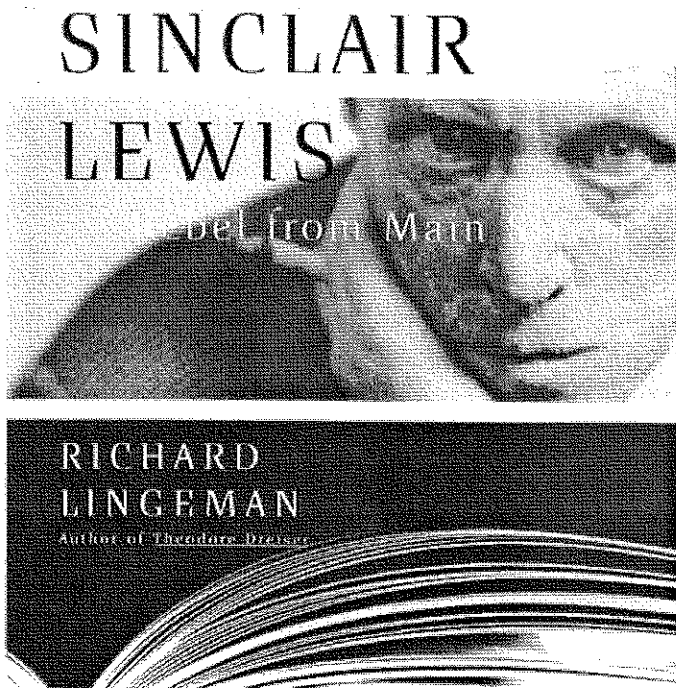


The SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME TEN, NUMBER TWO

Spring 2002



Cover of Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street
(Random House, 2002)

“HE REALLY CARED”: A REVIEW OF *REBEL FROM MAIN STREET*

Sally E. Parry
Illinois State University

It is a pleasure to read a new biography of Sinclair Lewis, especially one that seems to give Lewis his due as an important American author. It is also likely that this biography by Richard Lingeman will definitely be compared to Mark Schorer's *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, which has, for the past forty years, been

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SUMMARIES OF REVIEWS OF *SINCLAIR LEWIS:* *REBEL FROM MAIN STREET*

As a service to the readers of The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter, we are providing summaries of some of the major reviews. Readers are invited to send their impressions of Richard Lingeman's biography *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street* (Random House: New York, 2002. xi+659pp. \$35.00) to the newsletter for publication in the fall issue. Submissions will be accepted through mid-September.

From *The Christian Science Monitor*
(January 10, 2002)

“The Babbitt Booster: Sinclair Lewis Changed a Nation with His Ferocious Satire”

By Bill Kirtz

Kirtz's review may be one of the most incisive reviews of the biography and one of the most sympathetic responses to Lewis as author. “Happy only at his typewriter, seeking and shunning friendship, Sinclair Lewis helped chart America's literary and political path for more than three decades. In his biography of the sophisticated hick from Sauk Centre, Minn., Richard Lingeman succeeds at two tasks. He reinterprets the mass of materials assembled by Lewis's 1961 biographer, Mark Schorer, and he details Lewis's achievements as the era's leading prober of bourgeoisie values.” Kirtz notes that Lingeman's Lewis is “a fully engaged professional who churned out popular stories to support serious novels, stayed true to socialist causes, and helped puncture the American fascist movement.”

Described by Kirtz as “[u]gly and charming, impulsive and calculating, generous and distrustful, expansive and dismissive—Lewis was a lifelong paradox.

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the more or less definitive word on Lewis's life and career. I'm glad to say that Lingeman is much more aware than Schorer of Lewis's interest in and interaction with the world. Sinclair Lewis was a complex and troubled man, but one who felt strongly about a variety of social issues including those connected with disenfranchised members of American society. In his writing, he was conscious of the voices of women, African-Americans, and Jews as being part of the fabric of our society but not always listened to by the those in power. He felt that part of the mission in his writing was to raise the awareness of Americans toward elements of society that were corrupting the American dream. As Dorothy Thompson wrote in a retrospective of his life, Lewis was a "disappointed democrat," one who felt bitterly that this country was falling short of the ideals of democracy and freedom, but who was committed to continuing to work toward these ideals and encourage others to do so. Not an activist like his friend Upton Sinclair, Lewis wanted to draw his readers' attention to social issues with a voice that was sometimes sarcastic, sometimes passionate, but almost always strongly expressed.

Rebel from Main Street differs from Schorer's biography in several important ways. The first and most important is Lingeman's greater emphasis on Lewis as a social critic and commentator. Lewis's interest in helping those he felt were unfairly hurt by society was demonstrated early in his life. He joined the Socialist Party when he was a young man, supported women's suffrage, and defended German-Americans during World War I, an issue that also arises in *Main Street*. He grew angry, as Lingeman notes, when he "saw how in the small town gossip and conformity were mobilized by conservative storekeepers and professionals to enforce orthodoxy." This anger against small-minded people and the harm they do to others is a constant theme in his work, and even drove his desire to write the never-completed

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CONTRIBUTORS

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

These people include Sonya Beese, Frederick Betz, Jessica Bowman, Christina Butzen, Democratic Underground.com, Tim Feeney, Roger Forseth, Mitchell J. Freedman, James Hutchisson, Jacqueline Koenig, Frank Krug, Richard Lingeman, David Lull, Layne Moore, Roberta Parry, Tara Reeser, Nikki Ronowski, Matthew Sonnenberg, Weymouth Symmes, Edward Watts, James Whalen, Jennifer Witt, and Lucy Zhang.

TEACHING *MAIN STREET*: WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE NOVEL ENDS?

Sally E. Parry
Illinois State University

Whenever I teach *Main Street*, especially to students in my English Senior Seminar, I like to ask them to imagine what would happen to Carol after the novel ends. The course is the last one that English majors take before they graduate, and I find that they need to be encouraged to think about the possibilities for life after graduation and the problems that can arise. Carol's despair, as "a working woman with no work," and her fight to maintain some kind of vibrant intellectual life in a small town, is something that may happen to my students.

Last semester, when I posed the question and asked them to write a creative response, I received more positive letters about Carol's state of mind than I usually do. Whether this is because of the more conservative climate due to the world situation or because they identify with Carol's struggles more than some classes, it is difficult to say. Below is a summary of some of the responses I received.

Two wrote as Carol writing to Fern to bring her up to date on the goings on in town and her attempts to make her marriage to Will work. Several others also wrote in Carol's voice. Sonya Beese created a diary entry in which Carol hopes that she can start a book club with her daughter. She says, "We will read nothing but high-class literature." Christina Butzen created correspondence between Carol and her adult daughter who is writing from Washington, D.C. In a number of these responses Carol's daughter is the woman Carol wanted to be: independent, musically talented, and ambitious. One student wanted to see Carol run for mayor of Gopher Prairie and a couple of other students had her move to another town, where, in one of them, she became a city planner. Another wrote in Will's voice, commenting on how much Carol had settled down.

Eric's influence is evident in several of the responses. Nikki Ronowski wrote an obituary for Carol, noting that she had twins, Eric and Fern, several years after her daughter was born. The conclusion to the obituary was suitably ambiguous, "She acted as though she despised this town until the day she died but we all know she had a soft spot for Gopher Prairie, just as we have one for Mrs. Kennicott." Another had her write to Eric, although it's not clear whether the letter was ever sent, and in it Carol imagines her own obituary. One of the most thoughtful ones, by Jessica Bowman, had an older Carol being visited by

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<i>Editor</i>	<i>Interns</i>
Sally E. Parry	Amanda Karvelaitis
<i>Layout Editor</i>	Sarah Haberstich
Caroline Benzing	Kelly Kloster
<i>Production Director</i>	Stacy Koziol
Tara Reeser	Jeremy Scott

Please address all correspondence to: Sally Parry, Editor, 4240 English Dept., Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-4240

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[...] Bumptious, sometimes by design but often not, he conducted famous literary feuds, but still offered important early praise to Fitzgerald, Dreiser, and Hemingway, and mentored such younger writers as Barnaby Conrad, Richard Wright, and John Hersey.”

He notes that Lingeman is writing to oppose the prevailing view promulgated by the Schorer biography and contends that it is something of a straw man argument, since much of what Lewis wrote, especially in the 1920s, has “never gone out of fashion.” [This would come as a surprise to John Updike.] Kirtz praises Lingeman’s attention to detail and commends his smooth writing, especially “on outlining Lewis’s lifelong and commercially risky commitment to socialism, and his compulsive womanizing.” He is also convinced by Lingeman’s discussion that lesser-known novels like *The Job* and *Kingsblood Royal* deserve “more favorable reappraisals.” Kirtz concludes with a quote from Kipling that has echoes in both *Our Mr. Wrenn* and *World So Wide*. His final image of Lewis is as eternal critic, who once said, “It’s my mission in life. I must carp and scold until everyone despises me. That’s what I was put here for.”

From *The New York Times Book Review*

(January 20, 2002: 10)

“All-American Iconoclast”

By Jane Smiley

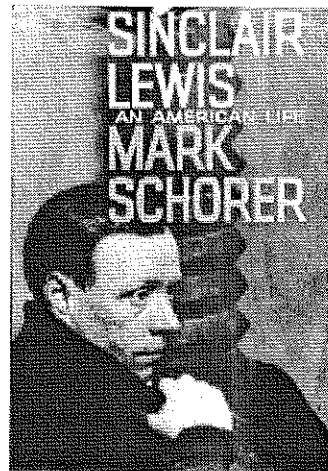
Smiley offers a mixed review of the Lingeman biography, praising Lewis, but finding Lingeman’s depiction of his life too depressing. “The re-emergence of Sinclair Lewis as a paradigmatic American novelist, a potential result of Richard Lingeman’s new biography, could well cause any number of graduate students in fiction-writing programs around the country to reconsider their aspirations. Lewis was a productive writer of lively intelligence and style who got wonderful reviews and made lots of money and, by the way, was the first American to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, but as Lingeman makes painfully clear, his life was longer and even less happy than that of his near-contemporary, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and before his death he and everyone else believed that he had outlived his talent by several decades. Lewis’s posthumous reputation, unlike Fitzgerald’s, did not rise by easy stages to immortal status. Rather it wavered in the territory of respectability

for a while, then was torpedoed, according to Lingeman, by a biographer, Mark Schorer, in 1961, 10 years after Lewis’s death.

“The Nobel Prize, which he won in 1930, should have crowned Lewis’s career but actually hastened its decline, not, perhaps, because Lewis himself grew cautious or overconfident, but because his selection was the subject of intense scrutiny and controversy; every literary pundit had an opinion on whether he deserved it, and many of the opinions were negative. His talents and accomplishments were furiously called into question while he was still in midcareer, and though he had supporters—Edith Wharton telegraphed her congratulations—the fact is that he never quite recovered, either as a writer or as a Famous Author.”

Smiley then summarizes Lewis’s life, noting that “his childhood in Sauk Centre had given him empathy for all sorts of disempowered groups—he was teased and taunted for his odd habits and his appearance until he was well into his 20’s [sic].” She mentions that the “publication of *Main Street* ranks with that of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as one of the few literary events in American history that proved to be a political and social event as well. The book sold hundreds of thousands of copies. As with the Stowe novel, Americans took up what appeared to be a violent critique of themselves with great enthusiasm, and were ready to read it, judge it and discuss it.” After summing up the rest of his life, she complains, “As Lingeman tells Lewis’s story, it is all too depressing, depressing to the point of ‘why bother?’

“Lingeman might have told it differently, though, because Lewis had plenty of energy and even charm. [...] More important, Lewis’s best novels are well worth reading, and not merely as social documents. *Main Street* is not as shapely as some novels, but it is smart and lively. The characters are skillfully drawn and Lewis’s



Mark Schorer's biography of Sinclair Lewis (McGraw-Hill, 1961)

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labor novel. And his concerns about inequities in society did not die as he grew older. In 1947's *Kingsblood Royal*, for example, he sympathetically draws a portrait of the air of prejudice against African-Americans that even liberal northerners breathe. His heartbreaking portrait of an African-American woman who is callously tossed aside by a "poet" in *Work of Art* is a subtle but telling critique of racial and gender relations.

A second important difference is in the portrayal of the relationships that Lewis has with other people. Perhaps because Lingeman did not write his biography with Dorothy Thompson looking over his shoulder, as it seems Mark Schorer did, he is able to better represent how Lewis connected or failed to connect with others. There seems to be a more balanced portrayal of Lewis's relationship with his father, Dr. E. J. Lewis. Dr. Lewis was a man who kept his emotions tightly bottled up, in some ways like Lewis himself, yet, from the letters and other evidence that Lingeman offers, it is clear that he was proud of his famous son, even though he couldn't quite understand why he was so famous for writing. As he wrote to Claude, "It is certainly marvelous how such a bundle of nerves can pull in the money." There is also a more balanced view of Lewis's marriages to both Grace Hegger and Dorothy Thompson, with an awareness of how each of them contributed to the failure of their respective marriages. Lewis was not an easy man to be in love with, although Lingeman indicates that Lewis had a much more active sex life than Schorer

suggests. He makes it clear that Lewis did his share of philandering both within and outside of his marriages. He also brings up the possibility that Marcella Powers may have conceived a child with Lewis.

Other interesting differences include a more graphic presentation of the toll that alcoholism had on Lewis. Following the lead of Roger Forseth, Lingeman does not blame Lewis, but he does note how it hurt his relationships and his health. Lingeman also comments more sympathetically on the novels after the Nobel Prize, noting his concern for the environment, especially in the later novels set in Minnesota. He treats *Cass Timberlane*, *Kingsblood Royal*, and *The God-Seeker* as the "Minnesota trilogy" and is especially intelligent in his observations about this last novel, which is usually ignored by the critics, and which he claims shows "how Minnesota—and thus America—became the class-bound, racist society described in the earlier ones, particularly *Kingsblood Royal*."

Rebel from Main Street won't replace *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, but it provides a needed corrective to Schorer's misanthropic take on Lewis as author and person. Schorer had the advantage of being able to talk to more contemporaries of Lewis, including his wives and Marcella Powers. There is detail in the Schorer biography that Lingeman does not have nor do I think that was his intention. Rather, this biography calls for a reexamination of Lewis as a social critic and still very important author for our times. ✍

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Eric Valor and the emotions that this caused:

In an instant I was transported back to our time together and felt that immediate longing I thought had disappeared. We did not talk about old times together, since there really was no need to put ourselves in the past. Yet, why is it that when Eric left I watched my door close on my dreams, goals, and the missed opportunity to say so many things, things that were probably better left unsaid?

In the most unusual of these responses, Jennifer Witt imagined Carol literally shrinking as the pres-

sure to conform became more and more onerous. Eventually she shrinks to the size of Will's pinkie and he happily keeps her in a box where she is "as cute as a button."

My teaching Lewis's novels on a regular basis is always rewarded by creative efforts such as these when students try to imaginatively enter the life of the characters.

[My thanks to members of my English Senior Seminar, Fall 2001, at Illinois State University, for allowing their papers to be mentioned.] ✍

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insights into their psychology are subtle and compelling. It is not depressing, and neither are the other novels.

“Lewis’s idiosyncratic combination of critical intelligence and humanity comes across far better in his novels than in Lingeman’s biography, which often degenerates into a list of events, few of which reveal anything about Lewis’s inner life. Lingeman does not seem to have an overriding theme or a general theory of Lewis. He follows him around, and Lewis sometimes appears in the distance, but he never comes forth. Who he is is lost in the detail of what he did.

“In fact, the novel and the biography are diametrically opposed forms of literature. Whereas the novel evokes what life feels like as it is experienced, the biography sticks with what is known, and experience is all hedged about with caution. [...] Perhaps Lingeman might have evoked Lewis more successfully if he had dared to imagine him more fully. Certainly, though Lewis wrote 23 novels and planned several others, a more extensive and sensitive reading of Lewis’s works, and a theory of how they developed (as opposed to details of how they got written), would have helped flesh out the novelist. But Lingeman seems to feel that he doesn’t have the space to devote to too much analysis of the novels. On the other hand, he doesn’t fully explore and portray many

of the events he mentions either.

“But what is a novelist to do when his reputation has gone into undeserved decline? Someone at least has to get his name out in front of the people so that they think to look up his shelf at the earth’s biggest bookstore. In spite of the Depression and World War II and all the intervening history, *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, *Elmer Gantry*, *Dodsworth* and *Arrowsmith* are still around, big as life, as unchangeably natural to the American landscape as Jay Gatsby. Not every critique of American life has to be lyrical and bittersweet. There is room for the confrontational scold, the man with a political theory. If Lingeman’s biography gets Lewis back into circulation, then it has done enough.”

Richard Lingeman responded to the review in *The New York Times Book Review* two weeks later (February 3, 2002: 4). Here is his answer in part:

Lingeman offers clarifications on some of Smiley’s statements, including the fact that Lewis scholars in general feel that Schorer’s biography hurt Lewis’s reputation. He also notes that Lewis did indeed graduate from Yale, something that Smiley missed. “More seriously, in summarizing Lewis’s life, Smiley at times misleadingly muddles chronology [...]” Even in the post-Nobel novels, Lewis continued to have an impact on the reading public. “The novel about race, *Kingsblood Royal*, was a sensation and sold 1.5 million copies; the 1933 novel about feminism, *Ann Vickers*, was a best seller. The low point of Lewis’s career came between 1933 and 1945, when he issued *Cass Timberlane*, a worthy effort and a huge commercial success.

“Smiley says that I make Lewis’s story ‘too depressing’ and that he had charm and was ‘a gifted mimic.’ While not omitting the sadness in his life, I do evoke his charm and his talent for mimicry several times. She says I seemed to feel I didn’t have space to devote to much analysis of the novels. I offer critical analysis of the major novels, but I did not intend an academic critical biography or a 900-page treatise. I do, however, spend a proportionate amount of space on the personal, political and artistic history of major novels like *Main Street*, and on their cultural impact. If I inadequately discuss the novels, how is it that ‘the re-emergence of

NEW MEMBERS

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

Dick Gillmer
11 Red Cedar Ln
Minneapolis, MN 55410

Dexter Martin
629 6th Ave. N
Brookings, SD 57006

Augusta Sheppard Wilson
P.O. Box 220175
Hollywood, FL 33022

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MINNESOTA PUBLIC RADIO WEBSITE

Go to http://www.mpr.org/index_main.shtml, the Minnesota Public Radio website and type in "Sinclair Lewis" under Search. There are over 30 articles on Lewis. Here are some of the more interesting entries, most of which are abridged.

Listing: January 8, 2001 – January 14, 2001 (Almanac)

Frank Doubleday in 1897 joined with Samuel S. McClure to found his own [publishing] house. He published Joseph Conrad, Selma Lagerlöf, Sinclair Lewis, and many other great writers. He's also known for the terrible thing he did to Theodore Dreiser: after publishing Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* in 1900, he withdrew it almost immediately because he did not approve of it.

Listing: February 5, 2001 – February 11, 2001 (Almanac) [A similar entry has existed for the last several years.]

It's the birthday of writer Sinclair Lewis, born in Sauk Centre, Minnesota (1885), the son of a country doctor. He made his name with *Main Street* (1920), a novel portraying a small town.

Post to the Host (from the Prairie Home Companion) [October 2001]

Dear Garrison,
I love your PHC and have listened to it for a very long time. In all this time, however, I have not heard you mention perhaps Minnesota's most famous author, Sinclair Lewis. Also, it seems that Lewis was overtly shunned at the naming of the Fitzgerald Theater. Since you and Lewis find small town and rural midwestern life such rich sources of material, I am wondering why he seems to be persona non grata on PHC?

Leonard

Dear Leonard,
I read *Main Street* and *Babbitt* and *Arrowsmith* way back in high school and liked them all and think I'd probably like them again if I picked them up today and find him almost as funny as I did back then. Lewis's stock has fallen on the literary exchange, especially compared to

Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby* is a very popular unit in high school English classes and young people seem to identify with the perpetual adolescent that lurks in so much of FSF's writing. But PHC is not a program about literature. We don't talk about Lewis (or Fitzgerald, really) nor Hemingway nor Faulkner nor Cather nor Wharton nor any of Lewis's other contemporaries. We are a program of light fizzy entertainment and cheap thrills. [...] I am no Alfred Kazin to stand around lecturing on Sinclair Lewis.

Word of Mouth – June 8, 2001

Sinclair Lewis grew up in Sauk Center [sic] but spent many of his writing years in New York. He returned to Minnesota in the 1940s in a deliberate effort to restore connections to his home state, and to emulate Henry David Thoreau's contemplative life.

Word of Mouth – June 8, 2001

George Killough, editor of Lewis's *Minnesota Diary*, visits Lewis's Duluth home. [This has two great pictures.]

A Minnesota Century: Maud Hart Lovelace (News Feature) [February 2000]

When asked to name some of the state's best-known authors of the early 1900s, most Minnesotans will name F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis and Laura Ingalls Wilder. After all, who hasn't heard of *The Great Gatsby* and Lewis's *Main Street* [...]. [The entry actually discusses children's author Maud Hart Lovelace.]

Listing: October 22, 2001 (Writers Almanac)

It's the anniversary of the publication of Sinclair Lewis's novel, *Main Street*, first published by Harcourt, Brace and Howe on this date in 1920. The novel was denied a Pulitzer Prize in 1921 because it offended the sensibilities of Midwestern critics with its unflattering portrayal of life in the small town of Gopher City [sic], Minnesota.

IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE AS A POEM

With the permission of the Democratic Underground, we reprint this recent poem, also called "It Can't Happen Here." Please check out this website <http://www.democraticunderground.com>. The poem itself is at http://www.democraticunderground.com/articles/01/12/03_itcant.html. The poem recalls elements of James Whitcomb Riley's "Little Orphant Annie."

Pamela Troy (December 3, 2001)

When things get dark and scary
I don't give in to fear.
I think of what someone once said
In a book I haven't read
By what's-his-name (he's prob'ly dead.)
"It Can't Happen Here."

He must have been a wise man—
A 1930s seer.
Back then when the whole world shook
Frightened folks had but to look
And read the title of his book:
It Can't Happen Here.

AGRIPPINA

The illustration, by Frank Krug, appeared as the cover of the Autumn 2001 *Agrippina*, which featured an appreciation of Sinclair Lewis by Layne Moore. The magazine publishes a variety of poetry and prose as well as author appreciations. Check out their website at www.agrippinapress.com for more information.



Cover detail of the
Autumn 2001 *Agrippina*

Now in this time of trouble
We have to make it clear
That though most of us might have meant
To cast votes for that other gent
Bush really IS our President
Cause It Can't Happen Here.

Sure, we've locked up some foreigners
And while it may appear
They're being held in secrecy
From lawyers, friends and family
It's just protective custody
Cause It Can't Happen Here.

If we want information
That they won't share from sheer
Ignorance or audacity
We'll ship them someplace where they'll be
Treated with less gentility
(See? It Can't Happen HERE.)

And as for our own criminals
Who want a lawyer's ear,
They'll think twice before they sin!
How can lawbreakers ever win
When the DA can listen in?
No, It Can't Happen Here.

But still, there are non-patriots
Who only live to sneer.
And if our hearts are brave and stout
We'll make a list and soon drive out
Anyone who dares to doubt
That It Can't Happen Here.

I keep a copy with me.
I always have it near.
Though my edition isn't new
The cover's in Red White and Blue
So what it tells me must be true.
It Can't Happen Here.

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Sinclair Lewis as a paradigmatic American novelist' is the 'potential result' (her words) of my biography?"

Fred Betz responded to Jane Smiley's review on February 9, 2002.

[This response was not published]

To The Editor:

In her review in the *Times* (January 20), Jane Smiley suggests that "the re-emergence of Sinclair Lewis" is "a potential result of Richard Lingeman's new biography." In fact, the modern Lewis revival began already in 1985, when the centennial of his birth was marked by the New York Grolier Club's Sinclair Lewis Exhibition (organized by Daniel D. Chabris) and the St. Cloud, Minnesota "Sinclair Lewis at 100" Conference, both of which launched what has become a sustained and wide-ranging effort to re-evaluate Lewis's life and work as portrayed in Mark Schorer's unsympathetic biography of 1961. A few examples will have to suffice here: Sally Parry's Ph.D. dissertation (Fordham, 1986) on the "Darkening Vision" in Lewis's later (post-Nobel Prize [1930]) novels; the founding (1992) of the national Sinclair Lewis Society (by Parry et al.), which regularly publishes a scholarly newsletter and occasionally organizes a Lewis conference; the Library of America edition of *Main Street* and *Babbitt* (1992); the University of Nebraska Press Bison paperback editions of *Free Air* (1993), *The Job* (1994), and *Ann Vickers* (1994); the Penguin 20th Century Classics paperback editions of *Main Street* (1995) and *Babbitt* (1996); James Hutchisson's study of *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis, 1920-1930* (1996); a volume of new essays in Lewis criticism (Hutchisson, ed.) and a descriptive bibliography (Pastore) in 1997; new Signet Classics paperback editions of *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and *Arrowsmith* in 1998; the Random House Modern Library paperback editions of *Kingsblood Royal* (2001) and *Babbitt* (2002); and a forthcoming Library of America edition of *Arrowsmith*, *Elmer Gantry*, and *Dodsworth*. Lingeman's new biography is therefore not so much the catalyst for "the re-emergence of Sinclair Lewis" as the beneficiary of a Lewis revival since the mid-1980s.

Frederick Betz

President, The Sinclair Lewis Society
Carbondale, Illinois

From *The Washington Post Book World*
(January 20, 2002)

Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street by Richard Lingeman

By Jonathan Yardley

This review of the biography is generally sympathetic, although Yardley does tend to stress the earlier Lewis work, rather than the writings after 1930. He notes that "Sinclair Lewis was a strange, difficult, troubled man who published, in the early 1920s, two of the more important novels in American literature, *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, and several others that found wide, admiring, and long-lasting readership, most notably *Elmer Gantry*, *Arrowsmith* and *Dodsworth*. Like his contemporary and rival Theodore Dreiser, Lewis was not an unduly graceful or original prose stylist, but—also like Dreiser—he had a deep understanding of American society and the courage to depict it in his fiction with clarity and candor. [...]

"Literary reputations rise and fall according to fads and fashions among the critical establishment, and Lewis's has been no exception. He was a satirist, and a rather ham-handed one to boot, and the literati have always been a bit uneasy about satire, which may be fun to read but somehow doesn't seem all that serious. He also had the misfortune to follow his great successes of the 1920s with a long string of inferior novels that tended to cloud people's view of his early work. His big novels were obligatory reading in the contemporary literature courses of the 1950s, but it would not be surprising if they are now more widely studied as works of sociology than of literature.

"Yet Lewis apparently still has readers somewhere, as more than a half-dozen of his novels remain in print, and some of them enjoy decent sales." Yardley contrasts the new biography with Schorer's, noting that "Lingeman by contrast is sympathetic toward Lewis, albeit scarcely uncritical, and for this we should be grateful, as his assessment and portrait of Lewis doubtless are far fairer than were Schorer's."

After a brief summary of Lewis's life and the focus of his work, Yardley writes about Lewis's friendship with Alfred Harcourt and the pressure to live up to the standard he set with *Main Street*. He also sympa-

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thetically discusses Lewis's problems with alcohol and the damage that it did to his relationships with others. "The inner demons must have been screaming at him. [...] Lewis was able to find a rewarding life for himself at his writer's desk but precious little of the same in the world itself. [...]"

"His legacy is small but important. He was of course a penetrating satirist; he put Babbitt and Babbittury into the language as synonyms for boosterism and small-town insularity, and in so doing forced us to see ourselves more clearly than we had before. He also did

things that too few other ostensibly serious American writers have done: He wrote about real Americans and the real world in which they live, which is to say that he wrote about work and business and commerce. He turned up his nose at much of what he saw in the American workplace—the false sincerity, the glad-handing, the flag-waving—yet he was far from unsympathetic to those who labored there. Lingeman correctly points out that in the end George Babbitt is far more than a carica-

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Minnesota Public Radio *continued from page 7*

"Postcard from a Lynching: A Writer Brings the Story Back to Life" By Chris Julin and Stephanie Hemphill (MPR News Feature) [June 6, 2001]

As decades passed, memories of the lynching faded, like an old photograph tucked away in a shoebox. But they never disappeared. Over the years, pieces of the story worked their way to the surface in surprising ways. Back in the 1940s, Sinclair Lewis moved to Duluth after he'd won the Nobel Prize for literature. Lewis worked on his novel, *Kingsblood Royal*, in Duluth, and he interviewed Eddie Nichols and other black people about their memories of the lynching. Lewis set his story in a fictional northern Minnesota city an awful lot like Duluth. The book makes repeated references to lynching, and it bitterly attacks racism.

Twenty years after Lewis's novel, Bob Dylan recorded his song, "Desolation Row." Dylan was born in Duluth. His father lived in a downtown apartment at the time of the lynching, and almost certainly knew about it. Bob Dylan's song contains several fragments of the lynching story—the circus, a riot squad, the waf-fling police commissioner.

Ten more years passed, and in the mid-1970s, a teacher in the Twin Cities named Michael Fedo decided to write a historical novel. He planned to set the story in the early part of the century in his hometown of Duluth. As Fedo put together an outline of the book, he remembered something his mother had mentioned years before, in passing. There'd been a lynching. He knew nothing more about it, but he thought it might add a dramatic twist to his novel.

"It was going to be a peripheral event that I was going to include in a chapter perhaps. I would just simply pick up the book that somebody must have written back in 1925 or so—only to discover there was no book," says Fedo. "The historical society had a folder that had a few clippings in it, so I just started to poke around. After reading about it over the course of a week or two, I filled a spiral notebook with notes, and then I decided this is the story. This should have been written years ago, and I forgot about the novel and wrote this instead."

Fedo's book [*The Lynchings in Duluth*, published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press in paperback in 2000] came out in 1979. He says the initial response was, "overwhelming indifference." He sold about 3,000 copies before the small publisher went bankrupt. But it did get some people talking. A few high school teachers started using excerpts in their history classes. Local newspapers sometimes ran stories on the anniversary of the lynching. And a few people got to wondering about the question Fedo raised in the last paragraph of the book.

Where were the bodies? [This book is available on amazon.com.]

Minnesota Public Radio's Word of Mouth

Sinclair Lewis Diaries Listen to George Killough discuss the diaries <http://news.mpr.org/programs/wordofmouth/archive2001.html> (June 2001) [This an interview with George Killough, editor of Sinclair Lewis's *Minnesota Diary 1942-45*.] ✍

Summaries of Reviews *continued from page 10*

ture, that he is a human being with unfulfilled dreams and longings.

"Presumably Lingeman's biography will be widely reviewed and prominently displayed in bookstores, so for a few minutes Sinclair Lewis will be back in the news. If that leads a few more people to read the best of his books, Lingeman's labors will all have been worthwhile."

A response to the review by Lewis Society member Mitchell J. Freedman was sent to *The Washington Post*. [This response was not published.]

I must ask you, despite your generally sympathetic review of Lingeman's book: Have you read *Kingsblood Royal*, Lewis's mediation on race and how people see racial differences in others and themselves? Have you read Lewis's wonderful novel on marriage as an institution, *Cass Timberlane*? Or *Gideon Planish*, Lewis's dead on rendering of the politics and personalities within non-profit organizations?

I ask these questions because I, a mere lawyer in my mid-40's, have read these novels and found them anything but "inferior." In fact, over the past four or five years, I've read most of Lewis's 22 novels and found most of them compelling and all of them a delight. After I devour Mr. Lingeman's bio, I will be finishing the Lewis novels (missing only his first and third ones, both before *Main Street!*).

It is a shame, though, if Mr. Lingeman has not given full due to the post-Nobel Prize novels including not only the above, but also the great feminist and social welfare novel, *Ann Vickers* or the brilliantly crafted *Work of Art*.

Mr. Yardley, I continue to be mystified at the conceit of English literature professors across America who have consistently denigrated Lewis's writing style. I have read Dreiser, Cather, and other Lewis contemporaries, including London, who I enjoy second to Lewis. I do not feel that any of them deserved the Nobel Prize as much as Lewis. Lewis wrote in a voice that was sharp, ironic and—most important for modern readers who think those first two attributes must necessarily be mean spirited—humane. That combination of sharpness, irony, and humanity—and often enough humility—is exceedingly rare and should be praised without the usual negative comments about Lewis that *Lewis's first biogra-*

pher, Schorer, made so respectable.

I must also take exception to your contention that Lewis's novels may have more interest as "sociology" than as "literature." This strikes me as facile. Great literature should reveal a mature and wise understanding of human interactions within human-created systems or the wilds of nature and climate. Lewis's novels, both before and after 1930 (the year he won the Prize), explain the American culture of business—in essence, America's culture overall—and how people behave and interact in that culture. Harold Laski and Calvin Coolidge both said, in their own ways and from their own very different viewpoints, that business is the essence of America. Lewis was the muse who dug deeply and insightfully into that observation for not only Americans but for the world.

Mr. Yardley, I am glad you wrote a generally positive review of Mr. Lingeman's new book and about Lewis. I am very happy you have discerned that Babbitt is a very complicated and sympathetic character in the hands of Lewis. But I must still tell you that Lewis deserves even better than you gave. For in my view, Lewis stands as America's greatest novelist of the Twentieth Century. He should be read *today* as the latest American-led economic bubble has burst, for his insight is as timely as *tomorrow's* news.

Mitchell J. Freedman

From the *San Francisco Chronicle*
(January 20, 2002: M5)

"Sinclair Lewis's Measuring Stick: New Biography Makes a Case for the Author and How He Found the United States Lacking"

By Martin Rubin

This is one of the most perceptive and positive reviews of both Lewis and the new biography. "Today, neither Dreiser nor Lewis is much read, and Richard Lingeman, who made a valiant case for the importance of Dreiser in a biography some years back, now attempts, with this latest book, to restore Lewis to his rightful place in the literary canon." Rubin discusses Lewis's novels of the 1920s and then asks, "Why, then, do we not read Lewis today? Very few of his books are even in print. Lingeman addresses the questions of Lewis's

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eclipse in the decades following his death in 1951 with intelligence and perspicacity.” He notes Schorer’s disdain for Lewis, and comments that “Lingeman ascribes this attitude to the hegemony of the ‘New Critics, who placed text above social context,’ and this is true. Today, there is no one critical orthodoxy holding sway, but looking at Lewis’s prose now, one cannot but be struck by how different the style is from the American novel of today. Even in the 1920s, Hemingway began to take American literature away from the discursive style that Lewis had adapted from his literary models, the English writers Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells.

“Three-quarters of a century on, such influences as the *New Yorker* magazine, the Iowa School of Writers and minimalism have made the heartiness and insistent authorial presence of Lewis’s narrative a bit jarring to contemporary ears. But just as we adjust our expectations when we read the Victorian styles of Dickens and George Eliot, so too should we make this effort for Lewis, whose heyday (amazing though it be to contemplate) is chronologically closer to their time than to

ours.” This effort, Rubin says, is well worth doing because of Lewis’s strengths as a literary sociologist, his high standards for American life, and his “anger at some banality or stupidity or injustice. [...]

“As is obvious from the contrast between Lingeman’s and Schorer’s summing up of Lewis, this latest biographer is far more sympathetic in every sense than was his predecessor. He is a competent analyst of the novels and is wise enough to make no claims for the many less accomplished works that crowd Lewis’s considerable oeuvre. Lingeman is sensitive to the demons and pressures that tormented Lewis.” Rubin thinks that Lingeman should have made more of Lewis’s opposition to Stalinism but finds this a minor flaw.

“*Sinclair Lewis: Rebel From Main Street* should reintroduce a new generation of readers to a novelist whose insights are much needed now. *Arrowsmith* and *Elmer Gantry* are truly subversive novels today, highlighting, respectively, the altruism essential to good medical practice and the hypocrisy that has played such a notable part in the tradition of American evangelical preachers. Both novels are not currently on most readers’ radar screens, but with tens of millions of Americans denied access to medical insurance and evangelical religiosity playing an even greater role in American politics, they are timely indeed.”

From *Publishers Weekly* (December 10, 2001: 60)

This short summary of the biography makes a good case for its selling well. “Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951) lived in an era of American literary giants: there was Dreiser (whose life Lingeman has also written), James, Wharton and Hemingway, just to name a few. But Lewis himself is remembered as an author of middling distinction who achieved celebrity with pointed satires of American mores, particularly in *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and *Elmer Gantry*. Lingeman’s absorbing biography, however, makes critics’ offhand treatment of Lewis seem misplaced. [...] Lingeman, a senior editor at the *Nation*, succeeds in capturing the giddy, forward progression of Lewis’s life, full of obsessions and accidents; it’s only at the end that one realizes that one has finished a tragedy. Although relatively few readers may set out to read a life of Sinclair Lewis, this well-crafted

SINCLAIR LEWIS SCHOLARSHIP

Princeton University Press has published Sinclair Lewis Society member Catherine Jurca’s *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth Century American Novel* (2001). She read a part of her chapter on Lewis at the 1997 Sinclair Lewis Conference in Sauk Centre.

Lucy Zhang (Zhang Hai-rong) has had her article, “The Writing Career of Sinclair Lewis,” published in the *Journal of Luoyang Teachers College* (2001.6). She is using some of the same themes from the article that was published in the last *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*, “Standardization and Conformity: A Critical Study of Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt*” (Fall 2001:7+). Among the issues she discusses are his American style and the early feminist thought in his writing.

Weymouth Symmes presented a paper on Lewis to the Pen & Plate Club in Asheville, North Carolina, in January. The title of his presentation was “Recollections of the Years between the Great Wars as Seen through the Novels of Sinclair Lewis.”

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biography holds many rewards for those who find it. [...]

“Forecast: Thanks to the reputation Lingeman established with his acclaimed life of Dreiser, this will receive widespread review attention, which may draw more than the usual number of readers for a literary bio.”

From *The New Yorker* (Feb. 4, 2002: 77-80)

“No Brakes: A New Biography of Sinclair Lewis”

By John Updike

This is one of the worst reviews of the biography, notably because Updike seems to have such a dislike for Lewis. His opening sentence, “What has Sinclair Lewis done lately to deserve a new, five-hundred-and-fifty-four-page (plus notes and index) biography [. . .]?” certainly reveals his bias. Updike tends to want to place Lewis somewhere in a literary hierarchy, preferably as low as he can, despite Lewis’s literary achievements. He puts him “a slot below that of Theodore Dreiser [. . .] and above that of Upton Sinclair.” He acknowledges

Lewis as a publishing sensation and grudgingly notes that *Babbitt* “comes closer to being a contemporary classroom standard” than *Main Street*, but neither is in a class with Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Updike certainly finds Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald to be more interesting writers, observing that “a certain attic dust of datedness, as on quickly obsolete gadgetry, began to gather on Lewis’s sensational novels as early as 1930 [. . .].”

“No doubt it is to blow the dust off the oeuvre that Lingeman has undertaken to tell the author’s tale again,” says Updike, but then compares this biography unfavorably to Mark Schorer’s. He finds Schorer’s biography “more energetic, more circumstantial, more engaging, and more earnestly analytical than Lingeman’s.” Updike seems to want a longer book, with more quotations, and to cover ground that has already been covered. “Lewis’s foremost virtue comes across as his brute industry: he was heroically able to rise, in whatever unhomey shelter his wanderlust had brought him to,

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CYBERSURFARI AND LEWIS

CyberSafari is an Internet treasure hunt. They describe themselves as follows: “We have a large following of students and their teachers and parents. We are teaming up with the National Education Association to launch a special CyberSafari to promote Read Across America, their event scheduled for March 1st. To get people excited about the event, we are planning a special CyberSafari devoted entirely to READING. The CyberSafari Reading Challenge will launch on February 1st.”

The Sinclair Lewis website was asked to participate in the CyberSafari Reading challenge. We were told to write a question or “clue” that will direct players to a specific piece of information on our site. They then posted the clue on their site along with a link to our homepage. Students visit our site to find the answer, and when they do, it will be a link to this special page which will allow them to enter

their code for credit.

A non-profit organization administers CyberSafari and their mission is to educate students, teachers, and parents about the great resources available to them on the Web. They can be found at <http://www.cybersafari.org>.

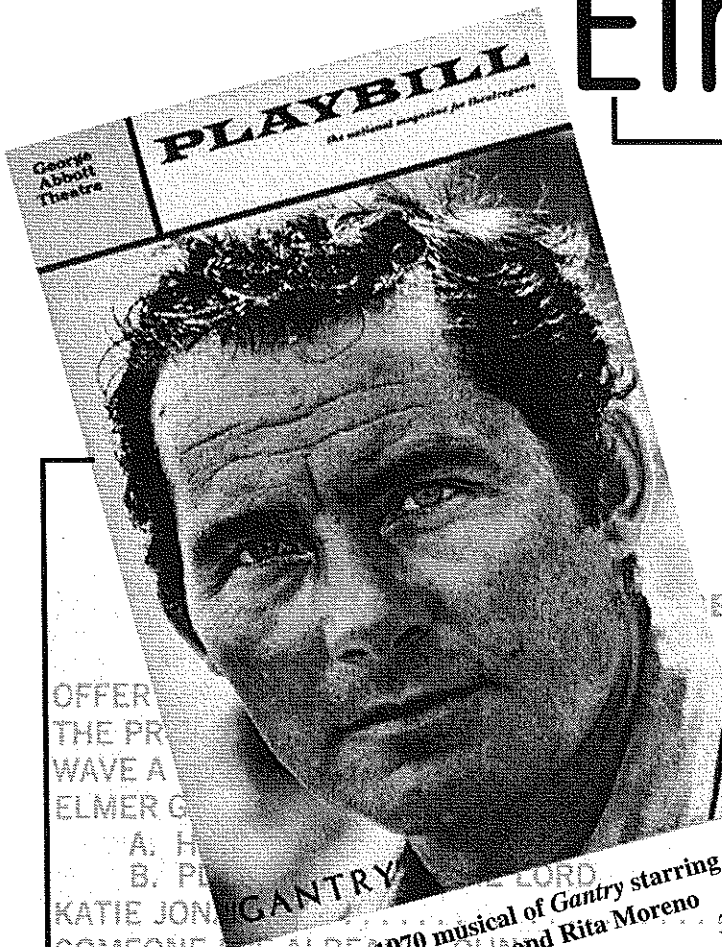
Here’s the clue for the Lewis page.

Sinclair Lewis was the first American novelist to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. His first best-selling novel was *Main Street*, written in 1920. What was the name of Carol’s baby?

Answer: Hugh

This will take them from the Home Page to the Main Street Page where they will get to read a substantial part of the excerpt in order to find the answer.

Elmer Gantry



PLAYBILL
The national newspaper for the theater

George Abbott
Theatre

Marriott's Lincolnshire Theatre

ELMER GANTRY

based on the novel by Sinclair Lewis

Written by: John Bishop
Music by: Mel Marvin
Lyrics by: Bob Satuloff
Originally produced at Ford's Theatre, Francis Hewitt, Producing Artistic Director

Starring
TOM ZEMON
DAVID STUDDWELL
JOEL HATCH
KERRY O'MALLEY
FELICIA FIELDS

Set Design by: Thomas M. Ryan
USAA
Costume Design by: Nancy Shuons
USAA
Lighting Design by: Diane Perry Williams
USAA
Properties Design by: Kathy Kluisner
Sound Design by: David Lewis
Orchestrations by: Michael Gibson
Choreographed by: Kenny Ingram
Directed by: Eric D. Schaeffer

Scene 1. A spring day in the 1920s
"Riders on the Road"
Scene 2. Later that night at a
"Shine"
"Riders on the Road"
Scene 3. Aboard the railcar
"Saved"
Scene 4. Sioux City, Iowa
"Dangerous"
Scene 5. Sharon's dress
"Dangerous"
Scene 6. On the road
"Riders on the Road"
"I've Got an App"
"Dangerous"
Scene 7. A Hotel Room
"Night Heat"
Scene 8. Fort Snell
"Carry That"
"No Greater"

Scene 1. The
"He's Co"
Scene 2. To
"With Y"
"Shine"
"Cross"
"Bore"
"Not"

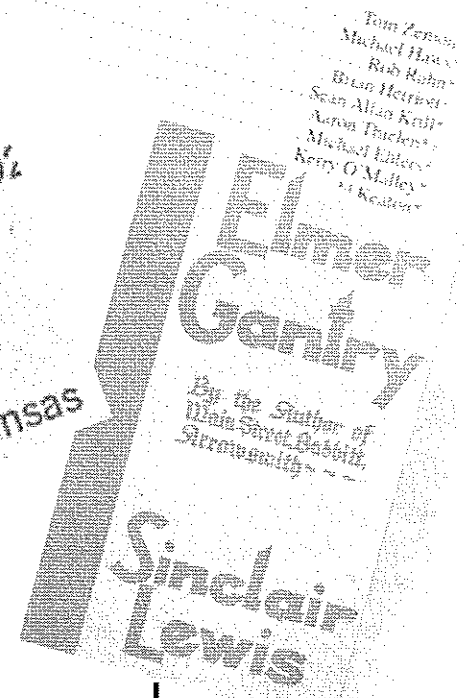
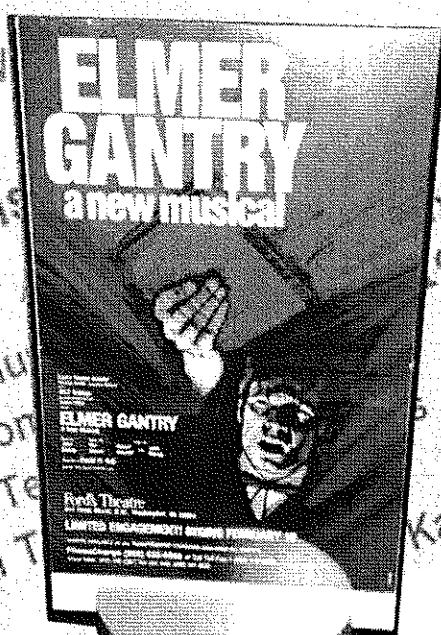
The 1970 musical of *Gantry* starring
Robert Shaw and Rita Moreno

This 1998 musical version of *Elmer Gantry* had a new book, music, and lyrics, but a similar structure to the 1970 musical

OFFER
THE PR
WAVE A
ELMER G
A. H
B. P
KATIE JON
GANTRY
SOMEONE I'VE ALREA
HE'S NEVER TOO BUSY
HE'S NEVER TOO BUSY
WE'RE SHARIN' SHARON

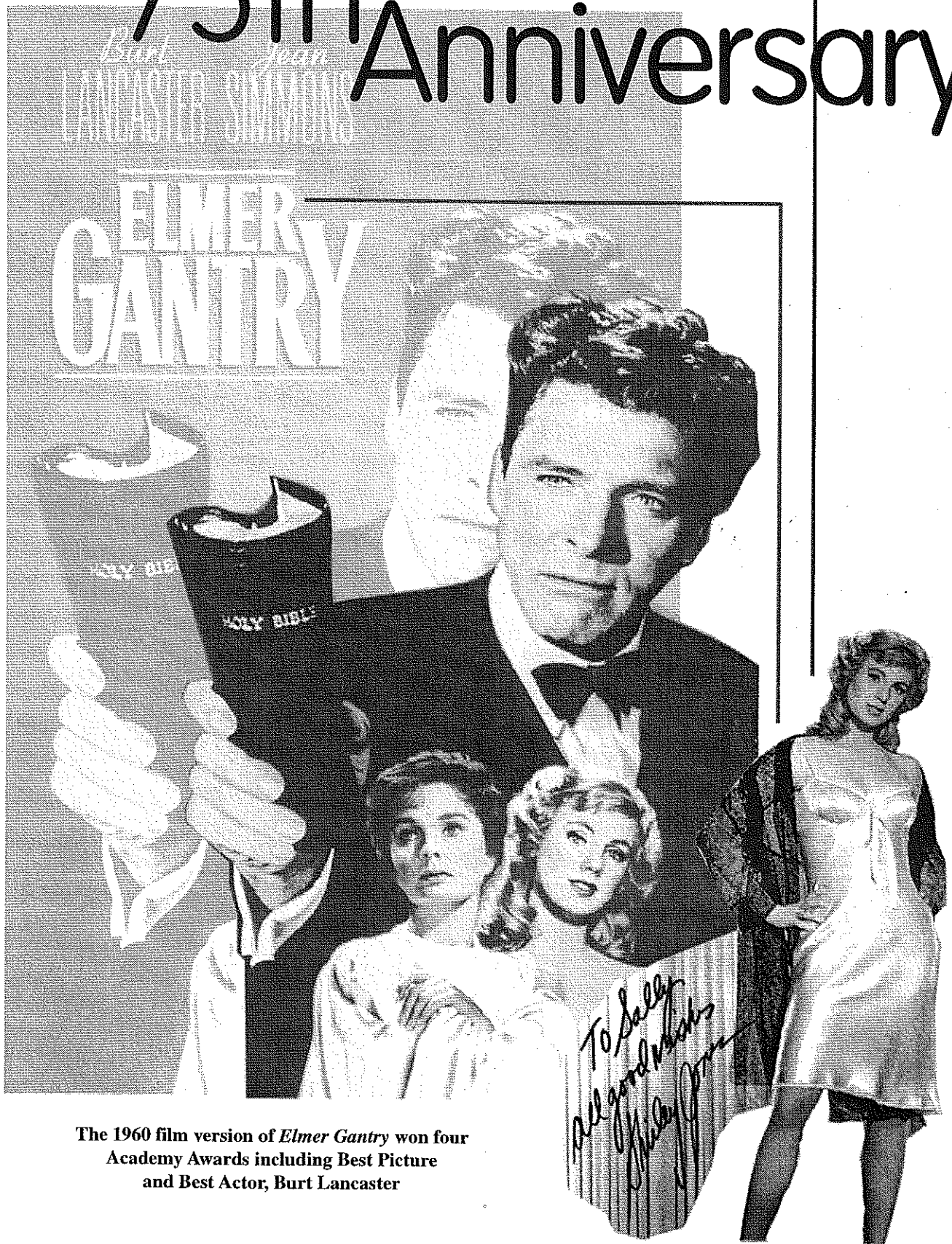
SYNOPSIS

- Scene 1 Baptist Church
- Scene 2 Hotel Room
- Scene 3 Revival Tent
- Scene 4 Revival Tent
- Scene 5 Train
- Scene 6 Revival Tent



An earlier musical version of the Bishop, Marvin, and Satuloff *Elmer Gantry* was performed at Ford's Theater in Washington,

75th Anniversary



The 1960 film version of *Elmer Gantry* won four Academy Awards including Best Picture and Best Actor, Burt Lancaster

Shirley Jones won a Best Supporting Actress Academy Award for playing Lulu Baines

SECOND MIDWESTERN STUDIES AWARD

The Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature and Ohio University Press announce a call for completed, single-authored, book-length scholarly manuscripts. Manuscripts may address various aspects of cultural and literary history and conditions from or about the states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, the Dakotas, Kansas, or Nebraska, or other areas considered "Midwestern." Projects addressing single figures are welcomed. Pertinent authors might include Cather, Lincoln, Howells, Dreiser, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Brooks, Erdrich, Morrison, Lewis, Anderson, and dozens of others. Manuscripts addressing the Midwestern experience of particular ethnicities, races, and genders are welcome. Manuscripts are especially encouraged to engage theoretical aspects of Midwestern history and culture. The winning manuscript will be published by Ohio University Press.

Edited republications of primary sources, collections of essays (single or multi-authored), and festschrifts will not be considered. Applicants must be either members of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature, or must join before his or her manuscript is considered. The Society hosts a conference in East Lansing, Michigan, every spring, and convenes panels at the Modern Language Association, the American Literature Association, the Midwest Modern Language Association, and the Popular Culture/American Culture Association meetings annually.

Address all inquiries or submissions to:
Edward Watts
American Thought and Language
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 48824
wattse@msu.edu

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through whatever grisly thickness of hangover, and go to this typewriter and pound his daily five thousand words." He speaks of Lewis's revision process, not with praise at the awareness of the need for revision, but rather to further critique his writing as "an industrial process."

Even Updike's discussion of Lewis as a person drips with disdain. He never wrote a *Moon-Calf* type novel, as he notes along with Schorer, as though this were a major failing. Updike calls Lewis a mooncalf though, "spindly, pimply, ill-coordinated, unpopular, romantically book-obsessed. And a mooncalf he remained, while acquiring wealth enough to wear London suits, travel through Europe, buy big houses, divorce two women, and get radium treatments for his face that ravaged it further." Reducing Lewis's life to this list does Lewis a tremendous disservice. Updike says that he "would have welcomed from Lingeman a more detailed medical account of Lewis's red, riddled face" as though Lewis's looks were the primary key to understanding the author. In continuing his discussion of Lewis the

person, Updike focuses on Lewis's annoying habits, his drinking, his mimicry, and amateur acting. One wonders how Lewis found time to do all the writing he did, if he spent most of his waking hours constantly talking, as Updike seems to imply.

In critiquing Lewis's writing, Updike notes, "Further, his satire, as more politically committed critics pointed out, ends up in a kind of hopeless surrender to the values satirized." He incorrectly says that "his novels have happy endings," which would surprise most of his characters including Carol Kennicott, George Babbitt, and Neil Kingsblood, who may be wiser than they were at the beginning of their respective novels, but have to settle for their lives rather than really enjoy them. He also criticizes Lewis for acting distant after his son was killed in the war, not taking into account that because of the way Lewis was brought up he may have been uncomfortable with discussions about his feelings.

In closing, Updike gives some credit to Lewis,

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citing John O'Hara's comment that "All the other novelists and journalists and Babbitt himself were equally blind to Babbitt and Zenith and the United States of America until 1922.' Who in the last century more manfully and systematically attempted to fill the demand, in recent times voiced by Tom Wolfe and Jonathan Franzen, that American novelists cast off solipsism and introverted delicacy and embrace the nation as it exists, in its striving variety and dynamism." He complains that there is not much updating of Schorer except for a greater "sexual frankness." Oddly, Updike, who has been compared to Lewis, especially in connection with the Rabbit series, fails to appreciate the man as artist and writer. "It is the conflicting fate of an American artist to long for profundity while suspecting that, most profoundly, none exists; all is surface, and rather flimsy surface at that. [. . .] Affection may be what he wanted, but attention is what he got."

From *The Atlantic Monthly* (February 2002: 98-101)
"Sheer Data"

By Benjamin Schwarz

This review, like Updike's, starts with a startlingly vicious attack on Lewis as both author and person. He opens his review with "Richard Lingeman has set himself a thankless task. A new biography of Sinclair Lewis, whose novels have been regarded as old but not classic for half a century, is decidedly not in demand. Lewis's dismal reputation stems largely from the trajectory of his career, which concluded with one of the longest and most depressing anticlimaxes in American letters. After a lengthy and unrewarding apprenticeship, during which he wrote five forgettable and forgotten novels, Lewis published *Main Street* [...]." Schwarz seems not to have read the post *Main Street* novels and calls the other bestsellers of the 1920s "all important books, though none could rival *Main Street*, and each was worse than the previous one." He notes that Lewis had several commercial successes after 1930, "but all these works were at best undistinguished, and many were downright terrible."

However, it seems that Schwarz admires *Main Street* as a record of Midwestern life in the 1920s, and following E. M. Forster's observations about the novel, spends about half of the review discussing *Main Street* in terms of plot, character, and detail. He finds that

Lingeman doesn't bring any "startling episodes" that Schorer didn't mention first and seems unpersuaded by Lingeman's contentions about Lewis as a "literary sociologist." After *Main Street*, Schwarz finds Lewis's writing growing increasingly coarser, and he even criticizes *Babbitt* too much for its mimicry of language. "Through his accumulation of detail Lewis painted the most vivid and comprehensive picture we have of the middle-class heartland as it was being fully subsumed by a national economy and a consumer culture—an event that historians now recognize as one of the most far-reaching social transformations in American history. These novels are much less successful as explorations of character and motivation than they are, to paraphrase Lingeman, as works of literary sociology, and fiction was perhaps not the most appropriate vehicle with which to impart the world Lewis observed." Like Forster, Schwarz contends that Lewis's later books were bound to be disappointing because they were primarily photography, and "photography is a pursuit for the young." Schwarz ends on an oddly elegiac note. "But the consolation Forster offered continues to be the best reason—aside from *Main Street*, the only reason—to read Lewis: 'The historian of our future will cease to worry over this, will pick up the earlier and brighter volumes [...] and will find there not only genius, but a record of our age.'"

From Minneapolis's *Star Tribune* (January 20, 2002)
"Master from Main Street: A Nuanced Bio of Sinclair Lewis Revisits Minnesota's Troubled Nobel Laureate."
By Roger K. Miller

Miller's review shows an awareness of how Mark Schorer's biography has set the tone for more recent readers and scholars of Lewis. He notes, "In recent years you could hardly pick up a paperback of a Sinclair Lewis novel without finding somewhere on its covers this partial quotation from Mark Schorer's 1961 biography of Lewis: 'without his writing one cannot imagine modern American literature.'

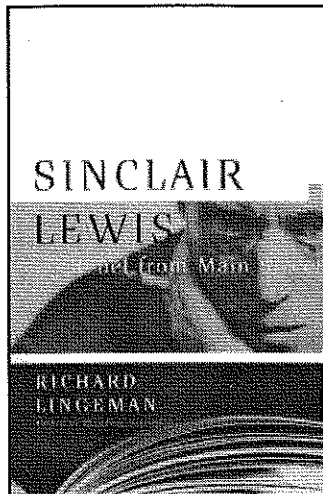
"High praise, eh? But the paperbacks, understandably, rarely quoted the first half of that sentence: 'He was one of the worst writers in modern American literature.' Those 11 words at the end of Schorer's

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massive biography cap what the previous 800 pages had been building: a tone of disapproval of Lewis' life and work that has colored perceptions of the man and writer for the last four decades."

Miller says that Lingeman's "excellent and far more favorable new biography [...] may go some way toward encouraging the slight, though noticeable, uptick in appreciation of Lewis among today's critics.



Richard Lingeman's new biography of Sinclair Lewis (Random House, 2002)

of the reviewers, Miller gets caught up in the unhappy aspects of Lewis's life and says very little about the fiction. He mentions Lewis's drinking, looks, loneliness, sense of rootlessness, and "prickly personality, which combined a defensive vanity with persistent feelings of self-doubt. Lewis was a hair-trigger volcano of vituperation who could erupt at the tiniest slight, real or imagined."

Miller's recommendation does end with high praise, "Perhaps it is not too much to hope, then, that this is what will appear on future Lewis paperbacks, words from the end of his latest biography: 'His fiction functioned at its highest pitch when galvanized by anger at some banality or stupidity or injustice ... he wrote with a real moral passion. He really cared.'"

"If it does, it won't be easy. Consider that this is only the second major biography since the death of the first American to win the Nobel Prize in literature [...]. Then consider how many biographies and studies have been done of his fellow Minnesotan, F. Scott Fitzgerald."

The review shows an awareness of how critical attention in general has been drawn away from various realist writers including Lewis and Dreiser. But, like many

From *The Wall Street Journal*

(January 18, 2002: W8)

"At Odds with America, at War with Himself."

By Kenneth Silverman

This review was very positive, discussing Lewis's life and works, and noting, "in only four years he produced three novels that endure as landmarks of the nation's social and literary history." Silverman praises the biography as "a model of its kind: vivid but never overdrawn, written in a lean, wry prose that stays grounded in the documentary evidence. He tends to summarize rather than interpret Lewis's novel. But from the maps, notebooks and outlines that Lewis compiled during the complex planning stage of each work, he revealingly reconstructs Lewis's unusual method of composition." Silverman also speaks admiringly of Lewis's research, commenting especially on the fieldwork he did for *Kingsblood Royal*.

Like the other reviewers, Silverman notes Lewis's sadness and loneliness, his drinking and self-consciousness about his appearance. He mentions some of the reasons for Lewis's inability to maintain close friendships or marriages. "His critique of America, Mr. Lingeman comments, was a larger version of the same self-defeated craving: 'As he did with his friends, he demanded too much of his country. He hated it with the passion of a jilted lover.'"

However, Silverman ends his commentary of this talented and tormented man on a very positive note. "Mr. Lingeman's sensitive biography makes pitifully clear what Lewis's driver, Ace Lyons, meant in calling him 'the loneliest man on earth.' It also inspires renewed admiration for Sinclair Lewis the artist. 'Babbitt' and 'Main Street,' in particular keep hold of their minor-classic status, combining closely observed detail, scathing social critique and, beneath the surface, a humane sympathy for their characters, in all their confused humanity." ✍



View the
Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter
Online!

<http://iilt.ilstu.edu/Separry/Newsletter.html>



SINCLAIR LEWIS NOTES

Lewis is still referred to in times of crisis. In a *Wall Street Journal* editorial, "Attack Offers Lessons on People and Markets," from September 20, 2001, David Wessel notes, "Freedom is tenuous. In 1935, Sinclair Lewis, the social critic and novelist, published *It Can't Happen Here*, a novel that warned that the despair of the Great Depression might allow an evilly ambitious U.S. politician to become a dictator by promising a quick fix, much as Hitler did in Germany in 1933. It didn't happen here. But in times of fear, Americans sometimes rush to do things they later regret—the internment of the Japanese in World War II, the inquisition led by Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s."

————— SLSN —————

Paul Theroux also finds resonance with *It Can't Happen Here*. In his *Fresh Air Fiend/Travel Writings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), he writes, "Memory can be a burden, and can seem a bore. In Sinclair Lewis's novel of the future, *It Can't Happen Here*, one of the hero's perorations about remembering sounds tedious to his listeners until America falls apart under a fascist dictatorship. [...] That is why it is often better to look at the past, or at the reality around us, through the window of fiction. A nation's literature is a truer repository of thought and experience, or reality and time, than the fickle and forgettable words of politicians. [...] Memory is power" (34).

————— SLSN —————

Heidi Benson in the *San Francisco Chronicle Magazine* writes of a San Francisco book group, which, in the aftermath of September 11, chose to read Lewis's *Dodsworth*. The leader of the group explained that they all wanted an "American story" (October 21, 2001: 4).

————— SLSN —————

In another article related to the events of September 11, Ron Grossman in the *Chicago Tribune* wrote about how Western civilization had already been under attack with words if not weapons. In "Looking for Freedom? Check a Mirror," he writes of attacks on Western civilization courses and Western culture. "Sinclair Lewis probably

received some 'drop dead you atheist' hate mail for his novel *Elmer Gantry*, a scathing account of a Christian fundamentalist preacher. But the American novelist didn't have to go into hiding. Neither did the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis, even though some thought his novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* was blasphemous" (3).

————— SLSN —————

In the October 22, 2001 *New Yorker* review by of the screenplay of Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot*, with interviews by Dan Auiler and edited by Alison Castle, Anthony Lane notes, "In 1933, when Hitler came to power, Wilder moved to Paris [...]. Less than a year later, as if the needle of his talent were seeking magnetic north, he came to America, bearing, according to Ed Sikov, copies of *Babbitt*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *Look Homeward, Angel*, and the sum of eleven dollars" (75).

————— SLSN —————

In a review of *Family Business: Selected Letters between a Father and Son*, by Allen Ginsberg and Louis Ginsberg, edited by Michael Schumacher (New York: Bloomsbury, 2001), reviewer Henry Taylor mentions a letter Allen wrote to his father in May 1963, "We didn't have one monster Stalin, we only had familiar Babbitt monsters so nobody recognizes how really perverse America became, and how much there is to revolt against. It's that very quality of blandness & smartness that's disguised the literal murderousness of U.S. heart & specifically U.S. policy, as in Vietnam & Formosa" (*New York Times Book Review*, September 30, 2001: 26).

————— SLSN —————

Jonathan Franzen, author of the best-seller *The Corrections*, has been the subject of much controversy since he was uninvited by Oprah Winfrey's show and dismissed middlebrow readers (many of whom had bought his novel). In the *New York Times Week in Review* (November 4, 2001), A. O. Scott discusses how authors have an ambivalent reaction to their readers and their preferences, "because it threatens to lump their books together

with products they deem inferior, and to level the distinctions that allow them to see themselves as serious in the first place. From Sinclair Lewis to Ann Beattie, from John Cheever to Jonathan Franzen, the middle class has provided novelists with subject matter—and also with readers—and the result is that writers must court the favor of the people whose way of life they anatomize” (4).

—SLSN—

In the November/December issue of *National Parks*, Ryan Dougherty, in an article entitled “A Final Harbor,” writes of the Eugene O’Neill National Historic Site in Danville, California. Tao House, which O’Neill and his wife Carlotta lived in from the late 1930s until 1944, was the site where he composed *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. “In 1930, social critic and fellow playwright Sinclair Lewis defined O’Neill’s impact on American theater: ‘O’Neill has done nothing much in American drama save to transform it utterly in the last 10 or 12 years from a false world of neat and competent trickery to a world of splendor, fear, and greatness’” (43). [Note: this quote is from Lewis’s Nobel Prize address but is inaccurately quoted. For the full text of his address, “The American Fear of Literature,” see <http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1930/lewis-lecture.html>.]

—SLSN—

The Sweet Valley High series also has a novel called *It Can’t Happen Here* (Sweet Valley Twins #86).

Amazon.com provides the following description:

Social studies class gets a lot more exciting when a visiting teacher, Mr. Levin, comes to Sweet Valley Middle School to teach the students a game. The rules are simple: Mr. Levin tells the students what to wear the next day, and they get points for obedience and demerits for disobedience. They get extra points for rattling on anyone who disobeys.

Everyone loves the game, especially Aaron Dallas, who is determined to be the best player of all. But Elizabeth Wakefield thinks something is fishy. Why is it so important that everyone dress the exact same way? And if it’s just a game, why is everyone taking it so seriously?”

One reader noted, “I thought that *It Can’t Happen Here* was a great book. If you would like to learn about racism, physical abuse, and what’s cool and not cool, then read this book.” Another wrote, “I re-read this book as an adult & yes, one of the other reviewers was right on the money when they said it was an excellent teaching tool about the Holocaust. It can very easily happen even here in the U.S. When you have the cliques who gang up on other kids & make fun of others & exclude others, it needs to be taken seriously, not passed off as just ‘normal’ adolescent or childhood games. [...] We need more books like this to make sure this kind of history never repeats itself.”

[I’m sure that Lewis would agree with the sentiments of the above writer.]

The Sinclair Lewis Homepage
First American to win the Noble Prize for Literature

BIBLIOGRAPHY
“Babbitt and the Dream of Romance.” by Robert W. Lewis from *North Dakota Quarterly*

FAQ
What were culture and politics like in the 1920s and 1930s when Lewis was writing?

QUOTES
“There had to be one man in town independent enough to sass the banker!”
—from *Main Street*

BIOGRAPHY
His analysis of the America of the 1920’s holds true for the America of today.

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

LEWIS AND THE WEB: INFORMATION AND REQUESTS

Do check out the Sinclair Lewis Society website. Thanks to Christina Butzen and Layne Moore, it has undergone some needed updating. Among the changes are two new categories: FAQ (frequently asked questions) and Quotes (provided by Rusty Allred). Also, the category on the new biography will soon contain responses by Richard Lingeman about his experiences with completing his book.

We've had another 10,000 visits to the Sinclair Lewis website since the fall newsletter. Hopefully some of this interest in Lewis has been piqued by Lingeman's new biography. Here is a selection of recent e-mails received from people who contacted the website. Material in brackets are either answers that were sent or comments by the editor. I hope you enjoy reading them.

————— SLSN —————

Many years ago, Sinclair Lewis authored a well-reported article expressing his appreciation of the US, and I would like to have the text of that article, if it is possible. [The website received several requests for this article after September 11, although what is actually being referred to is an article by the Canadian journalist Gordon Sinclair. The article can be accessed at <http://sinclair.quarterman.org/sinclair/who/gordon.html>].

————— SLSN —————

Here's a series of e-mails from a reporter from *Forbes*.

1) I am trying on a tight deadline to confirm a quote that supposedly comes from *Main Street*. The quote is: "It's difficult to get someone to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it." Can you tell me whether this is, word for word, the correct quote?

2) I have now searched both *Main Street* and *Babbitt* online (except for the final chapter of *Babbitt*, which was unavailable) for key words from the quote, "understand" and "salary," to no avail. Any idea where else it could be?

3) I have solved our mystery. [...] The person who made the quote was apparently confusing Sinclair Lewis with Upton Sinclair. I certainly appreciate your efforts

and sorry to have sent you on any kind of goose chase.
Best,
Ian Zack
Reporter
Forbes Magazine

————— SLSN —————

My Dad passed away recently and among his things I found a short letter written to Hugh Rankin, 63 Wall Street, NY, NY from Sinclair Lewis. The stationery is from "Twin Farms, Barnard, Vermont" and the letter tells of going to Vienna till the spring of 1932. It also states, "so that M. Michael Lewis, age 15 months, may have room in which to breathe and holler." Can any of this information be validated from your research?

————— SLSN —————

I heard a quote from Sinclair Lewis today at Church. It was so beautiful and thought provoking that I would like to read the book or article where it is found. I'm paraphrasing this: it stated that if we could see our neighbors as they can become glorious beings, that we would feel like worshipping them. Please forgive my inability to remember the spoken word, but it made a big impression on me. [If anyone knows the source, please let the editor of the newsletter know.]

————— SLSN —————

If you search "Lewis's *The Jungle*" on the web — many people attribute the meatpacking novel to Sinclair Lewis instead of Upton Sinclair.

I myself thought all these years that *Babbitt* and *The Jungle* were written by the same author...

————— SLSN —————

I am a fact checker at the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine and I have a question about Sinclair Lewis I'm hoping you can help me with. The book review I'm checking says that Gopher Prairie from *Main Street* is a "small western-Minnesota town." I'm having trouble confirming "western." Do you know if this is where it is supposed to be located?

————— SLSN —————

I am currently painting a portrait of Sinclair Lewis for a major review. Could you supply me with medium to high resolution photographic portraits, e-mailed to me in jpeg files, of Lewis to use as reference? Unfortunately, the budget implied by my commission won't allow me to pay much of a fee, but I could donate an honorarium to the Society in return for any help you can provide. Thank you very much, Dugald Stermer [His portrait of Lewis was done for the *New York Times Book Review*.]

————— SLSN —————

1) Please inform me where to write or e-mail for permission to quote a passage from Sinclair Lewis's novel *Arrowsmith*, published in 1926 or '27. I want to quote a passage of roughly 60-70 words. Please tell me if the book is considered in the public domain, whether the heirs (if any) consider 70 words "fair use," and if they charge for permissions.

2) Thanks for your e-mail re. Lewis permissions, which is a big help. I'll be contacting the estate attorney Mr. Winick soon. Look for my book THREE HYPOTHESES whenever it comes out (hopefully soon). Gerald Solof

————— SLSN —————

In four days, I will begin teaching my 11th grade English class. Their summer reading book was *Elmer Gantry*, and I was wondering if it would be possible to be mailed a summary of the book from The Sinclair Lewis Society. If this request cannot be made, I would also appreciate being told where to look for some information to help guide the teaching of my class. [no comment]

————— SLSN —————

Do you know if the original "plots" that Lewis wrote for London are available for the average reader to enjoy, or were they just something that he gave directly to Jack London?

LEWIS BOOKS AND MEMORABILIA VALUES

I would like to purchase all books written by Lewis but am having a great deal of trouble locating many of them. Is there a publishing house that would have his entire collection?

————— SLSN —————

I recently found a letter from Sinclair Lewis to my grandfather, dated 1935. Is this of any interest or value?

————— SLSN —————

In 1967, I purchased at an auction two Sinclair Lewis first editions: *Our Mr. Wrenn* and *Arrowsmith*, both in library bindings. I was a college student at the time and noticed the books in a box of otherwise uninteresting titles. The auction included part of the estate of a well-known California artist and his wife, both of whom were members of the San Francisco-Carmel bohemian scene. In fact, he was a charter member of the Bohemian Club. The auction included fabulous art books and catalogs, and I believe these were overlooked because of their "plain Jane" binding. But inside, both books were copiously inscribed by Lewis. His remarks were very personal and included rather obvious pledges of his love for the artist's wife. One of the books included caricatures Lewis did of the couple and of himself. I held on to the pair of books for a couple of years until penury forced me to sell them to a dealer in Oakland, Ca. The reason I am writing to you is that I believe the books likely are now in the hands of a serious Lewis collector, or in a collection. I would be pleased to add substantial detail to their provenance.

————— SLSN —————

I am in possession of a letter signed by Sinclair Lewis that I am interested in selling. It is a typewritten letter addressed to my aunt, Camelia Campbell, (recently deceased at age 100) dated November 29, 1938, and is in its original envelope.

Ms. Campbell was a theater actress in New York in the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s, and had at one time performed in a play written by Mr. Lewis. The letter reads: "Dear Miss Campbell: I remember you very happily as the first Mary Greenhill, but there isn't a role in my new play which would be suitable for you. I am awfully sorry. Yours sincerely,"; and the letter is signed by Sinclair Lewis.

————— SLSN —————

I have 4 books with the penny impression on the covers; they say they were copyrighted between 1920-1934. Could you tell me if I have the originals or not. I can send you pictures if you need them. [This person is probably referring to the Nobel Prize edition.]

I have a book and the title is *Babbitt* by Sinclair Lewis Harcourt and Brace 1922 to Edith Wharton. The book is blue and orange and in good condition. Would you be interested in this book?

STUDENT QUERIES

1) Dear Somebody who has some time and lots of kindness to answer my silly question:

I am sorry to bother you, but I have to find out what Sinclair Lewis meant with the phrase "if one applies the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair" he once advised. Have you heard about that? I have to confess that I am an ignorant non-English language native who hasn't heard the name Sinclair Lewis until now. I've just looked through a few lines of *Main Street* looking for pants and seats. It seems to be a quite interesting story.

2) Thank you for the reply to my inquiry. So he just said that there isn't any quick way to become a writer but you actually sit down and keep writing. My problem was that I didn't know what the seat (of the pants) was, which I now know the part where my bottom touches. Also, I expected something dramatical after I had found a phrase "seat-of-the-pants." However I am now confident that Lewis meant the actual movement of the body, thanks to your help.

I am a bit surprised that he didn't mention to those students that even if you sit and write for long long years, some/most people will never be able to be a writer. He must have a kind heart.

————— SLSN —————

I am writing a paper for my history course in college on *Elmer Gantry* and I was wondering if you could answer me one question. I was wondering if Sinclair Lewis was an atheist? If not, by any chance do you happen to know what religion he was? I am trying to relate that to my paper.

————— SLSN —————

1) Do you have any book reviews on Sinclair Lewis's novel *Babbitt*?

2) Thank you for responding! I found that all those books about Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, which you recommended to me, are available in the library of the University of

Regensburg. I hope that they are written in easy English otherwise, I guess, I won't understand that much! Anyway, you were a big help for me, so I've got to say thanks.

————— SLSN —————

Can anyone at this homepage give me a short synopsis of *It Can't Happen Here*?

————— SLSN —————

I have some information I would like to know about Sinclair Lewis. My question is why was he famous/accomplished? Also, how did he become famous? And my last question is what are two interesting things about him?

————— SLSN —————

How many novels has Lewis written in his whole life—22 or 23?

How many copies of *Main Street* and *Babbitt* have been sold?

Indeed, what is different between the two biographies of Lewis, Schorer's and Lingeman's?

What is Sauk Centre, an apartment or a hospital?

How about the illness on his face?

Who is John Hersey, is he Lewis's secretary, or just that writer who reported a series of articles on Hiroshima for the *New Yorker*?

Why did the European readers like *Babbitt* more than *Main Street*, on the contrary to American?

When did Americans start to snub novels of Lewis after his death?

Dear friend, I am waiting for your reply!

Best regards,

Huang, China

————— SLSN —————

I am a visiting professor at Grinnell College and I am from China. I wonder if there is anywhere I can read the text online of Sinclair Lewis's speech at the Swedish Academy for the Nobel Prize? I am writing an article and hope to quote something from it. Thanks in advance. [Here's a website that contains the speech: <http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1930/lewis-lecture.html>]

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

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CATALOGUE 87 MODERN FIRSTS EDITIONS FALL 2001

132. Lewis, Sinclair. *Autograph Note Signed*
("Sinclair Lewis"). \$450

A brief *Autograph Note Signed*, one page dated 20 August 1937 on his Stockbridge, Massachusetts stationary to James Willis Birchman, who was attempting to compile a biography of illustrator Ralph Barton. With original envelope. In full: "Dear Mr. Birchman: I really knew Ralph Barton only as a friend of George Jean Nathan. Sincerely yours, Sinclair Lewis."

133. Lewis, Sinclair. *Martin Arrowsmith*. London:
Jonathan Cape, 1925. \$125

First English edition, published in America as *Arrowsmith*. Small bookstore label, and owner's name label else near fine, lacking the dustwrapper. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize (which Lewis refused) and probably the book most influential in his winning of the Nobel Prize (the first American author so honored). An uncommon issue.

134. Lewis, Sinclair. *Bethel Merriday*. New York:
Doubleday, Doran, 1940. \$125

CATALOGUE 90 2002

146. Lewis, Sinclair. *Mantrap*. New York: Harcourt,
Brace, 1926. \$1350

First edition. Faint tape shadows to the free endpapers, else fine in very good dustwrapper with shallow chipping at the extremities, particularly at the spine ends and with some light evidence of tape removed from the inside of the jacket. Author's eighth book under his own name, and exceptionally scarce in jacket.

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438. Lewis, Sinclair. *Launcelot*. [N.p.] Harvey
Taylor, 1932. \$300

Wrappers, stapled, fine. First separate edition of a poem published by Lewis in *The Yale Literary Magazine* in 1904, one of 100 numbered copies.

439. Lewis, Sinclair. *Main Street*. Chicago: Lakeside
Press, 1937. \$300

With a Special Introduction by the Author. Illustrations by Grant Wood. Dampstain on back cover; a very good copy, lacking slipcase. One of 1500 numbered copies, signed by Wood.

440. Lewis, Sinclair. *The Man Who Knew Coolidge*.
New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1928. \$350

Blue cloth. Fine copy in dust jacket with expert restorations to the edges and strengthening to the folds. First edition.

441. Lewis, Sinclair. *Sinclair Lewis on the Valley of the Moon*. [N.p.] Harvey Taylor, 1932. \$250

Wrappers, stapled, fine. First edition, one of 100 numbered copies.

442. Lewis, Sinclair. *Work of Art*. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1934. \$225

Blue cloth. A fine and bright copy in bright dust jacket with small paper tape repairs on the back. First edition.

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NEW YEAR'S MISCELLANY 2002

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

First edition. Some light spotting to fore and bottom edges; otherwise a fine copy in a near fine dust jacket with a few minor professional repairs at edges of spine panel. A very scarce book in jacket. This is the best copy we have seen in some years.

113. Lewis, Sinclair. *Elmer Gantry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927. \$1850.

First edition. First issue binding with "G" resembling a "C" on spine. A near fine copy in bright, unfaded dust jacket with a few chips at edges expertly restored. Burt Lancaster and co-star Shirley Jones both won Oscars for their performances in the 1960 film.

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E-mail: pepbooks@aol.com

CATALOGUE 109

162. Lewis, Sinclair. *Mantrap*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1926. \$350

Photoplay edition issued to coincide with the release of the silent film directed by Victor Fleming starring Clara Bow, Ernest Torrence, Eugene Palette and Percy Marmont in Lewis's tale of romance and adventure in the Canadian Northwest. Some foxing, very good in a dust jacket with some chipping mainly at bottom of spine. Front panel of the dust jacket is a color painting of Clara Bow and Percy Marmont in a woodland setting. Scarce in jacket.

CATALOGUE 110

154. *A Book of Prefaces* (With a Footnote by Sinclair Lewis). New York: Limited Editions Club, 1941. \$25

Literary Reference. First edition. Paperbound. Very good copy in printed wrappers. An interesting collection of prefaces to many great works of literature, including the preface to Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* by G.K. Chesterton, to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* by Andre Maurois, to Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Bernard De Voto, to Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* by Van Wyck Brooks, to O. Henry's *The Voice of the City* by Clifton Fadiman, to Sterne's *The Life of Tristram Shandy, Gent.* by Christopher Morley, etc.

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LIST 43

116. Lewis, Sinclair. *Elmer Gantry*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927. \$3000

First edition, first binding. 8vo. A remarkably fine, fresh copy in a completely unrestored, first state dust jacket with minimal soiling, one small chip to back panel and minor wear at the crown of the spine. A splendid copy.

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