

The SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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

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

Sally E. Parry
Illinois State University

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

Teaching *Kingsblood Royal* continued on page 5

GRANT WOOD'S MAIN STREET

January 13–August 7, 2004
Brunnier Art Museum
Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

In 1937, nine drawings created for a special edition of the Sinclair Lewis novel *Main Street* left the Iowa studio of Grant Wood. For sixty-seven years, these drawings have had different owners and locations—some museums, some private collectors, some locations unknown. Beginning on January 13, 2004 in Ames, these drawings came home to Iowa for the Brunnier Art Museum's premier exhibition, *Grant Wood's Main Street*.

Wood made nine illustrations in all, seven of major character figures portrayed in the book and two of particular generalizations, tersely summarizing the fictional personalities and conveying through them Lewis's basic skepticism toward any fanatic dedication to a singular cause.

The exhibition is organized by the Brunnier Art Museum, guest curated by Dr. Lea Rosson DeLong and is sponsored by Howard F. and Roberta Green Ahmanson and Hometown Perry, Iowa.

There are a number of special lectures connected with this exhibit. They include the following:

Sunday, February 1, 2 p.m.

Museum Speakers Series—*Curating Main Street*

Dr. Lea Rosson DeLong, art historian, guest curator and essayist for the *Grant Wood's Main Street*

Grant Wood's Main Street continued on page 4

IN THIS ISSUE

FEATURE ARTICLES

- 1 Teaching *Kingsblood Royal*:
Student Responses to Issues of Race
by Sally E. Parry
- 1 *Grant Wood's Main Street*
- 2 Help Us Celebrate the 75th Anniversary of
Sinclair Lewis Winning the Nobel Prize
- 3 Blackmailed by Love
by Brianne Marshall
- 5 The Plight of "Nhu-Yok" and "Wash-yn-tun":
Sinclair Lewis and John Ames Mitchell
by Martin Bucco
- 6 Twin Farms Update
- 7 The Fountain of Youth: Scandal and *Black Oxen*
by Sally E. Parry
- 8 Vestal's Diary
by Monica Nohren
- 9 Lewis and the Minnesota Quarter
- 11 Confrontation
by Christy Turner
- 12 Timeline of Race and Literature in America
by Karen Chachere

DEPARTMENTS

- 9 About Our Members
- 9 New Members
- 15 Sinclair Lewis Websites
- 17 Sinclair Lewis Notes
- 19 Lewis and the Web: Information and Requests
- 22 Collector's Corner

CONTRIBUTORS

The editor of the Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter would like to thank everyone who contributed to this issue by writing articles or sending in notes.

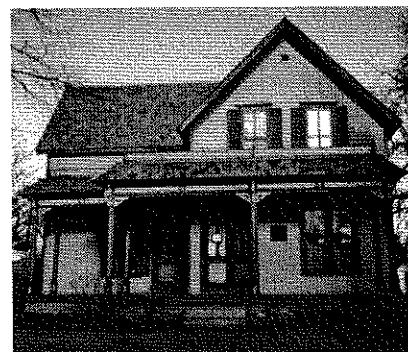
These people include *Fred Betz, Martin Bucco, Karen Chachère, Lea Rosson DeLong, Jacqueline Koenig, Brianne Marshall, Robert McLaughlin, Deb A. Mortenson, Monica Nohren, Roberta Parry, Christy Turner, and my English senior seminar class, fall 2003.*

HELP US CELEBRATE THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF SINCLAIR LEWIS WINNING THE NOBEL PRIZE

The Sinclair Lewis Society is planning to hold a conference in mid-July 2005 to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Sinclair Lewis winning the Nobel Prize in Literature, the first American ever to be so honored.

The conference will be held in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, Lewis's hometown, to coincide with Sinclair Lewis Days. Planned events include academic panels on various aspects of Lewis's writing, a visit to the Boyhood Home, films based on some of Lewis's short stories and novels, and possibly a dramatic reading.

The conference is still in the planning stages. Please send suggestions for panels, papers, or activities to Sally Parry, Executive Director, Sinclair Lewis Society, Dept. of English, Box 4240, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-4240 or e-mail her at separry@ilstu.edu. You may also send suggestions to Fred Betz, President, Sinclair Lewis Society, Dept. of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901, or e-mail him at fbetz@siu.edu.



The Sinclair Lewis Boyhood Home

BLACKMAILED BY LOVE

Brianne Marshall
Illinois State University

So it has been exactly two years since the ridiculous and unforgivably embarrassing eruption that took place outside the beautiful house that Neil and I once possessed. Huh! To think that I actually used to think that house—that wonderful Sylvan Park house—was second-rate. If I would have known Neil was going to bastardize me from my race, forcing me to the scum of living quarters I am in now, I would have been kissing the cracked tile on the floor that I used to think was so deplorable. To think that I was going to one day join the ranks of such decorous and stately women as Daisy Elliot, Pomona Browler and Violet Crenway. Oh how I wish I would have married their husbands! To think that Biddy would have actually been bestowed with the power, beauty, and wealth of a princess. To think that what I rightly deserved was... was blackmailed out of me. Blackmailed by love. To think that love...love? Yes love...something that you cannot even touch, cannot even explain, and something that I definitely cannot feel anymore, has robbed me of the opulence that my life promised. I am so overtaken with hate at that creature of a man called Neil that I cannot even think right. Like Hester Prynne, impressed with the bondage of the letter "A" on her chest, I have been condemned with a letter "N" burned on my skin and scorched in my soul. While I thought this would be bearable with the love I had for Neil, I have now found myself completely infuriated with him for destroying my promised social glamour.

Why couldn't Neil have come out just to me about his blackness? Why couldn't he have just kept it within the confines of our home? Yeah, I would've been surprised, upset, maybe even a little resentful. But at least we could have kept our dignified stature. I mean let's face it: everybody knows that blacks are incapable when it comes to a lot of things. They are unrefined, intellectually inferior, and although physically worthwhile—being that they are excellent shoe shiners, waiters and mechanics—they are aesthetically hideous. But fortunately, Neil did not inherit any of these characteristics—a good fortune only bestowed by the stroke of God. Therefore, I could have lived with Neil—knowing scientifically he was black, but for all social purposes, white. There would have been no economic or social roadblocks. Why on earth would he want to give all that up in the name of n****rhood?

Maybe I brought this all on myself. The impoverishment of my life. The severance from my family. To think that I came from a wealthy family to this—to this outhouse of an apartment, to this atrocity of a marriage, to this

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Grant Wood's Main Street continued from page 1



Grant Wood
Practical Idealist, 1935-1937
Charcoal, pencil, and chalk on brown paper
Collection of Howard F. and Roberta Green Ahmanson
Reproduced with permission of the Easton Press

exhibition, will tell of her hard work and good fortune as she searched across the United States for the nine original Grant Wood drawings created for the 1936 special edition of Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, bringing together the drawings for the first time in this unique exhibition.

Sunday, February 15, 2 p.m.

Museum Speaker Series—*Grant Wood, John Stuart Curry, and Thomas Hart Benton: Regionalists as Illustrators*

Dr. Charles Eldredge, Hall Distinguished Professor of American Art and Culture at the University of Kansas at Lawrence, and former director of the Smithsonian National Museum of American Art, will share his insights on these three great American artists/illustrators Thomas Hart Benton, John Stuart Curry, and Grant Wood with special emphasis on Grant Wood's drawings for *Main Street*.

Sunday, March 7, 2 p.m.

Museum Speaker Series—*Sinclair Lewis: Nobel Laureate, Great American Writer*

Dr. Sally E. Parry, executive director of the Sinclair Lewis Society and director of undergraduate studies in English at Illinois State University, will discuss the

scope of Sinclair Lewis's writing and explain Lewis's place in American literature as the United States' first recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930. Dr. Parry contributed an essay, titled *Sinclair Lewis*, to the exhibition publication.

Sunday, March 21, 2 p.m.

Museum Speaker Series—*Grant Wood's Portraits: From 5 Turner Alley to Main Street*

Jane Milosch, curator of the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, will discuss Grant Wood's wry humor and psychological insight, coupled with his expert design and drawing skills that come together in his character portraits. Iowans—often close acquaintances or friends—served as subject matter for a number of his paintings, prints, and illustrations, including Wood's illustrations for *Main Street*, 1935-1937.

Sunday, March 28, 2 p.m.

Museum Speaker Series—*Grant Wood: A Curatorial Dialogue*

Dr. Wanda Corn, professor of Art and Art History at Stanford University and author of *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision*, along with Dr. Lea Rosson DeLong, guest curator and essayist for the exhibition *Grant Wood's Main Street*, will offer a curatorial dialogue on Iowa artist Grant Wood. Dr. Corn, drawing upon her numerous curatorial roles and in-depth scholarship, will discuss Wood's biographical background and his role in American art. Dr. DeLong will focus on Wood's *Main Street* illustrations and the influence these drawings had in the context of Wood's artistic career.

Sunday, May 2, 2 p.m.

Museum Speaker Series—*Sordid Lives Beneath Seemingly Middle-class Respectability: The Midwesterner in American Literature*

Dr. Margaret Graham, author and associate professor, Department of English, Iowa State University, will discuss the passion and angst portrayed in early 20th-century American literature. Along with works by Sinclair Lewis, Graham will share representations of the human heart from Sherwood Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters, Thornton Wilder, and Ruth Suckow. ✍

THE PLIGHT OF “NHU-YOK” AND “WASH-YN-TUN”: SINCLAIR LEWIS AND JOHN AMES MITCHELL

Martin Bucco
Colorado State University

From time to time the dreamy scholar working in the literary vineyards of some by-gone era comes across a “forgotten” book that has the power to jolt today’s reader.

In an article featured in the May 1912 issue of *The Book News Monthly*—“John Ames Mitchell”—young Sinclair Lewis wrote an overview of his subject’s career. Lewis notes that John Ames Mitchell (1845-1918)—an artist trained at the École des beaux-arts, the founder and editor of the old humor magazine *Life* (1883-1918), and the author of nine books—“began to write novels as a pastime, and it is as a novelist that he is best known” (470).

The reviewer devotes a short descriptive paragraph to each of Mitchell’s works of fiction—from *The Summer School of Philosophy at Mt. Desert* (1881) to the recent *Pandora’s Box* (1911)—both vol-

umes, as well as *The Villa Claudia* (1904), illustrated by the author. At the turn of the century this minor novelist’s most popular works were *Amos Judd* (1895) and *The Pines of Lory* (1901).

Most pertinent and disturbing today, however—after 9/11—is the author’s chilling third novel, published one hundred and fifteen years ago. Mitchell’s satiric futuristic fantasy, *The Last American* (1889), describes a crew of Persians sailing to the West in the year 2951. Here they discover, explore, and wonder about the ancient ruins of “Nhu-Yok” and “Wash-yn-tun.” Setting sail for home after killing the last surviving “Merikan,” the seafaring Persians intend to place his skull in the museum at Teheran.

Works Cited

- Lewis, Sinclair. “John Ames Mitchell, Novelist, Editor, and Artist.” *Book News Monthly* 30 March 1912: 468-71.
Mitchell, John Ames. *The Last American*. New York: F. A. Stokes Company, 1889.

Teaching *Kingsblood Royal* continued from page 1

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

————— Teaching *Kingsblood Royal* continued on page 10

Blackmailed by Love *continued from page 3*

imitation of a town!!! I would have been better staying in the jail. That is where I belong. Not for the phony reasons that the police gave. But because of my stupidity. My stupidity for thinking that people would be able to differentiate Neil from the rest of the black scum around here. My stupidity for thinking employers would still hire him. How could I be so blind? Negroes are condemned to economic subordination. They always have been, and always will be. They don't deserve the empowerment of money. After all, if you look at the faces on the money, Lincoln, Franklin, Washington...these venerable men would have never wanted to be in the possession of these dirty monsters. Can you imagine the detestation these men would feel if they could ever find out that black people were fondling money with their faces on it? Why didn't I think of this before I rejected my father's offer for a divorce from that monster of a man called Neil? He has caused me to relinquish everything that means anything—my racial superiority, my social status, and most of all—my economic well-being. He has made me one of them—he has made me black! He has made me inferior. He has taken away the

lifestyle that I deserve. When I tell him this, do you know what he says? He says, "Money isn't everything...if we stick together, we will overcome." Money is everything, and I cannot buy into that Negro sense of survival. Look what the lack of money has made me. It has made me no more worthy than a n****r! We shall overcome? We shall overcome? I don't think so. Tomorrow I am taking Bidy and going back to see if I can reclaim my real family, my real identity, and my real economic stance. Neil and that bastard of a child can wallow in their own ordained economic slump. I can't take it any longer.

STATEMENT

I chose to write the continuation of the story in Vestal's perspective as somewhat cynical, somewhat bitter because I didn't believe her character qualities would allow her to diametrically switch her nurtured racial paradigm permanently. In the context of Vestal's life, pre-enlightenment of Neil's heritage, racial condemnation and perceived inferiority of blacks was so commonplace that it wasn't even a topic of debate. In Vestal's subset of society, blacks were scientifically inferior and that fact needed no defending. Just as unquestionable as it is that fire is hot, Vestal and her social crowd were absolute in their conception that blacks were naturally substandard. For that reason, I think that it would have been nearly impossible for Vestal to be able to uproot her entire foundation of racial dynamics that were so fundamental to her entire perception of life. The same way I could almost bet that I could not be convinced that fire was not hot, Vestal's deep-seated belief of her own racial superiority over blacks carried the same unbreakable faith. Although I could be entertained by the argument that fire was not hot, and even play devil's advocate and test the theory out, I would ultimately rely on what I regard as common sense and discard any such claim. In my eyes, Vestal's initial commitment to Neil parallels along these same lines. She was entertaining the theory that blacks may not be inferior. However, ultimately, her internal dogma would have been concrete in its conception of black inferiority. She was too convicted and way too comfortable in her belief of racial superiority to ever admit that a black person was equal to her own worth. ☞

TWIN FARMS UPDATE

Twin Farms, the Vermont home that was jointly owned by Lewis and Dorothy Thompson, is now an upscale resort. It made the pages of the Escape section of the *New York Times* (October 3, 2003: 1, 6) in the article "When 'Welcome' Doesn't Mean Junior" which focused on the growing trend of upscale hotels, spas, and resorts that have no children policies. "Many of the hotels say that children wouldn't like them much anyway. The Twin Farms resort in Barnard, Vt., has a 28,000-bottle wine cellar, art by Jim Dine and David Hockney and a spa offering facials and massages (all for \$950 and up a night). 'These kinds of things require an adult appreciation,' said Beverly Matthews, the resort's vice president. 'The Twin Farms experience would be somewhat wasted on children.' The hotel does not allow guests under 18."

THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH: SCANDAL AND *BLACK OXEN*

Sally E. Parry
Illinois State University

Black Oxen by Gertrude Atherton was considered a scandal when published by Boni and Liveright in 1923. However, it has long been out of print. In checking amazon.com I noted that Reprint Services Corp. could supply a copy—for \$89—in 8 to 10 weeks, which probably means that they photocopy and bind it.

I hadn't thought much about the novel since my graduate school days, when it was briefly mentioned in a lecture on scandalous books of the 1920s, including James Branch Cabell's *Jurgen* and Michael Arlen's *The Green Hat*. I read *The Green Hat* back then and enjoyed it immensely, since its overheated prose reminded me of a cross between F. Scott Fitzgerald and a young Tennessee Williams. I must have thought about reading *Black Oxen* at one time as well, since I had a copy in my library. It's an eighth printing, but still has the beautiful Boni and Liveright artisan look. The edging of the end papers is orange swirls on black and makes the book itself seem "artistic."

What brought the novel back to my attention was a review by Stephen S. Hall of *The Pursuit of Perfection: The Promise and Perils of Medical Enhancement* by Sheila M. Rothman and David J. Rothman (New York: Pantheon, 2003) in the *New York Times Book Review* (Jan. 4, 2004: 10). He begins his review, "In 1923, a middling writer named Gertrude Atherton published a thinly veiled autobiographical best-seller called 'Black Oxen,' which might be considered a kind of endocrinological morality tale. The novel tells the story of Mary Ogden Zattiany, a woman of a certain age (much like the 66-year-old Atherton) who travels to a Viennese clinic to receive hormone-stimulation treatment to reverse 'premature senescence.' The 'therapy'—repeated zapping of the ovaries with X-rays, a treatment Atherton herself underwent—produces a dramatic rejuvenation of the protagonist's body and spirits but offends all her increasingly decrepit female friends, who view this as an un-

natural and indecent form of medicine. 'I am not the years I have passed in this world,' Mary declares. 'I am the age of the rejuvenated glands in my body.'

"Though the novel is about as subtle as the first gush of hormones during puberty, it turns out to be a remarkably prescient document about both the mindless medical euphoria that periodically swells up around some dubious new form of enhancement therapy, and the moral scolds who just as periodically pop up to denounce such treatments as another sign of civilization's decline. Indeed, so scandalous was Atherton's tale of glandular enhancement that there was a move (unsuccessful) to ban the book from public libraries."

With a review like that how could one pass up the chance to visit the novel? What I found after reading it is that the reviewer was right: the prose is a little purple, and sometimes a little overly mystically philosophical, especially when Mary is speaking about how her life has changed. However, Atherton does make a number of astute comments about the arts and the position of women in society, especially how older women tend to be marginalized. Mary Ogden was from New York society, but married a European aristocrat and so was absent from New York for a number of years. When she first returns, as a mysterious widow, members of society assume that she is young and invite her to all sorts of parties. Young men fall in love with her beauty and intellect, and it is only later revealed that she is in her 60s. Part of the scandal of the novel was that young men were trying to become her lovers, including Lee Clavering, a critic and playwright in his 30s, who proposes marriage to her. That she will not be able to bear children (because of the treatment) is talked about at length, but then dismissed by the love-stricken young man.

There are also some striking comments about how the war has affected society, especially the women. One of Mary's reasons for taking the gland treatment is that she worked in a European hospital during the war and

————— The Fountain of Youth *continued on page 11*

VESTAL'S DIARY

*Monica Nohren
Illinois State University*

Dear Diary,

Neil and I are finally where we want to be. I haven't even had time to sit and write to you because life has been so hectic. For the first time in months, I hear nothing but the beating of my own heart. Neil is outside teaching Bidy how to plant seeds in our garden. I am in our living room that is a far cry from our old one but a great deal cozier.

A few weeks ago, Neil and I were escorted to the police station to discuss the violent scene that occurred in front of our house. We, of course, were to blame. The police officers had no intention of listening to our side of the story, even though they had known about everything since it was first being planned. They acted oblivious to the notion that we had been harassed out of our home, mentally and physically.

I was originally adamant about not moving and not giving in to our neighbors. We had every right to live there, and we had always been good neighbors to them. Our house was quiet, and we caused no trouble. Bidy had grown up there, and we had always been happy in our home. There comes a time, though, when you put your pride aside and take a hard look at what is important. The happiness of my family takes precedence over anything and everything else. We could not have maintained that happiness if we would have stayed in that neighborhood because they would have tried their damndest to bring misery into our hearts. Bidy doesn't deserve that, nor does the baby I am carrying.

So, we moved. We gave in to the threats and the harassment, and we moved. I will never look back. I already have a sense of life that I have never felt before. My spirit was being stifled by those prudish, judgmental "friends" of mine. I know now that my status doesn't matter and my membership to clubs is meaningless. I no longer care what others think of me, but what I think of myself. I don't want to be the

one with the most extravagant dress at the fundraiser gala—I want to be a good mother and a loving wife.

I avoid places where I may see these "friends," not because I am ashamed but because I am disgusted. They remind me of who I was before I became enlightened and enriched. They remind me of the frame of mind with which Bidy could have grown up. I have a new sense as to what a friend should be, and those people were never my friends. Neil and I are friends because we can stick together no matter how devastating things may seem. My baby is due soon, and he will come into a world in which Bidy is just now learning to live. He will be educated and aware, which gives him one up on any of my "friends'" children.

Neil has returned to the flower shop. I guess nobody cares that he works there now. He is no longer a threat, but just a worthless nigger. Any of his powers as a former white man have been extinguished. He still has his pride, though. He is proud to be a husband, a father, and a black man. I am preparing for our new child and staying home with Bidy. We are getting by and that is all that matters. Our home is not a palace, but I feel more at home here than I ever have before. When I said we were moving, I meant that we were moving to where we belonged. We were moving on mentally and emotionally—the physical move just happened to be included in the package.

Our main goal now is to live with love in our hearts and to forget the awful things we have endured. Life is hard when your family and friends turn their backs on you. Sometimes, though, it takes something like that to let you know yourself. I have never known Neil like I know him now. As a result, my love for him is much deeper. We moved, but we are not left behind. When we moved, we simply chose to leave them in a life where advancement is not possible. We have moved on, but they are there to stay.

Sincerely yours,
Vestal

LEWIS AND THE MINNESOTA QUARTER

Deb A. Mortenson, a Lewis Society member, sent along a message noting that the state of Minnesota was entertaining ideas for the design of the Minnesota quarter. She asked Lewis Society members to support the idea of having Lewis on the quarter, because he was the first American to win a Nobel Prize in Literature. Although some members did contact the state agency responsible for making the decision, Lewis did not make the final cut. Here is their website: <http://www.quarter.state.mn.us/>.

This website notes that "hundreds of Minnesotans accepted our invitation to send us their quarter dollar design narratives and artwork. The Quarter Dollar Commission met recently to review all submitted designs that were sent to the U.S. Mint."

A later posting includes a press release from the governor's office. "Governor Pawlenty's Minnesota Quarter Dollar Commission today chose five design

concepts for the 2005 commemorative coin for forwarding to the U.S. Mint. The U.S. Mint will produce artwork for those concepts that meet its qualifications, after which Governor Pawlenty will seek public input and choose a final design.

The five designs feature: a state outline with symbols of Minnesota including a plow, a loon and a snowflake; a state outline with a lake scene, an angler and canoists, a loon and 'Land of 10,000 Lakes'; a river scene with 'Headwaters of the Mississippi River'; a 'beautiful star-like snowflake'; and a lake recreation scene.

"Governor Pawlenty intends to seek public input on those designs the U.S. Mint approves before his decision on the final design."



ABOUT OUR MEMBERS

Martin Bucco, former member of the Sinclair Lewis Society's Board of Directors, announces that the Mellen Press will be publishing his *Sinclair Lewis as Reader and Critic* later this year.

Barnaby Conrad, an honorary member of the Lewis Society, had a new novel published in October 2003, *Last Boat to Cadiz* (Capra, \$25.95). A review in the *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 16, 2003, called it a "highly entertaining thriller about a bunch of Nazis and their hostages trying to get out of Spain at the end of World War II." Drawing from his own experiences, Conrad's protagonist, like Conrad himself, is a vice consul at the American Consulate in Seville in 1945. The *Tribune* notes that "the book is also solidly rooted in the geography of Spain and its author's prodigious experiences and memories. And there's a nice nod to fellow bullfighting enthusiast Hemingway."

NEW MEMBERS

A hearty welcome to these new members who have joined the Sinclair Lewis Society in the last year.

Peggy Ann Brown
Alexandria, VA

Connie Popenhagen
Wadena, IA

Ted Fleener
Elkader, IA

Juleen Trisko-Schneider
Northome, MN

Mark Firman
Kingston, Ontario
CANADA

Augusta Wilson
Hollywood, FL

Ana Maria Marques da Costa Pereira Lopes
Viseu
PORTUGAL

Teaching *Kingsblood Royal* continued from page 5

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. ⚡

CONFRONTATION

Christy Turner
Illinois State University

Vestal: Father, I did not come here to argue with you about who I should have as my husband, I came here to ask you to help your grandchildren.

Beehouse: That boy is no grandchild of mine. He's the nigger spawn of two idiots who have embarrassed this entire community.

Vestal: Father, that boy came from the same place Bidy did. He's as much your grandchild as she is. Neil and I do not need your help or your money, but I want to give my children the best life I can give them.

Beehouse: Bidy had the best life, the same one you so ungratefully abandoned to chase after some lunatic's fantasies.

Vestal: He's a good man, the same good man he was a year ago.

Beehouse: A good man would not take his family out of a proper life just to throw them into the slums and then send his wife here begging for money.

Vestal: Neil didn't send me. He'd kill me if he found out. I've taken up sewing. I'd just tell him the extra money came from that.

Beehouse: My daughter. The president of the Junior League. Sewing for pennies in a cardboard box.

Vestal: It's not so bad really. Our home is small, but it's attractive and it's in a good neighborhood. Bidy has a number of new friends. So do Neil and I.

Beehouse: Friends? How can you allow your own daughter to be around those heathens? They're filling her head with their disgusting ways and you call them friends?

Confrontation *continued on page 13*

The Fountain of Youth *continued from page 7*

was greatly aged by it. She felt a need to recover her looks and strength. There are also comments about women of the younger generation. When Lee visits Mrs. Oglethorpe, an old friend of Mary's, whose granddaughter Janet is also in love with him, he says that he finds Janet too foolish and young. He tells Mrs. Oglethorpe, "Janet informed me that they were going the pace [i.e. drinking and carousing and having easy sex] because they couldn't hold men any other way. But I fancy it's merely a part of the general unrest which is the usual aftermath of war. This was a very long war, and the young seem to have made up their minds that the old who permitted it are bunglers and criminals and idiots and that it is up to them to demonstrate their contempt" (187). The novel isn't too sympathetic to Janet the flapper, but the changing nature of women in society—should "nice" women hold a job?—is explored.

Since Lee is a theater critic, the novel also pre-

sents and critiques the intellectual society in New York in the early 1920s. This group is made up mostly of writers, performers, and critics, with a few "pseudo-socialists" (85) thrown in. During one of the dinners that Lee has with Mary, early in their acquaintance, she mentions that an admirer had sent her several books to show her what was being discussed by the "in" crowd. She says they include, "A verboten romance called 'Jurgen.' Why verboten? Because it is too good for the American public? 'Main Street.' For me, it might as well have been written in Greek. 'The Domesday Book.' A great story. 'Seed of the Sun.' To enlighten me on the 'Japanese Question.' 'Cytherea.' Wonderful English. Why is it not also verboten?" (86). It's interesting that in the entire list of books that the intelligensia is talking about, only *Main Street*, the novel that Mary dislikes, is still in print. Perhaps this gives a sense of how "intelligent" the intelligensia is.

The Fountain of Youth *continued on page 13*

TIMELINE OF RACE AND LITERATURE IN AMERICA

Karen Chachere

Illinois State University

- 1619—U.S. Slavery begins, June 20th; blacks brought to Jamestown, Virginia, on a Dutch slave ship.
- 1661—Maryland adopts the first anti-miscegenation law, which prohibits interracial relationships.
- 1706—Bostonian Cotton Mather, an influential clergyman, writes *The Negro Christianized*, which provides religious justification for the enslavement of “heathen” Africans and Native Americans. He held that owning these humans was a sacred privilege granted by God to his chosen Puritans.
- 1781-1782—Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*
- 1790—Federal law reserves naturalized citizenship to “free” white persons.
- 1807—England becomes the first nation to abolish the African slave trade. By the early 1770s, the British were conducting most of the world’s slave trade. After the United States declared its independence, in 1776, the British government no longer directly profited from slave labor in North America.
- 1826—James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*
- 1828—Thomas Rice sees a slave of Mr. Crow’s dancing and singing; decides to parody the slave by burning black cork and spreading it on his face. The minstrel show is born and so is the term “Jim Crow.”
- 1845—Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*
- 1852—Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*
- 1859—Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig*
- 1862—Abraham Lincoln’s *The Emancipation Proclamation*
- 1864—The word “miscegenation” is coined by David Croly in his political pamphlet *Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the White Man and Negro*.
- 1865—The Civil War ends and the 13th Amendment outlaws slavery in the United States.
- 1865-1877—Reconstruction
- 1866—Civil Rights Act protects former slaves from “Black Codes.”
- 1867—First Reconstruction Act—grants suffrage to blacks in “Rebel States,” and the first meeting of the Ku Klux Klan, at the Maxwell House Hotel, in Nashville, Tennessee.
- 1868—First Amendment guaranteeing blacks equality
- 1870—15th Amendment granting blacks the right to vote
- 1871—2nd Enforcement Act passes to uphold the 14th Amendment. Gives federal officers and courts control of registration and voting in congressional elections.
- 1871—3rd Enforcement Act—Defines Klan conspiracy as a rebellion against the United States and empowers the president to suspend the writ of habeas corpus and declare martial law in the rebellious states.
- 1875—Civil Rights Act—public accommodations
- 1877—Federal Troops withdraw from the South; the end of Reconstruction.
- 1880—California prohibits the issuance of licenses for marriage between a white person and “a Negro, mulatto, or Mongolian.”
- 1883—Missouri judge prevents intermarriage because “It is stated as a well authenticated fact that if the (children) of a black man and white woman, and a white man and black woman intermarry, they cannot possibly have any progeny, and such a fact sufficiently justifies those laws which forbid the intermarriage between blacks and whites.”

Timeline of Race and Literature in America continued on page 14

The Fountain of Youth *continued from page 11*

Lee also seems to be connected to members of a thinly disguised Algonquin Round Table. He lunched with a friend at “the Sign of the Indian Chief, a restaurant where the cleverest of them—and those who were so excitedly sure of their cleverness that for the moment they convinced others as well as themselves—foregathered daily.... There was a great deal of scintillating talk in his group on the significant books and tendencies of the day, and if the talk of French youth in their clubs before the Revolution may possibly have been profounder and more far-reaching in its philosophy, more formulative in its plan of action, owing to a still deeper necessity for change in the social order, the very fact that these brilliant young Americans had no personal grievance but merely sharpened their wits on matters in which they were intelligent enough to take an interest, saved their cleverness from becoming mordant or distorted by passion....

“But their most solemn causeries were upon the vital theme of The American Reputation in Letters. Past. Present. Future. This was the age of Youth. Should any of the old reputations be permitted to live on—save in the favor of the negligible public? All the recent reputations they would have liked to pronounce equally great, merely on account of their commendable newness, but they were too conscientious for that. They appraised, debated, rejected, finally placed the seal of their august

approval upon a favored few.... From these judicial pronouncements there was no appeal, and the pleasant spaces of the Sign of the Indian Chief, so innocuous to the uninitiated eye, was a veritable charnel house that stank in the nostrils of the rejected; but, inconsistent even as life itself, those melancholy graves were danced over by the sprightly young feet of the elect....

“But for good or ill, it was a matter for congratulation that criticism was at last being taken seriously in the United States” (128-29).

In the end, for those of you who will not visit the novel, Mary decides that she cannot abandon her plans of helping to raise Europe up after the war and agrees to marry a man who many suspect will be the next Chancellor of Austria. In her farewell to Lee, she strikes a world-weary pose, “Love is a very old story to me.... It could never be to me again the significant thing it is even to the woman of middle age, much less to the young. And now—with a world falling to ruins—in the most critical period of its history—to imagine that love has any but a passing significance—Oh no, my friend.... I could contemplate going back to certain death at the hands of an assassin, or in another revolution; to stand on the edge of the abyss, the last human being alive in Europe, and look down upon the expiring throes before I went over the brink myself. But I have not the courage to marry you” (345-46). ❧

Confrontation continued from page 11

Vestal: Those people love Bidy. And they love Neil. Our own families have disowned us. Our friends forced us out of our home. We are the same people we have always been. But you can't see that. All you see is black.

Beehouse: No. I also see shame, and embarrassment and a daughter who is ungrateful for everything I have given you.

Vestal: You only gave to me when it suited you Father. You wanted your daughter to be a fine member of high society. Well I was. And Bidy can have a chance to do the same if I can give her the proper things.

Beehouse: You chose this life. I tried to help you out of it.

Vestal: But my children didn't choose who they are. And neither did Neil. I just want to give them the best things possible so that I can prove to everyone that there is nothing dirty or ugly about them.

Beehouse: Your children are dirty because of your husband's blood and his big mouth and your foolishness. You ruined my granddaughter. She had everything she needed to be a fine woman and you are taking that away from her.

Confrontation continued on page 14

Timeline of Race and Literature in America *continued from page 12*

- 1883–*Pace vs. Alabama*
- 1883–U.S. Supreme Court overturns Civil Rights Act of 1875.
- 1890–Mississippi limits black suffrage through “understanding tests,” setting precedent for other Southern states
- 1892–Frances Ellen Watkins’s *Lola Leroy*
- 1893–Kate Chopin’s short story “Desiree’s Baby”
- 1894–Homer Plessy boards a train in Louisiana
- 1894–Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*
- 1896–*Plessy vs. Ferguson*, separate but equal (Jim Crow Laws)
- 1898–Wilmington, North Carolina Race Riots
- 1901–Charles Chestnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition*
- 1901-02–Pauline Hopkins’s *Hagar’s Daughter* (serialized version)
- 1903–W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folks*
- 1905–Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman*
- 1909–National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) founded by Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois.
- 1909–California passes a law that specifically adds Japanese to the list of those barred from marrying whites.
- 1919–Red Summer (a record-setting number of blacks lynched)
- 1920–“Mulatto” is no longer a category on the U.S. Census
- 1921–The Harlem Renaissance/The Negro Renaissance, a period of activity on the part of black artists and extraordinary receptivity on the part of the white public
- 1923–Jean Toomer’s *Cane*
- 1924–Virginia Act to Preserve Racial Purity
- 1925–The Rhinelander Case
- 1929–Nella Larsen’s *Passing*
- 1929–Vera Caspary’s *The White Girl*
- 1929–Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry*
- 1932–William Faulkner’s *Light in August*
- 1934–Langston Hughes’s *The Ways of White Folks*
- 1936–William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*
- 1947–Sinclair Lewis’s *Kingsblood Royal*
- 1954–*Brown vs. The Board of Education* overturns separate but equal. ✎

Confrontation continued from page 13

Vestal: That may be true. But I am giving her something you never could.

Beehouse: You. You come here begging for money and then lecture me on what I can’t give to my grandchild. What did I ever deny you? Did you not have everything you ever wanted? No. I will not support you or any of your children so long as you live the life of a nigger. You deserve to be poor, like the dirty darkie you married.

Vestal: But don’t you see? If you help us, I can see

that Bidy and Rex have nice things and go to good schools. People will give them a chance if they have nice things and good manners.

Beehouse: Bidy could have had any life she chose. Bring her here while she still has a chance.

Vestal: Until what? Until she decides to do something you don’t like? Then what Father, will she have to learn as I have that she is loved only to the point that she meets your approval? That she meets the Federal Club’s standards, the Junior League’s? When does it end? ✎

SINCLAIR LEWIS WEBSITES

A new feature of the newsletter will be to mention a couple of websites that are related to Sinclair Lewis's writings and life.

The death of Sinclair Lewis on January 10 was duly noted on history@encyclopedia.com which is a daily e-mail sent to subscribers with births and deaths of the famous as well as interesting things that happened on that date. You'll notice in the summary link that although there are relatively recent bibliographical references, the aesthetic appreciation of Lewis's work is still very much based on Schorer.

Today in History: **January 10**

Born Today

Pat Benatar 1952
 Rod Stewart 1945
 Jim Croce 1943
 Sal Mineo 1939
 Paul Henried 1908
 Ray Bolger 1904
 Robinson Jeffers 1887
 Francis X. Bushman 1883
 Ethan Allen 1738

Died Today

George Meany 1980
 Coco Chanel 1971
 Dashiell Hammett 1961
 Laura Ingalls Wilder 1957
 Sinclair Lewis 1951
 Buffalo Bill Cody 1917
 Samuel Colt 1862
 Pope Gregory X 1276

Events

1969—Last issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* published after 141 years.
 1956—Elvis Presley records "Heartbreak Hotel" in Nashville.
 1946—First U.N. General Assembly held in London.
 1941—*Arsenic and Old Lace* starts 1444 performance run in N.Y.

1920—League of Nations first meets at Geneva, Switzerland; U.S.A. unrepresented.

1911—First aerial photograph from an airplane taken by Major Jimmie Erickson over San Diego.

1901—Greatest oil strike in history at Spindletop well in Beaumont, Texas at 10:30 a.m.

1890—Cleopatra's tomb discovered.

1863—London underground railway inaugurated.

1840—First adhesive stamp in the world issued—Penny Post in England.

1776—Thomas Paine publishes *Common Sense*. One out of four Americans reads it.

Link to Lewis's life:

1885-1951, American novelist, b. Sauk Centre, Minn., grad. Yale Univ., 1908. Probably the greatest satirist of his era, Lewis wrote novels that present a devastating picture of middle-class American life in the 1920s. Although he ridiculed the values, the lifestyles, and even the speech of his characters, there is affection behind the irony. Lewis began his career as a journalist, editor, and hack writer. With the publication of *Main Street* (1920), a merciless satire on life in a Midwestern small town, Lewis immediately became an important literary figure. His next novel, *Babbitt* (1922), considered by many critics to be his greatest work, is a scathing portrait of an average American businessman, a Republican and a Rotarian, whose individuality has been erased by conformist values. *Arrowsmith* (1925; Pulitzer Prize, refused by Lewis) satirizes the medical profession, and *Elmer Gantry* (1927) attacks hypocritical religious revivalism. *Dodsworth* (1929), a more mellow work, is a sympathetic picture of a wealthy American businessman in Europe; it was successfully dramatized by Lewis and Sidney Howard in 1934. In 1930, Lewis became the first American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. During his lifetime he published 22 novels, and it is generally agreed that his later novels are far less successful than his early fiction. Among his later works are *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), *Cass Timberlane* (1945), *Kingsblood Royal* (1947), and

World So Wide (1951). From 1928 to 1942 Lewis was married to Dorothy Thompson, 1894-1961, a distinguished newspaperwoman and foreign correspondent.

Bibliography

See memoir by his first wife, G. H. Lewis (1955); biographies by C. Van Doren (1933, repr. 1969), M. Shorer (1961), V. Sheean (1963), and R. Lingeman (2001); studies by S. N. Grebstein (1962, rpt. 1987), D.J. Dooley (1967, rpt. 1987), M. Light (1975), and M. Bucco, ed. (1986).

Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition, Copyright 2004.

————— SLSN —————

IMDB (<http://www.imdb.com>), the international movie data base, and a wonderful resource for all sorts of film trivia, has a listing on Michael Lewis, the son of Sinclair Lewis and Dorothy Thompson. He is listed as Michael Lewis (II) because there are 17 Michael Lewises who have made films. I hadn't realized that he had appeared in two movies.

Date of birth and location

20 June 1930

New York City, New York

Date of death

6 March 1975

Summit, New Jersey

Trivia

Son of author Sinclair Lewis and journalist Dorothy Thompson.

Actor—filmography

The Gruesome Twosome (1967)

The Curse of the Werewolf (1961) (uncredited)...Page

...aka *The Curse of Siniestro* (1961)

...aka *The Wolfman* (1961) (USA)

————— SLSN —————

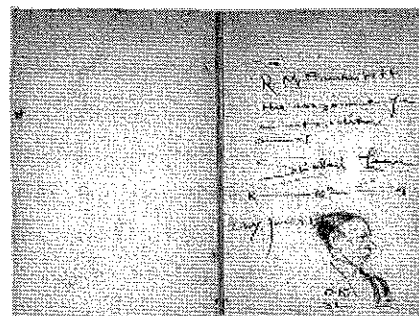
The Minnesota Historical Society has a website on Minnesota authors at <http://people.mnhs.org/authors/>. Among the authors to whom they have links are Margaret Culkin Banning, Robert Bly, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Garrison Keillor, Maud Hart Lovelace, O. E. Rolvaag,

Laura Ingalls Wilder, and of course, Sinclair Lewis. His direct link is http://people.mnhs.org/authors/biog_detail.cfm?PersonID=Lewi266

The site includes biographical information, interesting pictures, and a link to the Minnesota Statewide Project for Automated Library Systems (Web PALS) Web Database where you can search Lewis holdings and texts.

The additional resources links that are provided are also quite useful:

- Minnesota Historical Society Visual Resources Database
- Lewis Family Papers
- *The Minnesota Backgrounds of Sinclair Lewis's Fiction* by John Theodore Flanagan
- *Sinclair Lewis, An American Life* by Mark Schorer
- *Sinclair Lewis: A Descriptive Bibliography* by Stephen R. Pastore
- *With Love from Gracie. Sinclair Lewis: 1912-1925* by Grace Hegger Lewis
- *Babbitt* (Online text of Lewis novel)
- Language of the Land Project, Lewis poem "Launcelot"
- *Main Street* (Online text of Lewis novel)
- *Our Mr. Wrenn* (Online text of Lewis novel)
- Sauk Centre's Lewis web page
- Biographical Lewis web page
- Sinclair Lewis Winner of the 1930 Nobel Prize (Nobel Prize pages about Lewis)



SINCLAIR LEWIS NOTES

Sinclair Lewis is mentioned briefly in a new collection of letters by James Thurber, *The Thurber Letters: The Wit, Wisdom, and Surprising Life of James Thurber*, edited by Harrison Kinney with Rosemary A. Thurber (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003). In "Is Editing Necessary?" (Aug. 10, 2003 *New York Times Book Review*: 8), Terry Teachout makes reference to one of Thurber's best-selling books, *Is Sex Necessary?* The book as a whole he finds way too long and not annotated enough, but since Thurber knew most of the New York intelligentsia in the 1930s and 1940s, there are a number of gems: "To be sure, it's nice to know that Groucho Marx had a 'real appreciation' of Henry James's 'Jolly Corner,' or that Sinclair Lewis was 'the only drunken writer I ever met who said nothing about his own work and praised that of another writer present' (the other writer present, of course, being Thurber himself), or to read this description of George S. Kaufman, whose prowess as a lover mystified his friends: 'It's hard to imagine Kaufman taking his shoes off in a boudoir. He looks so permanently clothed.'" However, Teachout thinks that Thurber's neuroses tend to be focused on in so many of the published letters that this volume is much longer than it needs to be: "And while I do not mean to suggest that 'The Thurber Letters' is without interest, there is not a letter in it that would put into the balance with any of a hundred of his drawings. It is there, not here, that the 'wit' and 'wisdom' advertised in the shy-making subtitle of 'The Thurber Letters' are truly found."

————— SLSN —————

Sinclair Lewis and a quote of his were the theme of the September 28, 2003 Sunday *New York Times* crossword puzzle called "Bad Pitching." The quote was: "Advertising is a valuable economic factor because it is the cheapest way of selling goods, particularly if the goods are worthless."

————— SLSN —————

Dorothy Thompson, Lewis's second wife, was one of the most powerful newspaper columnists of the 1930s and 1940s. In *The Borrowed Years 1938-1941: America on the Way to War* (New York: Random House, 1989), Richard Ketchum quotes a cable that she sent in August 1939 to Harold Nicolson, a member of Parliament, to try to get him to use his influence to arrange a worldwide day of prayer and meditation: "England's strength is not appeasement with the enemy of peace nor war but a glorious Christian resistance. I mean this with all seriousness. I am not at all crazy. Love from Red [Lewis] who thinks I am" (198).

————— SLSN —————

A review by Bruce Rosenstein of *The Company: A Short History of a Revolutionary Idea* by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge (Modern Library, 2003) in the March 31, 2003 *USA Today* chronicles the rise of the company from 3000 BC in Mesopotamia to the U.S. in the present (48). A modest 227 pages, the book briefly moves through the Phoenicians to the Chinese to the chartered companies of Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries: "No history of companies would be complete without references to the watchdogs of wage slaves and scams—novelists such as Charles Dickens (especially his 1848 novel about a family firm, *Dombey and Son*) and Sinclair Lewis, who wrote *Babbitt* (1922), the classic on the company man. Shades of Enron are found in *The Way We Live Now*, an 1875 novel by Anthony Trollope probably 'based on a real-life scam by a share-hawking finance company called Credit Mobilier.'"

————— SLSN —————

One of the top ten great used-book stores in the country is owned by a man who once owned a copy of *Hike and the Aeroplane*. In "Used-Book Seller Exploits Good Read on Niche Market" in the *Chicago Tribune* (June 23, 2003) by Jan Norman, owner Bob Weinstein is interviewed on his success in a tough business. Weinstein, owner of Book Baron in Anaheim, California, notes that

one way to succeed is by having a huge inventory, another is by becoming a supplier of used and out of print books to Amazon. Norman writes, "Weinstein once paid \$28,000 for *Hike and Aeroplane* (1912) by Tom Graham, a pseudonym of Sinclair Lewis. He turned around and sold it for \$35,000." Although he appreciates rare and first edition books, he says, "I don't fall in love with my books. We're in the business to move inventory."

————— SLSN —————

Thomas Mallon's *In Fact: Essays on Writers and Writing* (New York: Pantheon, 2000) includes discussions of a variety of authors, often those who have been passed by in current scholarship. In the review "The Company He Keeps" (*New York Times Book Review* Jan. 16, 2001:14), William Pritchard notes that Mallon, once an academic and now an acclaimed writer of such historical novels as *Dewey Defeats Truman* and *Henry and Clara*, has premodernist sympathies, although that doesn't prevent him from appreciating contemporary authors like Richard Powers, Don DeLillo, and Robert Stone. Pritchard writes, "The short accounts of some American novelists read today by only a minority—John Dos Passos, John O'Hara, Sinclair Lewis—are not such as will lead to a revival of their work, but the Lewis essay contains observations made telling through Mallon's vivid phrasing. Lewis, an author bent on being 'a sort of anti-chamber of commerce,' allows for 'gentle moments' in the midst of his satiric denigration, but these moments 'tend to be carried in and deposited like a hot towel by some minor character who disappears before you can thank him.' Such writing has the effect of enlivening rather than withering its subject. Mallon's critical generosity also comes through in reviews of contemporary fiction writers, though he assumes readers have more appetite for short recycled book reviews than is probably the case."

————— SLSN —————

In the 1999 film, *Cradle Will Rock*, written and directed by Tim Robbins, mention is made of the 21 productions of the stage version of *It Can't Happen Here* that all took place on the same day, including the Brooklyn production, performed in Yiddish, and a production with a Negro company. The film's main focus is on the creation of the musical *The Cradle Will Rock*

for the Federal Theatre Project. Because of its leftist approach and criticism of industry, Hallie Flanagan, the director of the FTP, was told by government representatives that the musical could not be presented. In defiance, the actors and creative team marched to another theater and performed from the house. The film starred Hank Azaria as Marc Blitzstein, Rubén Blades as Diego Rivera, John Cusack as Nelson Rockefeller, Cary Elwes as John Houseman, Cherry Jones as Hallie Flanagan, and Angus MacFadyen as Orson Welles, as well as Joan Cusack, Bill Murray, Vanessa Redgrave, Susan Sarandon, John Turturro, and Bob Balaban.

————— SLSN —————

An eBay auction the week of January 26, 2004 featured a December 1942 issue of *Motion Picture* magazine. On the front cover is Deanna Durbin, with articles about Barbara Stanwyck, Carole Landis, and Mickey Rooney as well of pictures of Alexis Smith, Brenda Marshall, Lana Turner, Gene Tierney, Veronica Lake and Hedy Lamarr. There was also an article "Sinclair Lewis Defends Hollywood" written by Sinclair Lewis. The final price was \$355.



LEWIS AND THE WEB: INFORMATION AND REQUESTS

Over 17,000 people have accessed the Sinclair Lewis website in the last eight months, which shows that there is a good deal of interest in Lewis's life and works. Between 500 and 600 people visit the site each week. Here are some of the questions that have been received recently.

I'm a journalist at the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, working on a story about the top ten most sought after out-of-print book titles (recently put out by Bookfinder.com). *It Can't Happen Here* was tenth on that list and the second most sought after out-of-print novel, (behind a book called *Flicker*, by Theodore Roszak).

Can you tell me why that particular book by Lewis would be so in demand? I know that it concerns the rise of an American Fascist dictator. Is the demand [for the book] a response to current political realities?

Here's an excerpt from the article that was published:

Fort Worth Star-Telegram, "Site Gives Obscure Titles New Life"
(December 11, 2003)

No. This obviously is not your average *New York Times* bestseller list. Instead, this top-10 list, published last month by the Internet book broker BookFinder.com, charts the most sought-after out-of-print titles—in other words, books that have been abandoned by their publishers for one reason or another but have retained significant audiences just the same. As such, says BookFinder.com founder Anirvan Chatterjee, the list is a unique, Internet-age glimpse into underground reading tastes not influenced by the megamarketing campaigns of publishing houses and major booksellers....

That Sinclair Lewis's 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here* landed at No. 10 came as no surprise to Sally Parry, an English professor at Illinois State University and a Lewis scholar. Parry says the book traces the trajectory of a closet fascist who is elected to the American presidency and the terrible repercussions. "I was aware it was popular," Parry says of *It Can't Happen Here*. "One of the reasons is that with our very conservative political environment, there are a lot of correlations between the world of the book and

our current world. The gradual loss of civil liberties in the book leads to internment camps. I'd like to teach it every time there is a national election."

See <http://www.dfw.com/mld/dfw/entertainment/7466423.htm> for the complete article.

————— SLSN —————

I was told that a Vermont town and Vermont themes figure into one or more of Sinclair Lewis's works. Yet, my review of these comes up with little connection. Am I missing something important? I'd appreciate your response. I'm writing a book for the University Press of New England on writing in Vermont and, of course, would want to be absolutely accurate. [Lewis really loved Vermont and actually lived in Vermont at a place called Twin Farms in the late 1930s and early 1940s (I think the place is now a fancy inn). He has some short stories set there, but probably his most important work set in Vermont is *It Can't Happen Here*, a 1935 dystopian novel about America becoming a fascist nation. Doremus Jessup, a middle-aged newspaper editor, lives in Vermont and much of the novel shows how fascism becomes a part of fabric of the nation through Doremus's experiences.]

I'm reading *It Can't Happen Here* and I can't help but think the description of Fort Beulah [is] Woodstock. Any thoughts or research on that that you know about?

It's scary how much of what he writes in the book is applicable today.

And, oh yes, Twin Farms is a fancy inn or, at least, it was recently.

————— SLSN —————

I would like ask you about the synopsis of *Babbitt* for my thesis. I'm a student of Jember University, Indonesia, faculty of letters.

————— SLSN —————

Please excuse the intrusion. I came across your name on the Sinclair Lewis Society page and I have a question.

You see, I am, myself, by choice, located in a Wisconsin version of Gopher Prairie and I have no one with which to discuss great literature.;

I just finished reading *Main Street* and was struck by the difference in my reaction and that of the “popular” reviews. For the most part, the reviews I have read—granted they have not been serious academic work—agree that *Main Street* is an indictment of the pettiness and small-mindedness of small town middle America.

Though I certainly see that criticism there, I also see a criticism of the high-mindedness of the city and the self-important arrogance of the “reformer.”

After all, Caroline does come back to a rather heroic character in Will, a man who just does what needs to be done: cure the sick, stoke the coals, fix the screens. I think of William Carlos Williams and the “customs of necessity.”

So, my question is, where does one look for a more thorough analysis of *Main Street*? Does one have to go to a biography of Lewis to understand this better? Or am I way off base with my reading?

SLSN

Paul Dickson and I have just completed a book on the 1932 Bonus March for Walker and Company. (The title is “The March of the Bonus Army,” see thebonusarmy.com.) While working on the book, we came across a great deal of information about fears of fascism in the 1930s. (The leader of the Bonus March, for example, began the Khaki Shirts, inspired by the Brown Shirts and Black Shirts.) Naturally, our research included Sinclair Lewis and *It Can't Happen Here*. We have just learned that the book is about to be republished, but we do not know who the publisher is. We believe we have information that would be valuable for annotating the book. We would greatly appreciate it if you gave us the name of the publisher. [Penguin Signet]

SLSN

We here at the National Icelandic Broadcasting Service want to do a radioplay adaptation of *Babbitt* by Sinclair Lewis. I was trying to find out on your website to whom I should turn regarding royalties. Is it the law firm McIntosh & Otis? [Yes, although *Babbitt*

is out of copyright protection because it was first published in 1922.]

SLSN

I am a big fan of Sinclair Lewis. Reading *Main Street* right now. Great!

From your website, I have read about Lewis’s professional biography, but I wanted to learn more about his personal life. He seems like a fascinating person.

But I am having trouble finding a good biography. I read that Shorer’s book is “unsympathetic.” So I have doubts about that.

Do you have any recommendations of biographical books/articles that are accurate and written “sympathetically?” [I recommended Richard Lingeman’s biography.]

SLSN

We are producing a world premiere of *Main Street* at the Sunset Theater in Elm Grove, Wisconsin, October 2-18th, 2003. I thought you and your readership might be interested. The novel was adapted for the stage by Wayne Frank. You can view more about this production at our website: <http://www.archangeltheatre.com>.

SLSN

I’m trying to locate a description that Sinclair Lewis wrote about light shining into Grand Central Station in New York. Or, at least I think it was Lewis. I heard the description on PBS and it was beautiful and I’d like to find it in the book. [I’ve been looking at the various books to see whether I could find a quote like the one you describe. George Babbitt comes through Grand Central on the way to Maine, but there’s no real comment. Lewis has an essay, “My First Day in New York,” in which he mentions Grand Central but only as a “red brick barn.” Many of his other characters including Wrenn and Dodsworth use Grand Central as a way to go somewhere else, but nothing about light that I could see.]

Thank you so much for trying. It looks like I got the wrong author. It was such a beautiful description. Quite ethereal. Esoteric. I appreciate your effort.

SLSN

A recent re-reading of *It Can't Happen Here* (as well as current events) led me to the discovery that Lewis had written and performed in a theatrical version of the book. I have, however, been unable to locate a copy of the play. I therefore am turning to you for guidance. Do you know if a published version of the play exists? Could you possibly point to sources who might have copies of the play? [I'm pretty sure that a published version doesn't exist. It was done by the Federal Theatre Project and there were a couple of subsequent productions, at least one of which starred Lewis as Doremus Jessup. I have seen a copy of the script which I believe is either with the Lewis archives at Yale University or those at Syracuse.]

You're certainly right that current events show that Lewis is as timely today as he was 70 years ago.]

————— SLSN —————

I have been looking for a copy of the play *It Can't Happen Here* without success. Can you make any suggestions?

————— SLSN —————

Regarding the (9.2) Spring 2001 edition of the newsletter, is this the same Claude C[arlos] Washburn who is the author of *Opinions, Pages from the Book of Paris, The Prince and the Princess, A Florentine Comedy* and so forth, in the 1910s and '20s? I am writing about the Tryon (North Carolina) colony of artists and writers and want to be sure I'm tracking the right fellow before I order the copy of your newsletter to read the article. We know that our Washburn was in Tryon before World War I, and that the Washburn family came from Duluth.

If I'm barking up the right tree, any additional Claude Washburn leads are very welcome. He is not an easy author to track down biographical info about. Thank you. [He was referred to Carlos Washburn's son, John L. Washburn, who wrote an article, "Lewis and Claude Washburn" for the Spring 2001 issue of *The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*.]

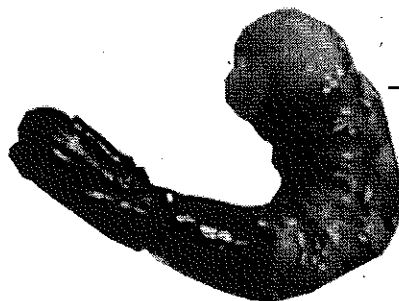
————— SLSN —————

My inquiry is a "long shot." I am a member of an organization in Chambersburg, PA (that's in south-central PA) that is seeking a speaker on Sinclair Lewis.

The downside is that we do not pay our speakers; however, we do pay mileage and breakfast or lunch expenses when necessary. Mileage is usually within a 100-mile radius of here at maximum, but the distance is not fixed.

Do you know of someone in our region (more or less as indicated above) who would consider giving a 75-minute presentation on Sinclair Lewis this fall at Wilson College, Chambersburg? More detailed information will be discussed/provided should you be able to provide referral(s)?

The group is comprised of retired persons who have a life long interest in learning. Members' backgrounds are varied and include some from academia. [Steve Bowersox, a Lewis Society member, made an excellent presentation, according to Myra Jean Morrow, Assoc. Program Director, IRP, Wilson College.]



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Jambalaya!*

Find Lewis recipes,
including desserts, at:

www.englishilstu.edu/separry/sinclairlewis/recipes.html

—Collector's Corner features catalog listings from book dealers as a sampling of what publications by Lewis are selling for currently. [Thanks to Jacqueline Koenig for her contribution to this section.]

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202. Sinclair Lewis. *Free Air*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1919.

First edition. Contemporary owner name, else near fine in a worn, but basically intact, good dustwrapper that has some modest chips and tears, and appears to have had some internal tape mends removed. One of the author's earliest books under his own name, and very scarce in jacket. \$1750

203. *Main Street*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920.

First edition, first issue. Brief owner inscription, else fine and bright in a later issue dustwrapper that has undergone a little restoration at the extremities. Lewis's first major success, a realistic portrayal of Midwestern life, and the first of several important novels for which he became the first American to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. \$4500

204. *Elmer Gantry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927.

First edition, first issue with "Gantry" spelled "Cantry" on the spine. Fine in a bright, very good dustwrapper with several shallow chips and tears. A flawed but pleasing copy of a notable novel about a corrupt evangelist, memorably filmed with Burt Lancaster and Shirley Jones, who both won Oscars, as did the screenplay of director Richard Brooks. \$1000

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CATALOGUE 130

142. Lewis, Sinclair. *Work of Art*. Garden City:

Doubleday Doran, 1934.

First Edition, Second printing. From the library of Harpo Marx, the great clown of the Marx Brothers comedy team, and his wife, actress Susan Fleming Marx, former member of the Ziegfeld Follies and star of early talking films like *Million Dollar Legs* with W.C. Fields. With a charming bookplate illustrated by Susan Marx with a drawing of Harpo in his comic character which reads: "From the Library of Harpo and Susan Marx." With a penciled note on the pastedown written by Harpo recording someone's name and telephone number. Spine faded, very good in a very good dust jacket with some light chipping and small tears. \$150

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CATALOG 130

151. Lewis, Sinclair. *The Trail of the Hawk*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1915.

The third book, second under his own name, by the first American to win the Nobel Prize. Inscribed by the author in the year of publication: "To Joseph Margulis/ with the regards/ of his friend/ Sinclair Lewis/ Aug. 31, 1915." Spine greatly faded; near fine, lacking the dust jacket. Color frontispiece by Norman Rockwell—a very early illustration in Rockwell's career, done when he was just 21 years old. About his first five novels, including this one, Lewis has said, "all of them dead before the ink was dry. I lacked sense enough to see that, after five failures, I was foolish to continue writing." The comments were made in an autobiographical statement for the Nobel Foundation after Lewis won the Prize in 1930 for his continued writing, including *Main Street*, *Arrowsmith*, *Babbitt*, *Elmer Gantry*. An uncommon early novel, very scarce inscribed. \$2500

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85. Lewis, Sinclair. *It Can't Happen Here*. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1935.

First Edition. A fine copy in a dust jacket with minor wear. \$450

86. Lewis, Sinclair. *The God-Seeker*. New York: Random House, 1949.

First Edition. Fine in a dust jacket with light wear and tear. \$85

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182. Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922.

First edition, first issue. Small 8vo. A fine copy in a fine dust jacket of this quintessentially eponymous novel with minor repairs to the spine by a master paper conservator. A highspot of 20th Century American Literature that is seldom seen in collector's condition. \$7500.

183. Lewis, Sinclair. *Dodsworth*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929.

First edition. 8vo. Walter Huston memorably conveyed the world-weariness of the title character in the 1936 William Wyler movie. A fine, fresh copy in a near fine dust jacket (some tiny nicks and tears). \$1250

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EARLY FALL MISCELLANY 2003

124. Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922.

FIRST EDITION. First issue with Purdy for Lyte on page 49, line 5. A near fine copy in a near fine dust jacket with chips at spine ends expertly restored. Attractive copy. \$2500

125. Lewis, Sinclair. *Elmer Gantry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927.

First Edition. First issue with "G" on spine resembling a "C." Fine crisp copy in bright dust jacket with some restoration along top edge. Burt Lancaster and Shirley Jones both won Oscars for their roles in the 1960 film. \$1750

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19TH & 20TH CENTURY LITERATURE

LEWIS'S COPY INSCRIBED TO HIS WIFE

173. Lewis, Sinclair. *Dodsworth*. 8vo, navy cloth stamped in orange, cover rubbed, spine heavily rubbed and darkened; internally sound; married to dust jacket from a later edition. New York, (1929) [4,000/6,000]

First edition. Inscribed to his wife Dorothy: "To Dorothy, in memory of Handelstrasse, Moscow, Kitzbühl, London, Naples, Cornwall, Shropshire, Kent, Sussex, Vermont, New York, Homosassa, and all the other places in which I wrote this book (— + this is the first copy of it I've seen) or in which she rewrote me. Hal / Homosassa, Fla. March 2, 1929."

The inscription reflects the numerous places Lewis and his journalist wife, Dorothy Thompson, visited while writing the semi-autobiographical *Dodsworth*, partly an effort to recover from a nervous breakdown. As a result of his traveling, drinking, social life, and marital upheavals among other incidents, the Twenties became increasingly stressful for Lewis. A particularly bad incident occurred in the year preceding *Dodsworth* when Lewis and Thompson filed a complaint against Theodore Dreiser who wrote a book about the current state of Russia that was, in their opinion, too similar to Dorothy's series of articles published at the same time. The grudge erupted into the now famous slap-fight between Lewis and Dreiser at a Metropolitan Club dinner two years later over the former's verbal outburst accusing Dreiser of plagiarism.

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