

Jay, Daisy, Nick and Cassie

The women come and go, talking of F. Scott Fitzgerald.

BY LIESL SCHILLINGER

A COUPLE of years ago, when the Australian filmmaker Baz Luhrmann bought the rights to "The Great Gatsby," the move generated a fair amount of what Hollywood calls "buzz." On the red carpet at the Academy Awards last year, the director, accosted by curious members of the press, called "Gatsby" "a great, iconic story" with remarkable contemporary resonance. "If you reread it now," he declared, "you'll see how powerful and meaningful it is in this time." But last September Luhrmann retreated from the project, telling News-

THE SUMMER WE READ GATSBY

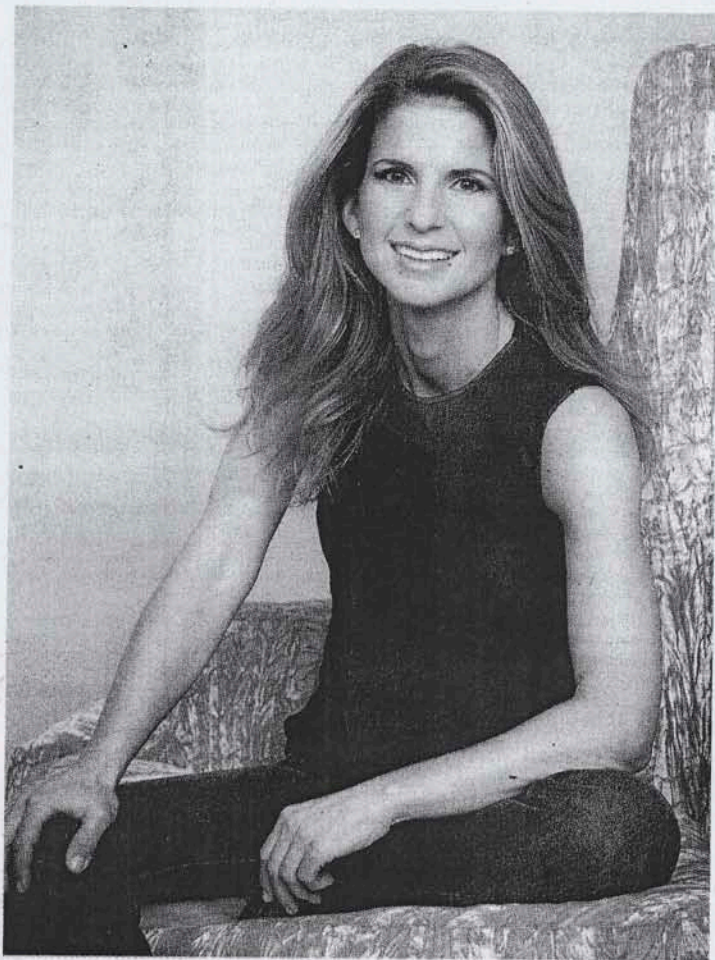
By Danielle Ganek.
292 pp. Viking, \$25.95.

week, "I've not decided which thing I will commit to." Conceding, "I own the rights to 'Gatsby,'" he added, "I own the rights to it and a whole lot of other books." It's dispiriting to think of one of the greatest of the Great American Novels jumbled among a pile of books, not top of the heap. But, as Nick Carraway reflects at the story's outset, "a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth." In this case, however, humility may hide behind the mask of hubris: it takes audacity to wrap the gilded name of Gatsby around your own shoulders and hope to wear it with grace. The prospect is daunting — or ought to be.

This thought comes to mind in the case of Danielle Ganek's new novel, "The Summer We Read Gatsby," a plucky homage to Fitzgerald's masterpiece that has about as much in common with "Gatsby" as Diet Coke has with Perrier-Jouët. There's little harm and zero calories in Ganek's feather-light fare, so it would be illogical to seek more from it than simple refreshment. And if Ganek's novel is no "Gatsby," what is? Yet the question arises: Why bring "Gatsby" into this story of two women husband-hunting in the Hamptons in 2008?

Ganek's novel could have been called "The Summer We Read 'Being and Nothingness'" or "The Summer We Read Nordstrom Catalogs" or, for that matter, "The Summer We Watched 'Beaches'" — given a name change or two. Make no mistake: the operative word in the title is "summer." As in, "How I spent my summer vacation." This is an altogether reasonable theme for a book aimed at the soft target of not-so-very-critical vacation readers, and no terrible indictment. But the jaw drops, early on, when you realize that for most of this book's characters "The Great Gatsby" functions less as a

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work of literature than as a status symbol. In the words of one of the characters, Peck's Peck (Peck) Moriarty, "A literary fetish is the new black."

The "we" of the title refers to two half sisters: Peck, a busty, theatrical, narcissistic 32-year-old, and Stella Blue Cassandra Olivia Moriarty (who goes by Cassie but whom Peck perversely calls Stella), a shy, earnest divorcée of 28 who grew up in Europe and admires her American half sister for being "glamorously eccentric" and "one of the earliest Twitter users." Though Peck and Cassie had different mothers and were raised on different continents (their father died when they were little), they shared a few summers in the Hamptons in a country bungalow called Fool's House, named not for its owner (the sisters' cartoonishly "artistic and literary" maiden aunt, Lydia) but for the Jasper Johns painting.

In the summer of 2008, after Lydia has

died and bequeathed the house to her nieces, Peck and Cassie come together at Fool's House for the first time in seven years and bond over endless cocktails. "I never realized how much I would love having a sister," Cassie reflects, after spending a day with Peck and "the Girls" (Peck's "Sex and the City"-style entourage) "wrapped in a warm blanket of gossip, laughter and fashion." It recalls the world Daisy Buchanan conjured for Jay Gatsby — "the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves," with Daisy "gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor." Then again, maybe it doesn't.

The Moriarty sisters' vacation begins with a "Gatsby"-themed fete in Bridgehampton "concocted" by a party planner for one of Peck's ex-boyfriends, Miles Noble. Miles looks "exactly like a frog," and Peck suspects him not only of having "absolutely no taste at all" but of being

"the tackiest man in America." Yet these deficits are outweighed by his "extravagant" newfound wealth and his capacity for "obviously lavish spending." Miles had once wooed Peck with "The Great Gatsby" rather than candy or flowers, but at the fete Peck learns he never read Fitzgerald's novel, prompting some serious soul-searching. "The thing I can't figure out," she complains to Cassie, "is how, and more importantly why, he could spend all that time with me back then talking about this damn book." In 2001, the last time the sisters reunited at Fool's House, Peck and Miles had recently broken up. Peck spent the summer dramatically mourning "the denouement of the greatest love story ever told" and "pretending to read" the cherished copy of "Gatsby" Miles had given her. Have a bloody mary. Peck does. Perhaps that will help make things clearer.

To Cassie, books are more than props. Aunt Lydia, who had been an English teacher at a high-toned Manhattan boys' school,

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made a strong impression on Cassie in her girlhood by sending a "summer reading list" of improving books to her, from Nancy Drew mysteries to "The Catcher in the Rye" to "Catch-22." "Gatsby" never made it into the care package, but during her 2001 visit to Fool's House Cassie read Peck's tear-streaked copy, while catching the eye of a handsome bachelor architect. Will the handsome bachelor architect reappear in the Hamptons in the summer of 2008? You'll have to read "The Summer We Read Gatsby" to find out.

SUMMER reading isn't for everyone, as a brood of cupcake-eating children explain to Cassie when they drop by Fool's House. They dismiss the activity outright, "making it sound like a disease." "What's wrong with summer reading?" Cassie asks them in surprise. Her Aunt Lydia had told her "it was the way you learn what matters in life." Could Aunt Lydia have been wrong? "Reading is boring," one of the kids tells her "in a gentle manner, as though he didn't want to hurt my feelings by pointing out something so obvious." Before you wail, "O tempora, o mores," remember that almost two centuries ago Lord Byron despaired of the sensibilities of his contemporaries when he wrote, "Society is now one polish'd horde, /Form'd of two mighty tribes, the Bored and Bored." That remark, come to think of it, would have made a fine epigraph for Fitzgerald's "Gatsby" — or Ganek's. □