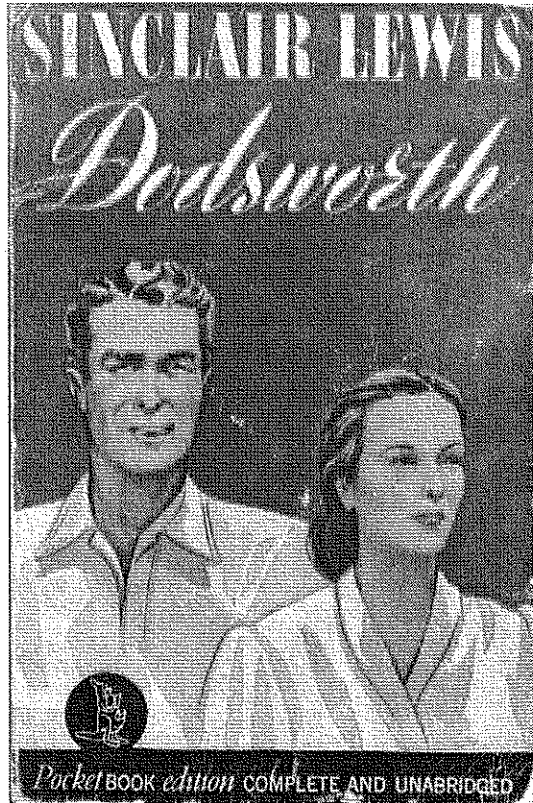


# The SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME TEN, NUMBER ONE

FALL 2001



Cover of *Dodsworth* (Pocket Book edition, published in 1941)

## NEW BIOGRAPHY OF LEWIS TO BE PUBLISHED JANUARY 2002

Richard Lingeman's new biography of Sinclair Lewis, *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street*, is scheduled for publication by Random House for January 2002. Lewis scholars everywhere are looking forward to it. Random House is also publishing a Modern Library edition of *Babbitt* with an introduction by Lingeman and the Library of America is publishing a second Lewis volume containing *Arrowsmith*, *Dodsworth*, and *Elmer Gantry* for which Lingeman has written the notes. 2002 may be a banner year for Lewis studies. ☞

## THE EDUCATION OF THE EYE

Roger Forseth  
*The University of Wisconsin-Superior*

Sinclair Lewis. *Minnesota Diary, 1942-1946*. Ed. George Killough. Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 2000. xi+293pp. \$39.95.

Edmund Wilson called his review of *Cass Timberlane*, a "salute to an old landmark":

We have had Lewis around for so long, so consistently being himself, that he has become a familiar object, like Henry Ford or the Statue of Liberty [...] But I found in his new book [...] some qualities that were new to me and that I had not expected. (140)

Wilson's observation echoed in my mind as I read through George Killough's splendid edition of the *Minnesota Diary*. A Midwesterner by birth and by choice, I

— The Education of the Eye continued on page 2

## SOCIETY ELECTIONS

The following people have been elected to the Board of Directors of the Sinclair Lewis Society.

Our congratulations to them.

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George Killough, College of St. Scholastica  
Jacqueline Koenig  
Robert L. McLaughlin, Illinois State University  
Sally E. Parry, Illinois State University

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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 Frederick Betz, Martin Bucco, Roger Forseth, James Hutchisson, George Killough, Jacqueline Koenig, Richard Lingeman, Kathryn Lindskoog, James Lorson, Joyce Lyng, Robert McLaughlin, Matthew Sonnenberg, and Lucy Zhang.

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felt as though I were sitting beside Sinclair Lewis on one of his peripatetic automobile journeys through the countryside:

Under the gray sky, the prairie seems wider, more mysterious. At 10:30, the sun is out, just as we cross border into SOUTH DAKOTA, then it deceitfully vanishes again. One always expects an immediate change when one crosses a national, even a state, border, but here is the same rolling prairie, same quite black soil, same red barns... There is real splendor in a day of intermittent sunshine like this: the masses of cumulus cloud, with flitting shadows, and the width of the plains—which, vs prairie, begin here perhaps.<sup>1</sup>

Lewis spends the night (May 11, 1942) in Aberdeen, South Dakota—my hometown—at the Sherman Hotel, and there is a very real chance that while he was upstairs I was in the basement playing pool in the Sherman Billiard Parlor, at the time my home away from home. It is an epiphany such as this that makes the *Diary*, for me, such a personal, living document. And, it seems, I am not alone in discovering the pleasures of reminiscence. Driving along Highway 10 in North Dakota, Lewis, recalling the trip that inspired his 1919 novel *Free Air*, writes, "I join the course I took with Gracie in 1916, when I motored, in a Model T Ford, from Sauk Centre to Seattle"(73). Such, in brief, are the rewards (for both reader and writer) of this perhaps most quietly reflective of Lewis's works.

The first entry in the *Minnesota Diary* is dated April 8, 1942, the last, March 11, 1946; however, Lewis's narrative is devoted almost entirely to the years 1942 (135 pages) and 1944 (46 pages), the remaining years receiving together just 14 pages. There are (increasingly) large gaps in the *Diary*, since only days spent in Minnesota are recorded, raising questions about the seriousness of his commitment to the state where, he wrote Marcella Powers, he was determined to spend the

The Education of the Eye *continued on page 4*

# TWO NOTES TO A LOW DISHONEST DECADE: SINCLAIR LEWIS'S *IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE* AND SAUL BELLOW'S "THE HELL IT CAN'T"

Roger Forseth  
University of Wisconsin-Superior

"The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime."

—Lord Grey of Falloodon, 3 August 1914

"I sit in one of the dives / On Fifty-second Street / Uncertain and afraid / As clever hopes expire / Of a low dishonest decade."

—W. H. Auden, *September 1, 1939*

On October 21, 1935, Sinclair Lewis published *It Can't Happen Here*, his novel about a populist demagogue capturing America's government from an indifferent populace. Less than four months later, on February 19, 1936, Saul Bellow's first published (and never reprinted) short story "The Hell It Can't," an account of a man seized and tortured by the police for no apparent reason, appeared in *The Daily Northwestern*, the student newspaper of Northwestern University.<sup>1</sup> That Bellow, at the time a 20-year-old Northwestern junior, responded so quickly to Lewis's novel with his depiction of precisely how it can happen here, is surely a reflection of the political and ideological anxiety and turmoil of the decade that began with the Great Depression and ended with the opening of World War II.

Saul Bellow took his title from an exchange in Sinclair Lewis's novel:

"Didn't Hitler save Germany from the Red Plague of Marxism? I got cousins there. I know!"

"Hm," said Doremus [...]. "Cure the evils of Democracy by the evils of Fascism! Funny therapeutics." [...]

"[...] [M]ight be a good thing to have a strong man in the saddle, but—it just can't happen here in America."

And it seemed to Doremus that the softly moving lips of the Reverend Mr. Falck were framing, "The hell it can't!"<sup>2</sup>

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## The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter

The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter is published twice a year with help from the Publications Unit of the English Department at Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-4240

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## CALL FOR PAPERS

For more information on the American Literature Association, visit their web site, [www.americanliterature.org](http://www.americanliterature.org).

The Sinclair Lewis Society will be sponsoring a panel at the American Literature Association Annual Conference to be held May 30 through June 2, 2002 at the Hyatt Regency Long Beach, 200 Pine Avenue, Long Beach, California. The Society is interested in papers on aspects of Lewis's life and work including the new biography by Richard Lingeman. Please send an abstract by January 15, 2002 to Fred Betz, President, Sinclair Lewis Society, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901, e-mail, [fbetz@siu.edu](mailto:fbetz@siu.edu).

The Education of the Eye *continued from page 2*

rest of his life.<sup>2</sup> One notices, additionally, that the 1942 sections of the *Diary* are more energized and positive than those in the years that follow: his enthusiasm for the enterprise of going home waned as time went by; and in the end it was perhaps an illusion that this most restless of men, unlike his beloved Thoreau, would at last settle down.<sup>3</sup>

When Lewis returned to Minnesota in 1942, he lived in the Twin Cities area, frequently changing rented residences and motoring about extensively. This constant movement, combined with residing in a metropolitan area, allowed him to have it both ways: to be *really* home yet not in fact staying put. For instance, in just "5 noble days" he travels "1273" miles through Minnesota and the Dakotas, giving wonderfully detailed descriptions in an account that takes up more than a tenth of the entire *Diary* (61-78). We are treated, among other things, to an extensive list of names on graveyard headstones; acute topographical observations ("The point keeps recurring of education of eye to see this land. After the flat W of Fergus, how important seem low hills"); "GIRLS IN SLACKS" (a phenomenon he mentions at least nine times); and highway advertisements ("Another BURMA [Shave] sign—a chapter out of Babbitt: When Junior takes / Your ties and car / It's time to buy / Another jar"). Finally, the joys of Midwestern cuisine are not neglected:

At Linton, N. Dak., stopping for lunch, I naively order rare roast beef. That beef has been in the oven for days, and it's like chips. Plus radio, doors that

#### SHORT STATEMENT BY JAMES HUTCHISSON

Since publishing "Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser: New Letters and a Reexamination of Their Relationship," *American Literary Realism* 32.1 (Fall 1999): 69-81, I have received new information that calls into question the authenticity and provenance of the letters reprinted therein. I must therefore ask scholars to discount this essay until the matter can be settled definitively. My apologies to anyone whose research may be disrupted by this unwelcome news.

James M. Hutchisson  
Department of English  
The Citadel

crashes shut every time some one comes in, bawling radio, waitress girl [...] has tinted fingernails and tries to give me gravy-covered fork, used vainly on the roast beef, for the decayed raisin pie. (72-73)

Babbitt indeed!

In an important way, the *Diary* seems designed to educate Marcella Powers, Lewis's protégé-mistress-friend. A substantial percentage of the text consists of carbons of letters sent to her, and one wonders if other entries, including the precise weather reports, weren't included with her in mind; as though Lewis were preparing her also for permanent Minnesota residence ("I am enclosing some carbon copies of my Minnesota Diary which you may want just to glance through" [183]). Marcella visited Lewis in Minnesota in 1942, 1944, and 1945, and the differences in mood between the earlier and the later occasions are marked. Her first visit was by all appearances a joyous one, the host expansively conducting a tour of his home state. By 1944, however, the relationship had clearly changed, Marcella having put a considerable emotional distance between them.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Marcella's mother, having again accompanied her daughter, stayed on in 1945 to manage the new home in Duluth ("DULUTH AT LAST!!!!!" [179]).

Lewis purchased a fine mansion in the East Duluth Hillside with a magnificent view of Lake Superior and threw himself into the social life of the city. He had published *Gideon Planish* (1943), was writing *Cass Timberlane* (1945), and began planning *Kingsblood Royal* (1947—all dedicated to Marcella), and for a while he gave signs of permanently settling down. He became involved in interior decoration, the local literary life, and explored the local terrain—all, by his own account, accomplished in a state of complete sobriety<sup>5</sup>:

Then yesterday I had another of the trips which are beginning to make me love Duluth—as I do a number of places in New England and England and Italy; far more that I ever did Minneapolis. (203)

Yet, for all the at times frenetic social, and domestic activity of his Duluth life, Lewis's legendary restlessness began once more to assert itself. As he settled into his new home and responded to the marvelously varied

The Education of the Eye *continued on page 6*

## POE IN LEWIS

Martin Bucco  
Colorado State University

Among the many writers whom Lewis evoked in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1930 was Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)—not Poe the alert magazinist but Poe the outcast genius, one of the “men alone and despised, berated by the New Humanists of their generation” (“American Fear” 15).

Lewis later confessed in “Rambling Thoughts on Literature as a Business” that he and other successful authors have received so much more money and praise than they deserve “that if we were to run into Poe in the club, and he were to scoff, ‘I hear you’re doing very well, my lad!’ we would blush distressingly, in memory of his struggles” (194). At least part of the struggler’s greatness Lewis attributed, in the sketch “I’m an Old Newspaperman Myself,” to more than a few “drops of the tramp” (88).

But for the deadbeat expatriate *symbolistes* tethered to Latin Quarter cafés, the highly professional Lewis felt no distress. His article “Mr. Eglantine” pokes fun at all the bohemian geniuses who over the past ten years have brought forth a hundred lines of free verse apropos their non-objective play about Edgar Allan Poe (290).

Lewis first met the type not in Paris but in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey—at Upton Sinclair’s short-lived experiment in communal living at Helicon Hall. In one of his early journalistic pieces, “Two Yale Men in Utopia,” young Lewis reports that one morning he had to take over the chores of the suddenly departed scullion, “a Tennessee lawyer and Poe critic” (62).

Besides these allusions to Poe scattered in his non-fiction, Lewis mentions the author in five of his novels. Not James Russell Lowell, one of the New Humanists of Poe’s generation (who judged Poe “two fifths sheer fudge”), but another Lowell—Lewis’s monologist Lowell T. Schmaltz in *The Man Who Knew Coolidge* (1928)—grotesquely brags that he yields to no one in his admiration for the America of Lincoln, Emerson, Hawthorne, and Poe. But if Poe were alive today, salesman Schmaltz sees him “as one of the leading writers for the *Red Book*” (256). This popular and well-paying women’s magazine bought a number of Lewis’s stories as well as the highly excited

serial version of Lewis’s most Poesque novel, *Ann Vickers* (1933).

Here we encounter Dr. Arthur Sorella, Lewis’s forlorn Poe look-alike (338). Recalling the famous Poe daguerreotype—the pallid face, the luminous eyes, the raven locks—the reader watched the tormented and alcoholic prison doctor, a ghost in the corridors, compassionately slipping poison to Copperhead Gap inmates on Death Row. Blackmailed and discredited, Sorella himself ends it all with a dose of venom (358).

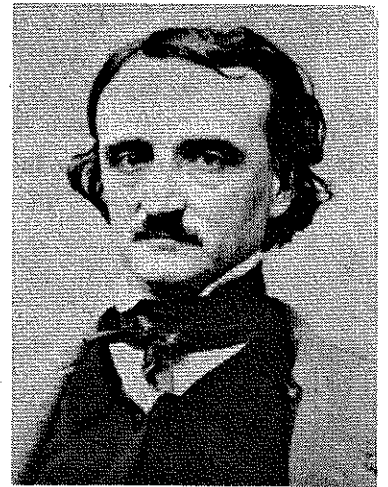
For the sake of dungeons, rats, and putrefaction, many an adolescent will endure Poe’s jeweled style and Gothic décor, and boy of letters Ora Weagle in *Work of Art* (1934) is no exception, although later in the novel Lewis tells us that the hack writer and his mistress had only “a little memory” of Poe from public school (188). No mention even of the ubiquitous “onomatopoeia” here, but in the historical *The God-Seeker* (1949), Lewis’s boyishly Byronic Aaron Gadd likes to sound Poe’s thumping numbers (26).

Finally, Lewis’s good American abroad in *World So Wide* (1951), Hayden Chart, mindful of Poe’s fictional ratiocination, wonders if all between beautiful Olivia Lomond and brazen Lorenzo Lundsgard is innocent: “There are things other than purloined letters that are artfully concealed by exposing them” (172).

Thus we find in our first literary Nobelist a few tell-tale traces of our perdurable Poe. ✍

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Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)

The Education of the Eye *continued from page 4*

view of the Lake, he became increasingly impatient with the human element: "Is it only as one grows older that he loves 'scenery'—an escape from human involvements" (134).

Killough points out that the *Diary* is almost oddly free of references to the world outside of the state. The War is only occasionally mentioned and then, often as not, involving the inconveniences of rationing. The social whirl and its demands began to bore and irritate him. His references to family are sporadic. His former wives and his Minnesota relatives receive, for the most part, only passing notice. When his twelve-year-old son Michael and his friend David visit, the experience is not a totally happy one. Lewis takes them up the north shore of Lake Superior to camp and fish:

I am badly trained as a parent; conversation of both Micky and David wears me out. [...] No questions for Mick [...]. He lectures without stop on How Indians blaze trails, How much Chinese coolies are paid, how tiresome it is to see Coco-Cola signs along the road (this with a Lucius Beebe sneer) [...] Mick talks as much as either his father or mother, which Christ knows is twice too much. (140)

The death in the war of his son Wells (29 October 1944) is not mentioned, though in fairness it occurred when he was absent from Minnesota. And the stark notice of the death of his brother Fred provides another occasion to discuss the weather ("January 19 [1946] to Sauk Centre, Fred's funeral; starts snowing at noon" [226]). (Fifteen years later, almost to the day, Fred's brother would join him in the Lewis family cemetery plot.) Two months later Lewis left Duluth—and Minnesota—for good.

I came away from the *Minnesota Diary* with admiration and sympathy for Lewis and his attempt—unsuccessful though in the end it was—to make a new life for himself. He gave up drink, in public at least (for the alcoholic itself, an act of courage and a test of character), and in the beginning of the last decade of his life, he experienced a marked creative surge. The fact that during this time he created *Cass Timberlane* and *Kingsblood Royal*, among his most popular works, novels that are just now receiving renewed critical attention, is ample evidence that the Minnesota return was no failure.

And, of course, we now have the *Minnesota Diary* in a text worthy of a major American author, An Approved Edition by the Committee on Scholarly Editions of the Modern Language Association. George Killough's superb introduction and exhaustive explanatory and textual notes insure that this task will never have to be repeated. Though we have, now, modern editions of several of the novels, issued by the Library of America and the University of Nebraska Press, no scholarly editions of the novels have appeared, as have for example, those of Theodore Dreiser and Scott Fitzgerald. Also, it seems to me, it is time for a comprehensive collection of the letters now in the various archives, especially those at St. Cloud State, Yale, and Syracuse Universities and at the Minnesota Historical Society. But in the meantime we have this edition. Be Happy. ✍

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 68, 69. Spelling and other irregularities in the quotations, where they occur, are in the original text.

<sup>2</sup> "I shall *never* leave Minnesota. You [Marcella] might as well make up your mind to coming out here at least twelve (12) times every year" (12).

<sup>3</sup> See Killough, "Thoreau." John Koblas ironically finds Lewis "home at last": buried in the Sauk Centre cemetery.

<sup>4</sup> This change is also reflected in Lewis's letters to Marcella, now in the Sinclair Lewis Archive, St. Cloud (MN) State University. For a bibliographical description of this collection, see Forseth, "Archives II."

<sup>5</sup> "Mark drank Bourbon (and I the old vintage soda)" (200); "The Boys had a great many Bourbon and sodas and poor Mr. Lewis drank ginger ale" (205); "...and more damn ginger ale" (207). These entries are in Marcella's carbons. It's possible he was protesting too much. Though he was publicly on the wagon during the period of the *Diary*, there is evidence of secret drinking. See Killough's "Introduction," 9-10, 23.

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# STANDARDIZATION AND CONFORMITY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF SINCLAIR LEWIS'S *BABBITT*

Lucy Zhang

Yangzhou University, Yangzhou, Jiangsu, China

Sinclair Lewis published *Babbitt* in 1922, and it was one of his masterpieces. It is generally believed that it was *Babbitt* that won Lewis the Nobel Prize.

*Babbitt* is a novel which shows a cross section of American middle class life through the eyes of the conformist, George F. Babbitt. Also, it depicts the complacency and materialism of the protagonist Babbitt, a real-estate agent and representative middle-class family man from Zenith, a Midwestern city. He tries to spite convention, conformity, and smugness of middle class life by pursuing liberalism and sexual freedom, but he soon finds the price of nonconformity too great and resigns himself to conventions. Finally, he hopes that his son might challenge the forces he himself has compromised with. This novel criticizes bourgeois materialism and satirizes the standardization and conformity of life in a business culture and the suppression of moral conscience under the burden of middle class customs. No one captured American life as truly as Lewis did.

## A. BABBITT, THE STANDARDIZED CITIZEN AND CONFORMIST

In *Babbitt*, using the example of Zenith, Sinclair Lewis first attacked the social phenomena in America—standardization and conformity. All rules and morality are standardized. Everyone should conform, thus becoming standardized citizens. In this way, they become a herd of brainless men, losing their individuality:

Having no guide, no standard, in themselves, they are driven to adopting the standards and the ideas of the herd. Their only existence is the pack—naturally they fight for their tribal taboos with the ferocity of savages. It is impossible that they should be anything but standardized and uniform, since the wellsprings of individuality have gone dry in them. (Whipple 74)

Sinclair Lewis made Babbitt the representative of the standardized citizen. In most chapters, Babbitt is described as a complete standardized citizen and conformist. He must conform and demonstrate a hatred of “Bohemians.” At the same time, he must work hard and earn a lot of money in order to be a standardized businessman. He must be the standardized father too, loyal to his wife and loving to his kids. Even his private belongings are standardized, confirming his identity as a successful businessman. Also, he is a conformist. He has no creative ideas or special thoughts. If another person did not give him suggestions or opinions, he would lose his talent for giving speeches. His political opinions are popular ideas which are accepted widely by the middle class. Because all his actions and behavior cannot be separated from others, his fame and career link him tightly to others. Babbitt identifies himself through his job, affiliations, and acquaintances. He aligns himself with the dominant ideology so as to be in the “in group.” Babbitt’s interaction with his peers promotes a clubby atmosphere and sense of belonging. His connection to the “goodfellas” and the athletic club creates a bond among the group and nurtures a loyalty that carried over into the business world. “Of a decent man in Zenith, it was required that he should belong to one, preferably two or three, of the innumerable ‘lodges’ and prosperity-boosting lunch clubs [...]. It was the thing to do. It was good for business, since lodge-brothers frequently became customers” (Lewis 203).

Babbitt “boosts” his friends and they support him in return. They elect him vice president of the Boosters’ Club and recommend him for delivering the Annual Address for the Zenith Real Estate Board. This makes Babbitt win a lot of fame. However, Lewis also suggests that social sanctioning has concrete consequences. Babbitt quickly learns that membership and recognition in societies like the “Boosters’ Club” and the “Zenith Athletic Club” are

——— Standardization and Conformity... continued on page 15

Two Notes... continued from page 3

Bellow's brief story—a 1300-word third-person monologue<sup>3</sup>—opens with a series of short, ominous sentences:

During the night the bell sounded. Henry [Howland], waking instantly, knew who it was. He heard the concerted clumping of the boots, the door hinge, scuffing against the wall. The chain of the hall lamp batted on the shade with a clinking, clear noise. He pulled himself free of the quilt and sat up trembling slightly. As soon as the door came open he grasped the lower panel of the bed and climbed out [...].

"Get dressed," said the man in the lead.

"What for?" But he need not have asked; he understood why. (5)

Henry's fate for all practical purposes is sealed here for the rest of the story, paradoxically joining a helpless inevitability with a terrible matter-of-factness, is a portrayal of a man on his way to his doom. Henry "drew on his damp clothes. [...] Was he so badly scared? [...] Just nervous. [...] He was almost relieved that they had caught him at last" (5).

In short order Henry is marched "down the long familiar street which was viscous, black and wet. [...] The street was as busy as at midday with new, hysterical activity. [...] They passed Gilbert's drug store. He saw the curtain waver in the apartment upstairs. He looked eagerly but no face appeared. [...] He hated the thought of disappearing so anonymously." The soldiers are everywhere, "sulky, hulking under large masses of khaki." Henry utters a prayer: "God. Is there no-one I know?" (5).

And then, as though viewing Eliot's Waste Land through the eyes of Kafka, Henry sees:

[a] woman burst yelling out of an areaway running into the rain, running heavily in the dark. The saloons were full and noisy with men lumped over the bars singing, "O, it won't be long till we're there, la-de-da." There? Where was that? London, Lisbon, Rome. (5)

Now Henry has become, in his mind, the innocent doomed by an "idiot force [...] that ran you down wherever you were." A momentary sense of false hope enters his mind, formed from Scripture: "Maybe they'd admire his nerve and let him go. Tender Mercy."<sup>4</sup> But the "men marched behind and before, their faces like slag" (8).

Shortly, they "began roughing him. [...] He felt a fist strike his cheek, shredding the skin," followed by the lash: "The whip howled over his head. The men beat him steadily, grimly, taking turns." In his agony and confusion, Henry "saw with a dry heart the tenuous red tracks running criss-cross"; and at that moment it comes to him: "He was five blocks from home." This—the final sentence of the story—in its stark simplicity is Bellow's mordant answer to "it just can't happen here in America" (8).<sup>5</sup>

Though at times cryptic, the meaning of "The Hell It Can't" is clear: it is a brief gloss on the Total State, an advertisement, as it were of 1984 written in 1935. In his recent memoir, *It All Adds Up*, Saul Bellow recalled:

In college (1933) I was a Trotskyist. Trotsky instilled into his young followers the orthodoxy peculiar to the defeated and ousted. We belonged to the movement, we were faithful to Leninism and could expound its historical lessons and describe Stalin's crimes. My closest friends

Two Notes... continued on page 10

Poe in Lewis continued from page 5

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## THE MICE: LEWIS STORY BECOMES A MUSICAL

Sally E. Parry  
Illinois State University

The Mice, a musical one act play inspired by Sinclair Lewis's writing, was very successfully done in November 2000 in Philadelphia with two other one acts under the title *3hree*. *The Mice*, by Laurence O'Keefe, Nell Benjamin, and Julia Jordan, and directed by Brad Rouse, is listed on the CD as being inspired by a short story by Lewis.

The play is set in Chippewa Falls, Minnesota in 1947. The plot concerns Virga Vay, an unhappily married woman, and her lover, Allan, an exterminator who is also unhappily married. In order for them to meet, Virga has collected a group of mice that she lets out in a person's house. The person calls Allan, Virga comes to collect the mice, and they have a brief romantic encounter while the exterminator's poisons are supposedly doing their work. After Allan's wife catches them in a romantic rendezvous, she tells them that she is moving Allan to California. In despair, Allan and Virga set up the poison canisters, inhale deeply, and their souls dance away as their bodies are found. Despite the ending, the play is very funny and includes the numbers, "Mice!," "Two Hours Here," and "If You'd Be Mine."

Knowing that Lewis did not write a short story called "The Mice," I did some investigation and discovered it's actually loosely based on an interchapter called "Virga Vay and Allan Cedar" in *Cass Timberlane* (285-91). The unhappily married lovers' plot is similar although Allan's occupation in the book is a dentist. They meet at random times and through the town's

little theater group. When Allan's wife threatens to move to California, Allan and Virga have one romantic weekend and then try to commit suicide by piping carbon monoxide into their car. I'm not sure whether Lewis's ending is happier or not. Allan's wife finds them before they die, Virga gets divorced and moves to Des Moines, and Allan is stuck with his wife.

The show has since been done successfully in California, although as David Lefkowitz writes ("*3hree* Likely to See Regional Life, but NYC Plans Still Cloudy" for Playbill.com, July 31, 2001) a Broadway run is not planned at present. Harold Prince, director of such shows as *Evita*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Phantom of the Opera*, is the producer for the show and directed another of *3hree's* musicals, *The Flight of the Lawnchair Man*, a comic look at man's desire to fly. Robert Lindsay Nassif and Peter Ullian wrote this musical, about an average fellow who hopes to soar by attaching hot air balloons to his lawnchair. The third musical in this group is *Lavender Girl*, with music and lyrics by John Bucchino and book by James Waedekin. It's a ghost story directed by Scott Schwartz who directed Broadway's *Jane Eyre*.

*3hree* is available from <http://www.drgrecords.com>. ☞



CD recording cover of *3hree*



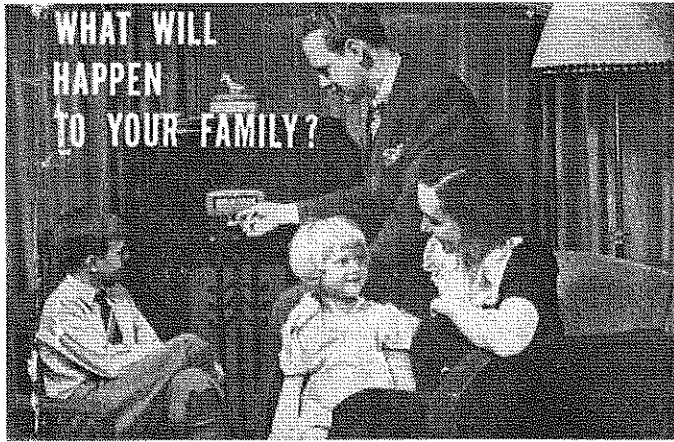
Contact *The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*  
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<http://lilt.ilstu.edu//separry/newsletter.htm>



and I, however, were not activists; we were writers. (100)

But these are reflections that gain objectivity through distance, through time: In the white-hot politics of the Thirties, there was little more than a rush of confusing events, and one remembers how desperate the future looked at that time. Bellow's friend the poet Delmore Schwartz said that their youth was shadowed by "the days of Munich, and the slow, loud, ticking imminence of a new war" (348). The loud ticking that Bellow heard in the fall of 1935 was quite specifically triggered not only by the menace of current events but by the shock of reading Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*.



Cover of *It Can't Happen Here* (Triangle Books, 1935)

That novel, years after its publication, still has the impact of a hammer. It is a powerful dystopia on a level with his very best work. In 1935, however, it must be said that a conspiracy of reviewers concluded that Lewis—after several of his works failed in their estimation to achieve Nobel stature—had gone soft. The book is a tour de force, they decided, a cause *célèbre*, propaganda; it "is a weapon of intellect rather than a novel" since "Lewis has always been a publicist in fiction" (Blackmur 516); it is "journalistic fiction" (Brickell 543). And since to the Left-Intelligentsia Lewis's political philosophy amounted to little more than dime-store liberalism, the intricate drama of ideas that is the book was either trivialized or missed entirely.<sup>6</sup> Even subsequent writers, who granted the novel a measure of merit, found it convenient to echo Mark Schorer's judgment that "*It Can't Happen Here* would never have been written if Sinclair Lewis had not been married to Dorothy Thompson" (608).<sup>7</sup> The conventional critical opinion, then,

is that the book and its immediate and huge success was a trick, a stroke of luck principally owing to Huey Long having obligingly gotten himself assassinated the month before its publication.

Such views, I believe, do not in any way reflect the effect that *It Can't Happen Here* had on the young Saul Bellow attempting to make some sense of the darkening scene. Indeed, it behooves us to remind ourselves now of the forebodings that people had at that time in order to gauge the impact of Lewis's novel on the future novelist. My own recollection of the events leading up to World War II—those of us of a certain age have this dubious opportunity—was the emotional shock induced by the reading of *Berlin Diary* by William Shirer. Published in 1941, Shirer's day-by-day narrative covering the years from 1934 to 1941 grimly particularized the rise of Hitler and totalitarianism. A sharply compelling indictment of the early Third Reich, it demolished for many the hope that there could be "Peace in Our Time." To give but one entry, Shirer wrote on September 2, 1934:

In the throes of a severe case of depression. I miss the old Berlin of the Republic, the care-free, emancipated, civilized air, the snub-nosed young women with short-bobbed hair and the young men with either cropped or long hair—it made no difference—who sat up all night with you and discussed anything with intelligence and passion. The constant *Heil Hitler*'s, clicking of heels, and brown-shirted storm troopers or black-coated S.S. guards marching up and down the street grate me, though old-timers say there are not nearly so many brown-shirts about since the purge. Gillie, former *Morning Post* correspondent here and now stationed in Paris, is, perversely, spending part of his vacation here. We've had some walks and twice have had to duck into stores to keep from either having to salute the standard of some passing S. A. or S. S. battalion or facing the probability of getting beaten up for not doing so. Day before yesterday Gillie took me to lunch at a pub in the lower part of the Friedrichstrasse. Coming back he pointed out a building where a year ago for days on end, he said, you could hear the yells of the Jews being tortured. (12-13)

This account of the casual, thuggish violence of the storm troopers exposes jackboot life under National Socialism.

In an incident in *It Can't Happen Here* strikingly similar in its brutality to that described by Shirer, the novelist almost uncannily echoes the account of the reporter. At

## A POSSIBLE ANSWER TO D.S.S.D.M.Y.P.D.F.

There has been some discussion as to what Lewis meant by the mysterious inscription on a piece of paper that George Babbitt keeps in his pocket. An anonymous commentator, IGNOTO, in the July 6, 1940 *Notes and Queries*, speculated that it meant "Do see somebody (or sell satisfactorily); do make

your presence definitely felt" (11). So the list may have been Babbitt's version of a pep talk. IGNOTO also suggests that if the reader doesn't want to accept this answer, then it might be the watchword to some secret society to which Babbitt belongs.

Two Notes... continued from page 10

one point in the novel, after the Huey Long-like rabble-rouser Senator "Buzz" Windrip has obtained despotic power, his "Commander," Effingham Swan (an "aristocratic Harvard graduate"), sits in judgment of Doremus Jessup's angry son-in-law, Dr. Fowler Greenhill. Summary justice follows:

"I've just come here to tell you that I've had enough—everybody's had enough—of your kidnaping Mr. Jessup—the most honest and useful man in the whole Beulah Valley! Typical low-down sneaking kidnapers! If you think your phony Rhodes-Scholar accent keeps you from being just another cowardly, murdering Public Enemy, in your toy-soldier uniform—"

Swan held up his hand in his most genteel Back Bay manner. "A moment, Doctor, if you will be so good?" And to Shad: "I should think we'd heard enough from the Comrade, wouldn't you, Commissioner? Just take the bastard out and shoot him." (235-36)

So much for Due Process. In these passages both the diarist and the novelist vividly capture the almost whimsical political terrorism of institutional lawlessness—and how utterly helpless the ordinary citizen is when caught up in it.

But the story Lewis tells in *It Can't Happen Here* is above all the story of Doremus Jessup, the small-town Vermont editor of the Fort Beulah *Daily Informer*. The triumph of Doremus, that most unlikely of heroes, is his embodiment—intellectually and morally—of "The Vital Center" years before Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s celebrated manifesto on the "Politics of American Freedom." Doremus is the classic Jeffersonian Liberal, the defender of the individual against the state in the face of the ideologists and the demagogues of the Right and of the Left.

In the beginning Doremus can't bring himself to take seriously what he sarcastically termed Windrip's "Revolution in terms of Rotary" (100). And even after the danger signals were plain to see, he was inclined to subvert alarm with denial:

Doremus went on his lawful occasions past the red-brick Georgian houses, the slender spires of old white churches facing the Green, as he heard the lazy irony of familiar greetings from his acquaintances, men as enduring as their Vermont hills, it seemed to him that the madness in the capital was as alien and distant and unimportant as an earthquake in Tibet.

Constantly, in the *Informer*, he criticized the government but not too acidly.

The hysteria can't last; be patient, and wait and see, he counseled his readers.

It was not that he was afraid of the authorities. He simply did not believe that this comic tyranny could endure. *It can't happen here*, said even Doremus—even now. (171)

His complacency, however, was soon to be overwhelmed by a *Walpurgisnacht*, or, as he put it, "I've been kicked into reality" (224-25). The "comic tyranny" not only endured; it had metastasized. Yet even in the face of overwhelming power, the stoicism and spirit of the individual prevails. After imprisonment and torture, Doremus escapes, joins the underground, witnesses the tide turn against tyranny, followed by the promise of ultimate victory: "And still Doremus goes on in the red sunrise, for a Doremus Jessup can never die" (458). The triumphalism of this, the final sentence of the novel, is saved from sentimentality, for it is clear that the ordeal and the struggle of Doremus are far from over; indeed, the message is that for the

Two Notes... continued on page 12

freeborn, individual liberty will never be suppressed just as it may never be fully achieved.

Perry Meisel has rightly observed that "*It Can't Happen Here* is an aesthetic breakthrough for Lewis because his novel shows us the real relation between politics and literature" (9). This is a relationship that at its best forms a barrier against both propaganda and abstract ideology. Time and again we see Doremus, the disinterested, cynical journalist, doing his best to remain apart from the political chaos that is slowly disordering his life, and then immersing himself in that chaos in order simply to survive. And the manner of his surviving, in both body and mind, is a richly ironic double vision required for his existence: the only way for Doremus the reflective individual to become a political activist without selling out truth is to use his civilized, ironical imagination to subvert the corrupting ideology of tyrannical power.

Last year Saul Bellow wrote: "A long time ago, when I was a teenager, I liked to think of myself as a future historian of culture" ("The Next Chapter" 36). With his very first published story, Bellow began for himself that cultural history with his gloss on Lewis's novel. Indeed, I can't think of two writers who contributed more to the narrative of what has been called the American Century than have Saul Bellow and Sinclair Lewis. And as a part of that narrative the fates of Doremus Jessup in *It Can't Happen Here* and Henry Howland in "The Hell It Can't" serve to remind us once again of that unfortunate time "where," as Thomas Hobbes put it, "every man is Enemy to every man" (168). *ES*

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Pages 5 and 8. The following "Editor's Note" appears on page 5: "Mr. Bellow's story, 'The Hell It Can't,' was awarded third prize in The Campus In Print Story Contest, held the latter part of last semester [Fall 1935] and judged by Professors Frederick, Smith, and Wright." Bibliographies of Bellow (e.g., Nault) consistently list "Two Morning Monologues" (1941) as his first published story. I wish to thank Patrick M. Quinn, University Archivist, Northwestern University, for his generous aid in obtaining a true copy of "The Hell It Can't."

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, 22-23. See also page 21.

<sup>3</sup> "Only a portion of Bellow's short fiction has seemed to him worthy of reprinting. Undoubtedly some of it is apprentice work. But those early fictions, several not available in collected form, indicate the

nature of the whole body of his short fiction. A remarkable number of the stories in the year 1941 [...] are monologues" (Stevick 73).

<sup>4</sup> Compare: "Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring on high hath visited us" (Luke 1:78). See also James 5.11.

<sup>5</sup> Since this essay was written, James Atlas's biography of Bellow has been published. Atlas comments briefly on "The Hell It Can't," noting (as I have) the influence of Kafka and Trotsky (51-52). Other than that of Atlas, I know of no other published reference to Bellow's story.

<sup>6</sup> Notable exceptions to the conventional wisdom were the reviews of John Middleton Murry and Clifton Fadiman.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Tanner 59; Kurth 204.

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## THE WOOLWORTH CONNECTION: SINCLAIR LEWIS, C. S. LEWIS, AND JOHN UPDIKE

By Kathryn Lindskoog

(Kathryn Lindskoog has allowed the newsletter to summarize her article on the Woolworth Building and its connections with the two Lewises and Updike. The essay is one of 23 in *Surprised by C. S. Lewis, George MacDonald, and Dante: An Array of Original Discoveries* (Mercer UP, 2001). For more information on her writing and some gorgeous pictures of the Woolworth Building, see her web site, [www.lindentree.org](http://www.lindentree.org).)

A hidden chain of events links three early twentieth-century cultural landmarks: one building and two books. First came the “cathedral” that was the loftiest building in the world; second came a down-to-earth international bestseller that mocked the famous evangelist Billy Sunday (calling him Mike Monday); and third came the story of C. S. Lewis’s personal pilgrimage.

“The scenario begins in 1879, when Frank Winfield Woolworth opened his first store. In just thirty years, his small business had exploded into a chain of five-and-ten-cent stores that became the largest retail business in the world. Mr. Woolworth was now an extremely wealthy man, and in 1910, he decided to erect a magnificent office building in New York City for five million dollars. As construction proceeded, Woolworth’s plans expanded; and in the end he erected the tallest building in the world at a cost of thirteen and a half million dollars, fully paid for from his personal fortune.

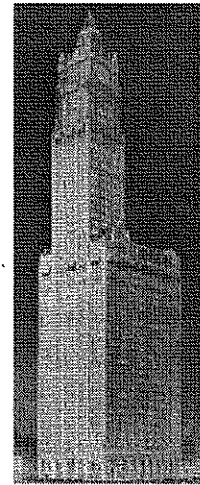
“The result was a modern skyscraper clad in fifteenth-century gothic splendor. An admirer from England declared, ‘The Woolworth Building does not scrape the sky; it greets the sky.’ In addition to its elaborate tower, observation gallery, lace-like tracery, Italian marble, graceful arches, splendid mosaics, vaulted ceilings, grand arcade and opulent balconies, the building boasted gargoyle portraits of its engineer, rental agent, and bank president. In 1913, one year after the sinking of the Titanic, President

Wilson pressed a button in the White House that switched on 80,000 lights in the Woolworth Building for its grand opening.

“When that spectacular event occurred, twenty-eight-year old Sinclair Lewis was an aspiring writer from Minnesota who had been working at a New York house for five weeks. So far, his only published story was a story for Tom Graham. However, he had launched a series of minor novels. His wildest dreams came true in 1920, when he published *Main Street*; it sold a million copies and became an international sensation. In 1922 he published *Babbitt*, and it was another spectacular success, especially in Europe; in fact, he considered it the book that would guarantee his lasting reputation. [...]

“*Babbitt* opens with a reference to some towers ‘delicate as silver rods. They were neither citadels nor churches, but frankly and beautifully office-buildings.’ [...] In my opinion Zenith’s Second National Tower is an allusion to what was then the nation’s first tower, the celebrated Woolworth Building.

“At the end of the first chapter, George Babbitt contemplated the Second National Tower from his bedroom window. ‘Its shining walls rose against April sky to a simple cornice like a streak of white fire. Integrity was in the tower, and decision. It bore its strength lightly as a tall soldier. As Babbitt stared,



The Woolworth Building

—————The Woolworth Connection... continued on page 14

The Woolworth Connection... continued from page 13

the nervousness was soothed from his face, his slack chin lifted in reverence. [...] He beheld the tower as a temple-spire of the religion of business, a faith passionate, exalted, surpassing common men...' Inspired, Babbitt turned away and whistled a popular song as if it were a noble hymn.

"Where did Sinclair Lewis get the idea of people worshipping business and of great office buildings serving as temples of this new religion?" Lindskoog notes that four years before Lewis published *Babbitt*, Edwin A. Cochran and S. Parkes Cadman wrote a lavish promotional booklet called *The Cathedral of Commerce*. The expansive language in it is similar in some ways to the opening of *Babbitt*. The description of Manhattan office buildings is quite effusive:

Here, on the Island of Manhattan, and at its southern extremity, stands a succession of buildings without precedent or peer. The vision of their grandiose effect from the Brooklyn Bridge at dusk, when the gathering darkness softens their bold outlines, and every one of the numberless windows coruscates with radiance, is beyond the brush of Turner to paint or the eloquence of Ruskin to describe. It outvies the imagination in its most fertile moments. Of these buildings the Woolworth is Queen, acknowledged as premier by all lovers of the city and the commonwealth, by critics from

near and far, by those who aspire toward perfection, and by those who use visible things to attain it. When seen at nightfall bathed in electric light as with a garment, or in the lucid air of a summer morning, piercing space like a battlement of the paradise of God which St. John beheld, it inspires feelings too deep even for tears. The writer looked upon it and at once cried out, "The Cathedral of Commerce"—the chosen habitation of that spirit in man, which, through means of change and barter, binds alien people into unity and peace, and reduces the hazards of war and bloodshed.

Lindskoog compares these passages and contends that Lewis "ironically mocks not only the romanticized veneration of commerce, but also the romanticized awe of technology" with his discussions of Babbitt's love for gadgets and most especially his motor car.

Later in the essay she notes that C. S. Lewis made "playful allusions" to *Babbitt* in *The Pilgrim's Regress* with "a brash, slangy American named Gus Halfways" whose love for his car rivals Babbitt's. Halfways says of his automobile, "'Our fathers made images of what they called gods and goddesses [...]. All self-deception and phallic sentiment. But here you have real art.' [...] 'Also' (and here he dropped his voice) 'very expensive indeed.'"

Lindskoog also notes an odd coincidence. In the seventh chapter of *Babbitt*, there is a minor character named Horace Updike, who had just attended a lecture by an eminent novelist. Ten years after "the manifestation of this fictional Updike, a real Updike was born who was destined to be an eminent novelist in the last half of the twentieth century, as Sinclair Lewis was in the first half." And of course one of Updike's best-known characters is Harry Angstrom, a businessman known as Rabbit. In the third novel, *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), which won a Pulitzer Prize, one of the two epigraphs is from *Babbitt*.

Today the Woolworth Building still stands although it is no longer the tallest building in the world and it is now owned by a syndicate rather than the Woolworth Company. There are a number of web sites devoted to it including [http://www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/Woolworth\\_Building.html](http://www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/Woolworth_Building.html) and <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/medny/buttowski/>. ✍

## LEWIS ESTATE CONTACT

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vital to the success of his business. When Babbitt starts taking late night drives with young libertines and showing up at restaurants with women who are not his wife, he elicits dirty looks from club members. The real trouble begins when Babbitt bucks staunch middle-class policies, such as hatred for the labor movement. A colleague informs him, "You've stood in [...] with some of the most substantial and forward-looking interests in town [...] and my papers have given you a lot of boosts. Well, you can't expect decent citizens to go on aiding you if you intend to side with precisely the people who are trying to undermine us" (Lewis 372). Sure enough, when he refuses to join a morality and Americanism league, his business starts to crumble.

### B. PREVALENCE OF MATERIAL STANDARDIZATION IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

Undoubtedly, Lewis was right to believe that what happens in people's minds was more important than what happens to their furniture. But since the change in material conditions preceded the change in attitude, one cannot slight the former. The new physical conveniences did play a large role in mass culture. After the turn of the century, railroads carried goods across country, sewing machines helped create mass produced clothing, and chain stores offered identical inventory. Sinclair Lewis describes the striking differences between a living room of the nineteenth century and one of the nineteen twenties:

It was a room as superior in comfort to the "parlor" of Babbitt's boyhood as his motor was superior to his father's buggy. [...] The fireplace was unsoftened by downy ashes or by sooty brick; the brass fire-irons were of immaculate polish; and the grenadier andirons were like samples in a shop, desolate, unwanted, lifeless things of commerce. [...] nowhere was there a hockey-stick, a torn picture-book, an old cap, or a gregarious and disorganizing dog. (Lewis 92)

Although most homes were not as processed as that of Lewis's hero, the general trend to standardize did affect the designs of houses and other buildings.

Architects had begun to concentrate on uniform and coherent town planning ever since the eighteen-nineties when the city-beautiful movement swept the nation. The movement was inspired by Chicago's rebuilding effort after the devastating 1871 fire, urban development in Boston,

and the exquisite buildings of Chicago's Columbian Exposition. In small cities across the country, community planners replaced crowded, helter-skelter streets with logically planned, expensive avenues lined with greenery, fountains, and marble public buildings. While Greek-inspired architecture or even shiny municipal buildings seem a far cry from Babbitt's sterile living room, the impulse to organize and standardize had begun. As the authors of *The Enduring Vision* argue, the movement also had moral implications, which would be amplified in the coming decades. Proponents of the city-beautiful movement believed that the aesthetic value of the building would combat what they saw as corrupt behavior in the crowded, disorganized immigrant neighborhoods. The move to organize and eliminate interesting irregularities intensified in the years following the Chicago World's Fair. Leading architect Louis Sullivan's call to abandon elaborate Victorian styles and observe the adage "form follows function" helped to change the city-beautiful movement into what might be called the city-functional movement. Planners turned from imitation of classical architecture to a modern, industrialized style based on efficiency and geared towards the middle class.

In *Babbitt*, Zenith is the standardized city:

Zenith [...] has attained a real beauty in its grouped towering skyscrapers, yet wholly by luck and accident, not purpose. And this beauty is only in the large; a closer inspection, though it shows comfort and luxury and even a kind aesthetic striving, reveals this effort at beauty as spurious: from the Old English dining room at the Athletic Club to the sepia photographs on the living room walls in Floral Heights, the taste for art is affected and unreal. The material showiness of Zenith is no improvement over the ugliness of Gopher Prairie, for it is conventional only, and the inhabitants find their truest pleasure in the accumulation of ingenious mechanical contrivances and conveniences. Zenith has arrived at the perfection of a mechanical luxury in which the only flaw is that it is altogether inhuman. (Whipple 72)

The obsession with efficiency was not limited to architects and city planners, but reached middle-class citizens as well. Something as basic as food became the center of a technological whirlwind. Refrigerators, supermarkets, and prepared foods cut hours traditionally spent canning and baking in the kitchen. The new electronic appliances and shopping conveniences certainly eased

household burdens, but also constituted one more way in which daily life was standardized.

Sinclair Lewis makes the point when describing a dinner party that would probably not have been prepared before World War I: "Vecchia was not a caterer, he was The Caterer of Zenith [...] at all nice teas the guests recognized the five kinds of Vecchia sandwiches and the seven kinds of Vecchia cakes; and all really smart dinners ended [...] in Vecchia Neapolitan ice cream in one of the three reliable molds" (Lewis 108-09).

### C. FORMING IDEOLOGICAL CONFORMITY

Besides these phenomena, what is most striking is the incredible concordance of opinions. In *Babbitt*, Sinclair Lewis depicts countless discussions where all of the middle class participants are in perfect agreement. Lewis argues that growing class consciousness and the bourgeoisie's desire to distinguish themselves from the lower echelons naturally create an in-crowd and within it the need to conform. The intense desire for social acceptance is seen when Babbitt's wife sobs after an unsuccessful dinner party, in Babbitt's shameless name-dropping, and in his swelling pride at being mentioned in the newspaper.

Lewis points out that survival in the bureaucratic business world was not just built on hard work and industry, but on conforming to middle-class ideology. Naturally, this ideology was based around business. Lewis illustrates the

ways in which subjects seemingly far removed from economics are influenced by consumer culture. For example, many citizens view business information as the highest form of knowledge and discount liberal arts education as superfluous. Babbitt exhibits this view in his explanation to his son about the value of literature studies:

"I'll tell you why you have to study Shakespeare and those. It's because they're required for college entrance, and that's all there is to it! Personally, I don't see myself why they stuck 'em into an up-to-date high-school system like we have in this state. Be a good deal better if you took Business English, and learned how to write an ad, or letters that would pull." (Lewis 76)

Lewis gives a taste of these programs in the Zenith newspaper advertisement: "The second announced that 'Mr. P.R., formerly making only eighteen a week in a barber shop, writes to us that since taking our course he is now pulling down \$5,000 as an Osteo-vitalic Physician'" (Lewis 83). The programs reflect consumer mentality in a variety of ways. First, they clearly emphasize practical application of knowledge instead of its inherent value. This is a drastic break from Victorian sentiment, which held knowledge as an elite and spiritual quality. Second, the ads show an obsession with quickness or speed. In a society where machines pump out products in record time and one can go to a two-hour movie instead of spending hours on a book, there is an expectation of instant gratification in education as well. Finally, money is the ultimate goal.

Business not only influenced academia, but also touched religion. Lewis suggested that many white Protestants, who were suspicious of alien religions, were interested in church mainly as a means of social membership and business connections. Babbitt certainly does not attend services for their spiritual message, but because he wants to be seen as a moral citizen. Lewis writes:

If you had asked Babbitt what his religion was, he would have answered in sonorous Boosters'-Club rhetoric, "My religion is to serve my fellow men, to honor my brother as myself, and to do my bit to make life happier for one and all." If you had pressed him for more detail, he would have announced, "I'm a member of the Presbyterian Church, and naturally, I accept its doctrines." If you had been so brutal as to go on, he would have protested, "There's no use discussing and arguing about religion; it

## NEW MEMBERS

*The Sinclair Lewis Society wishes to welcome the following new members who joined since the publication of the Spring 2001 newsletter.*

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Covington, LA 70433



## THEATRE WORKS RECORDS *BABBITT*

L.A. Theatre Works is an organization that brings together great actors to record classic and contemporary plays, musicals, docudramas, and novels. The plays they have recorded include Jon Robin Baitz's *Mizlansky/Zilinsky* with Julie Kavner, Nathan Lane, and Richard Masur; John Guare's *The House of Blue Leaves* with Sharon Gless, Ron Leibman, and Jessica Walter; and Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* with James Farentino, Aryn Gross, and Julie Harris.

They have also recorded novels, including *Pride and Prejudice*, *McTeague*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and

*Babbitt*. *Babbitt* is a 14-hour recording starring Edward Asner, Ed Begley, Jr., Bud Cort, Ted Danson, Richard Dreyfuss, Hector Elizondo, Fionnula Flannigan, Julie Harris, Helen Hunt, Amy Irving, Stacy Keach, John Lithgow, Nan Martin, Marsha Mason, Richard Masur, Judge Reinhold, and Ally Sheedy. *Booklist* says that "This lavish recording sets a magnificent standard," and it has been compared to some of the great BBC recordings of classic novels.

*Babbitt* and other recordings can be ordered through <http://www.latw.org/>.

Standardization and Conformity... *continued from page 16*

just stirs up bad feeling." (Lewis 207)

Lewis also described the church as a salesman, trying to edge out competitors or other sects. Babbitt's plan to invigorate the church does not involve more thorough Bible reading or serious religious debate, but concentrates on fund raising and meeting a quota of members. And like any good advertiser, he is willing to smudge the facts to get a buyer. Babbitt suggests, "suppose the week's lesson is about Jacob; well, the press-agent might get in something that would have a fine moral, and yet with a trick headline that'd get folks to read it—say like: *Jake Fools the Old Man; Makes Get-away with Girl and Bankroll*" (Lewis 216). Lewis completes the satire with a minister whose sermons are filled with the language and ethics of business. In short, Lewis argues that even spirituality has been commercialized and standardized.

Religion and education were not the terms that sprang to mind when one thought of commercialization, but as Sinclair Lewis illustrated, each was deeply affected by the mass production of the early twentieth century. However, while Lewis remarked on this material sterility, his main concern was the standardization of American minds. Religion, academia, and even people's speech seem tinged with conveyor-belt efficiency and conformity.

### D. NEGATIVE IMPACT ON THE MIDDLE CLASS'S MENTALITY

Material standardization in the United States led to a kind of homogeneity in ideology and suspicion of anyone who does not conform. Anyone who wanted to get away from it would find that it was impossible. Babbitt and his friends want to get away from it. Does their revolt succeed?

#### A. BABBITT'S DISCONTENTMENT

Sinclair Lewis plants evidence of Babbitt's discontentment that was intended to reveal the interior Babbitt during the account of the first two hours of Babbitt's day. It begins with irritability about the wet towels in the bathroom and the little chunks of toast and the socialist threat and his rebellious and bickering children. Soon, so early in the day, we hear the great burst of fatigue: "Oh, Lord, sometimes I'd like to quit the whole game. And the office worry and detail just as bad. And I act cranky and—I don't mean to, but I get—So darn tired!" (Lewis 23).

He says much the same thing before lunch, during lunch, after lunch, even in the evening. As the day ends, "His feet were loud on the steps as he clumped upstairs at the end of this great and treacherous day of veiled rebellions" (Lewis 94). To his friend Paul Riesling he complains:

—Standardization and Conformity... *continued on page 18*

"I don't know what's the matter with me to-day. [...] Kind of comes over me: here I've pretty much done all the things I ought to; supported my family, and got a good house and a six-cylinder car, and built up a nice little business, and I haven't any vices 'specially, except smoking [...]. I belong to the church, and play enough golf to keep in trim, and I only associate with good decent fellows. And yet, even so, I don't know that I'm entirely satisfied!" (Lewis 60-61)

In this little speech, we have what I think is the essential insight of the book. Lewis gives us the Babbitt-vision of the American Dream. Babbitt lives according to its inspiration, but it is a dream that leaves the dreamer restless and betrayed.

Paul Riesling believes that there is a widespread undercurrent of dissatisfaction among businessmen; they seem content, yet one-third of them feel restless and won't admit it, while another third are simply miserable and know it. "They hate the whole peppy, boosting, go-ahead game, and they're bored by their wives and think their families are fools" (Lewis 65).

Lewis discovered that Babbitt could suffer the tensions of conformity, though conformity was not supposed to bring tension. A part of Babbitt's early-morning fatigue comes from indecisions and contradictions. So sensitive is he to marginal differences that deciding what suit to wear was an exhausting problem with many subtleties. Then he engages in a circular, confusing discussion with his wife.

"I feel kind of punk this morning. [...] You oughtn't to serve those heavy banana fritters."

"But you asked me to have some."

"I know, but—[...] it would be a good thing for both of us if we took lighter lunches."

"But Georgie, here at home I always do have a light lunch."

"Mean to imply I make a hog of myself, eating downtown? [...] Why don't you serve more prunes at breakfast?" [...]

"The last time I had prunes you didn't eat them." (Lewis 10-11)

Such an exchange would indeed be wearing. Babbitt's fatigue engages both our sense of humor and our pity. It is both sound psychological insight and effective social criticism.

Babbitt also worries over the problem of faithfulness to the wife he takes no interest in.

In twenty-three years of married life he had peered uneasily at every graceful ankle, every soft shoulder; in thought he had treasured them; but not once had he hazarded respectability by adventuring. Now, as he calculated the cost of repapering the Styles house, he was restless again, discontented about nothing and everything, ashamed of his discontentment, and lonely for the fairy girl. (Lewis 37)

Now he is restless and discontented. He dreams of a fairy-girl, a divine playmate. He is worried, too, about his relationship with his employees. We see in chapter 9:

Babbitt did not often squabble with his employees. He liked to like the people about him; he was dismayed when they did not like him. It was only when they attacked the sacred purse that he was frightened into fury, but then, being a man given to oratory and high principles, he enjoyed the sound of his own vocabulary and the warmth of his own virtue. (Lewis 72)

If these tensions disturb the private Babbitt, then what was the public image of the Solid American Citizen? Babbitt's speech before the Real Estate Board describes his vision of himself. Lewis's parody attacks the attitudes he detested:

"Our Ideal Citizen—I picture him first and foremost as being busier than a bird-dog, not wasting a lot of good time in day-dreaming or going to sassiety teas or kicking about things that are none of his business, but putting the zip into some store or profession or art. At night he lights up a good cigar, and climbs into the little old 'bus, and maybe cusses the carburetor, and shoots out home. He mows the lawn, or sneaks in some practice putting, and then he's ready for dinner. After dinner he tells the kiddies a story, or takes the family to the movies, or plays a few fists of bridge, or reads the evening paper, and a chapter or two of some good lively Western novel if he has a taste for literature, and maybe the folks next-door drop in. [...] Then he goes happily to bed, his conscience clear, having contributed his mite to the prosperity of the city and to his own bank-account." (Lewis 181-82)

Yet, in reality, Babbitt sleeps fitfully and dreams of escape and rebellion.

In chapter 26 (with one-fourth of the novel remaining) Babbitt meets the socialist Seneca Doane, who recalls that in college Babbitt was "a liberal, sensitive chap" who dreamed he would become a lawyer, assume the

causes of the poor, and fight the rich. With Doane's encouragement, Babbitt's overt rebellion begins. He would draw strength from Nature; he would seek a princess outside of marriage; he would defend honesty in business and support social reform; he would right wrongs. But powerful forces were at work to call the adventurer and reformer back home:

Vast is the power of cities to reclaim the wanderer. More than mountains or the shore-devouring sea, a city retains its character, imperturbable, cynical, holding behind apparent changes its essential purpose. Though Babbitt had deserted his family and dwelt with Joe Paradise in the wilderness, though he had become a liberal, though he had been quite sure, on the night before he reached Zenith, that neither he nor the city would be the same again, ten days after his return he could not believe that he had ever been away. Nor was it at all evident to his acquaintances that there was a new George F. Babbitt. (Lewis 308)

His friends note only a mild liberalism and a flicker of conscience. Both, however, worry them. They thought him merely a crank at first. Then they decide to drive him out of their society or make him return. He becomes afraid of the terrorism of Vergil Gunch and the Good Citizens' League. When he came back to the fold, however, a different terror remained with him—the terror of defeat. They licked him.

Lewis planned from the beginning that Babbitt would break away from the standard "only for a little while." For all his careful planting of discontentment and tensions, Lewis decided not to give Babbitt much sensitivity or intelligence. He is conceived of as a generic figure; Lewis had early pledged to have everyone soon talking of Babbitt. It is impossible, however, to read Babbitt's last speech—his advice to his son to do what he wants to do—without realizing that Lewis had let Babbitt know to a small extent what his experience of rebellion has meant.

#### B. THE MIDDLE-CLASS DISCONTENTMENT

We perceive that the doubts that Babbitt has are shared by his friends and associates too.

Paul Riesling was Babbitt's college classmate and his closest friend. When he was young, he wanted to become a professional violinist. But like Babbitt, he becomes mired in the conventional lifestyle of the middle-class

businessman. He is harshly critical of the monotonous, hypocritical character of Zenith's middle class. Paul's wife, Zilla, is equally dissatisfied with her husband, but she vents her frustration on Riesling by constantly nagging him. One day, Riesling snaps and shoots her during an argument, for which he is sentenced to three years in prison. Paul Riesling revolts even more violently by trying to destroy his wife, the symbol of his imprisonment in a desolate world. The loss of his friend devastates Babbitt, and it prompts him to embark on a rebellion against the middle-class lifestyle.

Another example is T. Cholmondeley Frink. He is one of Babbitt's many friends and associates. He is considered a poetic genius, but he really writes clumsy, terrible jingles for advertisements. This is a sample of his writing:

*if I should look around and buzz, and wonder in what town I was, I swear that I could never tell! For all the crowd would be so swell, in just the same fine sort of jeans they wear at home [...] and all the fellows standing*

—— Standardization and Conformity... continued on page 20

## AGRIPPINA PRESS

A quarterly magazine, *Agrippina*, has been founded by Society member Matthew Sonnenberg. The magazine has featured on its covers three important writers: Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov and Sinclair Lewis. Frank Krug, who has recently completed a wonderful portrait of Chekhov, drew the Lewis portrait as well. Layne Moore, one of the student on-site coordinators of last year's Sinclair Lewis Conference, has an article on Lewis in the recent fall issue.

This fledgling press also has in production a children's magazine, *Kirby*. Their readership is slowly growing, and they hope that the Lewis membership will visit their web site: [www.agrippinapress.com](http://www.agrippinapress.com). Copies of *Agrippina* are available for purchase for \$7.50, including shipping and handling and can be ordered through the web site. The editors are looking for both articles and creative writing. Submissions can be sent to *Agrippina* Press, 415 Grantley, Elmhurst, IL 60126.

round and a-talkin' always, I'll be bound, the same good jolly kind of gruff [...] that Nice Guys talk in my home town! (Lewis 185)

However, he is secretly unhappy that he never fulfilled his youthful ambitions to be a real poet. Frink confesses drunkenly, like a character in an E. A. Robinson poem, that he has betrayed his talent; he could indeed have become a poet, not the hack versifier he is. The camaraderie, the noise, the activity of the Athletic Club and the Boosters' club, the fascist program of the Good Citizens League—all indicate a basic malaise, the unhappiness with life as it is.

Like Babbitt, the other inhabitants of this purgatory try to resolve or forget their inner torment by arranging a busy and gimmick-filled outer world, by their frenetic pursuit of money, by the chase to acquire class and caste symbols—a chase so exhausting that no energy remains to enjoy what has been achieved. Their symbols become ends in themselves.

In such a world, individual revolt comes too late for Babbitt; he could not see himself clearly for the first time at forty-eight and make changes. The children must determine the future, and they must do it by heeding their own desires, by defying the world and doing what they want.

### C. THE REASONS FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS'S DISCONTENTMENT

H. L. Mencken, the famous American literature critic, analyzes the American society:

wealth symbolizes honor and prestige in modern society; it is necessary for acceptance by our fellows. For status we need money, and without that status there can be no self-respect. Yet once we accumulate a certain sum, it is not enough. We are driven ever to increase what we own, to rise as far above the average as we can. Moreover, money brings power, or the sense of power; and, since man's striving for money also springs from his sense of purposeful activity—what Veblen calls "the instinct of workmanship"—we have come to see success as money and to measure success by money. But the possession of money is not alone sufficient to satisfy man; he must demonstrate his wealth, either by his own freedom from labor or by the amount of goods and services he and his family consume. Since money becomes the biggest thing, and the surest way in a business society to success and power, the aim of business is to gain money; all is subordinated to profit, even if the profit is gained at the community's loss. Nor are profit and wages necessarily

related to true value.

Likewise, Mencken in *The American Credo* (written in collaboration with George Jean Nathan), offers an analysis of the American character, which is perfectly applicable to *Babbitt*:

The thing which sets off the American from all other men, and gives a peculiar color not only to the pattern of his daily life but also to the play of his inner ideas, is what, for want of a more exact term, may be called social aspiration. That is to say, his dominant passion is a passion to lift himself by at least a step or two in the society that he is a part of, a passion to improve his position, to break down some shadowy barrier of caste, to achieve the countenance of what, for all his talk of equality, he recognizes and accepts as his betters. (qtd. in Love 43)

This desire to rise socially is at the root of American restlessness. However, Americans fear one another. Since the majority determines the individual's status, the individual fears the majority. His only way to success is to assume protective coloration, to lose his own in the crowd, and then to be approved by it as one of its members. Failure consists of being unmasked, of standing out as an individual; consequently, the American fears to question ideas and institutions. Ultimately, he fears simply to question.

Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* portrays the American business society in the 1920s successfully. Also in this book, Lewis hoped that individualism would survive in the middle class consumer's psyche. I think that is what Sinclair Lewis really wanted. ✍

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## LEWIS AND REAL ESTATE

Ever wonder who the good real estate novelists are? Judith Shulevitz, in "The Romance of Real Estate" for *The New York Times Book Review* (Feb. 25, 2001: 31), mentions Richard Ford for *Independence Day*, Mona Simpson for *Off Keck Road*, and Sinclair Lewis for *Babbitt*. Marjorie Garber in *Sex and Real Estate: Why We Love Houses* also provides a good summary of the fascination that Americans have with houses. As Shulevitz notes, "good real estate novelists do what good real estate agents do. They drive us out to parts of town we've never seen before and offer us alternate ways of being in the world."

In summarizing the history of American novels and real estate, she offers this introduction:

It is the relentless commodification of landscapes, exterior and interior, that gives "Babbitt" its comic tone. Sinclair Lewis's 1922 novel about a real estate agent and developer—call it the founding text of the genre, at least in American literature—is filled with deadpan inventories of the objects in George F. Babbitt's world, all of which are described in the jarring adspcak of the

day. His office building downtown is "as fireproof as a rock and as efficient as a typewriter." His Dutch Colonial house in the suburb of Floral Heights has, to Babbitt's pride, the same appointments and amenities as every other house in Floral Heights, "the best of taste, the best of inexpensive rugs, a simple and laudable architecture and the latest conveniences."

There's just one thing wrong with the Babbitt house, Lewis says: "it was not a home." This is the perfect summary of Babbitt's spiritual condition. He is ethically, emotionally, at one point almost physically homeless, largely because he can't see through his commercial appraisals of people and things to their true value. He falters and flounders, a victim of his own con man's boosterism. (Babbitt is not a crook exactly, but he specializes in the surreptitious purchase of land that he flips for an enormous profit.) Though he's Presbyterian, Lewis's Realtor—a word that by a fluke of trademark law must be suggestively capitalized—bears a certain resemblance to the type of social-climbing Jew (like Balzac's Baron de Nucingen or Wharton's Rosedale) whose speculations distorted the moral economies of so many 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century novels. ✎

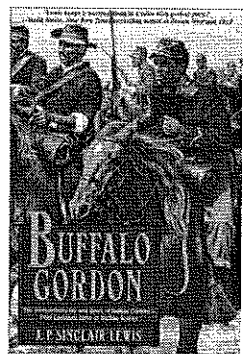
## LEWIS'S GRANDSON WRITES NOVEL

J. P. Sinclair Lewis, the grandson of Sinclair Lewis and Dorothy Thompson, has written his first novel, *Buffalo Gordon*, about a colored cavalry division after the Civil War. The novel, which was published in February 2001 by Forge, retails for \$25.95. The following description was provided by Amazon.com.

"The first novel in an ambitious new series, [*Buffalo Gordon* is] a fictional history of the west as seen through the eyes of runaway slave Nate Gordon. He has returned to Louisiana as Sergeant Major Nate Gordon of the Tenth United States Cavalry. His job is to recruit and form the second US colored cavalry, the Ninth Negro. Three years have passed since Nate left Louisiana and his life as a slave to join the Union Army. The war is now over, and it is clear that the South has paid a heavy toll. Nate's former plantation home has become a tattered collection of dilapidated buildings.

"Where once opulence and order ruled, poverty, corruption, and crime now thrive. Resentful and disgruntled white Southerners want nothing to do with Nate and his stripes. Racist Union officers and noncoms only make his task more difficult. Nate struggles to quell dissent from the ranks and to keep outside forces at bay as the Ninth Cavalry moves from the docks of Louisiana to the wide open West."

John-Paul's grandfather Sinclair would most likely be proud of his grandson for this novel. After all, *Kingsblood Royal*, written in 1947 by Sinclair Lewis, was a courageous study of race relations in the United States.



Cover of *Buffalo Gordon*, 2001

# SAUK CENTRE NEWS

## PALMER HOUSE FOR SALE

The Palmer House in Sauk Centre, where Sinclair Lewis worked when he was a young man, is now for sale. The asking price is \$495,000. Anyone who is interested should contact Alex and Mona Connors at Woods and Water Realty, RR 1, Box 255, Cable, Wisconsin 54821, 800-848-3932, e-mail [connorb@cheqnet.net](mailto:connorb@cheqnet.net). To see their website featuring the Palmer House go to [http://www.inns4sale.net/new\\_page\\_6.htm](http://www.inns4sale.net/new_page_6.htm)

Here's the beginning of the description:

St. Cloud, MN & Central Lakes area, Historic Inn with 22 Guest rooms, a Pub and Restaurant. This Hotel has been in business for 100 years. Easy access to I-94 from the town. There is an annual event nearby for Arabian Horse owners, in fact several events throughout the year involving Arabian Horses. There are three golf courses nearby. The hotel originally housed 38 small rooms with guests sharing a common "necessary room" down the hall. Now, there are 22 carefully planned rooms (each with its own bathroom facilities), some complete with jacuzzis to pamper the guests. All guest rooms include: clock radio, phone, cable color TV, individual controlled heating and air conditioning, private bath/shower.

And, as Lewis Society members recall, the Palmer

House has housed the last two Sinclair Lewis Conferences there, in 1997 and 2000.

## SINCLAIR LEWIS WRITERS CONFERENCE

The Sinclair Lewis Foundation of Sauk Centre sponsored the annual Sinclair Lewis Writers Conference on October 13, 2001 at the Sauk Centre Junior High School. The keynote speaker was Bill Holm, speaking on "How Stories Ignite Wondering & Imagination." Holm was characterized by Garrison Keillor as "The tallest radical humorist in the Midwest and a truthful and wonderful writer." He is the author of *Box Elder Bug Variations* (1985), *Coming Home Crazy* (1992), and *Eccentric Islands: Travels Real and Imaginary* (2000).

Other speakers included Susan Power, author of the novel *The Grass Dancer*, speaking on "Weaving Story Threads into Fiction"; Emilie Buchwald, editor of Milkweed Press, talking about the basics of book publishing; and Tanya Cromey, editorial director of the Lazear Agency, a literary agency, discussing what literary agents do and the current publishing climate.

## Boyhood Home of Sinclair Lewis "In the Middle of Minnesota"

Current Rates: \$39-\$99

Established business

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Taxes: \$11,333.50

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*Sinclair Lewis worked here*



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## PUBLICATIONS ABOUT LEWIS

Lewis Society member James Lorson has written "Sinclair Lewis: The Need for a Proper Bibliography," for *Hoja Volante*, the quarterly publication of the Zamorano Club of Los Angeles, California, 212 (Feb. 2001). In it he discusses how he, as a bookseller, began putting together author collections, including one devoted to Lewis in the early 1980s. The basic source material he cites for collecting are: *American First Editions*, by Merle Johnson, published in 1929, revised in 1932, and revised again in 1936 and 1942 by Jacob Black; *Sinclair Lewis: A Biographical Sketch*, by Carl Van Doren with a bibliography by Harvey Taylor, published by Doubleday in 1933; *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, by Mark Schorer, published by McGraw-Hill in 1961; and *First Printings of American Authors*, vol. 3, by Richard Layman and James S. Measell, a Brucoli Clark book published by Gale Research in 1978. He mentions *Sinclair Lewis: A Descriptive Bibliography* by Stephen Pastore, published in 1997, but finds it does not provide much additional help to collectors.

Lorson states that a proper two-part bibliography is still needed. Part one would be the Lewis canon: books by Lewis and other material including prefaces, introductions, translations, and reprints; periodical contributions and newspaper articles written by Lewis, and incidental works containing Lewis's writing. Part two would be biography and criticism, including books about Lewis, books that contain chapters and/or references to Lewis, periodical and newspaper articles about Lewis, and finally theses written about Lewis.

Lorson offers a well-informed argument for the creation of a bibliography and the very great need that it would serve for collectors and scholars. One hopes that someone will take him up on this.

— SLSN —

Amy Campion and Gary Alan Fine have written an intriguing article, "Main Street on Main Street: Community Identity and the Reputation of Sinclair Lewis" *Sociological Quarterly* 39.1 (1998): 79-99. Our critic, George Killough, reports that "it reveals at great length the steps involved in making a negative event like the publication of *Main Street* into a positive element of

community identity, which over time brings prosperity. A reader can see that the writers' intentions are good, but what would poor Lewis think!

"The article concludes with a suggestion that Sauk Centre could serve as a role model to Auschwitz and Hiroshima, as follows: "The case of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, reminds us of the diversity of materials that communities use in their creation of identity. While unambiguously positive memories are surely easier to work with, history and reputation can be altered, within limits. Even fully negative memories, consensually recognized, such as those at Auschwitz or Hiroshima, can be transformed into an economic base for community development and a recognition of the power of the human spirit to transcend tragedy. With a greater attention to the range and diversity of identity strategies employed by communities, we quickly learn that the flexibility of individual identity is equaled on the collective level."

### The Sinclair Lewis Homepage

Books Films Links  
Biographies Bibliographies  
Lewis Links  
Films Bibliographies  
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Biographies Films Links  
And More!

*He was a consummate  
professional, a man containing  
a boy inside...*

<http://lilt.edu//separry/lewis.html>

## SINCLAIR LEWIS NOTES

Paula Fox wrote a personal history for *The New Yorker* (July 2, 2001: 53-69) called "Whose Little Girl Are You?," about her childhood, especially her relationship with her father, Paul Fox, who was a screenwriter in Hollywood during the 1930s. She writes, "The interior of the country was abhorrent to him. He feared those vast stretches of prairie and mountain, those flat plains, the towns and cities populated by characters out of 'Main Street,' those Babbitts—." When she recalls asking him about Babbitts, he just said, "Sinclair Lewis wrote novels about them" (69). Paul Fox had written for Mencken's *Smart Set* before he wrote the stories for the movies *The Last Train from Madrid* (1937) and *Mandalay* (1934) among others.

— SLSN —

Paul Berman's review of *The Last Empire: Essays 1992-2000* by Gore Vidal (Doubleday, 2001) in *The New York Times Book Review* (July 1, 2001: 7) finds that the essays by Vidal are of mixed quality. However, he praises essays on Edmund Wilson, and "the Greenwich Village novelists Dawn Powell and Isabel Bolton, and even on Sinclair Lewis, the Prairie Bard, of whom Vidal turns out to be surprisingly fond."

— SLSN —

In a review of *The Faithful Narrative of a Pastor's Disappearance* by Benjamin Anastas (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001) in *The New York Times Book Review* (May 20, 2001: 6), critic Jacqueline Carey notes that the novel functions as "an extended, sometimes hilarious double take on American culture." One of the characters is Margaret Howard, "successful matriarch of a real estate firm called Howard Homes" and "a Babbitt in drag, emblematic of the empty piety and rigid moralism religion is often accused of purveying."

— SLSN —

The novelist Tom Wolfe continues to praise Sinclair Lewis, mentioning him on a Book TV/C-SPAN 2 show. He especially thought highly of *Elmer Gantry* and *Main Street*, partly because Lewis was careful to check his facts when he wrote. He attributes this partly to Lewis's early work as a newspaper reporter. He also praised Yale University, the alma mater of both himself and Lewis.

— SLSN —

In *The New York Times Book Review* letters section for July 22, 2001, writer Bob Black praises another contemporary novelist, Gore Vidal. He takes umbrage at a mediocre review of Vidal's most recent book, *The Last Empire*, and notes, "Vidal is an astute literary observer, and I particularly enjoyed his essays on Mark Twain and Sinclair Lewis."

— SLSN —

*Sports Illustrated* provided a reference to Lewis in its August 27, 2001 issue. In a feature on overrated and underrated sports and sports figures, Jeff MacGregor maintains that the Minnesota Vikings are an underrated team in terms of fan obsession. "They'll get close to the big prize, sure, but in the end they'll succumb to the paralyzing modesty required by the surrounding community. To be a standout is, to, well, stand out, and per Babbitt, no one is more suspicious of a show-off than a Minnesotan" (57).

— SLSN —

In *The New Yorker* column, "Cries and Whispers," on April 2, 2001, Claudia Pierpont Roth wrote a long essay on Edith Wharton (66-75). In it she mentions that Wharton won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 1921 because "The Columbia University administrators of the award had refused to bestow it on the judges' first choice, Sinclair Lewis's 'Main Street,' complaining that it did not sufficiently exhibit 'the wholesome atmosphere of American life.' Wharton felt insulted that her book was considered sufficiently wholesome" (74).

— SLSN —

Jane Resh Thomas, in a review of *Brides of Eden: The True Story Imagined* (HarperCollins, 2001) for *The New York Times Book Review* (August 12, 2001:25), starts out her essay by referring to one of Lewis's characters. "Long before evangelists got rich weeping for Jesus on television, before fictional Elmer Gantry and real-life Jim Jones, charlatans seduced naïve American believers." The book, written for adolescents, recounts the story of a charismatic preacher of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who attracted young women to the Bride of Christ Church and seduced many of them.



## LEWIS AND THE WEB: INFORMATION AND REQUESTS

The web site has now had over 75,000 visitors since October 1998. With interest building in Lewis studies over anticipation of the new Lewis biography by Richard Lingeman (probable publication date, January 2002) and Lewis's presence in a new musical (see *The Mice*, on page 9), the web site has been getting quite a variety of questions recently. Here's a small sampling.

I live in Arizona and would like to request your assistance. I am trying to locate a portrait of Sinclair Lewis that was subsequently used in a U.S. postage stamp (postcard) around the mid-1980s. In particular, I am trying to learn more about the artist who created the painting. I happened to have a phone conversation with the artist back in New York City in the 80s during which he described what it was like to have Sinclair Lewis sit for him. I found the artist to be very interesting and have always regretted that I did not get his name. I assume he has since passed on by this time. I thought I might learn his name through my research through your organization. I have already tried the U.S. Post Office web site with no luck. Any knowledge of that painting or the stamp?

————— SLSN —————

Can anyone confirm if Mr. Lewis lived in Duluth, MN at anytime? My 85 yr old grandmother has a bet riding on it. She says it is near Glensheen. [Lewis did indeed live in Duluth and the Society was able to provide the exact address.]

————— SLSN —————

I've been trying to find the original Sinclair Lewis story that Jack London based his novel *The Assassination Bureau* on. Do you have any information on this story? [The story was based on a plot synopsis Lewis wrote for London and for which London paid.]

————— SLSN —————

Please, would it be possible for your society to help me in locating S. Lewis's son Michael Lewis (if he is still alive) or his inheritors. I would be very much obliged to you if you could give me this assistance. [Unfortunately

Michael Lewis is no longer living. This person was referred to McIntosh & Otis.]

————— SLSN —————

I have the novel *Dodsworth*—autographed by Sinclair Lewis in 1929 to a "commissioner"—

"my dear commissioner: I do so hope that you will make a reasonable America" Sam Dodsworth per secy Sinclair Lewis.

Could you give me any information who this "commissioner" may have been (New York seems the most likely candidate) since I cannot make out who Lewis wrote it to—something like, S.E (or C) Ca...S.... The handwriting isn't all that clear when it comes to whom the autograph was addressed to. Thanks for any help you may provide. [This person was referred to Society member James Lorson.]

————— SLSN —————

I read that a new musical has an act in it based on a Sinclair Lewis short story entitled: "Virga Vay & Allan Cedar." I am desperately trying to locate this short story, but can't find it anywhere. Does it exist? [See the article on *The Mice* on page 9]

————— SLSN —————

Did Sinclair Lewis ever live in either Montclair, New Jersey or in Verona, New Jersey?

[To the best of my knowledge, the only time Lewis lived in New Jersey was when he lived in the Utopian community of Helicon Hall in 1906. The community was located near Englewood.]

————— SLSN —————

Was Sinclair Lewis's novel *Main Street* first published with no subtitle? The 1920 Harcourt, Brace and Company edition appears to have had no subtitle. I have noticed, however, that the Penguin paperback "reprinting," with introduction and notes by Professor Martin Bucco, is subtitled "The Story of Carol Kennicott." The Library of America volume containing *Main Street* and *Babbitt* reprints whatever the Penguin paperback reprinted so it too has a subtitle. [In Mark Schorer's massive *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* the full title and subtitle are given

for the book published in 1920: *Main Street: The Story of Carol Kennicott.*]

— SLSN —

I heard from St. Martin's that Lingeman's bio is scheduled to be published in January 2002, by Random House. I've read his comments for your site, of course; he sounds like he's sympathetic to Lewis. I don't know why Schorer spent so much time with and on somebody he had so little sympathy for—I don't detect much of a sense of humor in Schorer; maybe that was the problem.

— SLSN —

I'm doing an interview with George Killough for Minnesota Public Radio's "Word of Mouth" arts program. Can we have permission to include a link to your website, on our website? Minnesota Public Radio <http://www.mpr.org>

— SLSN —

Did Sinclair ever run for political office? [No. He was more interested in writing. And after years of life with Dorothy Thompson I think he was sick of politics. Upton Sinclair, a writer he is sometimes confused with, ran for governor of California in the 1930s.]

— SLSN —

Do you have a summary on Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*?

— SLSN —

I noticed in the timeline that Lewis worked at Upton Sinclair's Helicon Hall as a young man. Does the connection between them pre-date 1906, and is it just a coincidence that Lewis's first name is Sinclair's last name? [Just a coincidence.]

— SLSN —

Where can I find the text of the letter that Sinclair Lewis wrote when he refused the Pulitzer for *Arrowsmith* in 1926? [See *The Man from Main Street: Selected Essays and Other Writings, 1904-1950.*]

— SLSN —

Your site <http://lilt.ilstu.edu/separry/lewis.html> was successfully submitted at [hotrate.com](http://www.hotrate.com) (<http://www.hotrate.com>), the web's most relevant search engine! You can find your site in [hotrate.com](http://www.hotrate.com) at [http://](http://www.hotrate.com)

[www.hotrate.com/navitem.asp?id=132317](http://www.hotrate.com/navitem.asp?id=132317) Our thousands of editors and reviewers will now start to analyze your website, and provide you with immediate feedback.

— SLSN —

I am writing to ask if you would allow us to provide users of our web sites with a link to your own site. The particular web sites we intend to link from are *Literature Online* and *Literature Online for Schools*. *Literature Online* was first launched in 1996, bringing together Chadwyck-Healey's full-text databases in English and American Literature, previously only available individually on CD-ROM. The latest version includes more literary texts, more extensive coverage of 20th-century literature, and access to the full text of literary journals. It is now available in hundreds of libraries and academic institutions worldwide.

*Literature Online for Schools* is a new web site, launched in June 2000. It is designed to support the teaching and study of English literature at A Level, AS Level, and for the International Baccalaureate. It offers students and teachers access to a large archive of primary and secondary materials geared to the texts, authors, and topics set by the exam boards in the UK, and for the Language A1 programme of the International Baccalaureate diploma.

An important function of both these web sites is to provide, in addition, access to the most informative and accessible free web resources currently available on key authors and works, and we would like to include your own site among these. This will give a wider publicity to your site and mean that more people will be aware of its value and usefulness as an educational resource. If you want to know more about *Literature Online* or *Literature Online for Schools*, do visit our site at <http://www.lionschools.co.uk>, which will give you further information, or <http://www.chadwyck.co.uk> for information about our Company and products in general; however, please contact me if you have any other questions.

— SLSN —

I was reading *It Can't Happen Here*. I just want to remark that it was extremely interesting to watch the creation and evolution of a totalitarian state, whereas in other similar novels like *1984* and *Brave New World*, the totalitarian society had long been established and we never got to see what life was like before.

— SLSN —

Is Sinclair Lewis the one who came up with the quote "An Apple a Day Keeps the Doctor Away?" I am looking for the author of this quote.

————— SLSN —————

Hi, do you know what Sinclair Lewis means when he said, "I love America but I don't like it." ???

### STUDENT QUERIES

I am a student from Germany, and my English teacher wants me to do a skilled work about Sinclair Lewis's "Babbitt." The theme is: In how far can George F. Babbitt be compared to a German "Spießbuerger" (trans. "petty bourgeois"). And therefore I need your help. I have already read the book and I have to say that it was quite interesting; I was fascinated by the language Mr. Sinclair used to choose. All in all, it became one of my most favorite books. But to get a better understanding of what Mr. Sinclair wants to express it would be helpful to have an interpretation. While seeking for such an interpretation, I stumbled on your web site and I thought that you probably could help me. I would be much obliged if you can send me some information on my inquiry!

————— SLSN —————

I'm writing my dissertation at the Univ. of Iowa on the interest in Dante in art and literature of the 19th century and the early 20th century. I've found in *Babbitt* the very interesting section in which at a party a séance is held and Dante is contacted in the "otherworld" to answer questions of the party-goers. I'm interested in reading about Lewis's interest in Dante—any information on why he might have included this section in his novel *Babbitt* would be particularly appreciated. How is this section usually interpreted by scholars of Lewis's work?

————— SLSN —————

I am a junior at Santa Barbara High. I am writing a research paper on *Babbitt*. Unfortunately, I am having trouble finding criticism on my thesis. I was wondering if you can give me some names of critics or sites that might have in depth criticism on the actual book.

————— SLSN —————

I was hoping you could answer a quick question for me.

I have to write a term paper on three of Sinclair Lewis's books. I have already read *Dodsworth*. What other two books do you think would be best to read for the term paper? The paper will deal with the similarities in the main characters.

————— SLSN —————

I am currently doing research on the critical acceptance (both present and at time of publication) of *Main Street* by Sinclair Lewis. I was wondering if you could direct me to where I might find the information I am looking for.

————— SLSN —————

I have been assigned Sinclair Lewis as the person about whom I must prepare a research paper consisting of not more than 10 pages. Because there is so much information available about Mr. Lewis, I want to include only the most important and meaningful information in my paper. Anything I could receive from you would not only be very helpful, but very much appreciated.

————— SLSN —————

For a paper on Sinclair Lewis, are you familiar with any source which gives Lewis's inspiration for the name Babbitt? Is it a reference to Irving Babbitt?

————— SLSN —————

I have a report due about Hitler's banning of books. I am to give the Nazi rationale of the ban of Sinclair Lewis's book and the author's reaction. I am unable to find any information on what book was banned and why. Do you have any information for me on this? My whole paper hinges on it.

————— SLSN —————

I am an 11<sup>th</sup> grade student from Miami Senior High and I have been assigned Sinclair Lewis as my research topic. I find his satire very interesting and his mentality is equal to most that don't want to conform to standards. I am trying to narrow my topic to how he affected life in the 1920s but I have not been successful in finding information that comments on the topic. Do you have information that might help? If you don't, is it possible if you can help me by pointing out other areas that I should look into for a new topic?

—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 contributions to this section.]

### **Pacific Book Auction Galleries**

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www.pacificbook.com

#### **SALE 224, THURSDAY, JUNE 28, 2001**

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

Blue cloth lettered in yellow, jacket. First Edition, Second Binding. Inscribed and signed by Lewis in red marking pencil on the half-title, "3-8-27-Par' Yours, Sinclair Lewis." Above the inscription is mounted a portrait of Lewis clipped from a newspaper; this has offset to the facing leaf. Second binding, with the "G" in "Gantry" in the spine lettering actually a "G" (in the first binding, it resembled a "C"). Just a little rubbing to the spine ends and corners; bookplate on front pastedown, light offset to front free endpaper, hinge cracking before title with old cloth tape repair, else very good. (\$488.75)

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E-mail: pepbooks@aol.com

147. Lewis, Sinclair. *Elmer Gantry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927. \$1500

First Edition, First Issue binding. Fine clean copy with the lettering bright and fresh in a very good dust jacket which has been restored by a paper conservationist.

148. Lewis, Sinclair. *Work of Art*. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1934. \$300

# Collector's Corner

First Edition. Near fine in a lightly used dust jacket with a few tiny chips and light wear. Better and brighter than usual.

149. Lewis, Sinclair. *Work of Art*. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1934. \$150

First Edition, second printing. From the library of Harpo Marx, the great clown of 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 & SUSAN MARX." With a pencilled 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.

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Fax: (413) 584-2045  
Email: klopez@well.com  
www.lopezbooks.com

231. Lewis, Sinclair. *Our Mr. Wrenn*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1914. \$350

His first book under his own name, after the 1912 *Hike and the Aeroplane* by "Tom Graham." Modest overall handling; near fine, lacking the dust jacket.

232. Lewis, Sinclair. *It Can't Happen Here*. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1935. \$1250

A novel of fascism coming to America, written at a time when Europe was coming under the sway of various fascist dictators.

Inscribed by the author: "To Roy Grimmer/ from his friend/ + some-time patient/ Sinclair Lewis." Light flaking to spine gilt; near fine in a very good dust jacket with light edge-chipping.

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**SUMMER 2001**

153. Lewis, Sinclair. *The Innocents*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1917. \$12,500

First Edition. Tiny stains on endpapers, else about fine in a dust jacket with a couple of archival mends, shallow chipping at the top of the spine, and a large chip at the top of the front panel, which just reaches into the decorative title box, but does not affect any lettering.

Lewis wrote this book to fulfill his contract with Harper's; he had already signed on for future books with Harcourt, Brace. The book was not a success, and is not considered to be in the first rank of his work. However, it is notably rare in dust jacket.

154. Lewis, Sinclair. *Elmer Gantry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927. \$1,000

First Edition; first binding. Owner inscription inside front cover; very good copy in a restored dust jacket.

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**CATALOGUE 32**

367. Lewis, Sinclair. *Mantrap*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1926. \$3500

First edition. Some light foxing to fore and bottom edges of pages. Some faint mildew spotting to cloth at spine. Otherwise a

tight, near fine copy in the scarce dust jacket. There are two small chips, one at top of spine panel, and one near the center of the spine panel, obscuring the bottom half of the last four letters in the word "Author." Some additional minor loss at extremities of rear flap fold. An extremely rare book in dust jacket.

368. Lewis, Sinclair. *Work of Art*. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1934. \$150

First edition. A fine bright copy in dust jacket (neatly price-clipped).

369. Lewis, Sinclair. *It Can't Happen Here*. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1935. \$225

First edition. A fine copy in a near fine dust jacket (a few tiny nicks).

370. Lewis, Sinclair. *Main Street*. Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1937. \$850

First illustrated edition. One of 1500 numbered copies signed by the illustrator. A lovely fine copy in the original glassine dust jacket and publisher's box (spine label slightly faded, minutely nicked at edges). It is very unusual to find the slipcase undamaged. Beautifully illustrated edition of this classic. With a special introduction by the author. Illustrations by Grant Wood.

371. Lewis, Sinclair. *The Prodigal Parents*. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1938. \$150

First edition. Fine copy in dust jacket with some minor restoration at head of spine panel.

372. Lewis, Sinclair. *Bethel Merriday*. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1940. \$150

First edition. Fine bright copy in dust jacket with some very minor wear at edges.

373. Lewis, Sinclair. *Gideon Planish*. New York: Random House, 1943. \$150

First edition. Fine in bright unfaded dust jacket missing a few small chips at top and bottom of flap folds.

374. Lewis, Sinclair. *The God-Seeker*. New York: Random House, 1949. \$150

First edition. Some light soiling to page edges. Otherwise fine in dust jacket.

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