

COLUMNS

On 50th anniversary of 'Great Gatsby' in Newport, Mark Patinkin considers today's overlaps



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Providence Journal

The iconic [Sam Waterston](#) stepped into the ballroom of Gatsby's mansion.

That's what Newport's [Rosecliff](#) became in 1974, when Robert Redford and Mia Farrow brought alive onscreen the iconic novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Several hundred had gathered here for a [Preservation Society of Newport County](#) event – "[The Great Gatsby](#) Revisited: An Evening with Sam Waterston" – marking the half-century anniversary of the film.

Waterston, of course, is an A-lister and Oscar nominee with a long résumé, including years as a key "Law & Order" character. But perhaps his breakthrough role was as Nick Carraway, the Midwest soul of modest means in "The Great Gatsby" movie blockbuster, where, in its Newport location, he observed the corrosive effects of wealth on the spectacularly rich.

Soon, Waterston was sitting onstage for the evening's main event – a conversation with the gracious and able Anne Thompson of NBC News to talk about the film then and now.



You would not guess that Sam Waterston is 84. His voice still projects powerfully, and he has retained a thick shock of gray hair I can only be jealous of.

Waterston proved an excellent raconteur, recalling moments from the making of the movie, including a conversation he had on set with Robert Redford.

At one point, Waterston shared with Redford how nice the principals had been to him.

Redford's response: It's not because they love you, it's that they want something from you.

The Rosecliff audience loved it.

Those who are younger doubtless think of a different onscreen Gatsby – Leonardo DiCaprio played the same character in [a 2013 remake](#).

But the Redford version was iconic in 1974, coming during the peak of the great actor's fame, and it remains especially important here – a major Hollywood production made in Rhode Island.

Of course, Thompson asked Waterston why “The Great Gatsby” – book and original movie – still resonate today.

Waterston observed the obvious – that the country has always had a bit of an obsession with the moneyed.

“Aren’t they rich?” he said, echoing a theme from the book, “and aren’t they awful?”

The conversation did not get overly political, but it was hard to avoid that when questions came up about the power of the 1 percent.

“In the Declaration of Independence,” Waterston said, “it’s the whole idea of a country where power flows from the bottom to the top, not the top to the bottom.”

The implication was clear and the applause long.

But then he added: “It’s been flowing both ways from the beginning, and the book talks about that.”

Indeed, one of the core themes Fitzgerald sought to address was the American Dream, and the danger, as seen through the eyes of Waterston’s character Nick Carraway, of defining oneself only through the pursuit and display of wealth.

The book and movie explored all of that as part of the decadence of the “The Roaring '20s.”

It occurred to me as I listened that although we were marking the 50th anniversary of the movie, this was also 100 years from the publication of Fitzgerald's book.

One wonders: Are the 2020s a distant mirror of the Roaring '20s? Both embody similar economic extremes, with fortunes made overnight back then while today, the stock market and housing prices are at all-time highs.

It even might be said that we are in a renewed era of Gatsby figures, reflected by some of the names who happen to live near the very location of this Preservation Society event.

Larry Ellison, the world’s second-richest man, now worth \$250 billion, owns the mansion next door to where we were sitting this night. It’s called [Beechwood](#), and it’s said that after buying it for \$10 million in 2010, Ellison has put \$100 million into renovating it.

Less than a mile away in Miramar on Bellevue is another contemporary version of Gatsby, at least in terms of wealth. That would be [Blackstone CEO Steve Schwarzman](#), net worth \$52 billion.

Many of the super-mansions of Bellevue Avenue proved unsustainable as individual homes. By today's standards, they are too museum-like. That’s why a grand collection of them, including the Breakers and Rosecliff itself, are now tourist sites ably managed by the Preservation Society.



But some of the other grand homes in Newport are indeed owned by the fabulously wealthy, as was the case a century ago.

One can only wonder if F. Scott Fitzgerald would have been writing about the likes of Ellison – or Bezos – were he alive today. If so, would he portray them as decadent? Or maybe, in contrast to Jay Gatsby, whose wealth came from suspect things like bootlegging, Fitzgerald would be more laudatory about figures who, whatever their flaws, built wealth as entrepreneurs creating important things?

As the event concluded, it was clear that Sam Waterston wasn't the only figure from the film being celebrated these 50 years later.

There was a second character, and it was Rosecliff itself.

Still today, as the center of the 1974 movie, it stands out as one of the most notable "appearances" ever of Newport onscreen.

Which left me with a final thought as I drove home down Bellevue Avenue.

One can't help but think how lucky Rhode Island is that Rosecliff has been preserved.

And the same for all of the Preservation Society's mansions.

Truly, they add to the state's character, its national profile and the exceptionalism of living in this amazing state.

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