

# The SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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## SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY SPONSORS PANEL AT 1995 AMERICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

The Sinclair Lewis Society sponsored an intellectually stimulating session at the sixth annual Conference of the American Literature Association at the Stouffer Harborplace Hotel in Baltimore, Maryland on May 28, 1995. The panel, chaired by James M. Hutchisson of The Citadel, was called "Sinclair Lewis: New Approaches" and featured papers on the 1920s novels including *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and *Dodsworth*. The newsletter is pleased to be able to offer abstracts of the papers.

### "Carol Kennicott's Curious Conversion: A Turnerian Reading of *Main Street*"

by Jon W. Brooks

Okaloosa-Walton Community College

*Main Street* and its Nobel Prize-winning author seem close to disappearing from American literature's canon. Critics have tended to dismiss Sinclair Lewis's contribution to American literature and discounted his impact on American culture. Perhaps a new means of measuring the impact of his work should be considered. Because Lewis accurately recorded 1920s middle-class American society through his best novels, especially *Main Street*, he should be evaluated from an anthropological perspective. One fruitful approach applies anthropologist Victor Turner's theories concerning rites of passage to *Main Street*. An anthropological approach seems applicable because of Lewis's interest in American society and his careful attention to detail. As a researcher, Lewis conducted himself much like an anthropologist, depending on field work in the collection of his data. Turner's theories allow readers to understand Lewis's critique of American society and his examination of the roles individuals play in relation to that society. Lewis and Turner both concern themselves with what happens to individuals making a transition from one status level to another.

In *The Ritual Process* Turner introduces three concepts regarding rites of passage pertinent to *Main Street*: liminality, *communitas*, and structure. Liminality occurs during the movement from one status level to another. While in transition, liminal figures temporarily lack status because they are separated from their old social structure and are not yet members of a new one. Their fleeting statuslessness empowers them because they experience *communitas*, a "communion of equal individuals," which equates to "social antistructure." *Communitas* opposes society's structure—the arrangement that remains in place to ensure social continuity—and allows for creativity and experimentation. Thus liminal figures may threaten the existing social structure, that which binds a group's members together and establishes the limits of behavior and codes of

conduct. Lewis uses this liminal period in his characters' rites of passage to expose the hypocrisies and failings of American society. While statusless, his characters can briefly but clearly see the realities of their societies.

In *Main Street* Carol Kennicott clearly undergoes rites of passage, and, as one experiencing liminality and enjoying *communitas*, she poses a threat to those entrenched in Gopher Prairie's social structure. Her marriage to Will constitutes her immediate transition; her long-term transition involves her passage into Gopher Prairie society. Carol participates in a transition in which society largely acts upon her rather than her acting upon society or herself. Turner labels this kind of change a ritual of status elevation, where "the ritual subject or novice is being conveyed irreversibly from a lower to a higher position in an institutionalized system of such positions." Carol possesses little control over her fate because of her statuslessness; in theory she possesses self-determination, but in reality Gopher Prairie's established structure determines exactly how much or how little control she has. She only briefly enjoys the freedom of expression and creativity associated with *communitas* because of the restrictions placed on her by Gopher Prairie's structure. The established social structure marks Carol as a threat, but she enjoys an outsider's perspective on Gopher Prairie society. Carol will remain a liminal figure until Gopher Prairie deems her acceptable; ironically, when she completes her rites of passage, her vision blurs.

Carol's conversion manifests itself in two areas: marriage and motherhood. Carol initially rejects marriage but later surrenders to it. As the novel progresses, Carol vacillates between wishing to remain married to Kennicott and separating from him. Carol also dismisses motherhood initially; she sees having children as tightening the manacles of marriage. Ultimately, Carol embraces motherhood. The community of Gopher Prairie serves as the most significant social structure Carol must pass into: first, she wishes to conquer it; second, she desires to join it; third, she hopes to flee it; fourth, she gladly surrenders to it. Carol's movement from outsider to insider functions as a ritual of elevation and results in personal growth.

## “Tropic of Zenith: *Babbitt* as Field Study”

by David J. Knauer  
Purdue University

A persistent criticism of the work of Sinclair Lewis has been that he more often wrote as a scientist than as a novelist. Mark Schorer's charge that he wrote "like any cultural anthropologist" demonstrates an assumption contained within such criticism: Lewis's scientific methodology may be discouraging, but it is easily understood and essentially unsophisticated. Lewis describes from above and without, utterly unself-consciously. Yet Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, a work that re-evaluates the project of the cultural anthropologist in terms of an alienated modern identity, suggests important complications in the supposedly formulaic technique of *Babbitt*. Lévi-Strauss posits cultural anthropology as an institutionalized search for the self in a primitive Other, a search mirrored in both George Babbitt's dissatisfaction and Lewis's account of it.

Lewis's preparations to write *Babbitt* did take on the characteristics of an anthropological field study. The organization of the novel seems to emphasize the technique of field observation, and the tone of Lewis's prose often effects a laboratory objectivity. The adoption of such narrative strategies, however, is less a deficiency of technique than a necessity grown out of alienation, according to Lévi-Strauss. Susan Sontag asserts that the homelessness and spiritual nausea of modernity have resulted in our prospecting for the self within a purifying Other. Anthropology, with its attendant field work and travel among strange cultures, has made into a vocation the search for an Other. *Tristes Tropiques* finds Lévi-Strauss intensely aware of this motivation in his own career; his work is a necessary reaction to a creeping "monoculture" that pollutes all it touches with a ruthless consistency. Yet simultaneously, Lévi-Strauss vacillates between idealizing an originary, primitive, redemptive Other that is the object of anthropological pursuit and an intimation that the primitive Other is gone or perhaps never existed at all. Similarly implicated in monocultural critique, Lewis cannibalizes the banal in *Babbitt* for a functional, primitive Other. His subject and proxy, George Babbitt, seeks his own primitivism on the margins of the monoculture.

As in most studies of "primitive" culture, tribal affiliations are paramount to determining identity in Lewis's Zenith. The fabric of social order is compulsory membership in an ever-increasing list of associations, clubs, lodges, and brotherhoods. These groupings provide not so much for the individual's companionship as they serve to guarantee consistency of thought. The natives of Zenith arrange themselves into class-, race-, and gender-defined clusters in order to defend themselves from the perceived threats of outsiders, of others. Thus Babbitt seems to follow Lévi-Strauss's dialectic when, vaguely dissatisfied with his entropic existence, he seeks a new social grouping, one clearly defined as threatening to his previous loyalties, the Bunch, differentiated from his primary culture by the twin forces of attraction and repulsion for Babbitt within these groups: sex and alcohol. Initially, the Bunch seems to be the reckless, extravagant, sensual Other that Babbitt longs for. He

is simultaneously lured and disgusted by the gender reversal that the Bunch sanctions. And the Bunch uses alcohol with such familiarity that it strikes Babbitt as attractively sacrilegious. But Babbitt eventually feels habituated enough to the Bunch to criticize their practices and his acquiescence to them. The Bunch gradually becomes just as demanding as his family.

Babbitt's crisis of identity redirects him to what he believes is the primitive Other to the machinations of Zenith: his fishing trips to Maine. If Zenith is alienating, the Maine wilderness is a place of male bonding fantasies. Yet his return to Maine only reveals how hopelessly divorced from this imagined virile and unsophisticated life he is; indeed, this escape has never existed at all. His guide, the ironically named Joe Paradise, does not welcome him into manly camaraderie but instead treats him as an annoyance. Paradise prefers the values of Zenith, and so the renewing aspect of the forest is a fiction, another disappeared Other to pursue futilely.

Lévi-Strauss comments on this frustrating aspect of the monoculture that finds a parallel in Babbitt's recognition. The primitive objects of culture's fascination might, if truly adversarial, be regarded with terror and disgust. But the modern attitude of awe and veneration for the primitive and exotic confirms that their threat or redemption is only manifested by the "cannibal-instincts of the historical process." The monoculture has always already envisioned and absorbed its Others so that, once in their presence, we quickly realize how much they are like what we already know. The impossibility of escape for Babbitt is comparable to Lewis's "inability" to take his narration outside the anthropological. It is not an artistic deficiency but a condition for telling his story.

Lewis's field study in *Babbitt* finally offers more than just a portrait of the typical tired businessman. Lewis instead shows himself to be supremely concerned with the locus of human identity in the twentieth century and whether or not the alternative identities we seek so obsessively are (or were) ever really available. We can laugh at and condescend to George Babbitt, but that reaction may presuppose our faith in some of the very Others that Lewis disallows. The irony of this point is discovered in the psychic kinship between Sir Gerald Doak and Babbitt. We expect a cultural clash between the British aristocrat

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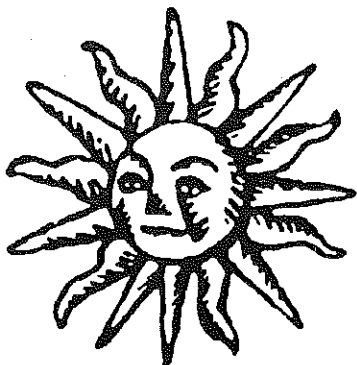
crat Doak and the boorish Babbitt, but they are intercontinental equivalents, and neither man can define the elusive primitive. Thus if no more Others exist to satisfy our scrutiny, then our anthropological search becomes self-reflexive and cannibalistic. It will compulsively manufacture Others within what was previously delineated as the self, the monoculture. Lewis can criticize the monoculture that wholly pollutes *Babbitt*, but he cannot take his eyes (or his imagination) from it.

### “Dodsworth, Character Designs, and Frank Lloyd Wright”

by Jay Williams  
University of Chicago

In *Dodsworth*, the right place to live, not in terms of status, but in the most meaningful personal, cultural, and aesthetic terms, is the suburb. For Sinclair Lewis and his central characters, the suburb differs dramatically from what was then and what is still now the popular conception of the outrageously spectacular or outrageously monotonous housing development. The historical claim in this paper is that we can locate the key sources for Sam Dodsworth's and Edith Cortright's ideas for garden or landscaped suburbs in the ideas expressed in the writings of Edith Wharton and Frank Lloyd Wright. More than a genealogy of ideas, however, is at stake. The manifold concept of suburb leads us to questions not just of urban design but also of health, machines in gardens, national identity, and leisure.

In the early twentieth century, the automobile was perceived as a threat, concretely to personal health (both the stink of gasoline and the decline of open-air walks) and symbolically to our collective myth of America as a garden of Eden. Sam Dodsworth, automobile magnate, and Edith Cortright are both ambivalent about cars. At the same time that these characters (and we can include Carol Kennicott and Hayden Chart) advocate walking as a necessary social as well as physical activity, these same characters praise the car and the skill to drive it well. Their ambivalence centered not only on the power of the car to push the pedestrian to one side. Whatever values walking represented and promoted were paved over as the city expanded sprawlingly. Dodsworth attempts to resolve this ambivalence by dreaming of garden suburbs. For Dodsworth, the suburb represents a complex unification—only partially realized, however—of traditional values (in particular, leisure) and modern technology. Sans Souci Gardens, without its awful name of course, is not an idle rich man's hobby. It is Dodsworth's and Lewis's idea of significant social reform.



## CALL FOR PAPERS 1996 AMERICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

The Sinclair Lewis Society will be holding a session at the 1996 American Literature Association conference which is scheduled for May 30-June 2, 1996 (the Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday after Memorial Day weekend). The conference will again be held at the Bahia Hotel in San Diego.

We welcome submissions on any aspect of Lewis's work. Please send a detailed abstract by January 1, 1996 to James Hutchisson, English Department, The Citadel, Charleston, SC 29409, or by e-mail to hutchissonj@citadel.edu. Fax number is (803) 953-7084. All submissions will be acknowledged. An announcement of session participants will be made before the end of January 1996.

Susan Belasco Smith of the English Department of the University of Tulsa will be the chief program director of the 1996 conference. Preregistration fees will be \$40 (with a special rate of \$10 for independent scholars, retired individuals, and students). The hotel is offering conference rates of \$77 a night (single) or \$82 (double). Preregistration information will be mailed to program participants about two weeks before the general mailing to all ALA members.

## SAUK CENTRE CELEBRATES 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF MAIN STREET

As part of an effort to put more of Sinclair Lewis into its annual Sinclair Lewis Days, Sauk Centre, Minnesota, marked the 75th anniversary of the publication of *Main Street* with a program called “Is *Main Street* Relevant 75 Years Later?” The program, held in Lewis's hometown on July 13, was sponsored by the Sinclair Lewis Foundation (trustees of Lewis's boyhood home and the Lewis Interpretive Center), the Stearns County Historical Society, and the Sauk Centre Community Education Department. The evening was divided into two parts: first, actress Kathy Ray portrayed Carol Kennicott in the monologue “Gopher Prairie Then and Now”; second, the relevance of *Main Street* and Lewis's other novels was discussed by a panel made up of Lawrence Ianni, Chancellor of the University of Minnesota, Duluth, George Killough, from the Languages and Literature Department of the College of St. Scholastica, Roger Forseth, English Professor Emeritus from the University of Wisconsin—Superior, John Koblas, author of four books on Lewis including the forthcoming *Sinclair Lewis: Final Voyage*, and Sally Parry, from the English Department at Illinois State University. The program was hosted by Jim Umhoefer, president of the Sinclair Lewis Foundation.

In her monologue, Ray portrayed Carol Kennicott returning to Gopher Prairie in 1995 to give a lecture about how the town has changed. She focused her remarks on architecture, culture

and leisure, and social attitudes. In discussing architecture, she recalled her famous initial walk up and down Main Street and her unsuccessful attempt to have a new city hall built. She found 1995 Gopher Prairie changed but not improved. She politely assessed the new city hall, built in the 1950s, as "functional," but decried the new architectural style of Gopher Prairie's homes as "pole barn modern." She also expressed concern over the homogenization of American towns, each with its Walmart, K-Mart, and McDonald's making it look like every other town. In discussing culture and leisure, Carol remembered trying to shake Gopher Prairie parties out of their rut. But in 1995 she found parties supplanted by "the television contraption," which she summed up as "shocking and offensive." In discussing social attitudes, Carol decided that, on the down side, women's work is still undervalued and gossip is still an evil influence but, on the up side, Gopher Prairie women fill leadership roles at several churches and one woman even serves on the City Council. Carol's conclusions were tentative. While she had no specific suggestions for reform, she hoped that "criticism may be a start." She also hoped that there would always be those who will continue to experiment.

The panel discussion of the relevance of *Main Street* emphasized two issues: the critique of the small town and the role of women in society. Everyone agreed that Lewis's dissection of the small town is far more than a thinly veiled picture of Sauk Centre. Forseth said that when he read Lewis in high school, he discovered everyone he knew in *Main Street*, and Ianni pointed

out that small towns don't have any exclusivity on small-mindedness. Killough argued that many of Lewis's specific complaints—newcomers being treated as outsiders, low artistic standards, and the need for a more conscious life—are still true in small Midwest towns. Koblas and Parry agreed that the novel's picture of women in society and marriage is still valuable and was, in fact, ahead of its time. The panel members also offered some other approaches to the novel that demonstrate its continuing relevance. Killough suggested that at heart *Main Street* is a story of the conflict between the individual of romantic aspirations and the hard realities of the community. Forseth argued that *Main Street* is a novel of manners narrating the courtship of Carol and the small town, featuring mutual learning, rejection, and eventual reconciliation. Parry offered that the novel is about the difficulties of communication and about how succeeding or failing to communicate is connected to how well or poorly communities function.

During the question and answer exchange, the panel asked the audience how relevant Sinclair Lewis is in Sauk Centre in 1995. Some audience members said that Lewis as a tourist attraction is good for business. Others said that Lewis, chronicler of Sauk Centre, is important for the town's heritage. Roberta Olson, member of the Lewis Foundation, admitted that while many in the town express apathy or antipathy toward Lewis, there is a significant group of people who love his novels and recognize his importance. The others, she said, "don't understand why the world is coming to Sauk Centre."

## THE RISE OF SINCLAIR LEWIS, 1920-1930 <sup>h</sup> New Book To Be Published on Lewis

James Hutchisson, Penn State University Press, Spring 1996

Hutchisson's book examines the making of Lewis's career during his "great decade," the 1920s. He draws on hundreds of pages of material in the Lewis archives at Yale and Texas that has never been published before. These notes, outlines, and drafts show how Lewis selected usable materials and shaped them, through his unique vision, into novels that reached and remained part of the American imagination. Lewis's papers reveal the complex aesthetic matrix that he tried to present in his novels, for he wanted to be recognized both as a satirist and as a more straightforward, mainstream novelist. Hutchisson's

research also demonstrates for the first time how large a role was played by Lewis's wives, assistants, and publishers in determining the final shape of his books.

The book contains thirty-two illustrations of manuscript materials and six appendices. Three of these reprint material by or about Lewis that has not been available: a chapter of *Main Street* that was omitted from the book; an essay, "The Pioneer Myth," written in February 1921; and Hugh Walpole's introduction to the British edition of *Babbitt*.

## ELMER GANTRY, THE MUSICAL, RETURNS

In March 1988, the musical of *Elmer Gantry* opened at Ford's Theater in Washington, attempted to come to Broadway, but closed without going anywhere. Three years later it was rewritten and produced at La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego. Des McAnuff, who directed *Big River*, and Heidi Landesman, who had designed that production, signed on. However, despite the enlargement of the cast, the reworking of the ending, and an enhancement of production values, it closed after eight weeks and again was not transferred to Broadway.

It has now been revived, once more at Ford's Theater, to generally positive reviews. Pamela Sommers, writing in the *Washington Post* on September 20, said:

"At a time when the words 'musical theater' bring to mind

whirring helicopters and falling chandeliers, big-bucks revivals and overdone body-miking, the mere existence of a human-scale, character-and-music-driven show like 'Elmer Gantry' is cause for celebration. To sit in the relatively intimate confines of Ford's Theater—where 'Gantry' opened Monday night—and listen to those gutsy, dramatic voices dig in to Mel Marvin and Bob Satuloff's wonderful country-and-gospel score is to understand what live theater is supposed to be about.

"The aural element—music, lyrics, voices, instrumentalists—is what makes this saga of lust, religion, greed and hucksterism definitely worth a visit. Based on Sinclair Lewis's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel [*sic*], this is a musical that commu-

nicates best through the steamy ballad, the fervent call to worship, the knock-around boozy blues number. We first meet con man and ex-preacher Elmer Gantry (John Dossett) as he and a group of fellow salesmen wait in yet another Midwestern train station, singing a stirring, cynical chorus that has him spouting Depression-era sentiments...

"Similarly, the ambitious tent show evangelist sister Sharon Falconer (Sharon Scruggs) with whom he teams up both professionally and romantically—is introduced via "Shine," a gospelish anthem that Scruggs delivers with sultry flair, followed by the haunting ballad "You Don't Know Who I Am"—in which Sharon reveals the darkness and mystery looming beneath her radiant self. Well-crafted songs are also the perfect means for Elmer, Sister Sharon and their small retinue to sell their spiritual wares. Dossett's rich, expansive baritone, Scruggs's husky and alluring instrument, the electrifying gospel stylings of Lynette DuPre, Tina Fabrique and Vanessa A. Jones—indeed the entire ensemble of singers and instrumentalists—do Marvin and Satuloff's score proud.

"Would that 'Gantry' looked as fine as it sounds. Choreographer Danny Herman's ever more crass and perkier tent-revival numbers are a delight—especially the football-inspired shenanigans for "Carry That Ball"—they are just about the only extended movement sequences in the 2½-hour show. Director Michael Maggio uses Ford's rather skimpy stage in indefinite and at times confusing ways—is that a dressing room at the back of the tent or a hotel room?—and set designer Chris Barecca has made matters worse with his static panels of wheat fields, unimaginative backdrop of sky, and cliched steel grids and bricks to suggest the big city. Pat Collins's lighting is serviceable at best; the shadow-and-silhouette techniques he employs during Gantry's frustrated, horny 'Night Heat' number are downright hokey. There's a hopelessly wimpy depiction of the devastating fire that serves as the climax of Act 2. And even a potentially effective device, the troupe's on-stage raising of its tent, comes off as messy and off-putting.

"The most perplexing visual problem is that of Scruggs's body language and overall appearance. This intense, often riveting actress has no difficulty playing the profane, troubled Sharon; her pain-drenched singing and smoky delivery of John Bishop's dialogue could not be more convincing. And her thin, almost bony frame, outfitted in costumer Tom Broecker's Jean Harlow-style gowns, slips and negligees, exudes a bruised sexuality. But Scruggs simply does not look the part of the sacred Sister Sharon; though wearing white angelic robes and lighted like some Heaven-sent apparition, the actress still gives off a world-weary, enervated air. And the stiff-necked, angular poses she assumes during her private encounters with Gantry—the pair do strike the requisite sparks, but never truly burst into flames—should not carry over into her public encounters with Jesus.

"Elmer Gantry's' creators and producers are hoping that this production of the show, its third incarnation in eight years, will finally wind up on Broadway. Realistically, though, this traditional book musical seems more a candidate for an off-Broadway or regional production. The basics—libretto, score, cast—are all in place. With a lot more attention to staging and set, this

impassioned, thoroughly American show could blow the roof off the house."

Elmer Gantry, *music and lyrics by Mel Marvin and Bob Satuloff. Directed by Michael Maggio. With Matthew Bennett, David Elledge, Allen Fitzpatrick, David Lutken, Barry Tarrallo.*

The original review in *Time* by William A. Henry III on March 14, 1988 noted: "[V]igorously staged, tuneful and robustly acted, this ambitious work circles outside the characters and never gives them a chance to look deep inside themselves, except in a pair of oblique, cryptic solo songs. Director David H. Bell has let a number of solecisms slip past, including a raunchy *Monkey Song* about the secret lustfulness of women that is entertaining but out of character for the men of a traveling revival show. Librettist John Bishop links the story's religious excesses too closely to the economic travails of the 1930's. But in Casey Biggs and Sharon Scruggs as the saints turned sinners turned martyrs, this promising show has lead performers capable of competing with the vivid memory of the 1960 film."

## SINCLAIR LEWIS WRITERS' CONFERENCE

The Sinclair Lewis Foundation of Sauk Centre sponsored the sixth annual Sinclair Lewis Writers Conference on Saturday, October 14, 1995 at the Sauk Centre Junior High School. The keynote speaker was novelist and short story writer Will Weaver, whose story, "Dispersal," was named by the Library of Congress as one of the best stories of 1985, and aired on National Public Radio. He is also author of the novel *Red Earth, White Earth* (1986) and *The Gravestone Made of Wheat & Other Stories* (1989). His talk was entitled, "The Long and Short of it: Story in Literature and Life." Other participants included Marjorie Dorner, a professor at Winona State University and mystery novelist, author of *Freeze Frame* and *Blood Kin*; Buck Peterson, author of numerous humor books including *The Original Roadkill Cookbook* and *Buck Peterson's Complete Guide to Indoor Life*; and Bill Vossler, who has sold and published more than 2,000 articles in national magazines. For more information write Jim Umhoefer, Coordinator, Sinclair Lewis 1995 Writers Conference, 950 Lilac Drive, Sauk Centre, MN 56378, (612) 352-2735 (evenings).

Lewis was a mentor to many aspiring writers during his career and the conference is a tribute to a writer who took the time to help other writers hone their craft.

## JEOPARDY TIME

Here are this issue's Sinclair Lewis questions and answers from the syndicated game show *Jeopardy*.

From September 26, 1995: "Walter Huston starred in the 1934 play 'Dodsworth' based on the novel by this author." No one knew the answer to this Theater question for \$600.

From May 31, 1995: "At the end of a Sinclair Lewis novel, this physician retires to a Vermont farm to make serum." The contestant guessed (incorrectly) "Babbitt" as the answer to this \$500 question in Literature. Because it was a Daily Double, he bet and lost \$1000.

# “CAROL'S REVOLUTION”: A REJOINDER

by Martin Bucco  
Colorado State University

Driven by hair-trigger gender-consciousness, a review of my book, *Main Street: The Revolt of Carol Kennicott* (New York, 1993) in the Spring 1995 *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter* made much ado about nothing and then diagnosed my “attitude toward women” as “lingering traditionalism.”

My point, for example, in briefly contrasting the central character in *Main Street* with the principal figures in Lewis's first five novels—not “first four” as the review miscounted—is to differentiate between Lewis's romantic pre-war stress on fulfillment and his realistic post-war accent on compromise—not, as the review asserted, to knock Carol's “lack of achievement in life.”

The mixed review also took me to task for a sentence about young Carol as a symbol of rebellious youth and the older Carol as fitting the archetype of the fleeing housewife. My next sentence (ignored by the review) plummets back to earth: “...What makes Carol's story of aspiration, struggle, revolt, and compromise so significant, as she herself realizes, is its articulate protest of ‘the ordinary life of the age’” (12). On the first page of *Main Street* Lewis's prose itself takes on symbolic resonance when he portrays Carol as “a girl on a hilltop...the eternal aching comedy of expectant youth...a rebellious girl is the spirit of the bewildered empire called the American Middlewest.” Further, one finds in *Main Street* numerous conversations, examinations, and self-characterizations of the chief personality as a “type.” Considering that for seven chapters I discuss in sympathetic detail Carol Kennicott's changing mind, appearance, body, behavior, and soul, I find it hard to believe that my little gesture toward Lewisian fable “diminishes the complexity of Carol's character.”

Fixing on my “sad-to-say” about Carol's withdrawal from her husband and his consequent resentment, the review declared that “this”—meaning Carol's decision to sleep alone, not Will's decision to sleep with Maud Dyer—is “less sad than explicable.” Going beyond Lewis's vivid scenes marshalling solid reasons for Carol's wanting her own room, the review hypothesized that her withdrawal “more likely” connotes “a fear of another pregnancy than any rejection of Will.” As an anxious young bride, Carol sensibly realizes that she's not ready to have children, but that Lewis, who disdained psychoanalytic fiction and criticism, should devise this particular sub rosa emotion to condition Carol's marital aversions and maternal gratifications seems doubtful, especially since the novelist does orchestrate “another pregnancy,” one without the slightest fanfare or trepidation.

To be sure, Lewis's inclusions and exclusions often surprise his readers. By “surprise” I mean nothing extra-literary or personal. I mean, in the parlance of slick fiction that Lewis himself spoke, literary rockets...the dynamics of hiss, whistle, and bang...the story effects that the writer fires or misfires. But

the review proposed a moratorium on “remaining surprised” about Lewis's failure to ridicule fully Mrs. Bogart's parental self-righteousness—and advised reading the satire here “as extending outward...to those more progressively minded in Lewis's audience, who, while advocating reform in women's lives, nevertheless retain the belief that female attitudes toward motherhood remain those of unadulterated joy.” All right, but I still do not see why students of *Main Street* should stop weighing literary effects like “suspense,” “shock,” and “surprise.”

Commenting on the long and slow development of *Main Street*, on the slow creation of Gopher Prairie by the long scrutiny of Sauk Centre, I note the importance of Lewis's “visit to Sauk Centre with his hypercritical wife, Grace Hegger Lewis, in 1916.” The review censured my phrase “hypercritical wife.” Would “visit to Sauk Centre with his wife, hypercritical Grace Hegger Lewis, in 1916” have passed muster? Incidentally, my book refers in several places to the well-known novelist “Zona Gale”—not, as the review tagged her, “Zona Gayle.”

The review provoked other demurrers, but I'll mention just two more and then bite my tongue. During my close reading of *Main Street*, I try to gauge the potency of Lewis's various mimic voices, but the hoary device of the intrusive narrator does not, as the review maintained, make me “clearly uncomfortable.” Finally, I can understand this kind of review labelling my exposition of *Main Street* as “old-fashioned.” But why must the review distort my view of the novel as a rich synthesis of illusion, form, expression, and morality by identifying only *one* of the four literary values I treat? After all, a “good” novel to me is more than an instrument of moral or social reform.

## MOVIE NOTES

Lewis gets mentioned briefly in a number of films. In *It Happens Every Thursday* (1953), about publishing a newspaper in a small town, Myron Trout, a local businessman, blames characters played by John Forsythe and Loretta Young for bad weather conditions. At a city council meeting, he is told to sit down and “not be such a Babbitt.”

In *Gentlemen's Agreement* (1947), Gregory Peck plays a man who pretends to be Jewish in order to write about anti-Semitism. Although his name is Phil, when he writes he uses the professional name of Schuyler Green. To support his name change, he mentions Sinclair Lewis whose given name was Harry.

## DODSWORTH, THE MUSICAL

Lewis's novels seem to be fertile ground for musicals these days. In addition to the revival of *Elmer Gantry* in Washington, Casa Mañana Musicals of Fort Worth, Texas produced *Dodsworth, the Musical*. The production ran from October 17-29 and starred Hal Linden, Dee Hoty, and Beth McVey. Book and lyrics were by Stephen Cole, music by Jeffrey Saver, and direction by Bruce Lumpkin.

If anyone saw the musical or knows whether the production is moving on to other theaters, the editor would like to hear about it.

# MAIN STREET U.S.A.

## Congress gets no respect in Sinclair Lewis's Hometown

by Albert Eisele

From: *The Hill*, Jan. 18, 1995

Sauk Centre, Minn.—Message to the 104th Congress from Main Street USA: Clean up your act, stop the political posturing, don't even think about raising taxes, pass some kind of healthcare reform, stop government waste, start balancing the budget, and work together to solve the nation's problems.

If you can't do that, don't worry about term limits because we'll find somebody else to do the job.

That's the grassroots feedback from Sauk Centre, Minnesota, where native son Sinclair Lewis created the image of small town America 75 years ago in his unflattering novel *Main Street*. Although the 3,700 residents of this heavily Republican town seem pleased that the GOP now controls Congress, the lone traffic light on the Original Main Street isn't exactly flashing green for Newt Gingrich, Bob Dole or the Contract with America.

In fact, many residents of the central Minnesota town that Lewis satirized and immortalized as "Gopher Prairie" in his 1920 novel of provincialism on the prairies are as skeptical about the ability of Republicans to solve the nation's problems as they were of their Democratic predecessors.

"As far as people around here are concerned, it's put up or shut up," says Dave Simpkins, editor of the weekly *Sauk Centre Herald*, when asked how Main Street views Washington. "Let's get something done. Let's make it work. People are frustrated by all the dialogue. We all use government but we hate to see money wasted. We live frugal lives ourselves."

At the intersection of the Original Main Street and Sinclair Lewis Avenue, the owner of the restored Palmer House Hotel is equally disenchanted. "I've been staunchly Republican all my life," says Linda Frumkin, who calls to mind Main Street's strong-minded heroine, Carol Kennicott. "But I tell you, I've gotten to the point where I have no confidence in politics. I don't think it matters one bit whether the Republicans or the Democrats are in power. I think they're all the same."

And down the street at the local bank, Pat DuBois, who grew up next door to Lewis and once went fishing with him as a boy, echoes Main Street USA's jaundiced view of Washington. "The attitude in Sauk Centre now is really, what's different?" says DuBois, a former Democratic state legislator. "Really, we all want changes, but it doesn't make much difference whether it's Democratic or Republican. A lot of people couldn't care less."

The downbeat view of Washington extends to the new Speaker of the House as well. "I think Gingrich is a little off the wall," says Gary Winter, a lifelong Republican whose Main Street Drug has a rack of Lewis's best-known paperback novels for the tourists. "He came on like gang-busters as if he was going to make everything better right away. The idea of the power he may have went to his head and he's trying to bully his way through."

Dairy farmer Paul Borgmann is pleased with the Republican victory, but he thinks Congress and the federal government are too big and wasteful. "If I had my way, I would get rid of half the people in Congress," he says from the ultra-modern barn on his 640 acre farm two miles west of town. "They should clean up all waste in government. And this middle class tax cut, that's a joke. There's no way you can balance the budget by giving people their money back."

The comments of Sauk Centre's leading citizens reflect the fact that there's little consensus on Main Street about what role Washington and the federal government should play in their lives. But there definitely is a feeling that it should be different than in the past.

"I really think we're at a crossroads in our nation's history right now," declares Mayor Paul Theisen, who took office Jan. 1. "The era of the Thirties, the New Deal, I think that's finally coming to a close, and maybe it's time."

But just what will replace it is an open question. "The Contract with America is a campaign gimmick," says editor Simpkins. "There are a lot of good things in it, but you can't go back to giving tax cuts when you've got a lot of bills to pay. It's like my household budget—I don't spend money I don't have."

Simpkins took note of *The Hill's* recent visit to Sauk Centre in an editorial that said the reporter "discovered people on America's Main Street don't like what they see coming out of Washington. Much of what he found were people more concerned about personal matters and very skeptical, if not hostile, about Congress."

\* \* \*

Asked what message he thinks Sauk Centre would like to deliver to Congress, Simpkins says, "We're a small town where people know their neighbors and care about them. We're not isolated—we've got cable TV and C-SPAN and fax machines. We work hard and pay our bills and Congress should too."

Mayor Theisen doesn't think the Republican revolution has made itself felt on Main Street yet, even though he expects it to result in even more cutbacks in federal urban aid. But he adds, "I think it's good that we have to fend for ourselves, to become more self-reliant, and it's going to take a lot of creative energies to get more involved in generating our own income. I think it's going to be a good exercise for us."

Theisen believes Sauk Centre is as good a barometer as any for the problems and potential of small town America. "We don't have a race problem or much crime, and right now jobs are no problem although some farmers and local business people are struggling to get along. Everybody works together. That's the reason we've been able to survive. Up here, if you don't build your woodpile, you're all done. They may share their pile with you the first winter, but the second winter, I'm sorry."

Linda Frumkin was born and raised in Sauk Centre but moved to California to start an import business. But she got tired of the overcrowding and returned to her hometown in 1989. When she heard that the run-down Palmer House—the "Minniemashie House" in *Main Street*—was for sale, she bought it with the help of a city loan and remodeled it. The hotel and part of Main Street were placed on the National Historic Register last year.

But she ran into a bureaucratic wall when she protested government regulations requiring her to pay the same wage scale as that in large cities. After hearing Vice President Gore talk about reinventing government, she faxed him a letter. "I got a phone call from somebody in the Labor Department, who told me they'd look into it," she recalls. "About six months later, I got a one-inch thick envelope that cited all these cases and said I could file an appeal. They wasted all this time and effort and didn't help me at all."

Even though she voted for Clinton ("I thought he was a breath of fresh air and his wife was strong, intelligent"), Frumkin is disappointed in him. "He's sort of wishy washy," she says, using a term repeated by several others in Sauk Centre. "He has no strength. Then there's all this personal stuff, it shows a lack of character." But she doesn't think Gingrich is qualified to be Speaker and Dole is "too right and doesn't bend at all."

Across the street, at Winter's Main Street Drug Store, Gary Winter sees healthcare as the biggest concern on Main Street. "Healthcare will kill us," he says. "We can't afford the healthcare the government wants to give us." He notes that Medicare doesn't cover the cost of most prescriptions for the elderly. "Drug prices are going up constantly, and every day there are new drugs. We have antibiotics that cost \$10 a capsule. That's nuts."

Winter voted for the local congressman, Democrat Collin Peterson (in Minnesota, it's the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party), who won re-election to a second term by two percentage points after needing a recount to win his first term. "He's not that bad," say Winter. "I think he's done some good for us."

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But that good will doesn't extend to the new Speaker of the House. "I think Gingrich made a jackass of himself when he said the Republicans weren't going to compromise. Hell, compromise is half the game. He's going to have to be controlled by the GOP and I think they've already started that." As for President Clinton, Winter predicts he'll be a one-term president. "He's wishy washy, no firm commitment to anything."

If there's anyone in Sauk Centre who's qualified to talk about the town's most famous citizen, it's banker Pat DuBois, whose father grew up with Lewis and started what is now the Independent Bankers Association of America, which is still headquartered here. He notes that many older people in Sauk Centre did not appreciate Lewis's withering satire of his hometown, and adds, "I don't think Lewis liked anybody very well."

As for the 104th Congress, he would like to see it "come to grips with providing healthcare for our people, and how they're going to pay for it." Noting that a lot of people he talks to think Gingrich is "a nasty S.O.B.," DuBois offers his personal opinion, "that he's a very dangerous, powerful person. But the Washington bureaucracy will take the rough edges off him. He can't be nasty to the degree he has been and attack the president to the degree he has without hurting himself and helping Clinton."

But DuBois, like many in Sauk Centre, has an equally low opinion of Congress in general. "It's really been a disgrace to the American people. The politicians have made their life so cushy with all the perks, retirement, staff, and so on. When you look

at all of these things and look at the product they have turned out, it make you feel that you've been let down."

The anti-Washington mood on Main Street USA is pretty well summed up by dairy farmer Paul Borgmann, who says, "I watch C-SPAN on TV and that's about the boringest damn thing I've ever seen. It's all talk and nothing ever happens."

Nevertheless, he holds out some hope for the new reform-minded Congress, and expects Republicans to live up to their campaign promises.

I just hope to hell these guys keep it up," Borgmann says. "If they don't clean up all the waste in government and do the job the people elected them to do, we'll kick 'em right back out again."

## OBITUARIES

We regret the passing of actress Lana Turner who may be best known to Lewis scholars as the woman who played Jinny Timberlane in the MGM film *Cass Timberlane* (now available on videotape).

She was an American leading lady of the 1940's who starred in such films as *Ziegfeld Girl*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Peyton Place*, and *Madame X*.

We also note the death last year of Frederick Manfred (Feike Fiekema), a regional novelist from Minnesota, who received much help and support from Sinclair Lewis while he was starting his career as a writer. Among his novels are *The Golden Bowl* and *Lord Grizzly*. He was nominated several times for the Nobel Prize in Literature and as David Anderson said in the newsletter of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature, he "has created one of the great mythic places of American literary history. . . Siouland, the plate where the states of Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota now meet, where the Rock River and the Big Sioux flow to the Missouri, where Fred was born and grew up in Doon and where he lived and died in Lucerne." Manfred was one of the speakers at Lewis's funeral service in 1951.

### Contributors

The editor of *The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter* would like to thank everyone who contributed this issue by writing articles or sending in notes. These people include Jon W. Brooks, Martin Bucco, Roger Forseth, James Hutchisson, Lawrence Ianni, George Killough, David Knauer, Jacqueline Koenig, Pia Lopez, Robert McLaughlin, Roberta Parry, Jim Umhoefer, Jay Williams.

### Teaching Sinclair Lewis

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, Dept. of English, 4240 Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-4240.



# COLLECTOR'S CORNER

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## From Catalog 19

305 Lewis, Sinclair. *Bethel Merriday*. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1940. First edition. One of an unknown number of copies signed by Lewis on a tipped-in leaf. Clean near fine copy in a very bright dust jacket with a short tear at top of front panel and some minor rubbing at edges. The only example of this signed issue we have seen. \$300

## From Catalog 21

Fall 1995

385 Lewis, Sinclair. *The Trail of the Hawk*. New York: Harper & Brothers, [1915]. First edition. Tissue guard for frontispiece foxed, a few pages soiled otherwise a very good copy of this scarce book. \$125

386 Lewis, Sinclair. *The Job*. New York: Harper & Brothers, [1917]. First edition. Paper on front pastedown skinned from a removed bookplate otherwise a very good copy of Lewis' third adult book. \$100

387 Lewis, Sinclair. *Free Air*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1919. First edition. Fine clean copy lacking the rare dust jacket. \$100

389 Lewis, Sinclair. *Ann Vickers*. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1933. First edition. Near fine in lightly soiled dust jacket with several closed edgetears. \$125

390 Lewis, Sinclair. *Dodsworth*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, [1929]. First edition. Near fine copy in dust jacket with a few shallow chips at edges. In the first issue jacket without reviews at bottom of front flap. \$200

391 Lewis, Sinclair. *Gideon Planish*. New York: Random House, [1943]. First edition. Fine copy in an unusually bright fresh dust jacket with a few tiny nicks. \$100

392 Lewis, Sinclair. *The God-Seeker*. New York: Random House, [1949]. First edition. Fine in dust jacket slightly rubbed at spine ends. \$75

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## March 1995 List

186 Lewis, Sinclair. *The Man Who Knew Coolidge*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1928. First edition. Nicely inscribed by the author: "For years I have autographed books for collectors. Few of them have had the courtesy to acknowledge it; none of them, I think has ever repaid me so handsomely as has Mr. H. Randolph Lever in sending me 'The Compleat Angler' & I send him this book in appreciation. Sinclair Lewis, New York, Nov. 13, 1951." About fine in a very good dust jacket. In a custom 1/4 leather slipcase. \$850

187 Lewis, Sinclair. *Arrowsmith*. Illustrated With Scenes

from the Samuel Goldwyn Motion Picture. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1931. Photoplay edition issued to coincide with the release of the John Ford directed film starring Ronald Colman, Helen Hayes, and Myrna Loy. Fine in a very good dust jacket with a few small nicks and tears. The front panel of the dust jacket is a striking painting of Ronald Colman looking at a reflection of Helen Hayes in a laboratory beaker. \$135

188 [Lewis, Sinclair]. Disney Studios. *Walt Disney's Bongo*: Adapted From the Characters and Backgrounds Created for the Walt Disney Motion Picture Fun and Fancy Free. Based on an Adaptation of the Original Story "Bongo" by Sinclair Lewis. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1947. First edition. Nearly fine. Scarce. \$375

## April 1995 List

177 Lewis, Sinclair. *Mantrap*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925. Uncorrected galley proof, 84 leaves, printed on rectos only. The proof is dated November 21, 1925. The novel was published the next year. Galley proofs of this vintage are genuinely rare, and were distributed only to a few people for editing, submissions for serials rights, foreign printings, etc. Some marginal tears, and archival mends in the final page. Bound in decorated vellum and boards (some wear). The sheets measure nearly two feet by six inches. \$2,000

## June 1995 List

261 Lewis, Sinclair. *The Trail of the Hawk*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1915. First edition. Inscribed by the author, "To Kate Vassault with the regards of a small boy who played with her & those other children, Artie Hoffman, Gil Hall, Virgie Roderick, Jimmie Hamilton, by the babbling brooks (of type metal) & pleasant fields (of galley proof) in the Butterick Building. Sinclair Lewis, Nov. 15, 1915." Some tears in, and fraying, of the spine cloth, very good. The author's third book. \$850

262 Lewis, Sinclair. *Arrowsmith*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925. First Trade edition. Very good. \$45

263 Lewis, Sinclair. *Mantrap*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1926. First edition. Ownership signature, some foxing. Very good. \$35

## From Thomas A. Goldwasser Rare Books

Catalogue Number Seven

126 Post Street, Suite 407

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Telephone: (415) 981-4100, Fax: (415) 981-8935

203 (Lewis, Sinclair). *Irvin Cobb. His Book*. Friendly tributes upon the occasion of a dinner tendered to Irvin Shrewsbury Cobb at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. New York, 1915. Original boards, paper label, spine and corners worn. First edition, contains Lewis's tribute "C-O-B-B," among works of many other writers and artists. This copy is inscribed by Cobb to Howard Chandler Christy, who contributed a drawing. Accompanied by the elaborate menu for the night, listing the

program and the members of the committee. \$250

204 Lewis, Sinclair. *Free Air*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1919. Original blue pictorial cloth, nice copy; bookplate. First edition. \$150

205 Lewis, Sinclair. *Kingsblood Royal*. London: Cape (1948). Beige cloth, a fine copy in dust jacket (spine slightly faded). First English edition. \$50

206 Lewis, Sinclair. *Kingsblood Royal*. New York: Random House (1947). Grey cloth, fine copy in dust jacket. First edition. \$50

207 Lewis, Sinclair. *The God-Seeker*. New York: Random House (1949). Blue cloth, slight lean, otherwise fine; bright dust jacket with masking tape on the inside top edge. First edition. \$75

208 Lewis, Sinclair. *The God-Seeker*. London: Heinemann (1949). Brown boards, fine in slightly used dust jacket. First English edition. \$50

### California Book Auction Galleries

A Division of Butterfield & Butterfield Auctioneers, Inc.  
June 13, 1995, San Francisco

2380 (Authors) 4 inscribed parchments or letters from H.L. Mencken, Vicente Blasco Ibanez, Sinclair Lewis and P.G. Wodehouse. Various formats (some show-through stains from glue, folds, occasional soiling). V.p.: V.d. The Mencken and Wodehouse contributions are on their respective letterheads; the Ibanez is in Spanish. The Lewis is a tongue-in-cheek note: "To Carl Laemmle, from a young actor who is showing some promise in the summer theatres, & looking forward to a hall bedroom on Broadway not later than 1949." The Wodehouse letter contains this amusing bit: "What I say about my walking is true. I was looked on as quite a freak, I believe, during my stay at Hollywood because I insisted on walking everywhere. It used to puzzle the studio authorities at first when they sent for me and I arrived two hours later!" An interesting group. *Provenance*: Carl Laemmle Sr. Collection. Estimate \$500/800

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Phone: (415) 896-2665 Fax: (415) 896-1664

The Library of Alf Stavig  
Sale 70  
Thursday, March 23, 1995  
1:30 p.m.

191 Lewis, Sinclair. *Work of Art*. [1934.] • *Cass Timberlane*. [1945]. Together, 2 vols. Cloth, 2nd in jacket. First editions. Garden City & New York: [1934 & 1945]. Both signed by Sinclair Lewis. Short tears to jacket extremities of 2nd; 1st with dulling to spine, else very good. (\$150/200)

### Early Ghostwriting by Lewis

192 [Lewis, Sinclair.] McLoughlin, Maurice E. *Tennis As I Play It*. Preface by Richard Norris Williams. Illus. from photographs. 9x6, gilt-lettered green cloth. First edition. New York:

George H. Doran, [1915]. T.L.s. from McLoughlin to Alf Stavig laid-in, regarding a recommendation about his investigative skills. The book, McLoughlin told Stavig when he met him, was ghost-written by Sinclair Lewis when he was a struggling writer, about 5 years before *Main Street* was published (a memorandum regarding this is also laid-in). About fine. (\$100/150)

## LEWIS ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB

Apparently, the only Sinclair Lewis text available online currently is the least likely one: OUR MR. WRENN—long out of print and not widely available.

It's in the electronic American literature text archive at the University of Keele ("MIMI"):

On the World Wide Web, type: <http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/as/Literature/amlit.mimi.html>

Or, if you have access to Netscape, enter "mimi" in the Net Search menu.

## 'TIS THE SEASON

### Sinclair Lewis's Sinful Christmas Cookies

John Koblas's book, *Sinclair Lewis: Home at Last*, describes this recipe as Sinclair Lewis's favorite one for Christmas cookies. Although the recipe says to use a cookie cutter, don't bother. They're delicious, but bake into amorphous shapes.

1/2 lb. butter  
1/2 cup finely chopped almonds  
2 eggs  
1 shot glass bourbon  
2 cups sugar  
2 tablespoons Drostes cocoa  
2 cups flour

Make sure you mix these ingredients well. Otherwise several of the cookies will have a very strong taste. Put mixture in the refrigerator overnight to harden. Roll out thin on floured board and cut with cookie cutter (from experience just dropping little balls on a cookie sheet would work just as well).

Bake on well-greased tin at 375° for 8 to 10 minutes. If you can smell them cooking, then they are done.

# YOUNG MAN WITH A PROBLEM

Rev. of *They Still Say No* by Wells Lewis. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1939.

by Sally E. Parry

Illinois State University

Imagine an ambitious college student, similar to those created by F. Scott Fitzgerald, but with problems more usually written about by the young Philip Roth. That, in a nutshell, is the premise of the only novel written by Sinclair Lewis's elder son Wells.

Mark Schorer's biography of Lewis alludes to this novel as do several other studies of Lewis. However, it had a relatively small run when it was published in 1939 and it is rarely seen in used book stores. It was not published by one of Lewis's publishers, suggesting that Farrar & Rinehart found merit in it for its own sake. Lewis indicated several times that he was proud of the work Wells was doing. However, Wells died in action in Italy in 1944 before writing another novel, although he did have some magazine pieces published.

In *They Still Say No*, Crane Stewart, rich young WASP and Harvard student, has a problem. He is a virgin in a culture which assumes that by the time young men are juniors in college, they have had some sexual experiences. Outside of some heavy petting though, Crane has not had any luck. The novel catalogues his experiences along the road to sexual fulfillment. His fiancée wants to wait until they are married, another young woman doesn't know him well enough, and the one woman who seems willing is having her menstrual period at an inopportune time.

In despair, Crane takes a job for the summer as a secretary to his uncle in Mexico. The job requires little work so Crane is free to continue his search. He finally does have sex with an American woman on vacation, but realizes that without affection for a woman and interest in her as a person, something is missing. He also carries on a romance with another American, Anne, but she tires of his moody behavior and becomes engaged to someone else. The novel ends up back at Harvard where Crane, sadder but wiser, is starting his last year. It concludes with a startling (and for Wells prophetic) question posed to Crane by his best friend. "'Say. . .' he remarked solicitously, 'what will you do if the United States gets into a world war?'" (306).

Wells, in this bildungsroman, seems to have been more influenced by Fitzgerald than his father. However, the extreme romanticism of Crane does echo the desires of protagonists like Mr. Wrenn and Carl Erikson of *The Trail of the Hawk*. He wants to do something important, although he doesn't know just what. There is some social satire, of aimless college students and their parties, and of expatriates, one of whom is described as speaking with an accent "one part French, three parts brandy" (140). Crane is gently mocked by the narrator and also mocks himself. After Anne tells him of her engagement, Crane decides to commit suicide in a properly dramatic way. He fills the bathtub and picks up a copy of the *Aeneid* so that he will have been said to have died a Roman death. However, he realizes he has forgotten his Latin and doesn't know what he'll read instead while waiting for the blood to drip out of veins. Shades of Dorothy Parker's "Résumé," he decides he "might as well live."

*They Still Say No* is a breezy novel about angst in the soul of a college student. Although not a great piece of literature, it has an engaging style and indicates that had he lived, Wells might have had a promising career as a novelist.

## ST. CLOUD TIMES CELEBRATES LEWIS

IN CONNECTION WITH THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE PUBLICATION OF *MAIN STREET*, THE *ST. CLOUD TIMES* RAN FIVE EDITORIALS ON SEPTEMBER 3, 1995.

### AT 75, MAIN STREET SPARKLES

*Main Street*, a novel by Sauk Centre native Sinclair Lewis, is making a national comeback 75 years after it was first published.

Many people still can identify with Lewis's story of a young woman moving from Minneapolis to the small town of Gopher Prairie—and the travails both of the newcomer and the long-time residents of the town as they come to terms with each other.

Where Americans once abandoned the rural areas for the city, many now are returning to the countryside, seeking to combine metropolitan area cultural sophistication with small-town community values.

Lewis's novel provides a fascinating study of the "outsider" hoping to change things overnight and "insiders" wanting to keep things just the way they are. In the end, community building is a reconciliation of both those impulses.

For the 75th anniversary of the publication of *Main Street*, the Sinclair Lewis Foundation in Sauk Centre gathered scholars from across the nation to assess whether *Main Street* is still relevant today. The Times asked each to write a column on that theme. Not surprisingly, all find the novel still very much alive.

### BOOK SHOWS CONFLICT BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL, COMMUNITY

Enduring theme is the courtship of woman  
and her new town

by Roger Forseth

Last fall, on my way to visit my home town, Aberdeen, S.D., I drove through Lisbon, N.D., where as a child I spent my

summers with my grandparents.

Lisbon is a small town, about the size of Sinclair Lewis's fictional Gopher Prairie, set in a lovely valley of the Sheyenne River, 80 miles southwest of Fargo. I had not been there for 50 years and what I expected to see, on the basis of the multitude of reports on the decline and fall of the Midwest village, was a pathetic row of half-abandoned storefronts.

What I did find was a thriving community surrounded by new residential development. I discovered that Lisbon had become a "bedroom" for surrounding manufacturing plants, a not uncommon fate for many towns of the upper Midwest.

This experience vividly underlined, for me, the reality that the obituary for the town in the American Heartland is decidedly premature. The geographical Main Street is, it seems, safe and here to stay.

But how safe is Lewis's novel *Main Street*: not simply its assured place in the history of American literature, but the timelessness of its art?

Part of the answer to this question lies in our evolving understanding of the novel. Originally it was received as a devastating demolition of the culture of the American small town, as was Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, published the year before *Main Street*.

Initially, the main character of the story, Carol Kennicott was taken to be the noble, idealistic, misunderstood rebel. However, by the '60's many readers found in the town and its inhabitants a certain sympathetic resonance combined, as it was, with a sense of nostalgia for the simple life of the village.

Carol, of course, did not realize that when she married Will Kennicott she married the town. It is not until the end of the novel that she is able, with pleasure bordering on joy, to accept this reality.

In the final analysis, *Main Street* is essentially a courtship narrative, a novel of manners. The real courtship is not between Carol and Will—that is over almost before the book begins—but between Carol and Gopher Prairie.

Viewed in this manner, the novel consists of a series of episodes concentrically arranged to form and document a community; the individuals and factions of this community then chip away at Carol's rampant individualism, weathering rather than destroying it.

The courtship is more a contest than a full-blown battle, consisting as it does of emergent compromises in which each side is momentarily under the illusion that it has won. At its most profound level the book is about Carol not just learning to love Will but learning to accept with feeling the town as well.

At the end of the novel when Will speaks to Carol of "a second wooing," he is also speaking for Gopher Prairie. The view, then, embodied in *Main Street*, is the evolution of the conflict between the individual and the community.

And it is Carol's individualism that goes through a sea-change without being dissolved. "I will go back!" she cries, "I will go on asking questions. I've always done it, and always failed at it, and it's all I can do." In the end she is not broken; she grows up.

It is this quality, the quality of epitomizing the eternal conflict between the one and the many, that makes *Main Street* a permanent part of our literary canon.

*Forseth, professor emeritus of English at the University of Wisconsin-Superior, is a member of the board of directors of the Sinclair Lewis Society.*

## CRITICAL TIME FOR SMALL TOWNS

**75 years after classic *Main Street* was written, small towns must battle complacency to remain vital**

*St. Cloud Times* editorial

When Sinclair Lewis wrote *Main Street* 75 years ago, residents of small towns could afford to be smug and complacent. And, as Lewis pointed out, they were. Small towns were thriving, the places a majority of Americans lived. A little criticism was the right medicine.

Today, however, small towns are in decline—although most Americans still idealize what they perceive to be small town life and values. Only 11,897 communities remain that fit the Census Bureau definition of a small town—less than 10,000 population. But neither romanticizing their virtues nor excoriating their flaws will keep them alive. They need inspired leadership and self-help.

Small towns are aging, the Census Bureau figures show. More residents in the 18 to 35 age group move out than move in. Small towns have the highest proportion of high school drop-outs and unemployed people. Their residents are more dependent on welfare and Social Security than those of larger cities or suburbs.

That's not the small town of American lore—full of self-reliant individuals all helping one another.

Yet the generalized picture of decline doesn't fit every small town. Many are reversing their fortunes.

Astute leaders are beginning to realize that residents of cities and suburbs increasingly are looking to small towns because they are viewed as stable places with a visible and living history. They provide a connectedness and rootedness lacking in larger communities.

The small towns that are drawing new residents are building on their historical identity, while welcoming new elements. Those that do nothing are dying on the vine.

Leaders in many small towns in Central Minnesota are realizing things cannot remain as they've always been. Some are actively beginning to define a community identity while promoting economic and cultural vitality. The small towns that don't confront change will continue to decline or be swallowed by the rootless suburban juggernaut.

The solution lies in residents getting together and consciously defining a dynamic community identity. What makes St. Joseph, Avon, Holdingford, Rice, Cold Spring and other towns what they are—different from others? What will make them different in the future? Some towns, like St. Joseph, already have begun this process.

The complacency Lewis portrayed in his fictional Gopher Prairie, Minn., of the 1920s was a flaw born of good times. Today complacency in declining small towns is a threat to survival. Thriving small towns, even with their shortcomings, provide a solid base of community that no suburb or larger city can match.

## DON'T LOOK DOWN ON ANYONE

### Lewis's book poked fun at those with small-minded values

by Lawrence Ianni

The citizens of present day Sauk Centre cannot be blamed if they occasionally have a laugh at the expense of the rest of us in America.

Present day readers of Sinclair Lewis's classic novel, *Main Street*, tend to view it in one of two ways.

Some see it as an historical piece about what American small towns used to be like—provincial, smug and predominantly shallow in their social values and actions. Others see it as still validly portraying certain unattractive characteristics of life in American small towns—characteristics that are not found in its metropolitan areas.

Since we universally accept the assumption that Lewis drew his 1920 portrait of the quintessential American small town from his birthplace in Sauk Centre, those who equate 1920 fictional Gopher Prairie with present day Sauk Centre believe it continues to reflect the limitations that Lewis portrayed so memorably.

In response to that conclusion Sauk Centre residents must chuckle and say, "They think he was writing about us and not them. I guess the boob is as enduring a species in America as Sinclair Lewis thought."

The truth is that *Main Street* shows even more clearly now than it did at its writing certain unappealing characteristics of the American social animal.

The reason for this is that America is more of a homogenized culture than it was at the time of the writing of *Main Street*. The size of one's home community doesn't differentiate life now as it did then. Through the contemporary media and technologies, the Grateful Dead, the Minnesota Symphony Orchestra, Oprah Winfrey, Rush Limbaugh—and most other features of contemporary American culture—are as available in Sauk Centre as they are in Minneapolis.

How can anyone smirk at an American small town for the presence of fast food restaurants when they may be found in towns of all sizes, including many of the world's major metropolitan areas? The same is true for spiked purple hair and nose rings.

The point is, why continue to look down on the American small town? Its inhabitants aren't perfect, but they aren't any more flawed than people everywhere else.

I doubt that Lewis meant to say that they were. Otherwise he wouldn't have written *Babbitt*, a novel in which urban people and the urban environment are represented as just as stultifying as a small town can be.

Until we see that it is the people and not the town that's the problem, we'll never get Lewis's point, which is that people with sterile and small-minded values look and behave foolishly no matter where they live.

We prove this over and over again in America because we prefer to believe that Lewis wrote about a certain place at a certain time that is now past.

People whose entertainment is soap operas, titillating talk shows and super-hero action movies and whose social values can conjure justifications for greed and self-interested politics can't afford to look down on anyone, let alone the inhabitants of American small towns. That message is why *Main Street* continues to be a relevant book.

Lawrence Ianni retired as chancellor of the University of Minnesota-Duluth to return to the classroom as professor of English.

## FOR TODAY'S STUDENTS, BOOK STILL RAISES CRITICAL QUESTIONS

by Sally Parry

In 1920, Sinclair Lewis wrote the revolutionary novel *Main Street*. His heroine, Carol Kennicott, got married, had a baby, and did many of the things a good wife is supposed to do. At the end of the book, however, instead of merely cooing over the new addition to the family, she led her husband to the nursery door, pointed to their new daughter, and said, "Do you see that object on the pillow? Do you know what it is? It's a bomb to blow up smugness."

This is the last in a series of indications that Carol tried to rebel against the stereotypical roles of good wife and good citizen and the values they imply. This questioning of values and looking forward to the next generation to make changes in society are as relevant today as they were 75 years ago.

What Sinclair Lewis wrote about small towns in some ways stands as a critique of American society as a whole because the things he criticized—intolerance of other nationalities and religions, indifference to the plight of people of lower economic classes, and insensitivity to those who do not always support the status quo—still remain problems with which our society is plagued.

When *Main Street* was published in 1920, it was seen by literary critics as part of the so-called revolt from the village movement, because Lewis joined authors such as Sherwood Anderson, Floyd Dell and Zona Gale in questioning the prevailing wisdom that the small town was the repository of all that was good about America. They all were concerned with the way pettiness, insularity and gossip affected the quality of life.

But what makes Lewis's writing still fresh and interesting is that he realized that many of the complaints these writers were making were all a matter of perspective.

In one of the most famous passages from the novel, Carol Kennicott walks around her new home of Gopher Prairie and is appalled by the dirt and the foul odors and the unsanitary conditions, including a hotel that was a "jungle of stained tablecloths and catsup bottles" and a grocery store that featured "black, overripe bananas and lettuce on which a cat was sleeping." But Lewis does not stop there. This description of a little horror on the prairie is balanced by the tour of Gopher Prairie that Bea Sorenson, a Scandinavian immigrant, makes. She sees the same stores and hotels, but to her the town, which is many times larger than the one she comes from, is a wonderful place to see.

The first time I taught the novel I was afraid students might

find it dated. But although the cars are different and movies now have sound, the struggles that Carol Kennicott goes through in determining her identity as a woman are still relevant.

Many of the students I teach are from small towns or are the first in their family to attend college. Some identify with Carol as she tries to find useful work to do in improving her community. Others are annoyed because she seems flighty, trying out many different activities, from civic improvement to community theater, but not settling on one project to pursue.

Older adults in these classes find this criticism amusing because Carol is going through many of the same growing pains as these young adults. One older student even suggested that they reread the novel in 10 years when their perspectives will have changed and they will have realized some of the compromises that one must make. Another older woman commented that the novel made her realize she was a feminist because she aches for Carol's attempts to find herself in a world that does not encourage women to be themselves.

Any novel that can raise such a variety of responses is still very much a part of our cultural heritage.

Lewis went on to critique other aspects of American society in novels such as *Babbitt*, *Arrowsmith*, *Elmer Gantry*, *It Can't Happen Here* and *Kingsblood Royal*. However, *Main Street* remains the novel with which he is most closely identified and the one that is named on his tombstone.

Journalist Dorothy Thompson, who was also Sinclair Lewis's second wife, wrote that he was a "disappointed democrat," because the society that he loved did not live up to the ideals on which it was founded. Until it does, Sinclair Lewis will remain a relevant and important writer.

*Sally E. Parry is an assistant professor of English at Illinois State University and Executive Director of the Sinclair Lewis Society.*

## PEOPLE, TOWNS HAVE FLAWS, RETAIN HOPE

### Book's main character returns to town aware of her limits

by George Killough

Readers in 1920 who rushed to buy Sinclair Lewis's hot new novel *Main Street* had deep familiarity with the American village. They felt it in their bones. It was part of them, even if they lived in cities.

No wonder the book struck a chord.

1920 was the census year when the urban-rural mix in America was closest to half-and-half. Thirty years previous, twice as many Americans were rural as urban. Today almost three times as many Americans are urban as rural.

1920 was just at the watershed when most people, even if they lived in cities, still had a rural or village background and the perspective that goes with it. They knew Main Street America. Many of them had experienced the same advantages and disadvantages that Sinclair Lewis articulated.

Today the Main Street experience may seem to be further removed from the reading public. But Lewis's book still resonates.

For one thing, though small towns have changed since 1920, many criticisms still seem true. Last summer, 28 Upper Midwest high school principals from small towns and rural areas, who were studying the book with me, decided it still reflects features of their communities today.

Outsiders, they said, are still regarded forever as outsiders. Outsiders who try to change things are still regarded as upstarts.

Small towns, they said, still accept a low standard of creativity, as Lewis's fictional Gopher Prairie did in the amateur theatrical production of *The Girl from Kankakee*.

The principals thought the attitude of intolerance still survives in small towns, though laws requiring due process and fairness have improved treatment of the disadvantaged.

One principal observed that because small towns are more man-centered than cities, the struggle for a more conscious life, what *Main Street's* Carol Kennicott yearned for, is still harder for women than for men.

These are all observations you might make if you see the book as a critique of small-town life, as many readers did in 1920 and as many readers still do today.

You can also see the book as the discussion of something larger, like the troubled relation between individuals and communities.

Gopher Prairie, as Lewis says in the headnote to the novel, is not just small-town Minnesota but also the "continuation of Main Streets everywhere," "the climax of civilization."

Main character Carol Kennicott tries to escape Main Street by running off to Washington, D.C., and discovers even there "a thick streak of Main Street." She returns to Gopher Prairie with a new, vaguely articulated understanding of how to make peace with community life.

It's as if the book's main issue is the struggle between the individual of romantic aspiration, Carol Kennicott, and all the rest of us who aspire to something more fulfilling than *The Girl from Kankakee*, on the one hand, and the hard realities of community living, on the other.

The way these hard realities crush individuals, as they do the *Main Street* characters Fern Mullins, the Bjornstams and Guy Pollock, and as they nearly defeat Carol Kennicott herself, is especially instructive to Americans in the 1990's who dream of an idealized past built around supportive, nurturing communities.

Readers of *Main Street* know that community life is no easy cure-all for the problems we often ascribe to our present mobility and rootlessness. Real communities are not like Sesame Street or Disneyland. Lewis's 1920 novel reveals this truth with enduring vividness.

Interestingly, it does not portray the individual as a flawless Cinderella. Lewis did not set Carol Kennicott up as the perfect heroine set upon by villains. Each side is flawed.

Can this opposition resolve? Does the book show us how to handle the conflict between imperfect individuals and imperfect communities?

No. At least not in any neat ideal way. As a book about

realities, the novel doesn't propose a utopian solution.

But Carol Kennicott does come back to Gopher Prairie. She comes back with a truer sense of her own limits and of the limits to the reformability of Main Street. And her vision is not dead.

Though her aspirations are subdued, she still has hope.

*Killough, an associate professor of English at the College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, is editing Sinclair Lewis's "A Minnesota Diary" for publication.*

## SINCLAIR LEWIS NOTES

The *New York Times* recommended a Lewis novel as part of its summer reading list of business and literature. In "Beach Blanket Business Reading" by Barbara Presley Noble (May 28, 1995), she places *Babbitt* right up there with Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* as works which show how "complacency and comfort lead to decadence." She notes, "In a lighter vein, there is 'Babbitt,' Sinclair Lewis's satire of middle American conformity and consumerism. It was written in 1922, and makes you realize middle America was once obsessed with fancy duds, not automatic weapons. OK, Babbitt's a Republican, but that doesn't mean the novel has contemporary relevance." She also mentions Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* as a novel with an inside tip: "the message is not that industries can police themselves."

NBC is filming a new version of *Elmer Gantry* which will be aired in the Spring of 1996.

Part of the 1960 *Elmer Gantry* was shown at the Cannes International Film Festival this year in connection with brief, single-theme montages called Preludes. A montage on the uplifting power of gospel music featured scenes from *Sullivan's Travels*, *Elmer Gantry*, and *Jezebel*.

In the April 1995 *American History*, Diana Serra Cary, in the article "A Cast of Thousands," also mentioned *Elmer Gantry*. She writes about the work of extras in Hollywood films and notes that although the average pay for an extra in 1960 was \$24.26 a day, because of the danger of working near fire, extras who were part of the scenes where the gospel tent burns down made \$90 a day.

The Museum of Modern Art in New York did a 100-film retrospective called "Screen Plays: From Broadway to Hollywood, 1920-66" between June 30 and October 3. The 1936 film *Dodsworth* with Walter Huston was chosen in part because Huston originated the title character on the stage.

A few years earlier, Jay Cocks of *TV Guide* listed *Dodsworth* as one of the "10 Great Movies to Watch Over and Over" (August 5, 1989). He describes the movie as follows: "The American dream doesn't make it, even for some whose job it is to make American dreams. Sam Dodsworth makes cars: he puts dreams together on the assembly line. As the movie opens, he is overtaken by middle age and a sense of some high, finer possibilities that remain inside him, unrealized. William Wyler's 1936 film (adapted by playwright Sidney Howard from Sinclair

Lewis's novel) is a lesson in the subtle dynamics of screen craftsmanship: no flash, no dazzle, no wasted motion. It concentrates on Dodsworth's interior struggles, externalizing them in the gentle, ironic rhythms of its own well-bred surfaces, where still waters run deep indeed. Walter Huston plays Dodsworth: for anyone who knows him only as the wiggy, cagey old prospector in "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre," the poignant majesty of his performance here will be another dividend."

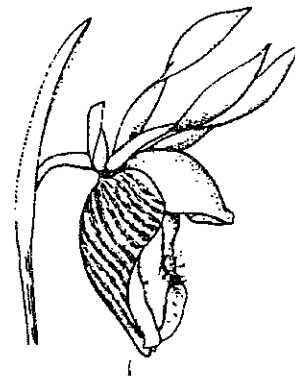
In the *New York Times* Travel section (September 3, 1995), travel writer Hilary de Vries mentions that Carmel, California has inspired visitors and residents with its natural beauty for centuries, including in the early 20th century writers Sinclair Lewis and Jack London.

The *Chicago Tribune Magazine* of May 7, 1995 noted the influence that Sinclair Lewis had on novelist Richard Wright. Bill Granger noted that Wright studied various naturalist writers including Theodore Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson as well to understand "the reality of existence for the tragedy that lay behind it."

A snide article on Minnesota, "Greetings from Minnesober," in the May 28, 1995 *New York Times Magazine* mentions Lewis, Judy Garland, and F. Scott Fitzgerald as examples of Minnesota natives who "all bad-mouthed their native state, and all died hopeless addicts" (32). It was not clear from the article whether eternal punishment is also part of the sentence for criticizing the state.

In an article on the American novelist Dawn Powell in the June 26 and July 3 issues of the *New Yorker*, John Updike mentions her as a contemporary of the "great flashing beasts of her era, with Sinclair Lewis and John Steinbeck lumbering unignominably beside." Powell, in a journal entry from 1953 notes that *Dodsworth* is one of the eleven novels that she has liked best.

Act One, a card company that publishes a series called Musical Notes, has printed a card that shows on the front side a copy of a music sheet with the title "Still Got My Heart," apparently a number written by young Stephen Sondheim for the Williams College production of *Phinney's Rainbow*, a takeoff on the hit Broadway musical *Finian's Rainbow*. The choreographer is listed as Ida Kay, presumably the woman who claimed that Lewis proposed marriage to her when he lived in Massachusetts toward the end of his life. If anyone can confirm Ms. Kay's talents in this area, the editor would appreciate a letter.



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