Nicole's mother died when she was 11. He and Nicole became very close and, later, Warren breaks down and admits that they became lovers. Nicole's madness is that she becomes deluded about men attempting to seduce her or attack her. Not even the most obtuse psychiatrist could fail to see the connection. Although the original diagnosis is *schizophrénie* (translated in the book as 'divided personality'), Franz, one of the clinic's psychiatrists, takes a psychological view once the full facts have come out.

*...from sheer self-protection she developed the idea that she had no complicity – and from there it was easy to slide into a phantom world where all men, the more you liked them and trusted them, the more evil [they became]*

It is a view that, to put it at its most kindly, reflects the mores of the time. The notion that men might actually seek to seduce a

vulnerable and beautiful young girl is not even thought about. Nor is Nicole's father arraigned as a child abuser, although he is disliked. There is a close parallel with Freud's case history Dora, published in 1902, which Fitzgerald might have read. Dora, also aged 16, was first brought to Freud by her father, who had himself been a patient of Freud's. Two years later Freud took Dora on as a patient. It was to be a spectacular failure. Dora's 'symptoms', which were diagnosed as 'hysterical', were migraines, a nervous cough, a tendency to whisper, irrational hostility, depression and suicidal thoughts. Herr K, a close friend of the family of a similar age to her father, had made sexual advances to her, which she had angrily rebuffed. When she had told her father, he had taken Herr K's side and dismissed his daughter's accusation as fantasy. Given that Dora's father was having an affair with Frau K, something that he had admitted to Dora, his part in this whole farrago seems central. Yet Freud saw the daughter as mad and tried to 'cure' her. As Gay (1988) writes:

*Freud felt virtually obliged to interpret Dora's vehement rejection of Herr K as a neurotic defense. He had met the man and had found him, after all, an agreeable and handsome person. But Freud's inability to enter Dora's sensibilities speaks of a failure of empathy that marks his handling of the case as a whole. He refused to recognise her need as an adolescent for*

*trustworthy guidance in a cruelly self-serving adult world – for someone to value her shock at the transformation of an intimate friend into an ardent suitor, to appreciate her indignation at this coarse violation of her trust.* (p.249)

Dora didn't stay the course but terminated therapy of her own accord.

In Fitzgerald's story the male psychiatrists take a slightly more enlightened though still paternalistic view of their patient.

*So Doctor Dohmler said to her frankly, 'Your duty now is to yourself. This doesn't by any account mean the end of anything for you – your life is just beginning' and so forth and so forth. She really has an excellent mind, so he gave her a little Freud to read, not too much, and she was very interested.*

I bet she was! In Nicole's case her doctor also betrays her trust. He sleeps with her, acting out the fantasy that some have suggested Freud may have had about Dora. Against the advice of his colleagues, Dick Diver goes on to marry Nicole. The little research that has been done indicates marriages made in therapy tend to go awry (Pope, 1994). It is in part about the imbalance in power; Dick acts both as Nicole's husband and doctor, and this puts an impossible strain on their relationship. Belatedly, therapists have begun to recognise that the intimacy of therapy can easily stray into sexuality and that therapists, like their patients, have sexual fantasies about clients. To the charismatic Dick Diver the rich, beautiful and vulnerable Nicole Warren is an irresistible attraction. But when the fantasy became reality, the result was devastating to them both.

### How illusions can be destructive

Why did Dick Diver behave the way he did? To my mind this is the main psychological interest in the book. The novel opens with Dick already married to Nicole. They are living in luxury on the French Riviera in the late 1920s and are surrounded by friends and admirers. We see the Divers through the eyes of another character, the young starlet, Rosemary Hoyt who is on holiday with her mother. She falls in with them and is taken up by Dick, with whom she soon becomes infatuated, a foreshadowing of infatuation that we later learn Nicole had for him.

There is something very special about Dick. As Fitzgerald puts it:

*...to be included in Dick Diver's world for a while was a remarkable experience: people believed he made special reservations about them, recognizing the proud uniqueness of their destinies... He won everyone quickly with an exquisite consideration and a politeness that moved so fast and intuitively that it could be examined only in its effect.*

Fitzgerald is fully aware that this sense of specialness is an illusion:

*So long as they subscribed to it completely, their happiness was his preoccupation but at the first flicker of doubt as to its all-inclusiveness he evaporated before their eyes, leaving little communicable memory of what he had said and done.*

The illusion is not just an individual's magic trick. Fitzgerald also sees it imbedded in the context, the Riviera beaches, the smart hotels, the chic social set, the immense wealth and social distinction, the playboy world of rich Americans in Europe. Another important theme of the book is the shallowness of this artifice of wealth and fame, the way it cannot compensate for something damaged inside. From the outset we like Dick Diver and feel the pull of his exciting, glamorous way of life. Dick is handsome, intelligent and charming, and the people he is with are fascinating. Nowadays he would be a celebrity, and this book does say something important about the dangers of that life. Some celebrities might do well to read it.

But its essential point is about illusions, narcissistic ones in particular. Dick's ambition is to become the greatest psychologist that ever lived. It is a grandiose statement and his taking on of the damaged Nicole is a grandiose act. Dick drifts through his life expecting it all to work out for him. He says:

*I got to be a psychiatrist because there was a girl at St Hilda's at Oxford that went to the same lectures.*

When confronted in the clinic about his relationship with Nicole, he blithely says:

*I'm half in love with her – the question*

*of marrying her has passed through my mind.*

This is the illusion of specialness and self-worth. Anything goes. You could be rich and famous, brilliant and successful, if you believe you are truly special. This the American dream. But it is a destructive illusion. In extreme cases, like Dick Diver's, it can be a defence against an inner emptiness. Revealingly, Dick makes a comment about actors that is almost certainly also about himself:

*The strongest guard is placed at the gateway to nothing...maybe because the condition of emptiness is too shameful to be divulged.*

As Mitchell (1988) has pointed out, we all need illusions. But we need to know that they are illusions and to avoid conflating reality with illusion for otherwise, as one might say in this context, 'that way madness lies.' Kohut (1977) speculated that narcissism need not be a pathological state provided it is tempered with 'optimal frustration', which he saw as a combination of admiration, empathy and firmness. Interestingly, the starlet Rosemary Hoyt, who falls for Dick at the beginning of the book and eventually has an affair with him, discards her narcissistic infatuation. She may herself be in the business of creating illusions, but she works hard at her acting and does not let it turn her head. Fitzgerald portrays her as protected by a strong and sensible mother. Whether this is a statement about the value of mothers versus fathers, I leave others to decide.

*Tender is the Night* shows us, in Fitzgerald's brilliant, shimmering prose, that narcissistic illusions, if unchecked, are in the end highly destructive. I write this as President Bush is on a visit to Europe. I wonder if he has a copy of the book.

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