

The Great Kanto Earthquake and F. Scott Fitzgerald

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How many recall the following striking sentence from *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, which appears on the second page of the novel where Fitzgerald first introduces Gatsby?

“If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away”

This line failed to focus our attention when we first read the book in our younger days. Now, however, as a Japanese seismologist and a student of Japanese culture (and geophysics!), we would have been greatly remiss in failing to note this statement again. Indeed, as *The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925, it occurred to us that the earthquake Fitzgerald mentions must be the Great Kanto earthquake which occurred on 1 September 1923 and devastated the Tokyo metropolitan area. *The Great Gatsby* is a story of people in Long Island (or the New York area), and the distance between the epicenter and Long Island is about ten thousand kilometers!

From on-line biographical materials on Fitzgerald, compiled by the Thomas Cooper Library of the University of South Carolina in honor of the 1996 centenary of his birth (<http://www.sc.edu/fitzgerald/chronology.html>), we know that he was in New York when the Great Kanto quake struck on 1 September 1923:

Mid-October 1922–April 1924

Fitzgeralds rent house at 6 Gateway Drive in Great Neck, Long Island.

Mid-April 1924

Fitzgeralds sail for France.

May 1924

Fitzgeralds visit Paris, then leave for Riviera; stop at Grimm’s Park Hotel in Hyares and settle in June at Villa Marie Valescure, St. Raphael.

Summer–Fall 1924

FSF writes *The Great Gatsby*.

The front page of *The New York Times* of 2 September 1923 carried a (three-line!) headline on the earthquake, along with several stories about various aspects of the

disaster. On page two appeared a boxed item with the following title: “Japanese Earthquake Recorded Across the World From Hawaii to London by Observatory Instruments”. This item tells how the earthquake was recorded on seismographs in Hilo (Hawaii), Berkeley (California), Washington (D.C.), and West Bromwich (England). It seems likely that Fitzgerald read this item on page 2 of *The New York Times* on Sunday morning of 2 September 1923 and that this was the inspiration for his striking sentence.

It is startling to reflect that seismographs were installed all over the world 80 years ago and that their recordings, reported in the next morning’s newspaper, became an inspiration for a great novelist. We cannot help admiring our predecessors, and perhaps providing such inspiration to the world beyond the geophysical community should be considered one of our challenges today, as well. Indeed, it might be of general interest to investigate the various roles played by geophysical events in the literary realm. At least it was inspiring for us to uncover the likely link between the Great Kanto Earthquake and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Acknowledgements

The book *Honyaku Yawa* by Haruki MURAKAMI and Motoyuki SHIBATA was our inspiration for examining *The Great Gatsby* anew.

From *the New York Times*, Sunday, September 2, 1923,
Vol. 72, No. 23,962, p. 2.

Japanese Earthquake Recorded Across the World From Hawaii to London by Observatory Instruments

HILO, Hawaii, Sept. 1 (Associated Press).—The seismograph at Kealahou at 7 o'clock last night registered a severe distant earthquake.

Sampans in the harbor were warned to beware of a tidal wave. Reports received here said a slight tidal wave was noticed at the Island of Puna, off the coast of Ecuador. No damage was reported.

BERKELEY, Cal., Sept. 1.—The seismograph of the University of California recorded a "very severe" earthquake starting at 10 minutes and 16 seconds after 7 o'clock last night and lasting for three hours and fifty minutes. The indicated distance was 5,400 miles and the point of origin in the region between Tokio and Osaka, Japan.

WASHINGTON, Sept. 1.—An earthquake described as extremely severe and continuing nearly five hours last night and early today was recorded on the Georgetown University seismograph. Beginning at 10:12 P. M., the disturbance reached a maximum intensity between 10:30 and 11 o'clock, and lasted until 3 A. M. Director Tonderf of the observatory estimated the centre of the disturbance at about 6,300 miles from Washington.

WEST BROMWICH, England, Sept. 1 (Associated Press).—An exceptionally severe earthquake shock was recorded at the observatory here at about 4:11 this morning.

The seismograph indicated that the origin of the tremors was 5,500 miles distant from here. The movement was sufficiently strong to ring an alarm bell and disarrange the mechanism of the recording instrument.