

# Nothing Is Wasted

*Penelope Fitzgerald: A Life*

By Hermione Lee

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Reviewed by Ana Isabel Keilson



Penelope Fitzgerald

On October 24, 1979, an interview ran in London's *Evening Standard* under the headline, "The Original Boat Person: the Lady who Sailed Away with £10,000." The subject had won a literary contest for a novel based on her experience living in a houseboat on the Thames. When asked whether she wrote regularly, she replied, "Well, not very often actually ... a woman is a sitting target for interruption." The paper summarized for its readers the author's personality: "In the modest manner of actual intellectuals she is more informed and less vague than she appears on first sight."

That "Original Boat Person" was 61-year-old Penelope Fitzgerald; the £10,000 prize was the Booker; and the novel was *Offshore*, which she had written in just three months. It had beaten out that year's competition, including *Praxis*, by Fay Weldon; *Joseph*, by Julian Rathbone; *Confederates*, by Thomas Keneally; and the front-runner, *A Bend in the River*, by V. S. Naipaul. At the time, Fitzgerald had published three books, including *The Bookshop* (1978), which had been shortlisted the previous year for the prize.

Many were confused by the judges' choice. The *Evening Standard* was not unique in its treatment of Fitzgerald. At the awards dinner she was told by a reporter "that they'd all written their pieces about Naipaul and felt they were free to get drunk." The day after the ceremony, Fitzgerald, along with Weldon, Rathbone, and Susan Hill, a former awardee and judge, appeared on the BBC's *Book Programme*, hosted by Robert Robinson. He began by suggesting that the judges had made a mistake in picking *Offshore* as the Booker winner. Hill agreed. "I know it's an appalling thing to say and I don't want to discomfort [Fitzgerald], but I wouldn't have chosen it." Robinson, who had not read *Offshore*, argued that winning novels should make "statements of some importance about the world and the society we live in." The interview continued in its parade of humiliation. At the end, Robinson turned to Fitzgerald and asked her to describe the purpose of the novel. "I think it's that, for the time being, you forget that it's dark outside," she said. In response, Robinson read a series of obscure names of former Nobel Prize winners. "Not that I wish to bring a cloud over the head of Mrs. Fitzgerald, but which of us have read Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson?"

"I shall go read him at once," Fitzgerald responded, off camera.

*Offshore*—its history, production, and reception—lies at the heart of Hermione Lee's compulsively readable biography, *Penelope Fitzgerald: A Life*. As Lee shows, *Offshore* marked the "beginning" of Fitzgerald's life as it has

come to be understood: the story of one woman's quiet journey to become the unsung hero of the modern British novel. Her prolific career came into public view just after midlife and continued until her death in 2000, at 83. (*The Blue Flower* [1998], considered by some to be her finest work, was written when she was 81.)

Fitzgerald came from a family of highly educated clergy, intellectuals, and academics. In 1938, she graduated from Oxford, where she had gotten her start as a literary critic. Her background was marked by entitlement, yet her life was also shaped by hardship and resistance. Lee's biography, at just under 500 pages, shows brilliantly the extremes running beneath the "modest manner"—well illustrated by the two Booker anecdotes—that Fitzgerald frequently presented to others.

*Offshore* captures this contrast. The action of the book centers around the life of thirty-something Nenna, who, in London in the early 1960s, struggles to make ends meet and decides to move with her two children onto a houseboat on the Thames. Nenna comes from a background of privilege, yet the circumstances in which we find her are the opposite. Her world is unstable, made of broken relationships, a pervasive sense of failure, the threat of poverty, and a retreat from social life. As in many of Fitzgerald's other novels (including *The Blue Flower*, *The Bookshop*, and *The Gate of Angels* [1991]), she constructs a main character only to do a bait-and-switch: the axes of her novels are often hidden, either in a supporting character or group of characters, as in *Offshore*; in the community itself, as in *The Bookshop*; or even in the spirit of a time or place, as in *The Gate of Angels*. Thus, while Nenna stands at the heart of *Offshore*, the pulse of the book is elsewhere, in the struggles and meditations of those around her. Nenna seems like an observer of her own life—as if to prove to herself, to others, and to readers her own existence in the world. Nenna is thus bold in her assertions of self. She is also frequently misunderstood.

*Offshore* is an apt frame through which to read Fitzgerald's life, and not only because Fitzgerald pulled from personal experience as source material for the novel. Lee shows that the book's qualities of understatement, economy of explanation, and claims to subjectivity resonated in Fitzgerald's life, habits, and relationships. She wasted nothing. Lee describes in detail how she repurposed old clothes and pieces of fabric into new garments for herself and her children. Homemade drawings, cards, and illustrated book plates, were holiday gifts, much loved by her close and devoted circle of family and friends. Throughout her life, Fitzgerald was

fascinated by craft; her first book, published in 1975, was a biography of Edward Burne-Jones, the pre-Raphaelite designer and founder (along with William Morris, another hero of Fitzgerald's) of the British decorative-arts movement. In many respects, her novelistic, journalistic, and nonfiction writing can be seen as an extension of this curiosity.

Some of Fitzgerald's economy, however, grew out of necessity. Her husband, Desmond, struggled with alcoholism and unemployment throughout his life. By the early 1950s, that, combined with the economic fallout from World War II and a shifting British class and social system, put the Fitzgerald family in financial distress. Penelope and Desmond began a literary journal, which eventually folded. There was personal strain. In 1952, Penelope took their eldest son, Valpy, then six years old, with her on a strange, spur-of-the-moment trip to Mexico, leaving Desmond and their infant daughter at home in London. This episode, Lee notes, remains an "unsolved mystery" of Fitzgerald's life: Fitzgerald herself never explained her reasons for going, nor spoke about it afterward. Lee does not speculate, but instead provides the observations of those closest to Fitzgerald: "Friends and family, looking back, made up their reasons. Jean Fischer said, admiring and baffled, it was just the sort of outlandish thing she would do. She was restless, she was escaping, she was trying to raise some money, her children supposed, looking back."

By the early 1960s, Desmond was drinking heavily, and there were long periods when he was absent from family life altogether. To support herself and her children, Fitzgerald took multiple jobs, including writing literary reviews and scripts for BBC children's educational programs, as well as teaching, which she did for 26 years. One of her teaching posts was at the Westminster Tutors, an elite girls' school. On the back of her students' papers, Fitzgerald would write notes to herself for her novels and short stories, as well as her observations about Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett, and her thoughts on biography as a literary form.

In the early 1960s, while Fitzgerald was at Westminster Tutors, she decided to move with her children onto a houseboat on the Thames to save money. They lived there for about two years. The houseboat, leaky and rife with structural problems, eventually sank, forcing Fitzgerald and her daughters into a series of homeless shelters (Valpy, then fourteen, was away at boarding school). In one jarring moment in the biography—often cited by reviewers—Lee powerfully relays Fitzgerald's qualities of understatement and resiliency.

The cat was found clinging to the mast, and had to be rescued. Most of Penelope's family documents, photographs, letters from her mother, childhood mementoes, were lost, to her great distress. Some books were salvaged, and remained in her possession, their pages forever crinkled and stained. She went back to her teaching the next day, looking more than usually disheveled, and said to her class: "I'm sorry I was late, but my house sank." Desmond was no help: "God knows where Daddy was."

"The Original Boat Person" had not simply "sailed away" with accomplishment but had worked unrecognized for decades before finally casting off. Fitzgerald wrote *Offshore* twenty years later, shortly after Desmond's death. Lee shows with great sensitivity that despite the many difficulties in their marriage, the Fitzgeralds were deeply devoted to each other. When Desmond died, Penelope felt his loss acutely. Lee argues, though, that this loss created a vital space for Fitzgerald to write:

She turned that difficult part of her life into a perfectly controlled short novel [*The Bookshop*], funny and profoundly sad. The modest midlife success of her two biographies and her quirky thriller, which, under cover, expressed the values in life she most cared about, cleared the way for her distinctive style of fiction-writing, in which she both kept herself concealed and gave herself away. Later novels would be more strange, daring and formally original. But the voice was now forged, and began to be recognized. She was doing exactly what she had always wanted to do, and she had rich and copious resources of material to draw on. There was no reason to hold back.

For Fitzgerald, sadness, loss, and concealment existed in a delicate balance with freedom and alienation. The ties keeping her tethered to shore—to society, to convention, to other people—were strengthened, modified, and finally cut. Desmond's death gave her the freedom to write in new ways. The literary world rejected and received her in waves. During it all, she kept writing.

*Offshore* also marked a practical shift in Fitzgerald's life. In addition to the Booker cash prize, it was her first novel with publisher Richard Ollard, whose support bolstered her career. "The moment Penelope Fitzgerald came his way, [Ollard] saw the point of her completely," Lee notes. Three days later, Ollard had read the manuscript for *Offshore* and wrote to Fitzgerald. "Do you want as much money as possible as soon as possible?" A contract and a £2,000 advance—ten times what she had received from her previous publisher—followed.

Lee has written biographies of some of the most important women writers of the twentieth century: Virginia Woolf, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and Elizabeth Bowen. (She has also written a biography of Philip Roth.) She has frequently commented on her working process as well as on the craft of "life-writing," a term coined by Woolf that Lee draws upon in her approach to understanding the lives of others. Lee structures *Penelope Fitzgerald* as a series of observations, organized under conceptual headings



Penelope Fitzgerald, 1940 © Dooley Archive

such as "The Useful Arts," "The World," and "Enigmas," suggesting that a life is best understood through the categories that shape it, rather than through conventional chronology, or a series of events whose relationships explain meaning or mark progress.

Literary critics have been endlessly fascinated by Fitzgerald's "late start"—and yet, to puzzle over a late start in the life of a woman artist belies a range of assumptions (gendered, structural) about artistic brilliance and about the criteria by which a life may be valued and understood. "Why did Fitzgerald wait so long to begin writing?" asked the *New Yorker* critic James Wood (November 24, 2014). He mentions her status as a mother, the multiple jobs and difficulties she faced—but Wood is ultimately unsatisfied with that as an explanation. In a Summer 2013 interview in the *Paris Review*, Lee offered her own, different perspective:

I'm deeply interested in the shape of [Fitzgerald's] life, and I'm fascinated by lateness, late starts.... I feel there was a powerful underground river running through her life. She was a brilliant young woman, and everybody thought she was going to be a writer and she was writing away like mad in her teens and early twenties, and she was the editor of a magazine. And then it all went underground. Meanwhile, she's writing notes in her teaching books, which are a form of apprenticeship, and she's bringing up her family, and she's coping with her husband. And then he dies. And then up it comes, this underground river, at the age of sixty, and she writes thirteen books in twenty years. I don't have a theory about that. Nor do I want to blame anyone. But I want to understand it and show it happening as best as I can.

A late start to a literary career is not necessarily a gendered phenomenon: Frank McCourt, Louis Begley, and Norman Rush, like Fitzgerald, all began publishing in their sixties. More often than not, though, gender does matter. Lee, after all, is the expert on Woolf, who in *A Room of One's Own*

showed so clearly why the life of Shakespeare's (theoretical) sister would have had to be understood differently from that of her brother. Woolf's claim from nearly a century ago should continue to give us pause today. When we engage to understand the lives of women artists, we bring into focus the values against which they are judged to be normal, exceptional, "natural," or different.

More specifically, the very idea of a "late bloomer" suggests that there is some kind of standard process of artistic maturation for writers. And what, one might ask, would an "early" or "earlier" bloom have given Fitzgerald? Would it have made her writing, or career, somehow "better"? Would it change how we understand the decades (decades!) of work she had done before *Edward Burne-Jones: A Biography* was published in 1975? Lee, in the same 2013 interview, remarked on this:

My friend Victoria Glendinning has a motto she uses, which I sometimes steal—"Nothing is wasted." It's a very reassuring and consoling idea, even if it isn't always true. Think of those terrible phases in your life when you're just grinding along, or you're missing your way, or everything seems arid and disappointing. It helps if you can say to yourself, But something will come out of this. Penelope Fitzgerald wrote a note to herself that I take to heart—"Experiences aren't given to us to be 'got over,' otherwise they would hardly be experiences."

For Fitzgerald, there were no early or late starts to life. There was only her work as it unfolded, as she experienced it, and through which Fitzgerald created a sea of words, ideas and images. Rather than consider how it might have been different, we should consider ourselves lucky to stand at its shore. 🍷

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