



## Radiant Days

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## **Radiant Days** Michael A. FitzGerald

During the last days of the Balkan War in the summer of 1995, Anthony, a hapless American questioning the dot-com values that allow him to live a pampered existence in San Francisco, agrees to join Gisela, a beauty he barely knows, in a search for her son, lost in a Hungarian orphanage. In Budapest they meet Marsh, a brilliant but frustrated British war correspondent. Anthony thinks he has found in Eastern Europe what his former life was missing: enterprising young people openly questioning U.S. values, determined to remake their own world. But when an odd and edgy love triangle emerges and he discovers his mission with Gisela is much darker than he imagined, Anthony is thrown further in flux. Moving from the tattered romanticism of Budapest, through the sparkling Dalmatian coast, and into the brutalized landscape of inland Croatia, the novel takes a shocking turn of irreversible consequence.

*Radiant Days* is held taut in the voice of Anthony, whose desire to experience a more serious (and thrilling) life leaves injury in its wake. With a swift plot and seamless style, Michael FitzGerald delivers a story of unattainable love, misplaced lust, and the politics of compassion.

## **Radiant Days Details**

Date : Published December 28th 2006 by Counterpoint

ISBN : 9781593761318

Author : Michael A. FitzGerald

Format : Paperback 256 pages

Genre : Fiction, Novels

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## From Reader Review Radiant Days for online ebook

### Laura says

I really kind of hate this book. I can honestly say I have never hated a main character/narrator more than I hate Anthony. Much of the novel left me with a dirty, deeply uncomfortable feeling, like a roach was crawling up my spine. So why two stars instead of one? Because Marsh was an interesting character, the one I will remember from the book (I hope to expunge the others from mind as quickly as possible-I am seriously in need of some metaphorical brain-bleach) and the author made some powerful points about the modern world and modern war. For while I would like to think that the soullessness, ennui, and putrid lack of empathy that ooze through this novel are merely elements of fiction, sadly I know better.

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### Ian says

I read this book on the recommendation of the author after I expressed a great liking for the French author Michel Houellebecq on this site.

I thoroughly enjoyed the read and rattled through it in a few days. It paints a bleak picture of the modern human condition and the direction western society appears to be taking. The characters are engaging for all their faults and I liked the setting of Budapest and Croatia (just after the war of the mid 90s). The author paints a wonderful contrast between the historic Hungarian capital, the striking Dalmatian coastline and some of the war torn interior in the Balkan state. The Balkans are a fascinating part of the world, particularly, I think, for us Europeans and the small insights into some of this history given to us by the English journalist Marsh are fascinating.

Maybe it panders to my preconceptions of a typical Americans grasp of the rest of the world and all the history that divides many nations.

A cracking read!!

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### Charles says

An excellent book, gripping, informative, surprising and quite unlike what I expected; a sort of unholy marriage between Hemingway and Brett Easton Ellis, with a startlingly unloveable - and extremely credible - hero. It's been on my to-read shelf for ages, and I only wish I'd got to it sooner.

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### Patti says

Radiant Days is thick with detail, angst, desperation, ennui, and culture shock. The story is set in post-soviet Budapest where expats live cheaply and spout philosophy and political theory without doing much else. Our hero accompanies a Gisela to Hungary and finds he might be there under false pretenses. As the lies and truth are revealed they don't seem to mean much to Anthony - he is interested only in his modest goals of

appearing cool and screwing Gisela. The story moves to the Balkans (during the height of the war) and life gets riskier and more complicated.

Michael Fitzgerald tells a story within a story - how an average college educated American knows so little about the rest of the world and the history of long time animosities, that everything has to be explained to him as he travels. Fitzgerald is brutally truthful with all his characters - at times I hated some and liked others, only to have my position switched in the next fifty pages.

I loved this book, and I can't stop thinking about it!

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### **Mark says**

From its opening at an expatriates' party in Budapest to its bittersweet ending, "Radiant Days" is an admirable first novel, immersing the reader in the pinballing life of a California man who is fleeing the end of a relationship and gets both more and less than he bargained for.

After a beautiful Hungarian bartender persuades the jilted Anthony Sinclair to go to Budapest with her, he convinces himself that he's in love with her, even though she quickly lets him know how willing she is to manipulate him and lie to him. In the course of his alcohol-fueled stay in eastern Europe, he meets a voluble British war journalist, who attracts him with his world-weary erudition and repels him by criticizing Anthony, Americans and virtually everyone else within reach.

The story looks for a moment as if it might devolve into one more meandering tale of a wandering American who is none too experienced and none too sure of his motives. But then he agrees to go with the journalist and the Hungarian woman on a quick war correspondent's trip to Croatia, and the novel quickly moves toward a crisis.

The novel is driven forward by strong description, vivid characters and highly charged eroticism, and it features characters who each show a stubborn moral streak in the midst of general selfishness and greed. It also paints a brilliant picture of the peculiar mixture of banality and terror that can co-exist in a war zone.

Only two of the three principals make it out of the book alive, and both of them, in the end, achieve a kind of world-weary freedom.

A fine first effort. It makes me eager to see what is coming next from Michael Fitzgerald.

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### **Rusty says**

I find myself echoing the review of the esteemed Jim Ruland. I thought I knew pretty much how this book would go after a few pages, but it turned into something else again, something really fine. I was particularly impressed with the way Fitzgerald took a familiar story (dude following his dick, more or less), moved it into a war zone, and came up with a fine novel that goes a long way toward explaining why people across the world resent Americans abroad. The prose style is lucid, the author takes some real risk with a somewhat unlikeable narrator, and turned it all into a novel I'll return to.

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### **Jim says**

I admit it: I thought I knew what the book held in store for me based on the first few pages. Boy was I wrong. Even worse, I made my assumption based on a knee-jerk appraisal of the narrator, Anthony, a dot-com era ex-pat in Budapest. But as I continued reading the book kept getting darker and darker and the protagonist's behavior kept diverging from what I expected him to do. At one point I was so startled I let out a little shout, prompting my wife to ask me what was the matter. I didn't have an answer for her. For in addition to great writing, memorable characters, hilarious dialogue, people doing terrible things, and wonderfully nuanced exposition, *Radiant Days* is a blistering attack on the value system that has brought us to this point in our history and culture. A great, but disturbing, read.

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### **Stephan says**

If you grew up on the fiction of Fitzgerald and Hemingway, this book should appeal to you. It's obsessed with glamor and the fast-life, like Fitzgerald's work, and takes the reader into a foreign war zone, like Hemingway's. But while its roots are in the past, the fruit of this novel are in the present day. (Am I sounding too much like I'm writing for the New York Times Book review? Forgive me.) What I'm trying to say is, the book's premise is rather familiar -- a mysterious and exotic woman lures a bored dot-comer to Hungary and then the Balkans -- but the treatment of the plot is anything but. Follow this protagonist into the closing pages and you'll be rewarded with a journey that'll have you judging him and you and maybe half the young men you know. It's a great book about America that just happens to be set during the waning days of the Balkan war. Buy it. Read it. Enjoy it. It's a book ready for a large audience.

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### **Ben says**

I have been trying to think about the best way to express my great affection for *Radiant Days* by Michael Fitzgerald, but it all seems cliché. You know the story in so many ways, it's a coming of age tale, a road trip and a love story, rife with drugs and sex, a debut novel done as males tend to do them, and yet it's so rich and audacious, painful and fresh, such a page-turner, that none of that matters. It's more like a reboot or a reinvention, but here's the thing, it also has substance and depth, politics and history, and trying to integrate all that stuff can be so hit or miss, failing to serve the story, or just failing, but here it works, it really works. Kudos dude. It's a triumph.

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### **Jason Pettus says**

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted here illegally.)

You know what really bugs me about arts publications sometimes? I'll tell you what really bugs me about arts publications sometimes; that after that one time they'll give some great, thoughtful, wonderful, exciting recommendation to a book or movie or whatever, they never have the excuse to go back and ever revisit that

project again, to maybe look one more time at why it's so great and maybe drum up a little more publicity for it as well. This is such an important thing in the underground arts in particular, after all, precisely because there is so little money available for traditional advertising; sales among basement presses rely on an unusually high amount on simple word-of-mouth, and that word-of-mouth many times starts precisely at websites like CCLaP, where I will sometimes post a review that gets a bunch of people all talking (and purchasing) at once.

I was just thinking about the subject last evening, in fact; I was reviewing some old essays here at CCLaP (but more on that in a bit), came across one and was reminded of a book from last year that was such an unexpected treat to come across, Michael Fitzgerald's sadly overlooked gem of a generation-definer *Radiant Days*, originally coming to my attention simply because Michael's a CCLaP reader, and one of the first to take me up on my liberal review policy here. Michael's book arrived at my place with almost no fanfare last summer, soon after opening CCLaP to begin with; and right off the bat, it simply blew me away, becoming one of only two of the 50 contemporary books I reviewed last year to get a perfect score of 10. (And the other one was the Pulitzer-winning *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, so you know I'm not f-cking around.)

You'll of course want to read my original review of the book at a certain point, either right now or after you finish today's essay, to understand in detail why I liked the book so much to begin with, why it's such an astounding statement about my entire generation and these entire times. But here's maybe the more interesting question -- what's happened since that review? Well, for one, Michael and I have become occasional correspondents; we're around the same age, after all, share a lot of the same experiences and attitudes, so of course enjoy talking with each other every so often. One of the things he told me, in fact, about what he liked the most about CCLaP's review, was how I found it both a "big" story and a "little" one, of how impressed I was that he could tell the individual stories of these unique characters but also tell the tale of an entire generation. According to what he was telling me, this exact kind of thing is mostly frowned on by a lot of people in the academic community, the exact delicate award-winning MFA holders with no sense of humor who I just don't like very much in general (there, *I said it*); I guess it's poo-pooed among a lot of that crowd to strive for something as large and vast as a generation-defining tale, to want to write a story that's not only delicate and character-oriented but also tries to tell something grand too.

And how funny that that community should think that, I realize now; because the essay at CCLaP I had been reading over last night had in fact been for F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, one of the first books I ever reviewed for the ongoing "CCLaP 100" series of essays about supposed classics. (I recently received a very nice email from a CCLaP reader about it, which is why I was checking it out for the first time in months and months.) And I realized last night, that even with *Gatsby* I had essentially argued the same thing that I had with *Radiant Days* six months previous; that both books tell not just interesting small tales about some unique, fascinating characters, but also give us a big clue of what those entire times were like, of how that generation of youth saw themselves, of what things were going on in that time were influencing them the most.

And, I mean, c'mon -- *Gatsby* is one of the most read and well-loved novels of all time now! It's the literal book that coined the phrase "Great American Novel!" SHEESH! In fact, the more book reviews I write here, the more I'm realizing that all the best books throughout history all share this trait that is apparently so frowned-upon by a certain part of the academic community; all of these authors end up telling a tale bigger than themselves, in most cases precisely by not trying to write a grand tale at all, but simply wanting to be as universally understood as possible. As I mentioned in my original review, but maybe not as precisely, that's really the key to *Radiant Days* being so astounding; that exactly because Fitzgerald keeps the storyline itself reigns in, because he keeps such a close eye on character like his mentors had been teaching him, he ends up with a sweeping, generation-defining tale like he does. What a sneaky lesson about the arts, huh? That those who yearn too much to tell a Grand Story will usually fail at it, precisely because they want it too

much?

I was thinking about all of this last night, and I was thinking, "Geez, too bad I don't have an excuse to just get on the CCLaP website tomorrow and talk all over again about this remarkable novel, and how even though it's a year later you should still all be checking it out." And then I realized -- wait a minute. I own CCLaP. *I can do whatever the hell I want.* Ha ha ha ha ha! And since I had so much fun doing so today, I thought maybe I'd just turn it into a semi-regular feature, where every so often I look back again on a book that's a couple of years old, but that still needs your attention and support, that will still provide you with a phenomenal reading experience. *Radiant Days* is definitely such a book, and I hope all of you who have never heard of it will have a chance to check it out soon.

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## **Tuck says**

what happens when an american educated "successful" web developer suddenly sheds his ennui, runs off to Hungary and former Yugoslavia with a beautiful but deceitful women, dabbles in nefarious "adoptions", then "wanders" down into the croat, serb, bosian stew of death? education of a different story, WITH MAPS, and accompanying real consequences to moral and "lifestyle" decisions. great novel for american times in the early 21st century.

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## **Bart says**

For a first novel, *Radiant Days* is a hell of an accomplishment. Michael Fitzgerald is a writer of both seriousness and serious talent. He deserves to be read.

On the back cover there is reference to Fitzgerald's MFA; but I'm overjoyed to report that Fitzgerald's work shows almost none of the scars of an MFA program. There's very little of the pathological cleverness, smug zaniness and "look at me I'm writing!" silliness that these programs seem to breed. Too often, the letters 'MFA' promise little more than inside-joke prose created solely for other MFA graduates.

For all its visits to the narrator's unrequited sexuality, *Radiant Days* is a novel that does not stop being serious. It is a novel whose writing took a lot of hard choices; when war is going on all round him and the narrator should probably be resorting to philosophical kitsch to show his readers how sensitive he is, Fitzgerald's narrator instead provides honesty: he's thrilled at the thought of having another try at bedding the woman who dragged him to Hungary.

As one reads this, he can almost imagine some literary critic - more concerned about his next cocktail party than offering a true critique of what he's read - carrying on about the "chilling dispossession" of contemporary Americans, that they can be thinking of only sex and drugs while *people are dying*. But that is a very real and true part of the American experience, and Fitzgerald nobly captures it.

If there was a part of the book that didn't thrill me, it was the beginning. We start at a party, and it felt so much like "The Swimmer" and a whole world that seems senselessly literary. Then there was the narrator's confession that he'd read little of Hemingway except biographies and *A Movable Feast*, and it made one worry about the rest of the novel - just how well Fitzgerald would be able to redeem his narrator's confession that he was more interested in being a writer than actually writing.

But redeem it he did. He did it with seriousness and honesty and a few interesting tricks, too. Here's perhaps the novel's most interesting sentence:

"She'd let me stand while she lay back on the bed and put her feet on my shoulders and let me move in below and her ass was rubbing against the top of my thighs and my memory was letting me almost feel the weight of her feet on my shoulders and I began to speed up."

There are also a number of very insightful observations about women and Europeans' general view of Americans. Fitzgerald has an English journalist named Marsh who provides many of these insights. At one point he says of the narrator's drug-using female obsession:

"People like her are the reason no one ever gets anything done. They smash things up and then retreat into their beauty."

That's a great truth. And it's an accomplishment to create a character who can say this in proper context and have it come out plausibly.

Finally, the reader is left turning pages quickly and admiring the novelist immensely by the end of this work. *How much of this is autobiographical?* is a question a reader is forced to ask of almost any story told in the first person, no matter how good that reader is.

Let us hope the answer, in Michael Fitzgerald's case, is: *Not too much*. This was a thoroughly well-constructed and enjoyable novel. I hope there are more to come.

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### **Craig says**

Strong book, the first half left me feeling uplifted and energized, while also feeling a bit of regret. I thought my study abroad times were a little rock n' roll. I think I probably should have headed east from Holland to be able to really live it up...I suddenly feel so docile and tame.

After the dark turn "down the rabbit hole" as the cover blurb says, I found myself relating a little less to the characters with each turning page. I think this goes along with the slow unraveling of Anthony and his disconnecting with the other characters and his sense of reality.

Nicely done, Mr. Fitzgerald. A real page-turner here. Why do men always want to save women like Gisela?

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### **Shauna says**

Hey listen, this is a little awkward, since Michael's one of my Goodreads friends here and I met him briefly when he read from the book at Vermin. So I sort of feel like I'm introducing him at a banquet, or I'm toasting him at his wedding. Here. I am figuratively clamping my hand on his shoulder in a signal that I'm acknowledging him standing right by me as I talk about his work.

The book is really, really powerful. I'm not just saying that because Michael's right here, fidgeting. The pages move quickly, and he does a funny thing with style -- the moments of overtly flowery prose are rare,

and experimentation even rarer, but the tone is quietly elegant, vivid, well communicated. Between that and sporadic literary and contemporary high culture references, he delivers in effect a reliable narrator doing extremely unreliable things. I felt always that this could be someone I know, this could be me, even, and it was the kind of stomach-turning suspicion that makes literature a better teacher than journalism.

I was reminded of Dave Eggers' second book (the fact that I can't remember the mothafoca's name speaks more to my deteriorating memory than the quality of the book) for the sort of wide-eyed vantage of an American seeing and recoiling from a very familiar looking sort of war, and I was also reminded of the necessity and despair and gorgeousness of the work of Aleksander Hemon. So definitely read *Radiant Days*, but also definitely read Hemon and probably Eggers' book, too, what the hell. There are things you should know.

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### **Olga says**

I am Hungarian and I met Michael in Budapest in 1993 when he was living there and collecting impressions. Then I knew nothing of him until I found his book on-line recently. So reading *Radiant Days*, especially it being related to the Hungarian experience, was such a treat!

His incredibly sharp eye for detail and great sense for absurdity and irony totally shine throughout this book. It is extremely well-written, the comical is so funny and the sad is so sad, and the observations and events somehow so relevant to our generation even if they have nothing to do with any particular life. A bit off the ground and terminally confused, we yearn for things that aren't there and then completely miss the point of what is there. In extreme cases, each and every time. That was my feeling.

I loved the narrator, Anthony. (I may be one of few people, though, it seems.) He has a rare sense for beauty – and I don't mean Gisela's butt –, and his approach to the novelty of being in a foreign place, that is, with acknowledged ignorance and open eyes, is so much more appealing than the arrogant confidence that characterizes the typical and widely hated American abroad. I think self-deprecation is hot and heroes are boring and dishonest. (But remember, I'm Hungarian and we like to kill ourselves.)

I found Gisela's and Anthony's relationship interesting beyond the premise of beautiful, slutty girl misleading clueless guy. Although they both seem at times willing to connect, there is a total lack of efficient communication, and their interactions almost always derail, and most painfully, often in the shadow of potentially beautiful harmony. When you do find the beauty, it comes unexpected, in the middle of ugly, desperate situations. I love the contrasts!

And the last line is so cool that it, in itself, is worth reading the book for.

I loved this book and I can't wait for the next one from Michael.

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