

TEACHING SINCLAIR LEWIS *MAIN STREET STILL* MAINLY MAIN STREET

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Small-town high school principals say *Main Street* is alive and well. In July, twenty-eight of them studied Lewis's 1920 novel and heard the gong of recognition clang in their minds.

The occasion was an NEH-sponsored summer institute for secondary principals from small towns in Wisconsin, Minnesota, upper Michigan, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Organized by two colleagues of mine, John Schifsky and Leo Hertzell, it ran three weeks at the College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, Minnesota. The theme was Words and Place: Reading Literature of the Upper Midwest.

Seeking to cover the range of upper-midwestern literature from Hamlin Garland to Louise Erdrich, the institute invited me to lead a discussion of *Main Street* for one of its all-day sessions. I added also an excerpt from Lewis's 1940s journal, "A Minnesota Diary," to illustrate his writing on Minnesota in another mode. With permission from the Lewis estate, I used photocopies of my edition of this document, still in preparation.

The principals reacted with enthusiasm to *Main Street*. They thought it reflected much of small-town life in the Upper Midwest today. Outsiders, they say, are still regarded forever as outsiders. Outsiders who try to initiate reform are considered upstarts.

Although many principals came from small towns themselves, they now work in different towns. The insider-outsider conflict affects them personally. This must be especially true for the principal who wrote in his journal, "I married Carol Kennicott."

Another principal explained that small towns still accept a low standard of artistic creativity, still applaud any equivalent of "The Girl from Kankakee." He noted as well that, though laws now enforce more tolerance for the underprivileged and more due process for employees, the old attitudes that hurt the Bjornstams and Fern Mullins still persist.

Several principals noted that new teachers are often told not to drink in local bars.

A woman principal observed that, despite the increase of women working outside the home, the struggle for "a more conscious life" (as Carol Kennicott called it) is still harder for women in small towns today than in cities. Small towns are still, she thought, more distinctively men-centered than cities.

Of course some changes have occurred. Not only have new laws forced a higher degree of tolerance and due process, but the center of economic power has shifted, especially in the Dakotas. The few families who still farm are often large landholders with extensive capital investment, far wealthier than village-dwellers—just the opposite of Gopher Prairie.

Also, as Lewis himself noted in the 1940s, chain stores have improved the style of merchandising in small towns and the

quality of available goods.

What I thought remarkable about our discussion was the intensity of interest in the book. This may be true because the participants were mature readers or because they work as professional administrators (and outsiders) in small towns.

A further surmise is that *Main Street* speaks in the voice of the village and is therefore more appealing to the village-bred than the city-bred. The principals originated mostly in small towns, as I did and as did large numbers of the vast readership in the 1920s. If the appeal of the book has waned, so has the number of village-bred readers. An urban contempt for provincialism may not be enough to make you like the book. Perhaps you need the small-town perspective, an ability to recognize not only the village but also its distinctive voice.

I hope to pursue this idea. Others have suggested it before, like T. K. Whipple ("Sinclair Lewis," 1928; rpt. in *Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Mark Schorer, Prentice-Hall, 1962, pp. 71-83).

My kindred-spirit principals were reluctant to follow me in this surmise, not being sure how to define a village-bred voice. As a village-bred person, I have to admire their scholarly caution, but I want to chase the idea anyway.

I also wish I could keep the principals around for more talk. They were probably the largest group of mature, literate, well-adjusted, small-town professionals with whom I will ever have the privilege to discuss Lewis.