

The Curious Case Of Benjamin Button

The older you get, the younger you feel.

Adapted by Bryon Cahill from the novella by F. Scott Fitzgerald • Illustrations by David Leonard

CHARACTERS

(main characters in **boldface**)

Narrators 1, 2, 3

Benjamin Button, *Benjamin through most of his life*

Roger Button, *Benjamin's father*

Doctor Keene

Nurses 1, 2

Old man, *Benjamin as an old man*

Clerk

Emily Button, *Benjamin's mother*

Cecilia, *a neighbor*

Mr. Hart, *admissions officer at Yale College*

Hildegard Moncrief, *Benjamin's wife*

Roscoe Button, *Benjamin's son*

Ben, *Benjamin as a young boy*

Nana, *young Benjamin's nurse*

SCENE 1

Narrator 1: On a September morning in 1860, Roger Button wakes in his Baltimore home and heads for the hospital. His wife was admitted the night before. The happily married couple are expecting their first child.

Narrator 2: The practice of being born in a hospital is not yet considered general custom by any means. In 1860, babies are almost always birthed at home. Whether the Buttons' decision to have their baby come into the world outside their home has any bearing upon the astonishing history you are about to hear will never be known.

Narrator 3: We shall tell you what occurred and let you judge for yourself.

Roger Button: Doctor Keene! Oh, Doctor Keene!

Narr 1: Roger Button, president

of Roger Button & Company, Wholesale Hardware, enters the hospital and begins to run toward Doctor Keene with much less **dignity** than is expected from a gentleman.

Narr 2: The doctor hears Roger coming and turns to face him. There is a curious expression on the doctor's face. It is one that the worried father cannot comprehend.

Roger: What happened? What was it? How is she? Is it a boy? Who is it? What—

Doctor Keene: Talk sense, Mr. Button!

Roger: Is the child born?

Keene: Why, yes, I suppose so—after a fashion.

Roger: Is my wife all right?

Keene: Yes.

Roger: Is it a boy or a girl?



Narr 3: Doctor Keene is perplexed. He does not know how to answer the simple question.

Keene: It is outrageous!

Roger: What is the matter? Triplets?

Keene: No, not triplets! I'll ask you, sir, to go in and see for yourself. And what's more, you can get another doctor. I brought you into this world, young man, and I've been physician to your family for 40 years, but I'm through with you! I don't want to see you or any of your relatives ever again! Good-bye!

Narr 1: And then, without another word, Doctor Keene walks away from Roger Button, leaving the poor man there to wonder at terrible things.

Narr 2: It is with the greatest difficulty that Roger forces himself forward. He walks in a confused manner before a nurse sees him.

Nurse 1: Can I help you, sir?

Roger: I'm Mr. Button. I want to see my—

Narr 3: The nurse drops the **basin** she is holding, and it clanks to the floor. She covers her mouth in horror.

Roger: I want to see my child!

Nurse 1: Upstairs. Right upstairs. Go—up.

Narr 1: She points toward the stairwell and then rushes off in the opposite direction.

Narr 2: Roger takes the stairs

three at a time. He arrives on the second floor and rushes down the hall, beside himself with fright. A dozen doctors and nurses are standing idly outside one particular room. He rushes to them. When he arrives, the crowd parts.

Narr 3: Roger looks in and sees an old man crammed into a crib and wrapped in a **voluminous** white blanket. The man is

* **vocab**

DIGNITY: the quality of being worthy of honor

BASIN: a bowl used for holding water

VOLUMINOUS: of great volume or size

approximately 70 years of age. His **sparse** hair is almost white, and a long smoke-colored beard drips from his chin. The beard waves back and forth absurdly, fanned by the breeze coming in through the window.

Roger: What is going on here? I am Roger Button. I want to see my child.

Narr 1: All the doctors and nurses turn to him, but they do not speak.

Roger: Am I mad? Is this some ghastly hospital joke?

Nurse 2: It doesn't seem like a joke to us. And I don't know whether you're mad or not ... but that is most certainly your child.

Narr 2: Roger cannot believe his eyes or his ears. He steps forward. The old man looks up, into Roger's eyes.

Old man: Are you my father? Because if you are, I wish you'd get me out of this place. Or at least get them to put me in a comfortable rocker.

Roger: Where in God's name did you come from? Who are you?

Old man: I can't tell you exactly who I am, because I've only been born a few hours. But my last name is certainly Button.

Roger: You lie! You're an impostor!

Narr 3: The old man turns to speak to the nurse. The rest of the hospital staff have left the scene to discuss the day's crazy events among themselves.

Old man: Nice way to welcome a newborn child. Tell him he's wrong, why don't you?

Nurse 2: You're wrong, Mr. Button. This is your child, and you'll have to make the best of it. We're going to ask you to take him home as soon as possible.

Roger: Home?

Nurse 2: Yes. We can't have him here. We really can't. You know.

Old man: I'm right glad of it. With all the yelling and howling **commotion**, I haven't been able to get a wink of sleep. I asked for something to eat, and they brought me a bottle of milk!

Narr 1: The nurse leaves Roger alone with the old man. He sinks down into a chair in the room and stares at his son in horror.

Roger: My heavens! What will people say? What must I do?

Old man: They gave me this blanket. I can't very well leave the building in it. You'll have to go out and buy me some proper clothes before you take me home.

Roger: Take you home?

Old man: And a cane, Father. I want to have a cane.

Narr 2: Still unable to fully grasp the incredible situation, Roger leaves the room and the hospital.

SCENE 2

Narr 3: Ten minutes later, Roger is in a clothes store just down the street from the hospital. A clerk greets him warmly.

Clerk: Good morning!

Roger: Good morning. I want to buy some clothes for my ... child.

Clerk: How old is your child, sir?

Roger: About six hours.

Clerk: Congratulations, sir! Babies supply department is in the rear.

Roger: Why, I don't think ... I'm not sure that's what I want. It's ... he's an unusually large child. Exceptionally large, in fact. ... He's 16.

Clerk: Oh. I beg your pardon, sir. I thought you said your boy was just six hours old. You'll find the youths department in the rear as well.

Narr 1: Roger looks around and sees men's suits hanging nearby.

Roger: I'll take that one.

Clerk: That's not a child's suit, sir. You could wear that yourself!

Roger: Wrap it up. That's the one I want. I'll take a cane, too, please.

SCENE 3

Narr 2: Back at the hospital, Roger enters his son's room.

Roger: Here's your clothes.

Narr 3: He throws them at the old man, who is now standing in the corner with the blanket wrapped around him.

Old man: They look sort of funny to me. I don't want to be made a monkey of ...

Roger: It is *you* who is making a monkey of *me*! Now put them on or ... or I'll spank you!

Old man: All right, Father. You've lived longer. You know best. Just as you say.



Narr 1: Upon hearing the word *father*, Roger cringes.

Narr 2: Once the old man is properly dressed, Roger escorts him out of the room.

Roger: Come along now.

Old man: What are you going to call me, Father?

Roger: I don't know. I think we'll call you Methuselah.*

SCENE 4

Narr 3: Upon bringing their newborn addition home, Mr. and Mrs. Button make some adjustments. They cut his long gray hair short and dye it black. They shave his beard and give him a name—Benjamin.

Narr 1: Despite their attempts

to make Benjamin look younger, he still has every appearance of a very aged man. For the first few months of his life, Benjamin Button is not allowed outside the house for fear of what the neighbors might think.

Narr 2: But it soon becomes quite apparent that hiding Benjamin from the world is doing him no good. In fact, he is quickly becoming **morose** and withdrawn. Mr. and Mrs. Button decide to have a coming-out party for him. They invite their family and friends, as well as their entire neighborhood, to their home and introduce their son over carefully chosen pasta.

Emily Button: Thank you all for coming. I know that there have been certain rumors flying

around about our newborn son, and we wanted to clear it all up now.

Narr 3: In their large Victorian home, 86 sets of eyes watch the staircase as Roger slowly helps Benjamin down. There are murmurs all around. Cecilia, the Buttons' next-door neighbor, chimes in the loudest.

Cecilia: What on Earth? Have you adopted an old man?

Roger: No, Cecilia. In fact, this is our son. His name is Benjamin. He is 6 months young.

* **vocab**

SPARSE: thinly scattered

COMMOTION: great disorder, turmoil, racket

MOROSE: terribly gloomy, sad

* the biblical grandfather of Noah who was believed to have lived for 969 years



Benjamin Button: Hello.

Narr 1: Cecilia faints. Her husband catches her. Benjamin is now known to all.

SCENE 5

Narr 2: As the months turn into years, Benjamin becomes readily accepted. He is an **anomaly** of nature. When he turns 14 years old, he notices in the bathroom mirror that he no longer has to dye his hair. The gray has somehow, as if by magic, gone away, and his hair is now black. He appears to have slightly fewer wrinkles on his face.

Benjamin: Can it be?

Narr 3: He leaves the bathroom and goes into the hall. His mother is standing there.

Emily: Oh, Benjamin. Oh my!

Benjamin: What is it, Mother?

Emily: You are walking without the use of your cane!

Narr 1: Benjamin realizes that is true. His cane is where he left it, propped up against the back of the toilet.

Emily: And you are not as hunched over as you used to be! Look at you! My little boy is growing up!

Benjamin: Imagine that.

SCENE 6

Narr 2: When Benjamin turns 18, he decides that he would like to go to college. He has been homeschooled his entire life and has become quite smart. He ap-

plies to Yale College in Connecticut and takes a trip there for an interview.

Narr 3: Upon arriving at the admissions office, he meets with a man named Mr. Hart.

Mr. Hart: Please come in, sir. Have a seat. I assume you have come to inquire about your son's possible registration here?

Benjamin: Why, as a matter of fact, my name's Button, and I—

Hart: I am very glad to meet you, Mr. Button. I'm expecting your son here any minute.

Benjamin: No, you don't understand. You see, I am my son. No. That's not right. I mean to say that Mr. Button is my father. No. Well, he is, yes, but—

Hart: I am afraid I don't follow

you, Mr. Button. Where is that boy of yours? Benjamin scored very highly on our entrance exams. Did you know that?

Benjamin: No. No, I did not.

Hart: It's true. In fact, he scored higher than any incoming freshman has in Yale's entire history. Can you believe that, sir?

Benjamin: You don't say.

Hart: Oh, but I do! Now where is Benjamin? He is late.

Benjamin: Well, that is what I have been trying to tell you. You see, I am Benjamin.

Hart: What?

Benjamin: I am Benjamin Button.

Narr 1: Mr. Hart looks Benjamin up and down. It is unheard of to admit elderly people into Yale in this day and age, and the admissions officer is disgusted.

Hart: Surely you're joking.

Benjamin: Not at all.

Hart: But ... I have Mr. Benjamin Button's age down here as 18.

Benjamin: That is correct.

Hart: Now surely, Mr. Button, you don't expect me to believe that?

Narr 2: Benjamin has met disbelief many times in his life, and therefore Mr. Hart's nearsighted judgments are nothing new. However, he believed he would be treated with respect when he traveled the long distance to one of the country's finest institutions of higher education.

Benjamin: Despite my surprising appearance, Mr. Hart, I am 18. That I can assure you.

Narr 3: Mr. Hart stares for a long moment into Benjamin's face before jumping out of his seat and hollering.

Hart: Get out! Get out of here! Get out of town! You are a dangerous lunatic!

Narr 1: Benjamin rises and heads for the door.

Hart: The very idea! A man of your age trying to enter here as a freshman!

Benjamin: But ... I am 18.

Hart: Eighteen years old, are you? Well, I'll give you just 18 minutes to get out of town! This is Yale, sir! Not an old folks home! Out! Out! *Out!*

Narr 2: As Benjamin leaves the building and walks across campus, Mr. Hart opens his window and shouts very loudly to anyone who will listen.

Hart: To all *true* Yale students, behold the elderly man who walks among you now. He claims to be 18! He is mad! Go to Harvard, young man! Maybe they will take the likes of you!

Narr 3: Many students laugh at Benjamin as he walks past them on the green. A small group even follows him all the way back to the train station, calling him names and pushing him along.

Narr 1: When at last Benjamin is safely in his seat on the train, the small crowd of **jeerers** leaves the platform, laughing wildly.

Benjamin: They'll regret this.

Narr 2: It is the biggest mistake that Yale College has ever made.

SCENE 7

Narr 3: Benjamin does indeed apply to Harvard, and he is accepted. He makes a name for himself and graduates with a business degree and the highest of honors in a mere two years.

Narr 1: When Benjamin returns to Baltimore, Roger looks at his 20-year-old son in amazement.

Roger: I do say, son, you are getting younger and younger every day! Why, we could pass as brothers, you and I! And here I stand before you, a man of 50!

Emily: Roger, dear, why don't you take Benjamin to the Shevlins' party tonight? I am sure there will be many pretty ladies there for my handsome boy.

Narr 2: Emily smiles at her son and gives him a teasing, motherly wink.

Roger: An excellent idea! Get yourself ready, son! Tonight, we celebrate your most outstanding education with class!

Narr 3: A few hours later, Roger and Benjamin are in the **phaeton**. Up on a hill, the Shevlins' grand country house looms. As they approach it, Roger begins to talk business.

Roger: There are great things to come for you, Benjamin. Old fellows like me can't learn new tricks. It's you youngsters with

* vocab

ANOMALY: something incredibly odd or peculiar

JEERERS: people who mock, taunt

PHAETON: a light four-wheeled carriage

energy and vitality that have the great future before you.

Narr 1: Benjamin is just about to answer his father when the phaeton pulls up to the house.

Narr 2: He steps out of the carriage and sees a woman whom he instantly recognizes as an angel in human form.

Benjamin: (*softly*) She is as beautiful as sin.

Narr 3: A chemical change seems to dissolve and **recompose** the very elements of Benjamin's body. Blood rises in his cheeks and his forehead, and there is a steady thumping in his ears. He is falling in love for the first time.

Narr 1: The woman he is marveling at is Hildegard Moncrief, the

daughter of General Moncrief. As she steps away from her own carriage and heads into the party, Benjamin's father tells him her name.

Roger: Pretty little thing, isn't she?

Benjamin: Dad, might you introduce me to her?

Roger: Of course, Benjamin.

Narr 2: Father and son, looking dashingly similar, enter the Shevlins' home. The interval of time that Benjamin spends before meeting Miss Moncrief is excruciating. He is introduced to many fine gentlemen and ladies, and many of them marvel at his likeness to his father.

Narr 3: Throughout it all, Benjamin keeps his eye on Miss

Moncrief from across the room. At last the moment comes, and he and his father approach her.

Roger: Hello, Miss Moncrief. You look lovely this evening.

Hildegard Moncrief: Why thank you, Mr. Button. Charmed, I'm sure.

Narr 1: She is the image of politeness with her words, but she looks only at Benjamin. She herself cannot turn from *him* either.

Roger: May I introduce—

Benjamin: My name is Benjamin, Miss Moncrief. Benjamin Button.

Narr 2: Benjamin lifts her hand gently and kisses it as a true gentleman would. Roger realizes his presence is no longer necessary, and he leaves them alone.

Narr 3: The band begins to play a waltz.

Benjamin: Would you do me the honor, Miss Moncrief?

Narr 1: She allows Benjamin to lead her, and they dance gracefully.

Hildegard: You and your brother arrived here just as we did, didn't you?

Narr 2: Benjamin hesitates. He remembers his unfortunate experience at Yale and decides against telling her the truth just now. However, it would be rude to contradict a lady, so he smiles, listens to her, and is happy.

Hildegard: I like men your age. Young boys are so idiotic. They tell me how much champagne they drink at college and how much money they lose at cards. Men of your age know how to appreciate women.

Narr 3: Benjamin feels as if he is on the brink of proposing, but he chokes back the words and the impulse.

Hildegard: You're just the romantic age. Twenty-five is too eager. Thirty is apt to be pale from overwork. Forty is the age of long stories that take an entire cigar to tell. Sixty is—oh, well, 60 is too near 70. But 50 is the mellow age. I just love 50.

Narr 1: Her smile is radiant, and Benjamin feels as if he is dreaming. Her words ring true, and he instantly wishes he really were 50.

Hildegard: I've always said that I'd rather marry a man of 50 and be taken care of than marry a

man of 30 and have to take care of *him*.

Narr 2: The rest of the evening is a wonderful blur. Benjamin finally finds his voice, and he and Hildegard talk and dance and laugh the night away. Just before dawn, the party ends, and the lovebirds say their good-byes.

Narr 3: In the phaeton on the ride home, Roger asks Benjamin what he thinks is the most important secret to running a successful business. Benjamin is lost in his thoughts and answers blindly ...

Benjamin: Love.

Roger: Lugs? Well, yes, I suppose you do need many lug nuts to keep a hardware store open. I will order more tomorrow.

Narr 1: Benjamin regards his father with dazed eyes just as the eastern sky is suddenly cracked with light, and an oriole yawns piercingly in the quickening trees.

SCENE 8

Narr 2: Six months later, Benjamin and Hildegard are married. It is the happiest day of their lives. Soon, they have a son and name him Roscoe.

Narr 3: Sadly though, their happiness does not last.

Narr 1: As the years go by, Benjamin takes over his father's business. The townspeople who originally welcomed him into the world as an old man now whisper unflattering things when they see him.

Hildegard: People are afraid, Benjamin. That's all.

Benjamin: They aren't the only ones.

Narr 2: As Hildegard ages, Benjamin's face and body become younger and younger. The love they once felt for each other **wanes**. They are headed in opposite directions.

Narr 3: When Benjamin's parents pass away within a year of each other, Benjamin is getting on in age, but his body is entering its prime. The year is 1898, and the Spanish-American War is on. Benjamin decides to leave the life he knows and joins the Army.

Narr 1: He is one of many youthful soldiers to charge up San Juan Hill. He is one of the few to survive, though slightly wounded. He receives a Medal of Honor, and two years later, he returns home.

Hildegard: Good lord!

Narr 2: When she first sees her husband, Hildegard is astonished.

Benjamin: Yes. Everybody says I look younger than ever.

Hildegard: Well, you don't have to boast about it! How do you think it makes me feel to look at your newfound beauty when I just whither away?

Benjamin: I'm not boasting.

Hildegard: The very idea of it is maddening! I should think you'd have enough pride to stop it!

Benjamin: But how can I?

* vocab

RECOMPOSE: to rearrange

WANES: becomes less



Hildegarde: I'm not going to argue with you. But there is a right way of doing things and a wrong way. If you've made up your mind to be different from everyone else, I don't suppose I can stop you. But I really don't think it's very considerate.

Benjamin: But Hildegarde, I can't help it!

Hildegarde: You can too! You're simply stubborn. Just think how it would be if everyone else looked at things as you do. What would the world be like?

Narr 3: Benjamin considers the question and decides it is impossible to answer. He begins to wonder what he had ever seen in such a woman to begin with. It is not long before their marriage dissolves and they are divorced.

SCENE 9

Narr 1: When Benjamin turns 52, he has the body and grace of an 18-year-old. He sells his father's hardware store and decides to head back to Harvard, where he spent the best years of his life.

Narr 2: He once again takes the entrance exams and passes with flying colors. He joins Harvard's football team and becomes the star player in his freshman year. Each time they play Yale, he crushes several opponents and even knocks a few unconscious with his ferocious tackles.

Benjamin: A Harvard man to the very end!

Narr 3: By his senior year, though, Benjamin is smaller and weaker. He cannot hold his own

on the field anymore. In fact, he starts to find that his mind is not as agile as it once was, and his studies suffer. He graduates at the middle of his class and leaves Harvard unsure and afraid of the direction he is heading in.

Narr 1: Benjamin decides that he cannot return to Baltimore. The people there just wouldn't understand. Without much other choice, he moves in with his son, Roscoe, and his family.

Narr 2: Roscoe himself is in his mid 30s and finds Benjamin's refusal to live "right" unpleasant.

Roscoe Button: You'd better not go on with this business much longer, Dad. You'd better pull up short. You'd better turn right around and start the other way. This has gone on long enough. The joke isn't funny anymore. You look younger than me! It is absurd! You should behave yourself!

Ben: I wish that I could, Roscoe.

Roscoe: And that's another thing. When visitors come to the house, I want you to call me Uncle. Do you understand? It looks absurd for a boy of 15 to call me by my first name. In fact, you should call me Uncle all the time in order to get used to it.

Narr 3: Hurt as he is, Benjamin **complies** with his son's request.

Ben: Very well, Uncle.

Narr 1: Benjamin goes upstairs and looks at his face in the bathroom mirror. He has not shaved for three months and now realizes that he will probably never have to again. Quietly, his reflection cries with him.

SCENE 10

Narr 2: In 1920, Roscoe's first child is born. Five years later, he is a little boy and becomes great friends with Benjamin. The two go to kindergarten together.

Narr 3: Benjamin is 65 years old but by all appearances seems to be no older than 5. He has trouble remembering the life he has lived, but he takes great pleasures in learning new words and seeing new things. His mind is a sponge, and it is as if he is seeing things for the very first time.

Narr 1: His kindergarten class is learning about animals. Benjamin falls in love with one in particular.

Ben: Ely-phant. Ely-phant. Hee hee. It is like a big gray monster!

Narr 2: When his long days are done, Benjamin goes home and sleeps. Every night he goes to bed earlier and earlier. Soon, he is too tired to go to school.

Narr 3: When it becomes obvious that Benjamin is not going to improve, Roscoe hires a nurse for him. And she is the only person in the world who gives him love.

Ben: Nana. Sun.

Nana: Very good, Benjamin! That *is* the sun you see in the sky! You are such a smart little boy!

Narr 1: Benjamin's face beams brightly in the warm sunlight. He is 68 years old and has just said his last words.

Narr 2: The final two years of Benjamin's life are blissful.



Everything he once knew is long forgotten.

Old man: The past. The wild charge with my fellow soldiers up San Juan Hill. The first years of my marriage when I worked late into the summer dusk down in the busy city. And beautiful, young Hildegarde, whom I most loved at one time. My father and my mother. They were all like **unsubstantial** dreams I could not remember.

Narr 3: Baby Benjamin does not remember clearly whether the milk he just drank was warm or cool. There is only his crib and Nana's presence. And then, he does not even remember those.

Narr 1: When he is hungry,

Benjamin cries. That is all. Through the noons and nights he breathes, and over him there are soft mumblings and murmurings that he scarcely hears. There are faint smells that he does not understand.

Narr 2: There is light and darkness.

Narr 3: In his white crib, the dim faces move above him. And then, Benjamin closes his eyes, and it is all dark. And the warm, sweet aroma of milk fades altogether from his mind. ■

* vocab

COMPLIES: acts in accordance with

UNSUBSTANTIAL: without material substance

About the Author

F. Scott Fitzgerald is most widely known as the author of the classic novel *The Great Gatsby*. The book, published in 1925, is considered one of the greatest works of American literature. Its characters grapple with attaining and holding on to the American dream during the "roaring 20s."

Fitzgerald lived in pursuit of the American dream. He and his wife, Zelda, lived beyond their means and often took extravagant trips to Paris. They had a shaky relationship and health problems as well. Zelda suffered from schizophrenia, and Fitzgerald battled alcoholism.

One wonders whether Fitzgerald was satisfied with his life. The author was a product of his time, and many of his fictional works are based on his own experiences. What do you think is the deeper meaning behind *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*?