

Chapter 8: The Great Grass-by

Douglas Valentine begins his book, *The Strength of the Wolf: The Secret History of America's War on Drugs* (Verso, 2004) with Arnold Rothstein, who Damon Runyon nicknamed "The Brain" and F. Scott Fitzgerald fictionalized as Jay Gatsby in his novel *The Great Gatsby*.¹

Notorious for fixing the 1919 World Series and getting away with it, Rothstein smoked opium in his youth, and understood its allure. After the Supreme Court ruled in 1921 that the Harrison Narcotics Act of 1914 forbade doctors from prescribing opiates to addicts, Rothstein applied his international liquor-smuggling expertise to the drugs he knew would be in illicit demand. By the mid-1920s, "he was in sole control of the lucrative black market in heroin, morphine, opium, and cocaine, and had set up a sophisticated system of political payoffs, extortion, and collusion."²

In the novel, Gatsby is widely suspected to be a bootlegger. He tells a comically grandiose life story of inherited wealth to protagonist Nick, while taking mysterious phone calls from Chicago and Philadelphia. He later speaks of "a little business on the side...a rather confidential sort of thing," and offers Nick a piece of the action in exchange for setting up a meeting with Nick's cousin Daisy.

After Gatsby sends a servant to mow Nick's lawn in anticipation of the meeting with Daisy, Nick tells him, "The grass is fine." "What grass?" asks Gatsby. "Oh, the grass in the yard."

An associate of Gatsby's is named Meyer Wolfsheim and Gatsby tells Nick that Wolfsheim fixed the 1919 World Series. Fitzgerald's description

¹ Leo Katcher, *The Big Bankroll: The Life and Times of Arnold Rothstein* (Harper, 1959).

² *ibid*

of Wolfsheim fits the physical description of Rothstein. He also wears cuff links made from human molars and asks Nick if he needs a “gonnegtion.” Shortly after Wolfsheim/Rothstein is introduced, Nick hears a group of girls singing “Shiek of Araby” on the street. (Arabs were associated with hashish, and shieks with mysterious and powerful men.)

Towards the end of the novel, Gatsby tells Nick he earned the money for his mansion in only three years, saying, “I was in the drug business, then I was in the oil business, but I’m not in either one now.” Then, belying his last statement, asks Nick if he’d “been thinking over what I proposed the other night.”

The Great Gatsby depicts no other drug taking than “finger bowls of champagne” and whiskey. (Unless the strange woman who charged exorbitantly for coming to your house and “looking at your feet” was dispensing a drug.) Nick’s description of being drunk is, “I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.” The dog’s eyes were said to be “looking with blind eyes through the smoke,” after Nick goes to the drug store for some cigarettes. At the time, marijuana cigarettes were available at drug stores. A subtly homoerotic scene follows.

The Great Gatsby was published in 1925. The following year, Rothstein risked exposure by bailing out two employees and became a target of investigation. He was shot in the groin in his hotel at New York’s Park Central Hotel on November 3, 1928 and died he next day. The case was never solved, and Rothstein’s underlings Frank Costello, Meyer Lansky, Charles Luciano and Louis Buchalter divvied up his empire. The US Treasury Department’s investigation into Rothstein’s trafficking and distribution empire “triggered a series of developments that in turn fostered national security and law enforcement policies and practices that endure into the 21st century.” (Valentine)

Hidden Delights: Cannabis in Literature

*An excerpt from the forthcoming book *Hidden Delights: Cannabis in Literature* by Nola Evangelista. Available through www.VeryImportantPotheads.com*