

**Introduction to Michael Wood's Essay About the Mystery of Henry James's Testicles**

by Jonathan Ames

A long time ago, I heard a rumor that Henry James had injured his testicles. In my novel *The Extra Man*, I used this rumor in the following bit of dialogue between the characters Louis Ives and Henry Harrison (the first speaker is Louis; he is also the narrator):

*"It's really very strange that I'll be moving to New York. It's all because I was looking at the cover of Henry James's Washington Square and I thought I should be in New York."*

*"I can't stand James!" Henry proclaimed. "He's unreadable."*

*"I know what you mean." I was worried that I had said the wrong thing, but then I stood up for myself and James a little bit by saying, "But the earlier books are quite good, like Daisy Miller, or Washington Square."*

*"Yes, that's true, his style did change. I wonder why. He burned himself, you know. Sat on a stove and shriveled his testicles. That may account for the change in style."*

I then recycled this rumor in my next book, my so-called memoir *What's Not to Love?*:

*In my small East Village apartment, the bathtub is in the kitchen. I can't shower in my tub, but attached to the faucet is a hose with a showerhead, and I use this to rinse off while I sit there . . .*

*Last Sunday morning, I was in the tub and I was working on my head with my scalp invigorator. The rubber hose was lying*

*coiled at the bottom of the tub like a snake; water was jetting out of the showerhead, warming my ankles. Then I nudged the snake and at that precise moment something happened to the building's cold-water supply -- it was cut off -- and the nudging moved the showerhead so that it was aimed not at my ankles, but at my testicles. My tiny balls were then scalded and I screamed and threw the scalp invigorator into the air.*

*I quickly shut off the water and stared down at myself. Was I going to have to call 911 for singed testicles? I had heard many stories over the years of children burned in their bathtubs, and then I thought of Henry James and the myth that his testicles had been burned, or punctured on a fence, and this had caused his legendary asexuality -- was this to be my fate?*

Well, a few months ago a young scholar named Michael Wood wrote to me after reading *The Extra Man* and *What's Not to Love?* and asked me if I had any proof to back up this Henry James testicle rumor. I did not have any proof, but I asked him if he could look into it for me, for us. It was my hope that he would discover just what the hell happened to Henry James.

Well, the following extraordinary essay, on this very important literary matter, is the result.

(You can find Michael Wood's bio and a list of his sources at the end of this document.)

## The Mystery of Henry's Bicycle

by Michael Wood  
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Another thing that should put us on our guard with James is that, more than most writers, he tended to live and make fiction behind a mask. In spite of the Herculean labors of Leon Edel, our image of James remains in many respects precisely the image he designed for us. He was very careful to doctor certain facts about his life and to conceal others. He sifted and destroyed documents [...] Many surviving family letters allude by date to others that are no longer extant; some of this missing correspondence undoubtedly requested the recipient to burn the letter after reading it. [...] Furthermore, many of these missing letters date from certain critical periods in the lives of one or more of the Jameses. There are many ambiguities about Henry James that we cannot sort out, and there are probably many important facts we do not even suspect

-Alfred Habegger, *Henry James and the "Woman Business"*  
(p.8)

I was talking with a couple of friends about sex and art and one of them mentioned *The Great Gatsby*. "Nick," he said, "is totally gay." As evidence, he read to us - emphasizing with gusto every suggestive phrase - the end of Chapter II, in which Nick (drunk for only the second time in his life) leaves Tom and Mrs. Wilson's party with Mr. McKee - who he had previously wiped some shaving lather off of - "a pale, feminine male":

'Come to lunch,' he suggested, as we groaned down in the elevator.

'Where?'

'Anywhere.'

'Keep your hands off the lever,' snapped the elevator boy.

'I beg your pardon,' said Mr McKee with dignity, 'I didn't know I was touching it.'

'All right,' I agreed, 'I'll be glad to.'

...I was standing besides his bed and he was sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands.

'Beauty and the Beast...Loneliness...Old Grocery Horse...Brook'n Bridge...'

Then I was lying half asleep in the cold lower level of the Pennsylvania Station, staring at the morning Tribune, and waiting for the four o'clock train.

(Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons: 1925.)

I hadn't read *Gatsby* for years and when I had, I hadn't noticed any homosexual undertones; then, as I thought about it, I realized it made perfect sense and I had been a fool to have missed it. And then, as my mind was reeling over this development an image started to form in my head and when it became clear, what I saw in my mind's eye was Henry James, impeccably dressed in a three piece suit and bow tie, hoisting his testicles onto a white hot stove.

I knew this was somehow relevant to our discussion but my prudery got the best of me and all I could offer was that I'd heard a story about *The Portrait of a Lady* author sitting on a stove, because he thought he deserved it, and that that must mean something.

"He thought he deserved to burn his bum?"

"I've never heard that."

"Yeah, it was definitely something like that. I think it had something to do with, yeah - you know?" I was hoping that one of them would jump in with details of the story but that wasn't happening. I was racking my head for an elegant way to suggest that it was the gonads, not the buttocks that had been the focus of the scorching when it hit me where I'd read about the incident: it wasn't from a biography on James, but from a novel called *The Extra Man* by Jonathan Ames.

I realized that if something had happened to Henry James' testicles, that my friends didn't know about it, because if they did, it'd just be weird that they didn't mention it - given what we were talking about. And I thought this was sort of neat because one of my friends had done his Ph.D. on James, and even he didn't know about the

guy's self-castration! I instantly resolved to solve the mystery.

"Look," I said, exited now, "I'm pretty sure something happened down there, so I'm going to check it out. And when I do find out - "

"You'll let us know.

"We'll look forward to it."

I think it was the personal nature of Ames writing which made me feel comfortable in e-mailing him. In his essays he addressed such topics as his poo-ing misadventures in France, his late puberty, and his Oedipal complex. I knew about his first sexual encounter, (which was with a prostitute,) so why would I be embarrassed about contacting him? Ames seemed like the kind of author who would bother to write back when a fan asked a sexually specific question; true to my suspicions, he responded quickly to my query:

i alluded to this rumor in both 'the extra man' and in 'what's not to love?'. i heard it somewhere, don't know if it's fact, but i'm pretty sure something did happen to henry james's testicles. he may have gotten them spiked on a fence or something. please find out the real story and report back . . .

It was exiting to hear back from Ames and the fence rumor (had puncturing been involved?) coupled with his exhortation to "find out the real story" sent a shot of adrenaline through my body.

After sorting through the mishmash an internet search for "Henry James + testicles" revealed, I came upon the first of several literary feuds I would encounter during the course of my investigation: In the 1950's, Leon Edel published his five volume biography of James; Edel also edited the equally massive *Henry James: Letters* as well as

writing and editing many other works on James. In 1996 Sheldon Novick published *Henry James: The Young Master*, a biography which refuted many of Edel's ideas. The two got catty in a couple of articles published in 'Slate', Edel striking first, with his piece 'Oh Henry! What Henry James didn't do with Oliver Wendell Holmes (or anyone else)'. Edel takes issue with Novick's claim that James and the Supreme Court Justice were lovers. "It upsets," he writes, "a century of scholarship that seems to have clearly shown James was a firm bachelor with a 'low amatory coefficient,' as one of his doctors put it in 1905 in New York." Edel goes on:

Another bit of imaginative projection upon James' life can be found in Ernest Hemingway's letters. This novelist, on learning that Brooks [Van Wyck Brooks, author of *The Pilgrimage of Henry James*] had written that James was 'prevented by an accident from taking part in the Civil War,' immediately incorporated this into his nearly finished novel, *The Sun Also Rises*'. In Chapter 12, Jake Barnes refers to his World War I accident, and Gorton says, 'That's the sort of thing that can't be spoken of. That's what you ought to work up into a mystery. Like Henry's bicycle.' Barnes replies it wasn't a bicycle; 'he was riding horseback.' (In his memoirs, James spoke of having had a 'horrid' but 'obscure hurt.' He had strained his back during a stable fire while serving as a volunteer fireman.) Hemingway had originally inserted James' name in the novel, but Scribner's editor, Maxwell Perkins, vetoed this. Hemingway insisted. They finally compromised on the 'Henry' alone. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote to Brooks, 'Why didn't you touch more on James' impotence (physical) and its influence?' (<http://slate.msn.com/id/3124/>)

Novick (a Professor of Law at The University of Vermont) responded to Edel's attack in the form of a letter directed at Edel himself:

I was startled to find in SLATE last week your intemperate and rather personal diatribe about my book *Henry James: The Young Master*. Whatever your reasons, you have allowed yourself to be provoked into saying outrageous things, and I have no choice but to answer plainly. Your remarks focus obsessively on Henry James' sexuality. This is your obsession, not mine. You dwell on a single sexual encounter that takes no more than a page in my book and is not referred to again. What I do say in my book, and give considerably more prominence--and what you fail to mention--is that your own biography of James is no longer useful. For a

modern reader, it badly distorts the record of the novelist's life. I point out numerous errors and outright inventions in your work, mistakes you give a fair sample of in your SLATE story. [...]As you will see if you read it, my book is devoted largely to a discussion of James' intellectual development and his stories, novels, and critical essays. James' sexual orientation is necessarily portrayed, and I take it for granted--as most scholars do now--that he was a closeted gay man. I don't think you have ever really disputed this, but you now seem to be shying away from its implications. In your story you hint that James was impotent, and you quote a bizarre, homophobic pronouncement by a doctor who examined James once when he was ill and away from home, then announced to a breathless world that the famous novelist was badly hung. (You omit the more bizarre and self-discrediting portions of the announcement.)  
(<http://slate.msn.com/id/3633/entry/23771/>)

What I like best about Novick's response is how he chides Edel for not admitting that much of his life's work, "is no longer useful". As I read Novick's article, I instantly accepted his picture of Leon Edel as a crusty old man, ensconced in the ways of the past and unwilling to confront James' sexuality.

As far as the original mystery went, I had some clues, but nothing definite. Had the accident James suffered as a fireman involved flames, or a fence? Was this what I was after? And was this Pre-Civil War accident connected to the "bizarre, homophobic" report in 1905 by James' doctor? I was also intrigued by the Hemingway-Fitzgerald connection because Ames, in numerous essays, had professed a strong affection for both these writers; perhaps what he'd done in *The Extra Man* was an intentional echo of the reference in *The Sun Also Rises*. But if this was so, why hadn't he told me? Either he hadn't thought it worth mentioning, or he didn't know about it - which would mean that he and Hemingway had each independently decided to include what was to both men only gossip about Henry James' sex organs into their fiction. What was it about James' genitalia which inspired generations of writers?

I knew that if I was going to solve this caper I would have to broaden my investigatory techniques, and so, in a series of trips to the New York Public Library's Main Branch, and it's less glamorous neighbor, the Mid-Manhattan Branch I delved into the lore of Henry James - or at least that lore connected to his private parts.

At this point I'm going to tell you what happened to Henry James' testicles: basically, he hurt them on a fence, helping put out a fire. Well, he definitely hurt his back - how much he hurt the testicles is open to debate; but the story Edel mentions in his 'Slate' article is definitely the basis not only for the rumor Hemingway heard, but also Ames (who says he was unaware of the reference in *The Sun Also Rises*).

As I learned more about the case I constantly picked up interesting tangential information: every impotence rumor quashed would reveal another literary fight, or another incredible coincidence. I would e-mail Ames progress reports and he was always enthusiastic and encouraging, though I wondered if, privately, he wasn't at all disturbed by increasingly long and minutia-filled communiqué. While I knew that what I was finding out was news to Ames and me I was also aware that, as much as I liked to play the gumshoe, tracking down clues and solving the insolvable, that that's not what was going on. And how could it? All the information I was getting was from books that were already published; the testicles' story (and all the stories it connects to) aren't exactly State secrets. Plus, I'm a complete idiot.

In narrowing my search from the infinitely fertile ground of topics related to Henry James, I decided to zero in on following areas:

- A) the testicles story
- B) any sex stuff (particularly insinuations of homosexuality)
- C) literary back stabbings

Here's what I found out:

In 1914, James' *Notes on A Son and Brother* was published. In it, he writes of the 1861 accident he had as a volunteer fireman. During the blaze, the eighteen year old Henry James was:

Jammed into the acute angle between two high fences, where the rhythmic play of my arms, in tune with that of several other pairs, but at a dire disadvantage of positions, induced a rural, a rusty, a quasi-extemporised old engine to work and saving the stream to flow, I had done myself a horrid even if obscure hurt; and what was interesting from the first was my not doubting in the least its duration - though what seemed equally clear was that I needn't as a matter of course adopt and appropriate it, so to speak, or place it for increase of interest on exhibition. (James, Henry. *Notes Of A Son and Brother*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons: 1914. p. 297-8)

The above is just a small part of James' recount of the saga; James stretches the story to many pages, recalling his sensations and motivations without revealing exactly what happened. Elsewhere he writes of seeing a doctor about the pain:

I have little forgotten how I felt myself, the warning absent, treated but to a comparative pooh-pooh - an impression I long looked back to as a sharp parting of the ways, with an adoption of the wrong one distinctly determined. (Ibid., p. 300)

In summarizing James' account various critics have tackled the challenge of condensing and making clear James'

famously circumlocutory, flowery and often opaque prose. Leon Edel does a relatively good job in the first volume of his biography, in capturing the spirit of the story and in chronicling the brouhaha which ensued:

The hurt is 'horrid' but it is also 'obscure.' It is a 'catastrophe,' but it is in the very same phrase only a 'difficulty.' It is a passage of history 'most entirely personal' yet apparently not too personal to be broadcast to the world in his memoirs[...]It is also 'extraordinarily intimate' and at the same time 'awkwardly intimate.'[...] His readers were to imagine the worst.

What, after all is the most odious, horrid, intimate, thing that can happen to a man? However much different men might have different answers, in the case of Henry James critics tended to see a relationship between the accident and his celibacy, his apparent avoidance of involvements with women and the absence of overt sexuality in his work. Thus there emerged a 'theory' - promptly converted into a rumor - that the novelist suffered a hurt, during those 'odious twenty minutes' which amounted to castration. In the April-June 1934 *House & Hound* issue, devoted entirely to James, Glenway Wescott reported it almost as a fact: "Henry James, expatriation and castration. . . . Henry James it is rumored, could not have had a child. But if he was as badly hurt, in the pre-Civil War accident as that - since he triumphed over other authors of his epoch - perhaps the injury was a help to him." Stephen Spender quotes this passage in *The Destructive Element* and suggests that "Castration, or the fear of castration, is supposed to preoccupy the mind with ideas about suicide and death." He goes on to show how this is true of many of James's characters. Mr. Spender, however does have a second thought and adds in a footnote: "The rumor of castration seems exaggerated and improbable, but it seems likely that James sustained a serious injury." (Edel, Leon. *Henry James: The Untried Years: 1843-1870*. Philadelphia, New York: J.B. Lippincott Company: 1953. p.175-176)

In the above, you will notice, I am quoting Edel, who quotes Wescott and Spender, and the part of Westcott that Edel quotes is the same part of the Wescott that Spender quotes. In my research I saw this sort of thing happening a lot: one person writes something, then someone else quotes it and adds their two cents to it, then someone quotes that person, and on and on until you get a shmuck like me quoting Edel. One might think this would lead to an increase in the universe's store of knowledge, but as

far as I can tell, what happens as often as not is we get a bunch of critics playing telephone.

Edel chooses not to quote Spender when Spender writes erroneously:

There is another reference to the accident in Miss Rebecca West's little book on James. Apparently he was called on as a volunteer to help with a fire engine to put out a bad fire. There was an accident, in which he was very severely scalded. (Spender, Stephen. *The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs*. 1935. Folcroft Library Editions: 1977. p.36)

What is spurious is not that Rebecca West references the incident, but that James was burned. In his 1996 'Slate' piece, Edel again doesn't mention West when he could have, an omission resulting in a misstatement of fact: "Novick's attempt to find love affairs in James' life reminds me of the 1920's, when there were no biographies of James".

In fact, Rebecca West's *Henry James* was published in 1916 - just two years after *Notes on A Son and Brother* - when West was twenty-three years old. Her reference is the earliest example that I've been able to find of an author mentioning the episode, and speculating on its significance:

In 1861 the Civil War broke out; and had it not been for an accident the whole character of Mr. James' genius would have been altered. If he had seen America by the light of bursting shells and flaming forest he might never have taken his eyes off her again, he might have watched her fascinated through all the changes of tone and organisation which began at the close of the war, he might have been the Great American Novelist in subject as well as origin. But it happened, in that soft spring when he and every other young man of the North realised that there was a crisis at hand in which their honour was concerned and they must answer Lincoln's appeal for recruits, that he was one day called to help putting out a fire. In working the fire-engine he sustained an injury so serious that he could never hope to share the Northern glory, that there were before him years of continuous pain and weakness, that ultimately he formed a curious and on the whole mischievous conception of himself. (West, Rebecca. *Henry James*. London, Nisbet & Co. LTD.: 1916.)

West's comments are interesting as much for what they say, as for what they don't. She suggests that the accident changed James, but not because it may have left him impotent or castrated. She doesn't mention (as far as I've read) the exact nature of the accident and unless she does it means that Spender was sloppy for assuming that the accident James suffered helping put out a fire involved his being burned. If West does say that fire was the culprit, than both she and I are guilty of poor reportage, and Spender's statement is more excusable. It's also possible that West (as I suspect) doesn't write that James was burned but someone in the twenty-one years between when West and Spender wrote did make that assumption and that's the story Spender heard. However, considering that James clearly states that it was a fence issue and no roasting was involved, it's fair to say that Spender made an avoidable mistake.

This charge (and worse) was leveled against Van Wyck Brooks almost immediately after *The Pilgrimage of Henry James* appeared in 1925. As Leon Edel writes:

Edna Kenton, a devoted Jamesian in Greenwich Village, demonstrated in a biting review in *The Bookman* that Brooks used important James quotations out of context. Years later, Brooks confessed to having nightmares "in which Henry James turned great luminous menacing eyes upon me." (<http://slate.msn.com/id/3124/>)

In *The Legacy of Van Wyck Brooks; A Study of Maladies and Motives*, William Wasserstrom quotes from an amusing letter written by the then seventeen year old Brooks:

I don't know much about Henry James, except that he's a brother of Prof. James, of Harvard, is an infernal snob, and does know how to write English. His books are very psychological, aren't they? His brother is the greatest psychologist in the world. I think Henry James is the reprobate who wrote Daisy Miller. Read that and you won't think much of him. He lives in Europe in a sort of Williams-Waldorf-Astor style. (Wasserstrom, William. *The Legacy of Van Wyck Brooks; A Study of Maladies and Motives*.)

Carbondal and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press:  
1971.p. 47)

My own experience with *The Pilgrimage of Henry James* was rather pleasant. Brooks' voice is excitable and dramatic; he uses exclamation marks a lot, (which I have a soft spot for) as when he writes:

Was he not, for comprehensible reasons, the prey of that "fear of life" to which Flaubert also confessed himself a victim? Undoubtedly; and to this may be traced perhaps the deep longing for security, privacy, ceremony that was to mark his later years. But to return from the ultimate to the immediate, what a light this fact seems to throw upon the great "renunciation" with which his career opened! (Brooks, Van Wyck. *The Pilgrimage of Henry James*. New York, Dutton: 1925. p.31-32)

While I was generally charmed by Brooks' prose style, I wondered where he got the chutzpah to write his introductory note. I'm tempted to think I'm misreading what he's saying, because what I think he's saying is so blatant and weird:

Readers who are familiar with Henry James will observe that many phrases and even long passages from his writings have been incorporated in the text of this book, usually without any indication of their source. The author has resorted to this expedient because he knows of no other means of conveying with strict accuracy at moments what he conceives to have been James's thoughts and feelings. (Ibid., p.v)

If we read the above without the phrase, "usually without any indication of their source" it kind of makes sense: Brooks is telling us that in his book he quotes James a lot, because he's found that it's a quick and accurate way of communicating what James thinks. Fair enough. But the inclusion of the phrase makes it seem as if Brooks thinks that it is his *not* including the source of his quotations which will make his account of James even more precise. Is the "expedient" quoting James, or quoting James without a source? It's confusing.

As you'll remember, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote to Brooks, asking, "Why didn't you touch more on James' impotence (physical) and its influence?" Here's all of that letter, written from Paris and dated June 13, 1925:

Dear Brooks:

I read the James book, so did Zelda + Ernest Hemingway + everyone I've been able to lend it to and I think it rises above either Bunny's carping or Seldes tag on it. It is exquisitely done + entirely fascinating

One reason it is of particular interest to us over here is obvious. In my own case I have no such delicate doubts - nor does anyone need to have them now since the American scene has become so complicated + ramified but the question of freshening material exists. I shall come back after one more novel.

Why didn't you touch more on James impotence (physical) and its influence? I think if hadn't had [sic] at least one poignant emotional love affair with an American girl on American soil he might have lived there twice as long, tried twice as hard, had the picaresque past of Huck Finn + yet never struck roots. Novelists like he (him) + in a sense (to descend a good bit) me, have to love as a main concern since our interest lies outside the economic struggle of the life of violence, as conditioned to some extent by our lives from 16-21.

However this is just shooting in the dark at a target on which you have expended you fine talent in full daylight. It was a really thrilling pleasure for a writer to read. Thanking you for writing me about my book so kindly + for sending me yours.

Scott Fitzgerald

(Broccoli, Matthew J., and Margret M. Duggan eds., with the assistance of Susan Walker. *Correspondence of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York, Random House: 1980. p. 170)

Fitzgerald's letter is interesting for many reasons.

First, there is the reference to Hemingway, who was also living in France. Wasserstrom writes that Brooks had "set out to examine the validity of James's assumption that the artist cannot thrive in the American atmosphere."

(Wasserstrom, 47) and this accounts for the "One reason it is of particular interest to us over here". Fitzgerald comments on this subject, then moves on to the impotence issue.

For Fitzgerald, it seems a given that James was impotent. His interpretation of its possible effects are

illuminating in terms of how Fitzgerald views himself as an artist, but seem naive with regards to James. Unless we take the letter to have been written with tongue firmly in cheek, it seems that Fitzgerald was unaware of James' homosexuality.

Another way to read Fitzgerald's letter is that he's being insincere. Maybe he didn't find the book "exquisitely done" and "a really thrilling pleasure for a writer to read" but wrote this to keep things friendly between he and Brooks. Maybe Fitzgerald was just being polite, perhaps even employing a subtle sarcasm; I prefer to read the letter as being from the heart, but I'm obviously in no position to make any sort of meaningful judgment.

It was almost a year to the day after Fitzgerald wrote to Brooks, that Ernest Hemingway wrote to Maxwell Perkins with regards to *The Sun Also Rises*:

As for the Henry James thing- I haven't the second part of the Ms. Here - it is over at Scott's - so I can't recall the wording. But I believe that it is a reference to some accident that is generally known to have happened to Henry James in his youth. To me Henry James is as historical a name as Byron, Keats, or any other great writer about whose life, personal and literary, books have been written. I do not believe that the reference is sneering, or if it is, it is not the writer who is sneering as the writer does not appear in this book. Henry James is dead and left no descendants to hurt, nor any wife, and therefore I feel he is as dead as will ever be. I wish I had the ms. here to see exactly what it said. If Henry James never had an accident of that sort I should think it would be libelous to say he had no matter how long he were dead. But if he did I do not see how it can affect him - now he is dead. As I recall Gorton and Barnes are talking humourously around the subject of Barnes' mutilation and to them Henry James is not a man to be insulted or protected from insult but simply an historical example. I remember there was something about an airplane and a bicycle - but that had nothing to do with James and was simply a non-sequitor. Scott said he saw nothing off-color about it. (Baker, Carlos ed. *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters, 1917-1961*. New York, Charles Schribner's Sons: 1981. p.208-9)

It's cute that in Fitzgerald's letter he mentions Hemingway, and in Hemingway's he mentions, "Scott". Their friendship has been examined in numerous books and in reading these accounts it is always fun to imagine this wonderfully odd couple traipsing around 1920's France. In *Fitzgerald and Hemingway: A Dangerous Friendship*, Matthew J. Broccoli chronicles the history of the relationship, asking such questions as: How did they affect one another as people? To what degree did they influence each others writing? To what extent did the fact that they didn't want to be influenced by each other affect their work? It should go without saying that I'm just going to talk about the speculation that they were gay lovers.

In Nancy Milford's biography of Zelda Fitzgerald, she writes on page 153:

On a boat to Europe Zelda had mentioned to Scott that she thought a friend from the ballet was homosexual. Now, desperately uncertain of herself, she accused Scott of a homosexual liaison with Ernest Hemingway. Scott, who had gone without Zelda to have a drink one evening with Hemingway and his wife, had returned home intoxicated and had fallen into a deep sleep. In his sleep he murmured, "no more baby," which was taken by Zelda as absolute proof of her suspicions. (Milford, Nancy. *Zelda: A Biography*. New York, Harper & Row: 1970. p.153)

Milford also mentions the following letter Fitzgerald wrote to Perkins about accusations made by the American writer Robert McAlmon:

By the way McAlmon is a bitter rat and I'm not surprised at anything he does or says. He's failed as a writer and tries to fortify himself by tying up to the big boys like Joyce and Stein and despising everything else. Part of his quarrel with Ernest some years ago was because he assured Ernest that I was a fairy - God knows he shows more creative imagination in his malice than in his work. Next he told Callaghan that Ernest was a fairy. He's a pretty good person to avoid. (Turnbull, Andrew ed. and intro. *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons: 1963. p.216)

We sense, I think, in Fitzgerald's words, an overly defensive posture. Scott Donaldson quotes Fitzgerald as writing in his notebooks of Hemingway:

I really loved him, but of course it wore out like a love affair. The fairies have spoiled all that. (Donaldson, Scott. *Fool For Love*. Compton: 1983. p. 75)

What are we to make Fitzgerald's words? And more, how does all of this relate to Nick Carraway's sexuality? A clue can possibly be found in looking at the draft of *Gatsby* which Fitzgerald sent to Perkins in 1924. In examining this version we find that the end of Chapter II is *nearly* identical to that which was published the next year:

...I was standing besides his bed and he was sitting up between the sheets, *still* clad in his underwear, *and* with a great portfolio in his hands. (Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *Trimalchio: An Early Version of The Great Gatsby*. Ed. James L. W. West III. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. p. 32. Italics mine.)

The additional "and" seems unimportant, but the "still" is interesting, suggesting different scenarios. Does it imply that McKee is soon to be separated from his underwear? Perhaps it suggests that Nick had attempted to dislodge McKee from the underwear, but had been unsuccessful. In this reading, the "and" could be seen as emphasising Nick's frustration: 'Not only wasn't he naked, but he had this massive portfolio in his hands.' On the other hand, we could read Nick's words in as an effusive denial (much like Fitzgerald's) of any homosexual shenanigans: 'Hey look, he still had his on the underwear - nothing happened.' Or maybe Nick had intended to access McKee's genitals, but had second thoughts before McKee was denuded. - However we interpret what Nick and McKee are meant to have done

between the time McKee is described as underwear-clad and Nick's ending up in Penn Station, it is clear that they *did not* make love within the period marked by the ellipses, a possibility which does exist in *Gatsby*. Therefore, it is possible that "still" was removed to allow for more gay sex.

It seems clear to me that 1) F. Scott Fitzgerald was gay, but completely paranoid about people finding this out 2) Nick Carraway is also gay, and so therefore 3) Fitzgerald used Carraway's homosexuality – never explicitly stated – as a surrogate and mask for his own sexuality, a sexuality he could never reveal, could in fact, only obliquely hint at through the vessel of his fiction. Either that, or he was straight and really hated gays.

Now, it was decade or so earlier that a curious book, whose title page reads:

*Boon, The Mind of the Race, The Wild Asses of the Devil, and The Last Trump Being a First Selection from the Literary Remains of George Boon, Appropriate to the Times Prepared for publication by Reginald Bliss, with an Ambiguous Introduction by H.G. Wells*  
(Wells, H.G. *Boon, The Mind of the Race, The Wild Asses of the Devil, and The Last Trump*. New York, George H. Doran Company: Copyright 1915, Reginald Bliss.)

was published. Wells' biographers Norman and Jean MacKenzie write of *Boon*:

The book is a rag-bag of pieces supposedly written by the popular novelist George Boon who is forced to write successful romances while he secretly yearns for literary success. Into these fragments H.G. inserted a bitter satire on James, portraying him as a portentous mandarin who pontificated on art and who denigrated those who wished to use literature as a means of saving the world from ruin. (MacKenzie, Norman and Jean MacKenzie. *H.G. Wells: A Biography*. Simon & Schuster: 1973. p. 291)

I am including this passage from *Boon* both because it gives a flavor of the chapter on James, and because of the sexually suggestive language used:

He doesn't find things out. He doesn't even seem to want to find things out. You can see that in him; he is eager to accept things - elaborately. You can see from his books that he accepts etiquettes, precedences, associations, claims. That is his peculiarity. He accepts very readily and then - elaborates. He has, I am convinced, one of the strongest, most abundant minds alive in the whole world, and he has the smallest penetration. Indeed, he has no penetration. (*Boon*. p. 104-105)

After James read what Wells had written he was understandably upset; the two had been friends for years and it is my theory, based entirely on the following letter, (written three years before *Boon* was published) that James had a crush on Wells:

Meanwhile if I've been deprived of you on one plane I've been living with you very hard on another; you may not have forgotten that you kindly sent me *Marriage* [...] I have read you, as I always read you, and as I read no one else, with a complete abdication of all those "principles of criticism," canons of form, preconceptions of felicity, references to the idea of method or the sacred laws of composition, which I roam, which I totter, through the pages of others attended in some dim degree by the fond yet feeble theory of, but which I shake off, as I advance under your spell, with the most cynical inconsistency. For under your spell I do advance - save when I pull myself up stock still in order not to break with so much as the breath of appreciation; I live with you and in you and (almost cannibal-like) on you, on you H.G.W. [...] I consume you crude and whole and to the last morsel, cannibalistically, quite, as I say; licking the platter clean of the last possibility of a savour and remain thus yours abjectly

Henry James

[Edel, Leon ed. *Henry James: Letters, Vol. IV. 1895-1916*. Cambridge, Mass. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 1984.p. 635-636]

Now, by an incredible coincidence, at the same time that Wells was having his *Boon* induced-spat with James, he was also in the midst of what was to be a ten year affair with Henry James's biographer, Rebecca West. The two met after

West wrote a not entirely favorable review of Wells' *Marriage* - the book James praises so enthusiastically in the above letter. (MacKenzie 283-284) So: Wells was forty-six years old and married when he wrote *Marriage*, which was published in 1911. West (who was nineteen at the time) didn't like *Marriage*, but Henry James did. By 1913 however, it was West, not James, who was sleeping with H.G. Wells. In 1914 they had a son (Wells was still married) and the next year *Boon* was published. 1916 saw the first appearance of West's James-friendly *Henry James* as well as the last appearance of Henry James, who died in February of that year.

To return to the fence incident (and the possible testicle crushing it resulted in) when, we justly ask, did this accident take place? In Edel claims a victory in solving this mystery:

It is clear that Henry James's blurring of the date of the hurt (the same dark hour" as the outbreak of the Civil War) served to, minimize his failure during the first six months to spring to the colors with other young men. To take his timing literally would fix the hurt as occurring in April or perhaps May of 1861. Had it occurred that spring, however, it is doubtful whether he would have climbed mountains in New Hampshire with T.S. Perry during July. Fortunately it is no longer necessary to speculate, since Perry comes to our assistance with specific dates. In a letter to James's nephew and executor, written shortly after publication of *Notes of a Son and Brother*, alluding directly to the "obscure hurt" passage, Perry wrote that "the fire at West Stables was in the night of Oct. 28, '61." (Edel, Leon. *Henry James: The Untried Years: 1843-1870*. Philadelphia, New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1953.p. 176-177)

Edel goes on to give a description of the fire, based on newspaper records and the "official report written by one of the firemen" (Ibid.) which is great, if we concur on the date he fixes for the fire. Sheldon Novick doesn't, and in a note in his book, he explains why:

Edel claimed that the strain occurred at a fire in a stable in October 1861, which was reported in the local press. Edel has

psychoanalytic reasons for linking HJ's sense of injury to a fire very much like the one in which HJ Sr. lost his leg; but the evidence makes the coincidence extremely unlikely. There is no evidence HJ was at the fire in October, to begin with. HJ visited his brother William in Cambridge three days later, without apparent difficulty. William's letter home describing the visit says nothing about Harry's supposed back injury. In a family that monitored their own and each other's health as closely as the Jameses, it is not credible that Harry could have visited William, shortly after injuring his back, without provoking comment. (Novick, Sheldon. *Henry James: The Young Master*. New York, Random House: 1996.p. 465)

Like the exact nature of the accident, it seems the date will be forever shrouded in controversy. For my part, I'd like to offer what I think is a comprehensive list of the possibilities which exist with regard to the outcome of the accident and James' sexuality. I'm not going to comment on how each scenario might be seen to change how we "approach James' work": if James was a gay man who died an impotent virgin, you can read into that whatever you think is appropriate. Here's what came up with:

Let's say James was heterosexual: during the accident he was either left impotent, or he wasn't. If he was impotent this explains the lack of relations with women. If he wasn't rendered impotent, we can infer that either he just wasn't very lucky with the ladies, he did have sex with women (and we just don't know about it) or he choose to live a chaste life. Or maybe he was a straight man who had sex (or didn't) with women, but also fooled around with a few guys.

Now, if James was gay, than this explains the dearth of female companionship in his life. If he wasn't impotent then he could have had sex with Oliver Wendell Holmes or any other guys, and maybe a few gals. He could have also been physically able to engage in the sex act, but

unwilling to do so, for whatever reason; in this instance, he would have died a gay, potent, virgin. Or maybe he was a gay man who only experimented sexually with women. Or maybe he was impotent but was still coupled with men (and women), giving oral pleasure, and/or taking it.

This last conjecture is as far as I know, completely original to the canon of criticism on Henry James. Here's another theory I've been working on: the earliest dated reference I've seen of the impotence theory comes from Fitzgerald's letter to Van Wyck Brooks. What if the whole story was cooked up by Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway? It wouldn't have had to have been an intentionally deceitful thing. Maybe they were in bed together and Scott couldn't perform. This would have been caused by his internal turmoil about acting on his homosexual desires.

"Jesus," Ernest would say, "you really are like Henry James."

"I didn't know James was a fairy?"

"He wasn't. But didn't you ever hear about that accident he had? I think was a bicycle or something. . ."

As you know, libraries are hotbeds of sexual tension. I would sit with my books and look at the cuties and sometimes I thought they were smiling back at me. One time this old geezer sat down across from me. I looked his way and he smiled. Then he put on his shades. Then he tilted his head down so I could see his eyes and he smiled again. I don't know if he was making a pass but it made me realize that maybe the girls I was looking at thought I was creepy.

I got up, in part to escape his penetrating gaze, and headed to the letters/biographies section. I was going to look up some of Hemingway's and Fitzgerald's letters - by a

lovely coincidence these books are ordered back to back - but when I got there, the books were gone! In all the time I'd been working, none of the books I'd wanted had been missing!

It occurred to me that perhaps not all of the library's other patrons were researching the genitals of famous authors. But if that was the case then what on earth were they doing? Why else would you need these books? I pondered this, but no answers were forthcoming and a thought hit me: A day or two earlier I had emailed Ames with information on the Hemingway connection; what if Ames was in the library, checking my handiwork?

I was buzzed and I did a quick 360, checking out the immediate area. I pictured Ames keeping an eye on the shelf where the precious volumes were housed, so that if I came along, he'd know. I didn't know if he'd bolt when he saw me, or if he'd say hello. I walked briskly around the third floor, then raced up the stairs to the fifth floor, though I knew that if Ames had removed the books from the third floor, he would be in flagrant violation of library regulations. My plan was to make a pass on each floor and then go to the one below. Unless Ames was in the toilet I would spot him; if it wasn't him with the books I would get a look at whoever it was, and through that undoubtedly work out their motivation.

The fifth floor proved fruitless, though twice I thought I spotted him - but in both instances it turned out to be Asian men. (Ames is white.) I recognized a mustachioed Russian library worker who had been eager to assist me at an earlier visit, but I didn't think this was a case where he could help.

As I walked around the fourth and then the third floor again, I wondered if I would even recognize Ames if I saw him. All I had to go on were the pictures on the back of his books. What if he looked different in real life? It occurred to me that that a metaphor for life.

The second floor was a bust too; this time the red herring was a black man reading the newspaper. I knew the first floor would be fruitless as there are no desks and few places to sit; Ames would have only used this area for his study if he was going out of his way to avoid being detected by me!

The whole hunt had me high; the library didn't close for another few hours and I considered sticking around and waiting for Ames (or whoever it was) to return the books, but I knew that would mean crossing some line of weirdness I wasn't ready for. Ames didn't take out the dumb books. What would he waste his time with that for? He had me to provide him with all the stupid testicle news he could possibly hope for.

I left the library without seeing Ames and pretty sure he hadn't been there. But heading home it occurred to me that I should have left some note in the spot where the books go, just in case. That would have been the thing to do, what they would have done in a movie. In the movie version I would have left a note and it would have said, "Enjoy the books, MR. J.AMES?"

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About the author: Michael Wood was born in New York City, where he lives now. He writes, "Alfred Habegger and Sheldon Novick were both kind enough to reply to my letters, for which I am grateful. If you've heard any strange rumors about writers but don't know what the whole story is, you can write me at [Woodyswoody@hotmail.com](mailto:Woodyswoody@hotmail.com) and I

will try to find out what happened. Also, I'm sorry for all the stupid mistakes I no-doubt made." This Michael Wood should not be confused with the Michael Wood who is the chair of the English Department at Princeton University.