

YA Book Review

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# THE GREAT GATSBY FRESHLY REVISITED: DEBORAH LINN'S *JUST DAISY*

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James V. Jacobs

Daisy Fay's mother left her with words to live by when she said, "A confident woman is a powerful thing, ... The Universe be damned." However, Daisy is struggling to find that *confidence* to realize her mother's advice.

Daisy displays outward signs of a self-assured young woman. She enjoys opulence, makes good grades, and is the most popular girl at prestigious East Eggerton Academy, an upscale high school in the affluent Chicago suburb of East Eggerton. Daisy also goes with Tom Buchanan, the school's most popular boy and star quarterback on the football team. Like Daisy, Tom comes from one of the premier East Eggerton families. He's the guy everyone expects Daisy to someday walk down the aisle with like royalty—to have his kids, be on his arm at all the high-society events, attend the obligatory ladies' meetings at the country club.

But Daisy feels that something is wrong with her life of privilege.

It's been three years since Daisy's parents died in a crash, and it seems that Daisy is still mourning them. Her problem, though, goes deeper than her parents' tragedy. Maybe it's Tom; he's not *the one*. It seems she can't quite put her finger on it. Or is it that Daisy Fay really does know her problem, but is in denial?

Deborah Linn's young adult novel *Just Daisy*, published in 2021, begins with the main character meeting her friends at a beach just off Chicago's Gold Coast, the neighborhood where the city's rich and powerful reside. Daisy and her Grandma Betty, with whom she lives, have returned to Chicago from a three-month getaway on Tybee, a paradise-like isle off Georgia's Savannah Coast. Daisy refers to Tybee as "family Island," because Tybee's property was bought up by distant relatives, streets even named for them. Daisy and her parents used to spend a lot of time on the island—and the past summer Tybee is where Daisy was swept off her feet by the mysterious Jamie Gatsby.

The subtitle to Linn's novel describes it as "A Gatsby Retelling." But *Just Daisy* is not a knockoff of *The Great Gatsby*. Linn simply uses F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic as a template, much as a skilled artist uses another artist's masterpiece as inspiration to create her own unique work—and *Just Daisy* stands on its own as very good YA literature.

Linn does borrow the names of Fitzgerald's characters. In addition to Daisy and Tom, there is the immensely wealthy and independent Gatsby, the blond, tanned Adonis who suddenly appears

hundreds of miles from Tybee to begin the school year at East Eggerton Academy, continuing his seduction of Daisy, as they renew their secret love with clandestine trysts in an isolated alcove of the school building.

There is Jordan, a blunt and perceptive young woman and Daisy's best friend. Myrtle, beautiful and sexy, is abused and discarded over and over. Nick Carraway, a cousin to Daisy, is a trusted ally and editor of the school newspaper. But Nick is not the story's narrator, as Daisy narrates the first-person tale, driven forward with strong verbs and figurative language painting vivid imagery for the book's audience.

Linn takes the reader on a roller coaster ride featuring a hedonistic party thrown by Jamie. It's a bash open to "everybody" who attends East Eggerton Academy, even the school's commoners. Gatsby provides a night filled with drugs, booze, and sex. The teen orgy's highlight is a fight between quick and agile Gatsby and the brute-like Tom Buchanan.

Then, the reader is taken to the homecoming dance, East Eggerton's most anticipated teen event. There, at the crowning of homecoming king and queen, Daisy Fay issues her declaration of independence.

Initially it seemed that the novel is about the triangle between Daisy, Jamie and Tom, as Linn coaxes the reader to empathize with Daisy—to feel the confusion she has over her feelings for Tom and her feelings for Jamie. One of whom takes Daisy for granted both socially and sexually, while the other offers her a fairy tale romance punctuated with passionate love making.

However, it becomes clear that Linn's story is not really about the love triangle. That is simply a literary vehicle to carry the reader to the real story—Daisy's discovery and resolution of her problem. The most important character, other than Daisy Fay, appears midway into the story. Claudia Hip is Daisy's model of that *confident woman*. Hip introduces Daisy to a world beyond Eggerton—and beyond Daisy's self-absorption. By focusing on other people and their needs, Daisy finds herself, fulfills her mother's hope for her daughter, and is ready to start life away from Eggerton as a confident woman—a powerful woman.

The novel will easily appeal to secondary school readers interested in the glamorous, wild parties as well as the conflict between Gatsby and Tom. Daisy's development into independence will no doubt delight many adult readers, too.

Linn's novel could serve as supplemental material for American history and American literature.

For parents or others who challenge the book's inclusion in the school curriculum, an easy option would be to offer Fitzgerald's work in its stead.

### **Author Biography**

James V. Jacobs was educated at Indiana Wesleyan University and Western Illinois University. He worked in Civil Rights for the Urban League, taught fifth grade, and taught writing at Carl Sandburg Community College. Jacobs received awards for teaching and human relations. They include *Award of Excellence* from the Illinois Math and Science Academy, *League of Latin American Citizens (LULAC) Teacher of the Year Award*, *Honored Teacher Award* from the University of Iowa, *Outstanding Alumni Award* from Indiana Wesleyan University, *Outstanding Dedication to Education Citation* from Boston University, and the *Human Relations Award* from the Galesburg (IL) Human Relations Commission. Jacobs was also part owner of HRC, Inc., a business dealing with racism. Jacobs' essays and short stories have appeared in *The Prairie Journal*, *The Zephyr*, and the literary/art magazine *Phizzogs*. Additionally, *The Midwest Book Review* called Jacobs's first novel *No Ordinary Season* "[an] extraordinary novel that is ... very highly recommended ..." He can be reached at [jvjake1964ghs@gmail.com](mailto:jvjake1964ghs@gmail.com).