

The SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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THE SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY

Thanks to the efforts of Robert Fleming, who sensed, as his exploratory letter put it, that "interest in Lewis is building again," the Sinclair Lewis Society held its first meeting on Saturday, May 30, 1992, as part of the American Literature Association annual conference, at the Bahia Resort Hotel in San Diego, California. Over 30 scholars attended this meeting to share ideas about Lewis studies and to organize the Society formally.

The meeting began with three presentations. Robert L. McLaughlin, from Illinois State University, read "Re-Opening the Case for Sinclair Lewis, or Appealing the Judgment of Mark Schorer," in which he argued that the New Critical interpretive premises Schorer applies to Lewis's novels in his massive and influential biography account for his failure to see the novels' value. He proposed instead that Lewis studies be approached in terms of cultural/discourse theory. Roger Forseth, from the University of Wisconsin, Superior, presented "Mark Schorer's Sinclair Lewis Revisited," in which he recounted his research in the materials Schorer donated to the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. He argued that Schorer's research methods and procedures, especially his relationship

with Dorothy Thompson, as revealed through their correspondence, help account for the negative portrayal of Lewis in the biography. Robert L. Coard, from St. Cloud State University, in "Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, and the New Antonia Road," argued for Cather's literary influence on Lewis and pointed out a tribute to Cather in *Main Street*. As the paper topics suggest, the discussion period was dominated by talk of Mark Schorer. The conclusion was that Schorer's biography was a horribly unfair assessment of Lewis's life and works but, unfortunately, has defined Lewis studies since 1961. Ironically, it even dominated this first Lewis Society meeting. The first step in revitalizing Lewis studies would seem to be to redefine them in terms other than Schorer's.

Professor Fleming then proposed a slate of Society officers, which was elected unanimously: President, Sally E. Parry, Illinois State University; Secretary-Treasurer, Roger Forseth, University of Wisconsin, Superior; Director, Robert E. Fleming, University of New Mexico; Director, Clara Lee R. Moodie, Central Michigan University; Director, Alice Hall Petry, Rhode Island School of Design; and Alternate, Barry Gross, Michigan State University. ♦

1993 ANNUAL AMERICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

The fourth annual conference of the American Literature Association will be held at the Stouffer Harborplace Hotel in Baltimore on May 28-30, 1993 (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of Memorial Day weekend). The Sinclair Lewis Society will be sponsoring a session.

Preregistration conference fees will be \$35 (with a special rate of \$10 for independent scholars, retired individuals, and students). The hotel is offering a conference rate of \$70 a night (single) or \$80 a night (double). Sessions will begin on Friday, May 28, at 9:00 am and the final party will be held in the early evening on Sunday, May 30th.

James Nagel of the English Department of the University of Georgia will be the chief program director of the 1993 conference, assisted by Alfred Bendixen of the English Department of California State University at Los Angeles.

The 1994 American Literature Association conference has been tentatively scheduled for June 2-4, 1994 (the Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday after Memorial Day weekend). Current plans call for the conference to be held again at the Bahia Resort Hotel in San Diego. ♦

CALL FOR PAPERS

The Sinclair Lewis Society will be holding a session at the 1993 American Literature Conference in Baltimore, Maryland, May 28-30, 1993. We welcome submissions on any aspect of Lewis's work. Please send papers or detailed abstracts by January 5 to Professor Sally Parry, The Sinclair Lewis Society, 4240/English Department, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61761-6901. Fax number is 309/438-5414. All submissions will be acknowledged. An announcement of session participants will be made before the end of January 1993.

The Sinclair Lewis Society will also be holding a session at the 1993 Cabo San Lucas Conference sponsored by the American Literature Association. The 1993 Cabo Symposium will focus on American realism and naturalism and will be directed by the editors of *American Literary Realism*, Robert Fleming (member of the Board of Directors, Sinclair Lewis Society) and Gary Schamhorst. The conference will be held the second weekend in November in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico.

SINCLAIR LEWIS DAYS IN SAUK CENTRE

"There's nothing about Sinclair Lewis in the whole damn festival," Al Tingley, co-owner of the Palmer House in Sauk Centre, complained to a reporter from the Associated Press in July 1992. The story, carried by the *Washington Post*, notes that although the town's annual festival, Sinclair Lewis Days, is named after the Nobel-Prize winning author, there is little connected with him during the weekend. Festivities include volleyball and softball tournaments, car races, weight-lifting and pie-eating contests, a spaghetti supper, a concert and dance, and the crowning of a new Miss Sauk Centre.

Although the annual festival is used to draw in tourists, many natives don't think much more of Lewis than their relatives did

TWAYNE TO PUBLISH CRITICAL VOLUMES ON LEWIS

Twayne Publishers, as part of its World Masterwork series, is set to publish two volumes on Lewis novels next year. *Babbitt: An American Life* by Glen A. Love is scheduled to be published in January 1993, and *Main Street: The Revolt of Carol Kennicott* by Martin Bucco will be out in the Fall of 1993.

Martin Bucco has had a prolific career writing on Lewis, ranging from his 1964 dissertation on the serialized novels of Lewis to his editing of *Critical Essays on Sinclair Lewis* for G. K. Hall in 1986. His most recent articles on Lewis include an entry in the *St. James Guide to Biography* (1991) and a note "Sinclair Lewis, Max Besont, and Henry James" for the Winter 1992 *Henry James Review*. He also has an entry on Mark Schorer in the forthcoming *Dictionary of American Biography*.

Glen Love, who has been writing about Lewis since 1973, has rephrased the title of Mark Schorer's biography of Lewis to comment on one of Lewis's most successful fictional characters. The book will be divided into two sections, the first on the literary and historical context of *Babbitt*, and the second on a reading of the novel. Among the chapter titles are "Babbitt and Realism," "Satire and Style in *Babbitt*," "Impossible Dreams: *Babbitt* and Romance," "Courting the Technological Sublime: *Babbitt's* Dance," and "Lewis and *Babbitt*—Two American Lives."

Love says of Lewis in his upcoming work, "Sinclair Lewis attempted a great survey of American life as it passed swiftly into its modern phase. In *Main Street*, *Arrowsmith*, *Dodsworth*—and in *Babbitt*, where satiric inversions jostle with hopeful dreams—Lewis demonstrated his rightful claim to a place among those writers who have examined the sources of validity in American life, and who have created in their works new emblems of possibility to be measured against the failures of the present.... A book of many strands of aesthetic and social significance, *Babbitt* is also a work of love, a mocking and yet heroic authentication of the fanatic Americanness of its author. Mark Schorer concludes in his monumental biography of Lewis that 'without his writing one cannot imagine modern American literature' (1961, 813). Applying this judicious evaluation to

75 years ago. Librarian Leora Sunderman says that most of the 40 copies of the Lewis books stay on the shelf, with occasional exceptions. "The only time I think people read anything of Sinclair Lewis is when people come into town who are new or kids for an assignment," she said. Joyce Lyng, a tour guide at the Lewis home, admits that she hasn't read *Main Street* either. In a sense, not much has changed since Lewis wrote *Main Street* in 1920. As Al Tingley notes, "I think it goes back to something that is alive and well in Sauk Centre today—and maybe all small towns. That is 'What will people think?' When [Lewis] took his gibes, he was taking America, what we hold dear, and he was pricking holes in it." ♦

Lewis's masterwork, it is tempting to add that no one can claim to understand American life in the twentieth century without having read *Babbitt*." ♦

SINCLAIR LEWIS WORK IS AGAIN BOMC SELECTION

The Book of the Month Club has made the one volume Library of America edition of *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, edited by John Hersey, one of its featured selections for Fall 1992. As part of their notes on this book, the *BOMC News* states "Drawing on memories and observations from his boyhood in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, Sinclair Lewis revealed as no writer had done before the complacency and conformity of middle-class life in America.... Original and provocative, these two novels astonishingly continue to reveal—more than 70 years after their first publication—an essential truth about the America we know today." ♦

THE SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

The Sinclair Lewis Newsletter is published twice a year at the Publications Unit of the English Department, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois; Director, Jean C. Lee. Please address all correspondence to Sally Parry, Editor, 4240/English Department, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61761-6901.

OFFICERS OF THE SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY

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TEACHING SINCLAIR LEWIS

IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE IN THE CLASSROOM (OR CAN IT?)

By Robert L. McLaughlin
Illinois State University

I have been teaching *It Can't Happen Here* in my "Literary Analysis I: Prose Fiction" course at Illinois State University. As one of two courses designed to introduce new majors to the discipline of English Studies, this course has many demands placed on it by the English Department: students are to become familiar with techniques and terminology for reading and interpreting prose literature, with research tools and methods in literary criticism, with the formal and rhetorical conventions of writing about literature, and with the various critical theories in which the study of literature can be grounded. Interestingly, it is in this last area that *It Can't Happen Here* proves particularly useful. Read at the beginning of the semester, it serves as a touchstone for our discussions of literary theory over the next several weeks.

I organize my course around a history of literary theory in the twentieth century. Readings (from Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* and K.M. Newton's *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*) and class discussions about theory are illustrated by fiction texts, and writing assignments ask students to apply specific theories to their readings of specific texts.

It Can't Happen Here, with its Depression-era setting, speculations about the 1936 election, and proposed fascist takeover of the U.S. Government, introduces the theories and methods of the Old Historicism. I begin our examination of the text with handouts and informal lectures on Lewis's life and career. We read the Nobel Prize address and talk about his ideas on literature and the purpose of studying literature. We learn about the issues that concerned Lewis in his other novels. I especially stress his continuing concern that the reality of America never lives up to the ideals of its origins. As part of our discussion of the novel, students present to the class the results of assigned research projects on such topics as fascism, the Great Depression, Huey Long, and Fr. Coughlin. The writing project attached to the novel is an annotated bibliography for which the students must summarize and react to the chapter on *It Can't Happen Here* in Mark Schorer's *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* and other literary criticism on Lewis they find on their own.

We end our discussion by using the text to deal with the issue of the Old Historicism. I ask them to decide, considering the things we learned about Lewis and the 1930s time period, how the text is most valuable: as a window on the past which tells about American life 60 years ago or about Lewis the man; as a text that speaks to and about America today; or as a text that speaks to and about all times and places. Opinions are usually divided pretty equally (though in this Perot-filled election year almost everyone made the case for the novel's relevance), and the supporting arguments provide a context and a starting point for our exploration of the purpose of literature and of literary studies.

We spend the next part of the semester learning, talking, and writing about the New Criticism and Reader-Response theories. For the midterm exam, I ask the students to define and compare the two theories so as to identify the positive and negative aspects of each. I suggest that one approach for doing this would be to ask how each theory would deal with *It Can't Happen Here*. I remind them that Schorer's New Critical interpretive premises led him to conclude that "it is futile to approach any Lewis novel as a work of art" (355). Many students conclude that it would be difficult to see the novel as an "organic whole," considering its loose and baggy structure and prose style. Similarly, they find it difficult to reconcile the New Critics' desire to find universal meaning in the particular with Lewis's intention to write about the specific situation in America in 1935; the fuzziness which results from an attempt to "universalize" the novel's meaning seems less interesting than the sharpness of Lewis's specific criticism. The students also learn a lesson in the politics of the canon when they realize that Lewis's fall from academic respect is linked with the rise of the New Criticism in English Departments. Reader-Response seems more valuable for dealing with the novel's structure; the students become conscious of the work they had to do as readers to make sense of the text: the point of view changing from an omniscient narrator to a narrator limited to Doremus Jessup's consciousness; the plot events occurring on the national level and the Fort Beulah level; the chronology in which dead characters are resurrected for episodes that occur earlier on the novel's time line. But having learned so much about Lewis and his intentions for the novel, they find it difficult to think of themselves as the seat of meaning for the text. And those who think that Reader-Response criticism wants the reader to relate the text to their own experiences have a hard time relating to events so long ago.

We leave *It Can't Happen Here* while we discuss structuralism, semiotics, and deconstruction, but we find it a good example once again when we turn to contemporary attempts to repoliticize literary criticism in the wake of poststructuralism. Our attention here becomes focused on discourse analysis. Using a Bakhtinian approach, I argue that specific discourses are manifestations of specific ideological belief systems. In prose fiction these discourses are used not just for the transmission of information but as objects of representation themselves; that is, the discourses and their associated ideological belief systems become what the text is about. A novel, then, is a battleground wherein various discourses are put into conflict so that they and their belief systems can be defined, examined, and critiqued. This complex approach to literature becomes easier for the students by returning to Lewis and *It Can't Happen Here*. They

see that Lewis's talents for mimickry and satire have allowed him to reproduce languages and styles of speaking that are associated with specific ideological positions and to exaggerate them enough to make them subject to the reader's criticism. The students find that just in the first chapter (the Fort Beulah Rotary Club meeting) the discourses and belief systems of General Edgeways, Adelaide Tarr Gimmitch (the Fort Beulah business community), represented by Francis Tasbrough, Lorinda Pike, and Doremus Jessup can be clearly identified and defined; in fact, the conflict of the chapter (which foreshadows the conflict of the novel) is defined entirely by the use of battling discourses.

My point, then, is that Lewis's novel is relevant not only in its subject matter, the critique of American society, but also in its theoretical underpinnings. In essence, my course becomes a search for how to read *It Can't Happen Here*. The solution, discourse analysis, is a good model for reading all prose texts, is defined in terms of the difficult questions poststructuralism asks about authorship and meaning, and is a way of demonstrating the vital political importance of the study of literature. ♦

LIBRARY OF AMERICA PUBLISHES SINCLAIR LEWIS VOLUME: *MAIN STREET AND BABBITT*

The Library of America has just published its first volume of the works of Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* and *Babbitt*. The following is the press release used to promote this new edition.

This edition brings together in one authoritative volume the two most famous works by America's first Nobel Prize winner for literature. In these satirical novels, Sinclair Lewis created a distinctive and penetrating portrait of America, revealing as no writer had done before the complacency and conformity of middle class life. His remarkable novels combine brilliant biting humor with affection for a few unusual men and women who want, as Lewis wrote of *Babbitt*, "to seize something more than motor cars and a house before it's too late."

Notes for the volume and a full chronology of Lewis's life were prepared by John Hersey, who holds a Pulitzer Prize for fiction and is the author of fifteen books of fiction and nine of reportage and essays. In 1947, he served as Sinclair Lewis's secretary.

Main Street (1920) was Lewis's first great success, an extraordinary event in our nation's cultural history that opened for fiction a new range of American life and experience. *Main Street* is the sad, wry, humorous account of an idealistic young woman, Carol Milford Kennicott, who, upon marrying, leaves cosmopolitan St. Paul for the village of Gopher Prairie (modeled on Lewis's native town—Sauk Centre, Minnesota). There, she attempts to uplift the drab community and instill its uninspired, self-satisfied inhabitants with a sense of imagination. As time goes on, Carol makes little headway. She first struggles against and then flees Gopher Prairie, but finally returns and submits to its cultural emptiness. While never relinquishing her ideals, she accepts that the romance of the early frontier has given way to the insurmountable conformity and hypocrisy of the American middle West.

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Schorer, Mark. *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961.

Anyone who has successfully taught a Sinclair Lewis novel or short story is invited to submit a short essay for consideration for publication. Please use MLA style. Send to the Sinclair Lewis Society, c/o 4240 Department of English, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61761-6901.

When *Babbitt* appeared in 1922, H. L. Mencken wrote, "I know of no American novel that more accurately presents the real America. As an old professor of Babbitry I welcome him as an almost perfect specimen. Every American city swarms with his brothers. He is America incarnate, exuberant, and exquisite."

In George F. *Babbitt*, the boisterous, vulgar, worried, gadget-loving real estate man, Lewis created a new and enduring figure in American literature—the total conformist. *Babbitt*, a small man amid a huge commercial culture, vaguely senses that his life is not fulfilling and attempts to assert himself and find happiness. He has neither the courage nor ability to succeed, however, and remains what he was at the beginning of the novel: an archetypal "good citizen," a prominent man in a conformist community. In biting satirical scenes of club lunches, trade association conventions, fishing trips, and Sunday school committees, and in his brilliant parodies of colloquial speech, Lewis captures the noisy restlessness of American commercial culture. Largely for his achievement in *Babbitt*, Sinclair Lewis became the first American to win the Nobel Prize for literature, in 1930. Lewis prepared the way for such contemporary authors as John Updike, whose *Rabbit* novels echo *Babbitt* in more than just their character's name.

With penetrating insight into the manners and morals of America's middle class, *Sinclair Lewis: Main Street and Babbitt* presents a portrait of this country that still has the power to astonish us with its essential truth. ♦

...

Members of The Sinclair Lewis Society will be able to receive a 20% discount when purchasing this volume. Members should write to The Library of America, 14 East 60th Street, New York, NY 10022 and enclose a check for \$28.00 for each copy plus \$3.50 postage for one copy and \$.50 for each additional copy.

CANONIZED — AT LAST

By Roger Forseth

Sinclair Lewis. *Main Street & Babbitt*, edited by John Hersey. The Library of America. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1992. 898 pp. \$35.00

The suspense is over. Sinclair Lewis is now in the Library of America and therefore has become part of the official unofficial canon of American Literature. How such decisions are made is a subject for a book. It is perhaps sufficient here to state that the volume at hand—the fifty-ninth in the series—is satisfactory in almost every respect. The selection of *Main Street* and *Babbitt* is a sound critical judgment. One hopes that these two novels shortly will be joined in the series by the other major novels; in any case, however, with the Lewis and the volumes of London, Howells, Norris, and Crane, we now have most of the realistic novelists of the first rank in the Library of America.

My preliminary judgment is that the texts are editorially sound. The editor, John Hersey (whose thirteen pages of explanatory notes are excellent), states that the “texts of both [novels] are taken from reprintings of the first editions that incorporate corrections made or authorized by Lewis.” The text chosen for *Main Street* is the eleventh printing, since it contains all known authorized revisions. The text of *Babbitt* is the fourth printing of that novel. Hersey has consulted Matthew J. Broccoli’s “Textual Variants in Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt*” (*Studies in Bibliography* 11 [1958]), and has reviewed Louis N. Feipel’s corrections of both novels, but has apparently not examined the manuscripts of *Main Street* (University of Texas Humanities Research Center) or of *Babbitt* (Beineke Library). Nonetheless, the texts of the novels appear carefully prepared and proofread.

One of the best features of the volume is the thirty-six-page

“Chronology.” It is clearly the result of determined research. A single example will have to suffice. One of the (many) parts of Mark Schorer’s *Sinclair Lewis* that has been questioned is his account of Lewis’s funeral. The “Chronology” reports: “The funeral ceremony is held at Sauk Centre high school on January 28, and then, with the temperature at twenty-two degrees below zero, Claude pours most of the ashes from the urn into a hole two feet square in the Lewis family plot.” The word “most” tells me that the preparer not only consulted Schorer, but Frederick Manfred (“Sinclair Lewis’ Funeral,” *South Dakota Review*, Winter 1969/70) and C. Rath (“On the Occasion of Sinclair Lewis’ Burial,” *ibid.*) as well. This perhaps minor (though not pedantic!) care is reassuring, and is one of the reasons I am confident that this edition of *Main Street* and *Babbitt* and its editorial apparatus will remain standard at least until a critical edition is published.

NOTE: So far I have seen two major reviews of *Main Street & Babbitt*, by Thomas Mallon (“Babbitt Rising: The Library of America puts Sinclair Lewis on Main Street,” *GQ*, November 1992: 185-192), and Gore Vidal (“The Romance of Sinclair Lewis,” *The New York Review of Books*, 8 October 1992: 14-20). Both reviewers clearly have read the novels afresh—and read them, essentially, with sympathy. Readers of Lewis criticism since Schorer will understand my sense of gratitude. (Mallon, by the way, writes, “If forced to find Lewis’s contemporary equivalent, one might settle on Gore Vidal.”) Vidal has several unkind things to say about Schorer; the main body of his review, however, consists of an extended, almost nostalgic, commentary on Lewis’s fiction. Mallon’s observations are equally perceptive. Two sympathetic reviews do not a renaissance make, but for those who care about Sinclair Lewis, the direction is encouraging. ♦

SINCLAIR LEWIS NOTES

In the October 1992 *American Heritage* a group of novelists, journalists, and historians were asked the question, “What is your favorite American historical novel, and why?” Liz Smith, the syndicated columnist, named *Main Street* as one of her top favorites.

Lewis is mentioned in academic books as well. In *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination* (Yale UP, 1992), Jaroslav Pelikan critiques universities which prize scholarship more than good instructors. He writes, “The criticism cannot be shaken off by a defensive ‘professoriate’... as the philistinism of (invoking an epithet from Sinclair Lewis) ‘sewing machine salesmen and college presidents’” (92).

In *The Campaign of the Century: Upton Sinclair’s Race for Governor of California and the Birth of Media Politics* (Random, 1992), Greg Mitchell refers to Sinclair Lewis several times. He notes the way that Lewis was often confused with Upton Sinclair and states that in the 1934 GOP primary for the

governorship of California, Sinclair Lewis actually received four write-in votes. Shortly after this, a *Washington Post* columnist, H. I. Phillips, perhaps to tease Upton Sinclair, who had just won the Democratic party’s nomination for Governor, referred to Dorothy Thompson as Mrs. Upton Sinclair. Thompson, Lewis’s second wife, had just been banished from Germany for writing unflattering articles about Hitler.

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 Martin Bucco, Robert Fleming, Roger Forseth, Jacqueline Koenig, Glen Love, Robert McLaughlin, Roberta Parry, and Max Rudin of the Library of America.

Membership

Many thanks to all of you who have joined the Sinclair Lewis Society and are contributing to the continuation of Lewis

studies. We would especially like to thank our founding members who have provided needed start-up money for the Society. The founding members are: Robert Coard, Robert Fleming, Roger Forseth, Barry Gross, Jacqueline Koenig, Glen Love, Robert McLaughlin, Clara Lee R. Moodie, Judith Myers, Idwal Parry, and Sally Parry. ♦

NEW PRODUCTION OF *IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE* OPENS IN SAN FRANCISCO

"Fifty-six years to the day after it opened around the country as a Federal Theater Project production, Sinclair Lewis' political fable on the dangers of the far right, *It Can't Happen Here*, had the audience groaning with recognition," Steven Winn reports in an October 29 review in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. This production of *It Can't Happen Here* featured a new adaptation by Rick Hickman and was presented at the Cowell Theatre by Z Collective and Industrial Strength Productions.

Although Winn complained about the "languid pacing" and some predictable elements, on the whole his review was very positive, noting the parallels between the 1936 and 1992 elections. The character of Adelaide Tarr Gimmitch with her warnings "against the dangers of trade unions, big government and Hollywood... without too many concessions to a half century of American history, would have been right at home in this summer's Republican National Convention." Especially effec-

tive was the portrayal of mysterious presidential candidate Senator Buzz Windrip as no more than a silhouette and a voice on the radio. Among the performances praised were those by Ken Grantham as Doremus Jessup, Joel Mullennix as Shad Ledue, and Jane Angeles as Sissy Jessup. "She's the soul of the play, an innocent America looking down the barrel of a gun that America itself loaded in the ballot box." ♦

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