

*Front cover and spine of Sinclair Lewis's Kingsblood Royal,  
published by Grosset & Dunlap*

**TEACHING *KINGSBLOOD*  
*ROYAL*: STUDENT  
RESPONSES TO ISSUES  
OF RACE**

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*Kingsblood Royal* is one of my favorite Lewis novels, because it focuses on constructions of race in American society in an insightful and ground-breaking way. For years it has been out of print and not available to the classroom teacher. Robert McLaughlin wrote a fascinating essay about his experiences in teaching it in "Teaching Sinclair Lewis: Getting *Kingsblood Royal*" in the

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spring 1996 *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*. To do this, he arranged with a local used-book store to acquire enough used copies of the novel prior to the start of his class. And this was before abebooks.com and similar web search sites were common. Modern Library has done teachers a great service by reprinting the novel in 2001 with an introduction by Charles Johnson.

Teaching the novel can be problematic because it uses a lot of derogatory language about African Americans and other minority groups. Lewis does this to make a very specific point about the power of language to intimidate others and promulgate ignorance. I wanted to make sure that students were very aware of the reason for the use of language as well as the context for the novel. Earlier in the semester we had read Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* and discussed issues of

language use and abuse. That helped to set the stage.

I require all of my students to do a presentation on some issue or theory during the course of the semester that will help augment their understanding of what we read. In connection with *Kingsblood Royal*, I assigned presentations on the NAACP and Walter White as well as a section of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and Bakhtin's theory of narrative. We also read Toni Morrison's "Black Matter(s)," an essay from her *Playing in the Dark*.

One of the best things that happened in connection with the novel was serendipitous. I knew that Karen Chachere, a Ph.D. candidate at Illinois State University, was doing her dissertation on American passing novels. I introduced her to *Kingsblood Royal* and asked

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if she would talk to the class about that concept so that we could then engage in the notion of the “reverse” passing novel. She wrote back to me, “After reading the first 100 or so pages, I believe [Lewis] understands the race problem more than any author I have read bar-none! This is the funniest book that I have ever read, especially the part where the four-year-old walks around calling the dog ‘Nigger’ and then addresses the maid as ‘Ms. Nigger.’ I laughed, until I cried.... I wish I would have listened to you and been more persistent in trying to secure a copy of this book three years ago. I would have loved to have written a chapter on Lewis for my dissertation. He reiterates a lot of things I talk about and is an excellent author to read Mark Twain against. He is way, way ahead of his time.”

Needless to say, she agreed to speak to my class, and created a very comfortable space in which students could talk about the uncomfortable topic of race. She started by passing out a timeline of American history and literature connected with issues of race, from the beginnings of American slavery in 1619 to the *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling in 1954. [see pg. 12 for this timeline]. In addition, she graciously stayed for the rest of the class and answered a wide variety of questions on race issues, encouraging students to think about how notions of race and skin color gain popular currency. She talked about race realities of the past, such as the “paper bag test” to see whether the skin of an African-American was light enough to join certain sorts of social clubs. She ended up moderating a free flowing discussion on race in America that lasted two hours. The class invited her to come back whenever she could because they enjoyed the conversation so much.

In the next several weeks we talked about a variety of issues including the undercurrent of sexuality that pervades the novel. Vestal seems to become both fascinated and disgusted when she learns that Neil is a “black” man, at one point considering abortion of their second child, and at another expecting that sex with him as a black man would be somehow more exotic than before. She also seems to be unduly interested in Belfreda’s boyfriend Borus Bugdoll: “there was in him an animal beauty made devilish by his stare at Vestal, a bold and amused stare, as though he had known every woman from Sappho to Queen Marie and had understood them

all perfectly. His eyes did not merely undress Vestal; they hinted that, in a flustered and hateful way, she was enjoying it” (23). And Neil’s sister Kitty exclaims, “What a man!... I thought he had the most stunning build I ever laid eyes on” (25). It was enlightening to students to consider the idea of the “gaze” that we had discussed in connection with Foucault to the presentation of race and sexuality. At one point in the novel, for example, Neil thinks that “the whole dark world was a conspiracy planning the destruction of all the white people, viciously clever yet jungle-mad” (98).

We talked too about issues of power and language, what my colleague Bruce Hawkins calls “fighting words.” When we came to the speech Clem Brazenstar gives on segregation, the dialectic setup between white and black was truly painful. Clem keeps repeating “segregated” and then offers the difference between white and black accommodations in a way that both mocks the language and thinking of the whites while piling on the indignities and cruelties of the system:

Segregated! “Separate but equal accommodations”—new coaches for the whites and pest-houses on wheels for the happy jigs! New brick schools for your kids—see pictures in the Atlanta Sunday paper—and unpainted barns for us, and benches without backs and no desks, no desks at all, for our little pickaninnies, as you would call ’em. Let the little bastards write on their knees, if they have to write—which sensible folks gravely question.

Segregated! School buses for your darling chicks, but ours can hoof it five miles. Marble-floored hospitals for you and slaughterhouses for us. (129)

For the final, one of the choices that students could make was to write a creative piece in the voice of Vestal, giving a sense of what happens after she tells the police “We’re moving” at the end. They needed to give a sense of what would happen and why. I thought I’d end this essay with three different responses from students Brianne Marshall, Monica Nohren, and Christy Turner. I look forward to teaching *Kingsblood Royal* again; I only hope that Karen Chachere can be with me when I do.

### Work Cited

Lewis, Sinclair. *Kingsblood Royal*. 1947. New York: Modern Library, 2001. *z*