

The SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME ONE, NUMBER TWO

SPRING 1993

SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY TO SPONSOR PANEL AT 1993 AMERICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

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

The panel will be called "Sinclair Lewis: Author, Craftsman, and Stylist," and will be held Friday, May 28th at 2:30 pm. The following papers will be presented:

"Lewis on Authorship," Martin Bucco, Colorado State University

"'All of Us Americans at 46': The Making of Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*," James M. Hutchinson, The Citadel

"*Babbitt* as Veblenian Critique of Manliness," Clare Eby, University of Connecticut at Hartford

"Sinclair Lewis's 'Minnesota Diary' and His Devotion to Thoreau," George Killough, College of St. Scholastica

JOHN HERSEY

John Hersey, novelist and journalist whose *A Bell for Adano* won a Pulitzer prize in 1945, died March 24 in Key West, Florida. Hersey was Sinclair Lewis's secretary in 1937 and wrote about his experiences with him in the *New York Times* Book Review and the *Yale Review* in an article entitled "First Job." A version of his time with Lewis was printed in *Encounters*, edited by Kai Erikson for Yale University Press in 1989. Hersey was also the editor for the Library of America *Main Street and Babbitt* which was published last year. Roger Forseth in our last issue praised Hersey's explanatory notes and commended the very detailed chronology at the end of the volume. Hersey's 25th work, *Key West Tales* will be published in 1994. ♦

DISCOUNT ON LIBRARY OF AMERICA LEWIS VOLUME FOR MEMBERS

Members of The Sinclair Lewis Society will be able to receive a 20% discount when purchasing the Library of America volume of the works of Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street & Babbitt*. 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. ♦

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). The telephone number of the Stouffer Harborplace is (410) 547-1200. Sessions will begin on Friday, May 28, at 9 a.m. and the final party will be held in the early evening on Sunday, May 30.

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 again be held at the Bahia Hotel in San Diego. The fall issue of *The Sinclair Lewis Newsletter* will have a call for papers for the 1994 conference. ♦

SINCLAIR LEWIS BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Sinclair Lewis Society is planning to update Robert Fleming's annotated bibliography of Lewis. We would appreciate receiving either isolated annotated entries from 1977 on or volunteers to survey a full year. Please write and let us know. Depending on the number of volunteers, we would like to have it ready by next summer. ♦

CALL FOR PAPERS

The Sinclair Lewis Society will be having 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.

We welcome submissions on any aspect of Lewis's work. Please send a detailed abstract or a copy of the completed paper by June 1 to Professor Sally Parry, The Sinclair Lewis Society, c/o English Department (4240), Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61761. Fax number is (309) 438-5414. All submissions will be acknowledged.

TEACHING SINCLAIR LEWIS

USING STUDENTS AS EXPERTS

By Sally E. Parry
Illinois State University

One of the challenges to be met when teaching Sinclair Lewis is the amount of detail he put into his writing to create a specific socio-historical context. Popular songs, movies, and authors, as well as politicians, philosophers, and poets appear with regularity in his novels. Although this certainly indicates Lewis was well read and that his references correlate with his characters' economic and intellectual attainments or at least comment on them, this denseness of allusion can prove daunting to students. They may feel distanced from a text that seems to create obstacles to understanding.

However, empowering students to become experts on a certain topic or theme in Lewis's works gives them valuable contextual knowledge and makes them feel in control of the text, enough so to be willing to discuss complexities in light of their specialized knowledge. For example, while teaching *It Can't Happen Here* in connection with last November's election, I assigned individual students topics ranging from the Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe and the United States to politicians and celebrities like Huey Long, Theodore Bilbo, Father Coughlin, and Upton Sinclair. Each student presented to the class the efforts of her or his research and was called upon to explain references within the text to her or his topic. Sometimes this meant that students picked up sarcastic asides that they might otherwise have missed, other times the research provided a deeper understanding of the political situation that Doremus Jessup found himself in. Since the presidential campaign was running simultaneously with our reading of the novel, the interrelatedness gave students reasons to question the concerns of a populace eager to turn to a third party populist candidate, especially one whose physical description was so close to Buzz Windrip's.

For *Main Street* this semester topics were again assigned on such themes as women in the pre-World War I era, the Chatauqua Circuit, H. L. Mencken and the revolt from the village movement, and isolationist and anti-German sentiment during World War I. These topics gave students some grounding in ways to understand Carol Kennicott and her insulated life in Gopher Prairie. One of my nontraditional students actually remembered attending Chatauqua meetings and seeing a production of *Peg O' My Heart*. Her closeness to the events in the novel gave students a unique insight into midwestern life of fifty years ago.

Allowing students to lay claim to expertise in areas of culture and history gives them a more vital interest in the novels of Lewis. It is understood that they are resources in their specific area and can be called upon at any point in the discussion of a text to provide commentary and insight. The classroom becomes less teacher-centered and more student-centered, providing for a richer learning experience. ♦

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, 4240/Dept. of English, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61761-6901.

TROUBLE ON THE ORIGINAL MAIN STREET

Forty-two years after his death, Sinclair Lewis can still cause trouble in his hometown of Sauk Centre, Minnesota. This time the Lewis-inspired controversy has been reported in newspapers across the country, on National Public Radio, and even on the BBC. In 1991 the state of Minnesota proposed repaving and widening a 1.7 mile section of State Highway 71 through Sauk Centre, the Original Main Street. In December 1991, after the Sauk Centre City Council approved the plan, a group opposing the magnitude of the changes was formed. They feared that the road improvements would destroy Sauk Centre's small-town character and disappoint the tourists who come looking for the Main Street Lewis criticized and made famous. As a result, the state's Historic Preservation Office is considering designating a 10-block stretch of Main Street for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. As of April 1993, the decision is still pending. ♦

Contributors

The editor of *The Sinclair Society Newsletter* would like to thank everyone who contributed to this issue by writing articles or sending in notes. These people include R. R. Centing, John Crowley, Robert E. Fleming, Roger Forseth, Jacqueline Koenig, Michael Keller, Robert L. McLaughlin, Robert L. Schab.

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.

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THE LIBRARY OF AMERICA LEWIS: THE REVIEWERS REVIEWED

By Robert L. McLaughlin
Illinois State University

On the bright side, the publication last year of The Library of America's Sinclair Lewis volume, containing *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, provided a much needed occasion for a reconsideration of Lewis and his novels. And indeed, several high-profile publications prominently featured review-essays reflecting on his life and work. On the less bright side, these review-essays tended to be not so much reconsiderations as rehashings, perpetuating many tired assumptions about Lewis and failing to define new ways of reading and evaluating his texts. Two in particular, Gore Vidal's "The Romance of Sinclair Lewis," published in *The New York Review of Books*, and Thomas Mallon's "Babbitt Rising," published in *GQ*, strike me as lost opportunities, because the authors' apparent desire to say positive things about Lewis is subverted by the assumptions, drawn from Mark Schorer's biography and the tenets of literary realism, they bring to the texts.

Vidal and Mallon both accept the Schorer-created paradigms for understanding Lewis's life and career. Like Schorer, they divide his life and literature into "climb-success-decline-fall" categories. Mallon writes that Lewis "between 1920 and 1929 scorched the national landscape and pride with five programmatic novels" (185), but that "The novels he managed to produce in the Thirties include such largely forgotten ones as *Work of Art* and *The Prodigal Parents*" (192). Vidal, while blaming Schorer for single-handedly eliminating "a popular and famous novelist" and criticizing him for having "taken on a subject that he so clearly despised," not only accepts Schorer's paradigms but uses his vocabulary: after "the great decade of his life, 1920-1930," he writes of Lewis, "the next twenty-one years... was decline and fall" (14). While Vidal discusses the pre-*Main Street* novels, neither he nor Mallon suggests that *Work of Art* and *The Prodigal Parents* are not typical post-Nobel-Prize works; *Ann Vickers*, *Cass Timberlane*, and *Kingsblood Royal* are not even mentioned, and *It Can't Happen Here* is brought up only in reference to its titular catch-phrase. It seems to me to be time to reassess and retire this paradigm of Lewis's career. Several interesting and important texts have gone out of print and have been ignored critically because of the accepted "wisdom" that the 1920s novels are the only "good" ones.

Similarly, both reviewers accept Schorer's assessment of Lewis as a shameless self-promoter. Vidal especially stresses this theme, writing of Lewis, "By putting himself at the center of bookchat, he insured good reviews for his own books in much the same way that in England now ambitious young writers not only review each other's books but also act as literary editors in order to promote their future reviewers" (16). This emphasis on a fairly typical practice overshadows the truly unusual in Lewis: his life-long, unselfish promotion of other writers. The generous praise he gives to his contemporaries and especially to younger writers in his Nobel Prize Address is repeated again and again, in his reviews, his speeches, his interviews, and his letters.

Having considered Lewis's career, Vidal and Mallon look specifically at *Main Street* and *Babbitt* from traditional, and eventually unsatisfying, critical perspectives. Both agree that Lewis's novels originate in thoroughly researched "big themes" (both, in fact, compare him to James Michener in this respect), but after that, their approaches diverge. Writing that for Lewis "the Subject comes before the Characters" (16) and often "there is no plot at all" (18), Vidal analyzes the novels as mirrors that reflect their author. He argues that "Although Lewis had been born with all the gifts that a satirist needs to set up shop he was, by temperament, a romantic" (14). He sees Lewis's romanticism in his main characters' desires for a better life and place than the ones they are in. Vidal argues (strangely, I think) that Lewis was not a conscious ironist and had "absolutely no sense of humor" (14); rather, he says, Lewis was simply "recording," and so his novels were "taken as just like life and Lewis was hardly more critical of Americans and their values than his readers were" (20). For Vidal, the novels are not themselves objects of study but vehicles for talking about Lewis, his romantic imagination, his place in his society. He sees, in effect, no critical distance between the texts and their author. (As an aside, I should mention the careless editing of Vidal's article: "Kennicott" is misspelled "Kennicut" throughout; Lewis's apprenticeship is said to have ended in 1929, rather than 1919 [16]; and, despite Vidal's well-known views on gender ambiguity, I assume his reference to Miles and Bea as "Mr. and Mr. Bjornstam" [19] is a typo.)

Mallon's approach is more text-centered. He writes that Lewis's big themes are "brought under control" (185) in texts that are focused on a single character. For him, too, the characters face a romantic dilemma: they share "a desire for admiration, a slightly guilty sense of superiority, and that peculiarly American conundrum known as the pursuit of happiness..." (186). However, like Schorer, he faults the characters' failure to grow in self-awareness: "The lack of much emotional development in Lewis's characters may make for a certain psychological realism, but it also results in narrative tedium" (186). Mallon, unlike Vidal, finds the novels most valuable for their satiric attacks on American life of the 1920s; he becomes dismayed, in fact, by the great critical distance between Lewis and his targets and is unnerved by his lack of any affection for his subjects.

Both these assessments attempt to value the novels in terms of basic New Critical assumptions (texts' meanings originate in authors' experience; superior texts are organically unified; realistic characters are psychologically self-aware; etc.), and so both, though certainly less mean-spirited than Schorer, find the same kinds of flaws in the novels that Schorer found. Ironically, though, both reviewers flirt with other critical positions that potentially offer ways of finding more value in Lewis's work, but, disappointingly, neither follows through. While Vidal says of his reading of Lewis's novels "that I stepped into the time-

warp" (17), as if we recreate a past reading of a text, Mallon realizes at least in passing that we read Lewis's texts differently now because we read them through the frames of postmodern fiction and poststructural theory; he writes, "*Main Street* now seems as much about feminism as small towns," and *Babbitt* "depicts the first mid-life crisis in modern American literature" (192). But instead of developing this, he concludes only that the texts are relevant.

Both reviewers briefly touch on what seems to me to be the key to interpreting Lewis: his mastery of discourse. Mallon says, "Lewis is to slang what Mark Twain is to dialect. He has a grotesque facility for reproducing it, a talent like playing the saw or cracking knuckles.... Lewis has some of the sharpest nails on the American blackboard" (186). For Mallon, however, this use of discourse is simply one weapon in Lewis's arsenal, so he moves on. Vidal comes even closer, saying of *Main Street*: "...the people themselves tend to be so many competing arias, rendered by a superb mimic under control. Later, Lewis would succumb to his voices and become tedious, but in *Main Street* he is a master of what Bakhtin (apropos Dostoevsky) called 'the polyphonic novel...'" (18). But this notion of a heteroglossal, or many-voiced, novel would contradict Vidal's main argument about Lewis, so instead of developing it, he dismisses it: "he is simply a straightforward narrator without much irony [and] his attempts to replicate the inner voices of characters are no different, no more revelatory, than what they themselves say aloud" (18). I would argue that Bakhtinian theory offers an ideal model for dealing with Lewis's novels. With it, the novels' narrative movement and meanings could be shown to be the result of many different discourses, each representing a distinct ideological world view, coming into conflict.

Vidal and Mallon, like Schorer, conclude that Sinclair Lewis's novels helped to change the way Americans think about themselves and their society, but because of their critical assumptions, they, like Schorer, are unable to explain how. Poststructural theory, however, has taught us that discourse is a social phenomenon, intimately connected with our ontological and ideological assumptions. Discourse analysis has the potential not only to show how Lewis's novels "work" but also how they have affected our perceptions of our society. His discourse ("Main Street," "Babbitt," "Elmer Gantry," "It Can't Happen Here") has become a part of the language with which we define and critique our world. ♦

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SINCLAIR LEWIS NOTES

Sinclair Lewis has made it onto the game board of *Jeopardy!* this year. On January 6 in the Minnesota category contestants were asked what author's home was in Sauk Centre. No one answered this correctly, but the next two times Lewis was mentioned, contestants were more successful. On January 12 the answer was "The Sinclair Lewis salesman who lived in the Floral Heights district of Zenith." *Babbitt* was given as the correct question as was *Dodsworth* for the answer "The 1929 Sinclair Lewis novel about a businessman who moves to Europe" on a February 11 game.

The Man Who Knew Coolidge received a mention in passing by Thomas M. Disch in his review of *Broadway for Bill Clinton* in the August 17/24, 1992 *Nation*. He notes that this novel and others like it show that "Presidents are, in their nature, more significant—to the degree that we can become significant ourselves by having been in the same enclosed space or by actually touching them" (186).

The November 1992 *Smithsonian*, in an article on the American Academy of Arts and Letters entitled "A Club Within a Club Where Creativity Elicits Rich Rewards" (136-47) by Ralph Graves, mentions Lewis as an example of a candidate who declined to be admitted to that august body. He even insulted the American Academy during his Nobel Prize acceptance speech by noting, "It only represents Henry Wadsworth Longfellow" and named 21 writers more worthy of being in the Academy than those already there. Lewis later joined the Institute in 1935 and the Academy in 1937.

The New York Review of Books is using Gore Vidal's article on Sinclair Lewis as an example of an article which contributes to "a continuing feast of good writing and stimulating ideas." This mention appeared in their most recent subscription offer.

Mel Marvin, one of the three collaborators of the musical review *Tintypes*, has completed a score for an adaption of *Elmer Gantry*. He told the Rochester (New York) *Democrat and Chronicle* on January 6 that this production has "been headed for Broadway for the last three years." He has also written a score for the television movie *Cooperstown*.

News of the Sinclair Lewis Society is slowly spreading. An announcement about the Society appeared in the March 1993 *American Literature* (211), the 1992 *Hemingway Review* (115), and volume 108, number 1 of the *PMLA* (170).

Membership

Many thanks to all of you who have joined the Sinclair Lewis Society since the Fall newsletter. We would especially like to thank our new founding members who have provided needed seed money for the Society. The new founding members are David D. Anderson, Daniel R. Chabris, and John Feaster. They join Robert Coard, Robert Fleming, Roger Forseth, Barry Gross, Jacqueline Koenig, Glen Love, Robert L. McLaughlin, Clara Lee R. Moodie, Judith Myers, Idwal Parry, and Sally Parry as founding members. ♦

THREE LEWIS LETTERS

By R.R. Centing

The Ohio State University Libraries

The Ohio State University Libraries, Division of Special Collections, purchased eighty-eight letters to the novelist Louis Bromfield (1896-1956), also known for his ecological memoir, *Malabar Farm* (1948). The letters were purchased for \$4,000 from the New York dealer, House of Books, 7 April 1964. The Bromfield collection includes letters from the likes of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, Henry Miller, and three letters from Sinclair Lewis (1 ALS, and 2 TLS). The earliest typed letter is from Villa Sauerbrunn, Semmering, Austria, and is dated 25 October 1932, and includes a long commentary on land prices in Vermont. The partially dated (May 17) holograph letter is from the Blakeney Hotel, Blakeney, Norfolk County, England, and mentions his returning to the U.S. and possible return to England in August. The second typed

letter of 28 September 1935 is from the Georgian House, Bury Street, London, and concerns a vacation on the Norfolk Broads, an inland waterway near the previously mentioned Blakeney, suggesting that the May 17 letter was also written in 1935. The May 17 letter also has a positive comment on Bromfield's novel, *The Strange Case of Miss Annie Spragg* (1928), as being among the best of the last ten years, which also helps place the letter in 1935. The letters seem to be directed to Bromfield at his home in Senlis, Oise, France. I am no Lewis scholar, but it is my understanding that no one is working on an edition of Lewis letters, and the only collection is Harrison Smith's compilation, *From Main Street to Stockholm: Letters of Sinclair Lewis, 1919-1930* (1952). This newsletter would be an excellent place for additional notes on holdings of Lewis letters. ♦

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

By Robert E. Fleming

University of New Mexico

The first Library of America volume on Lewis is on bookstore shelves, and it is a handsome volume. But there seem to be additional signs of interest in Lewis as well, as is made evident by several other new editions. Some of these works are paperbound and will thus lend themselves to classroom use. Others are beautifully-made hardbacks; it's a pleasure to see them on the shelves of commercial bookstores.

Selected Short Stories of Sinclair Lewis, a paperbound reprint of the 1935 edition with new introduction by James W. Tuttleton, has been published in the Elephant Paperback series, Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 1332 North Halsted Street, Chicago, Illinois 60622-2632. Price is \$12.95. While Lewis was a better novelist than he was a short story writer, some of these stories reward re-examination.

Perhaps encouraged by the Library of America project, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich has issued "HBJ Modern Classics" editions of both *Main Street* and *Babbitt*. Both appear to be reset for these editions. Each sells for \$15.95 in a nicely bound hardback edition. Can *Arrowsmith*, *Elmer Gantry*, and *Dodsworth* be far behind?

Free Air, the last novel Sinclair Lewis wrote before he became famous, is being reprinted as a Bison Books edition by the University of Nebraska Press, with an introduction by Robert E. Fleming. *Free Air* will be published as a paperback at

\$11.95 and should be available in June 1993.

Editor's Note: The University of Nebraska describes *Free Air* as follows.

"Fame was just around the corner when Sinclair Lewis published *Free Air* in 1919, a year before *Main Street*. The latter novel zeroed in on the town of Gopher Prairie; the former stopped there briefly and then took the reader by automobile in search of America. *Free Air* heads toward a West that was brimming with possibilities for suddenly mobile Americans at the end of a world war.

"The vehicle in Lewis's novel, not a Model-T but a Gomez-Dep roadster, takes Claire Boltwood and her father from Minnesota to Seattle, exposing them to all the perils of early motoring. On the road, the upper-crust Boltwoods are at once more insignificant and more noble. The greatest distance to be overcome is the social one between Claire and a mechanic named Milt, who, with a cat as his traveling companion, follows close behind. If *Free Air* anticipates many of the themes of Lewis's later novels, it also looks forward to a genre that includes John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley* and Josh Greenfield and Paul Mazursky's *Harry and Tonto*. And the character of Claire, blazing her own trail across the West, looks back to the nineteenth-century pioneer woman and ahead to Thelma and Louise." ♦

JOIN TODAY

We invite you to become a member of the Sinclair Lewis Society in one of the following categories:

- A. Founding Member \$50.00 C. Individual \$10.00
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I/we would like to join the Sinclair Lewis Society.

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Category A B C D

Send membership form, check payable to The Sinclair Lewis Society to:

The Sinclair Lewis Society
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IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE EXHIBIT IN NEW YORK

The New York Public Library is doing a series of major exhibitions examining artistic responses to fascism and its threat to the arts. Through June 12, the Library for the Performing Arts will present "It Can't Happen Here: Anti-Fascist Performance in New York." The exhibition takes its title from the 1935 Lewis novel that was turned into a play in 1937 and produced by the WPA. The work of many American playwrights, actors, designers, and theater companies will be featured. For a more lengthy description of the exhibit see the April issue of *American Theatre*, page 35.

MEMBERSHIP LIST

The Sinclair Lewis Society will be publishing a list of its members with addresses in the Fall issue of the newsletter to encourage communication between Lewis scholars. If you do not want your name and/or address printed, please let the newsletter staff know by August 15, 1993.

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