

The SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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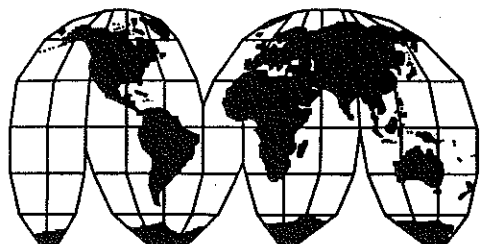
SINCLAIR LEWIS CONFERENCE POSSIBILITY FOR JULY 1997 IN SAUK CENTRE

In connection with the 75th anniversary of the publication of *Babbitt* and the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Kingsblood Royal*, the Sinclair Lewis Society is considering a conference in Sauk Centre, Minnesota in mid-July 1997 in connection with Sinclair Lewis Days.

These two novels represent writings from two different periods of Lewis's career. *Babbitt* is one of Lewis's major novels from the 1920s and the term has become synonymous with the American businessman. *Kingsblood Royal*, a novel of reverse racial passing, is one of the most important of his later novels, especially for what it says about race relations in this country.

Papers are encouraged on these two novels in particular, but are welcomed on any topic related to Lewis. Please send abstracts, proposals, suggestions to Sally Parry, Sinclair Lewis Society, Dept. of English, Box 4240, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-4240 or e-mail separry@rs6000.cmp.ilstu.edu or fax (309) 438-5414. It would be appreciated if these submissions were received by October 1 so that interest in the conference can be gauged.

The conference may include visits to Lewis's home, his grave, and the interpretive center. The Sinclair Lewis Foundation has offered some organizational support.



SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY TO SPONSOR SESSION AT 1996 ALA CONFERENCE

The Sinclair Lewis Society will be sponsoring its annual session at the 1996 American Literature Association Conference in San Diego, California, May 30–June 2. Speakers on the Lewis panel include Philip L. Gerber, State University of New York-Brockport, "Babbitt Rising: The Way We Lived Then," and Robert E. Fleming, University of New Mexico, "Lewis's Two 'Feminist' Novels: *The Job* and *Ann Vickers*." The chair of the session will be Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin of the University of Ottawa. An abstract of these presentations will appear in the next newsletter.

SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY JOINS THE WORLD WIDE WEB

The Sinclair Lewis Society is in the process of establishing a home page for Sinclair Lewis and a related one for the Society. The Lewis home page will contain basic information on Lewis's life and writings as well as notes on new articles published on his work. The Society's home page will give information on joining the Society, list articles in the newsletter, and mention upcoming conferences of interest.

Lewis home page address:

<http://www.ilstu.edu~separry/lewis.html>

Sinclair Lewis Society home page address:

<http://www.ilstu.edu~separry/society.html>

If you have suggestions about other information to be included on the website, please e-mail Sally Parry at separry@rs6000.cmp.ilstu.edu. The sites were created by Solomon Rutzky, a Philosophy major and a double minor in English and Applied Computer Science at Illinois State University.

CONTACT THE SINCLAIR LEWIS
SOCIETY NEWSLETTER ON THE
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REVISITING *MAIN STREET*

Review of *Main Street*, by Sinclair Lewis. Edited with a biographical introduction and explanatory notes by Martin Bucco. NY: Penguin (Twentieth-Century Classics), 1995. \$9.95

James M. Hutchisson
The Citadel

Sinclair Lewis's first great critical success, *Main Street*, published in 1920, is now available in a Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics edition. The new volume contains an introduction and explanatory notes by Martin Bucco, who in 1993 published an extended reading of the novel, *Main Street: The Revolt of Carol Kennicott*, in Twayne's Masterworks series.

The Penguin *Main Street* is a good-looking volume. Unlike the dwarfish Library of America edition of *Main Street* and *Babbitt* published in 1992, this book will stand proudly on the shelf beside its fellow Penguins. Its blue-green covers, good-quality paper, clean typeface, and ample margins give it a heft and a look of permanence. The cover reproduces Grant Wood's painting, *The Perfectionist*, one of several illustrations that Wood did for the 1936 "New Deal" edition of *Main Street*. The book is textually authoritative, although two minor errors should be corrected in the next printing. On the first page of the introduction there is a reference to "Sauk Centre, Minneapolis"; and in the bibliography, Grace Hegger Lewis's *New York Times Magazine* article should be "When Lewis Walked Down Main Street," not "When I Walked Down Main Street." The "Suggestions for Further Reading" at the end of the introduction is reasonably complete and up-to-date.

At the rear of the book there are some one hundred explanatory notes. These notes are highly useful—especially for teaching the novel, since students are usually thrown by Lewis's language, at times neologistic, allusive, or just plain slangish. Best of all, perhaps, having *Main Street* in a Penguin edition in many ways will legitimize Lewis to those who may doubt his importance. This volume should permanently replace the old Signet text, with its now-dated "afterword" and bibliography by Lewis's biographer, Mark Schorer.

Bucco's approach in the introduction is biographical and historical: he chronicles the development of *Main Street* from a blurry conception in Lewis's mind while home on vacation from Yale in the summer of 1907 through its slow gestation and laborious birth in the late nineteen-teens to its appearance, full-blown and audacious, on the literary scene in 1920. The fascinating story that Bucco tells, the story behind the making of the novel, thus restores to contemporary readers *Main Street's* historical significance, puts it in the context of its time, and gives a much fuller (and more accurate) portrait of Lewis, the man and the author, than we have had so far. The introduction is therefore quite different from Schorer's Signet "afterword," which was analytically sharp but elementally inappropriate in its application of New Critical precepts to Lewis's novels. Bucco argues that Lewis's blend of realism and "seraphic romanticism" and his "swift, nervous, flexible prose" (xiv) were wholly suited to

his satiric subject. Bucco then explains why this blending of styles appealed to such a wide audience in the 1920s. He thus offers an alternative to Schorer's thesis, that Lewis, with a little pluck and a sense of timing, merely stumbled into success. Missing here, too, is Schorer's archly condescending tone toward his subject. But Bucco is no apologist for Lewis, either; at times he positively revels in his descriptions of Lewis's near-paranoic worries about the reception of his book, as well as his self-promotive antics.

Finally, the introduction will offer a fresh experience for many seasoned readers of this novel. Bucco's prose is lively and well-paced. He is particularly good at describing how Lewis converted his actual experiences, particularly in Sauk Centre, into the narrative. We get a thorough sense of how Lewis's apprentice fiction served as his schoolroom and how his themes therein paved the way for further exploration in *Main Street*—"romantic dreaming, small-town life, youthful rebellion, adventurous escape, and struggling ambition" (xiv). Bucco also discusses the long tradition of anti-idyllic novels about American small towns and describes how *Main Street* both contributed to and diverged from such earlier portraits. The reception, dramatizations, influences, and later parodies of the novel are all described as well. Bucco's introduction should help stimulate thinking in the ongoing reassessment of Lewis. The Penguin *Main Street* is a valuable addition to the growing body of new work in Lewis studies.

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.

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, David A. Dean. Please address all correspondence to Sally Parry, Editor, 4240/English Department, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-4240.

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TEACHING SINCLAIR LEWIS

Getting *Kingsblood Royal*

Robert L. McLaughlin
Illinois State University

The biggest challenge in teaching *Kingsblood Royal*, Sinclair Lewis's 1947 novel about race relations in the United States, is getting a hold of enough copies of the book. (*Kingsblood* and *Cass Timberlane* [1945] are the only really important Lewis novels still out of print. Are there any publishers in the house?) Luckily, so many copies of Random House's initial edition and the book club edition were sold (1.5 million, according to Mark Schorer) that they can be found in used bookstores rather easily. Our local bookseller, Brian Simpson of Babbitt's (!) Books, was nice enough to gather 25 copies for my class.

Kingsblood Royal is set in 1945 and focuses on wounded World War II vet Neil Kingsblood, who, at his father's urging, starts to research his family tree. He discovers that his maternal great-great-great grandfather was "a full-blooded Negro," and he immediately starts to think of himself as black. Realizing that he knows nothing about African-Americans, Neil cultivates the friendship of some of Grand Republic's blacks, and before long he has admitted his ancestry to them, then to his family, and finally to the entire community. As a result, most of his family and white friends turn against him. Neil loses his cushy bank job and cannot find another that he can keep for long. His wife, Vestal, considers leaving him and having an abortion so as not to have "a black baby." His father dies from a heart attack. When his neighborhood association tries to force Neil to sell his house, he resists, and in the climactic scene he, Vestal, and a few friends, black and white, defend the house against a mob. After Neil shoots three of his former friends and neighbors, the police arrive, arresting him and Vestal.

I taught *Kingsblood Royal* at the end of a survey course, American Literature: 1920-1945 (OK, I fudged on the dates). In the first half of the semester we looked at the aesthetic experiments of the high modernists; in the second half we read texts that comment on social conditions and self-consciously seek social reform. My challenge to the students was to explore the ways in which the aesthetic and theoretical concerns of the modernists are connected to, overlap with, or allow us to understand in a different way the social and ideological concerns of the social commentators. Our reading of *Kingsblood* (preceded by readings of Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*) was the climax of this exploration and allowed us to discuss and come to various conclusions about the issues of race, identity, discourse, and power.

Our discussion of the novel focused on four basic questions or problems. First, what do we do with the first chapter, in which the Blinghams, that obnoxious family from New York City, drive into Grand Republic, have lunch at the Fiesole Room, and then drive out of town and out of the novel? Without too much trouble the group decided that the chapter establishes the relativity of belief systems. The Blinghams are viciously mocked by the narrator for their New-York-centric worldview, in

which everything and everyone west of the Hudson is deemed inferior. The group noted that much of what we are told in the chapter is expressed in terms of what the Blinghams *don't* see; their prejudices act as blinders, keeping them from really seeing their surroundings. After reading on a bit, the students guessed that the chapter functions as a sort of overture, establishing the themes that will be developed in the novel. Specifically, just as the Blinghams' worldview can be attacked for its mean-spirited narrow-mindedness, the worldviews of the residents of Grand Republic might also be seen as arbitrary, relative, and potentially dangerous to others.

The second question is: Why does a 1/32 black ancestry lead Neil to assume he's black? Why does his entire sense of self change when he finds out? One student suggested that because of his intellectually and emotionally boring life, Neil, perhaps unconsciously, finds the idea of being something different, something (from his society's point of view) taboo, exciting and exotic. She noted Neil and Vestal's fascination with the social life of their black maid Belfreda and her boyfriend Borus Bugdoll; probably because of stereotypes, Neil and Vestal, for all their assumptions of superiority, are sexually excited by (respectively) Belfreda and Borus. Taking this farther, we were able to bring in some ideas from cultural anthropology. Neil's self-identity as a white man has been culturally constructed by means of oppositions to various groups classed as Other. For Neil, being white means being not-black; being mostly white and only a little black confuses him because it breaks down the oppositions that are necessary (he thinks) to have an identity. He must be all one or all the other. In this case being the Other, while potentially dangerous, is also the chance to break out of the culturally imposed limitations of his white identity.

The third question: Why does Neil come out? Why does he announce, first to friends in the black community, then to his family, and finally to the whole community, that he is black? This posed some problems for my students, just as it did for some initial reviewers and has for some subsequent literary critics. After some discussion, we reached a consensus that it is connected to Neil's growing sense of identity. That is, one's identity is very much a product of one's social relations: we know who we are because we are someone's child, someone's spouse, someone's parent, someone's friend; we know who we are because of our profession, what church we go to, what clubs we belong to, what political party we support. Neil has discarded his old sense of identity and learns that he must construct a new one. He does this by using his newly discovered status as a black man to establish new friendships. Then, as this new sense of identity becomes more solidified, he becomes less satisfied with the fiction he is living at the center of, a number of what he now sees as inaccurate business, social, and familial relationships. Thus his announcing his status as black man to his family and to the larger community—despite his having a good sense of the consequences—is part of a process of revising his various outward-reaching relationships to fit and make more stable his new sense of identity.

The fourth question: Why do Neil's friends and neighbors respond to his announcement as they do? Why is there a community-wide amnesia about his past and a certainty that through all the previous years, when he was "just like them," he was unfairly deceiving them? Prejudice is one thing, but are all these people morons? My students connected this to the second

question. Like Neil, the Grand Republic community (that is, the white community) defines itself by means of oppositions; thus Neil is either white like them or Other. Building on this and taking into account the novel's context—the postwar attempts to remove blacks from positions of empowerment and to deflate blacks' feelings of entitlement—we can see that these culturally constructed oppositions define not only identity but power in society. Neil, a white man according to his various social relations but one who claims to be black, becomes a deconstructive principle threatening the factitious oppositions that define the economic, political, and cultural status quo in Grand Republic and, by extension, the United States. He must be put down by the Grand Republic power elite because he shakes the intellectual foundations of their power and their status as elite.

Through all of this, I kept using passages from the novel to stress the function of discourse in these questions. Lewis's most important achievement in this novel, I think, is to capture the discourse of race in America with a self-consciousness of it as discourse. (With his typical lack of perception, Mark Schorer gripes that "The people of Grand Republic almost never talk of anything except the inadequacies of their Negro servants, or, if they do not have servants, of the inferiority of Negroes in general"; that's the point, Mark.) Power in the United States is grounded in social relations, relations that are based in culturally constructed assumptions, assumptions that are constructed by means of oppositions, all of which are articulated by means of language. Thus the prevalent discourses of race as used by those in power are fundamental to understanding how power is distributed between the races and, concomitantly, how society is structured. *Kingsblood Royal's* most basic message, I think, is that the prevalent discourses of race are inextricably interconnected with the social relations between the races; for these relations to improve, enough people—like Neil and, eventually, Vestal—need to find or construct new discourses of race. *Kingsblood Royal* seeks to make us conscious of the power of the discourse of race and to make available to us the new discourses we need to change our society.

Theron Ware and Elmer Gantry

In an appreciation of *The Damnation of Theron Ware* by Harold Frederic (1896), Joyce Carol Oates, in the *New York Times Book Review* of December 17, 1995 (24-25), writes about the novel's thematic connections with two of Lewis's novels, *Main Street* and *Elmer Gantry*. "Like Lewis, Harold Frederic turns a seemingly unjudging, and thus pitiless, lens on small-town America, with its pretensions and anxieties. His Theron Ware is a precursor of the intrepid Carol Kennicott...and of Elmer Gantry in his phase as religious hypocrite and charlatan whose sermons increase in power as their sincerity decreases.

"On the whole, Frederic's touch is less heavy-handed than Lewis's; his characters less caricatured; his authorial voice subtler and more expansive.... Like Sinclair Lewis, however, Harold Frederic clearly knows his American landscape...." Theron Ware loses his religious calling because of an infatuation with Celia Madden, who describes herself as alternately Greek, pagan, and Catholic. Shades of George Babbitt, once Theron leaves the church, he becomes a real estate agent in Portland, Oregon, "an American of the upcoming century."

DODSWORTH, THE MUSICAL, REVIEWED

Peter Filicia, a New Jersey theater critic for the *Star-Ledger*, reviewed the musical of *Dodsworth* that was produced at Casa Mañana in Fort Worth last fall. Below are excerpts of the review he did for *TheaterWeek* (Nov. 20-26, 1995, pp. 6-8).

Casa Mañana in Fort Worth has produced a musical for which there may be many a tomorrow: Stephen Cole and Jeffrey Saver's adaptation of Sinclair Lewis's *Dodsworth*.

Sam Dodsworth (Hal Linden) is an honest, rough-hewed, no-apologies American businessman who's selling Revelation Motors and retiring. Reluctantly. His wife Fran, 25 years younger, seizes the opportunity for them to go to Europe—which Sam is looking forward to about as much as Leadville Johnny Brown did. But they go because Sam wants to make his "child bride" happy. As he sings when they're ensconced in their ocean liner cabin, "Have I told you lately I love you?"—ironically enough, as he puts on his pants.

Sam does have a sex drive, though. When Fran states that she "wants to live," he shyly suggests they go to bed. "That's not living," Fran says, mystified that he doesn't want to dress to the nines and meet shipboard society. But once they enter the ballroom, they see they're overdressed—the only ones formally attired. Fran's embarrassed—until a Colonel tells her how lovely she looks. Then she claims she purposely dressed this way.

So we find ourselves liking Sam. Edith Cortwright (Dee Hoty), an expatriate on her way back to Britain, does too—as much as the Colonel likes Fran. But while they dance, Sam and Edith talk, and spy from the boat the famed historical monument, Bishop's Light, that Sam has been looking forward to seeing....

But Sam is a one-woman man. He's so smitten with Fran that he even arranges a shipboard entertainment, in which he and nightclub chorines sing a tribute to her. (Whether Sam's the type to get up in front of a crowd and perform is questionable; giving Linden a number must have seemed important to the collaborators.)

The Colonel tries seducing Fran—and, surprisingly to us, she declines the offer. Nice move on Cole's part [not to mention Lewis's], for while we've had our problems with Fran's shallowness, we like her for resisting. But she's so humiliated by the Colonel's come-on that she decides she and Sam just can't debark in England, but will stay on board and sail away to France. Sam doesn't want to, "because they don't speak English there," but guess who wins?

Fran's happy there, for, "It isn't like America. Here, when you're over 30, you're only beginning. It's where they never draw a curtain on a woman of a certain age."...

Trouble really begins when a cablegram arrives with the news that the Dodsworths' daughter is pregnant. Sam is delighted that he'll now be a grandfather—he's even looking forward to his rocking chair—but Fran, now sorry she married so young, is horrified at the prospect of being a grandmother. She'll rebel in order to convince herself that she's still attractive,

and will dally [with] the very next man who asks her: Arnold Iselin. She'll be sorry. But by then, it'll be too late, because Edith, after waiting a very decent interval, gives Sam the happiness he so richly deserves.

Nice topic for a show, no? A married couple that hasn't noticed it's been running on automatic pilot must face the facts. That they have nothing in common hasn't crossed Sam's mind. It has Fran's, but she didn't realize that her boredom was so acute. *Dodsworth*, then, deals with some real and important issues. Getting older. Dealing with retirement. Coming to terms with it. How to make the most of your later years. Do you leave your mate of a lifetime who now bores you? Or do you count your blessings instead of new lovers? These are themes, then, that would interest a large segment of the older theater-going public.

Two of the leads are really astonishing in getting all the subtlety and subtext that Cole's book demands. What you need from Sam Dodsworth is a naive charm that doesn't seem stupid for a man of advanced years. Linden does it. He plays a man who's mature but still has youth inside him, even though for years he's been too busy to notice that it's still there.

What you need from Edith is a restraint that doesn't make her cold, aloof, or asexual. Hoty does it perfectly. She lets us see from the outset that Edith would take Sam in a sixteenth-note if he were available. But she knows full well that Sam doesn't see problems with his marriage, so she won't bring them up, or even horn in. If he's happy staying in the dark, let him inhabit this fool's paradise. Early in the show, Edith even advises Fran not to do anything foolish—partly because she knows that ravages of divorce, yes, but more because she doesn't want to see the good Sam hurt. It's a nice show of altruism, though it falls on deaf ears....

Bruce Lumpkin really knows how to stage a musical in slick fashion—astonishing given the scant rehearsal time that a stock company provides. Lumpkin, best known as Tommy Tune's assistant on *Grand Hotel*, is more than ready to strike out on his own.

Saver wisely doesn't have his music sound like the roaring '20s, but employs a Sondheimian dissonance to reflect the problems to come. At times, though, it's too Sondheimian. But Cole's book is literate and multi-layered. Even such a hoary observation as "You had to be there" carries a fine subtext....

Suggestions? Sam should sing "Have I Told You Lately I Love You?"—a better song than the title implies—when he arrives home after his last day in the office. He could sing it to cheer himself, praise his wife, and show us he's going to try to adjust to this retirement thing.

Then, at the end of the show, Fran shouldn't cry when she loses Arnold, but should see that she got what she deserved. Right now, she wants to return to Sam out of weakness, not appreciation. We'd wind up feeling more for her if she had the loftier motivation. And finally, the show should be called *The Dodsworths*, for it's both their stories.

Clive Barnes, when reviewing *A Little Night Music*, showed his enthusiasm by concluding his review with, "Good God! An adult musical!" Well, here's another one for him: Cole and Saver's *Dodsworth*.

NEW MEMBERS

The Sinclair Lewis Society welcomes the following who have become new members since the Fall 1995 newsletter:

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The editor of *The Sinclair Lewis Newsletter* would like to thank everyone who contributed to this issue by writing articles or sending notes. These people include Clare Eby, Roger Forseth, James Hutchisson, Jacqueline Koenig, Robert McLaughlin, Rosemary McLaughlin, Roberta Parry, Robert L. Schab, and Edward A. Sprague.

CONTRIBUTIONS

The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter welcomes short contributions about Lewis's work, life, and times. We also welcome essays about teaching Lewis's novels and short stories. Send books for review, notices of upcoming conferences, reports on presentations and publications relating to Lewis, discoveries of materials (correspondence, manuscripts, etc.) in and descriptions of collections in libraries, and all other items to Sally Parry, Editor, *The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*, Department of English, 4240 Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-4240.

REFLECTIONS ON SAUK CENTRE: VISITING LEWIS'S HOMETOWN

By Jacqueline Koenig

Jackie Koenig, a founding member of the Sinclair Lewis Society and source for "Collector's Corner" in the *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*, attended some of the festivities connected with the 75th anniversary of *Main Street* in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, last July. She sent us her impressions of the town and the celebration. Here are some excerpts.

Main Street ruined my home town for me. All those years, I'd been so naive! When I read Sinclair Lewis's book thirty years ago, I recognized the hypocrisy in my own townspeople.

Raised in the farm country of Indiana, I've been gone from there for more than forty years. But I saw today how much I still love the Midwest. Driving the country roads around Sauk Centre, I listened to Garrison Keillor, broadcasting from St. Paul. He was talking about another famous Minnesota author, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and I thought how nice it felt to be in Keillor-Fitzgerald-Lewis country again. Ironic, isn't it? Because Sinclair Lewis is why I seldom visit my home town.

I drove out through the cornfields, on those two-lane asphalt roads, across the flat countryside dotted with the affluent farm houses, barns, sheds, and silos, the awesome old trees and vast green lawns. My first morning in Sauk Centre, I walked into a gift shop, no doubt in the marble temple Farmers' National Bank in *Main Street*. I was met with, "Are you Jackie Koenig?"

The first thing we all do in Gopher Prairie is take Carol Kennicott's stroll on *Main Street*. And everyone knows the new person in town, just as they knew Carol Kennicott. But hearing one's name takes one by surprise. . . .

Main Street alerted me to the certainty that people were talking behind my back. Before, I'd thought they all loved me, as I loved and trusted them. It was then that I recognized gossip; and it disturbed me, as it did Carol. And it is no different here, in Sauk Centre. People practically fell off their chairs in the Palmer House dining room looking at me. I could overhear them whispering, "That's her there! In the red blouse. . . along the wall."

But this was impersonal, and it amused me. I enjoyed these people, the town, and the farm land; whereas, who wants to go home again when you know the gossip goes around about your loved ones, generation after generation. Plus, leaving one's home isn't understood by those who stay behind in small towns.

Mark Schorer says Sinclair Lewis, in some moods, saw the small town "as the best place after all, the real America, America at the roots, America at its kindest, its friendliest, its human best." That makes it a good place to be raised, but, also, a good place to get away from.

It's not enough for an entire lifetime. There's a whole big world out there. Sinclair Lewis lived a full life. And that's where I would take Mark Schorer to task. . . .

In all his 800-page biography, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, Schorer didn't once admire, love, or praise Sinclair Lewis;

and I hated him for it.

It's almost as if Mark Schorer were a small town product who hated people who change. But I needed to review the biographical detail of Sinclair Lewis's life, and Schorer does that exhaustively.

Some Sinclair Lewis scholars do not like the biography; and, as I started to reread it after thirty years, immediately I could see why. Why be so cruel on Sinclair Lewis the child? If, indeed, he were dissimilar from the other boys, why make him out to be a misfit? Personally, I'm glad he wasn't an average small town boy.

Especially troubling is the accepted belief that loners are unhappy, and that it is a tragedy Sinclair Lewis died alone in a foreign country. That's the least worry of a loner. Sinclair Lewis was right where he wanted to be. Though ill, he was well settled and writing. Would Schorer rather he surrendered to a Sauk Centre nursing home? Even the dictionary links "lonely" and "sad." I see it as one's independence.

Sinclair Lewis made his own freedom to move often to locales that all appear somewhere in his work. From away, he could wisely portray our society, its joys, its mistakes.

Schorer speaks of Lewis's "lifelong attempt of a country boy to become a man of the world." Attempt? Does Schorer mean to say that being a friend of Presidents and all the important people of his day, acquiring riches and mansions, writing so many wonderful books, his social prestige around the world, and being the first American writer to receive the Nobel Prize for literature indicates a failed life?

As Schorer describes Lewis's moves to New York City, Chicago, Washington, D.C., London, Florence, etc., he writes of the dinner parties, tea parties, lunching out with one friend after another, house guests, going up to Paris to lunch with Edith Wharton, and so on. That is the biography; eight hundred pages of it.

Schorer takes us through the creation of the novels, unrelenting progression of the work, book after book, 600,000 words of plan on a single book, "revising with a vengeance." *Main Street* "was the most sensational event in twentieth-century American publishing history" (268). However Schorer sums up, on page 813, Sinclair Lewis "was one of the worst writers in modern American literature. . . ."

It's difficult for me to move past the biography to get on with the main purpose of this journal—my trip to Sauk Centre. Being on *Main Street* is like nothing else. To stay in the Palmer House, to sit on the bench at the corner of *Main Street* and Sinclair Lewis Avenue and look up over Dyer's Drug Store to the empty second floor corner office which still has Dr. E. J. Lewis's sign in the window, to see the churches, the yellow brick buildings, the lake, town, and countryside, fulfills a lifetime dream.

As a fan who had come all the way from Arizona, I was as mystified at some of the townspeople, as they were puzzled by the fact I was there.

Many haven't read Sinclair Lewis. "I guess I should," a

waitress admitted, when she saw me reading *Main Street*.

And, the town definitely needs a Carol Kennicott walking "The Original Main Street," as it's now called, to stir up some curiosity, not only about their famous author, but about the world. . . .

I visited the Public Library, where Sinclair Lewis has a brass nameplate as a "benefactor." I thought there should be a Sinclair Lewis Room, photograph, or something more. Now I read there was at one time, until the Sinclair Lewis Interpretive Center came into town. The Center now serves the purpose of honoring the famous author. . . .

The marquee on the Main Street Theatre looks the same today as it does in the famous photograph of Sinclair Lewis taken in 1947 in front of the theatre. While in Sauk Centre, I went there to see *The Bridges of Madison County*.

I was rereading *Main Street*, and it seems to me the plots of the two works overlap. In *Bridges*, Francesca is caught up in a routine rural life in Iowa, totally different from her dream of life in America, when she came here from Italy as a young bride. . . .

Thursday evening's event celebrating the 75th anniversary of *Main Street* was held at Sauk Centre Junior High School on a very warm evening in the Midwest. The weather had been the main topic of conversation around Sauk Centre all week. Temperatures hovered at 100 degrees, and everyone was talking about nothing but the weather.

Numbers were not what they'd wished, but it was a group of residents interested in their famous author. I believe each and every person in the auditorium knew Sinclair Lewis as a noble son, the book as a classic, and Sauk Centre as a special place. It was an evening well worth traveling across the country to attend. (A discussion of the panel was included, see Fall 1995 newsletter for summary of the speakers' remarks.)

People from around the world travel to Sinclair Lewis's home town. A Sauk Centre teacher and author told us *Main Street* is being taught in school here, that most students are exposed to it, but there are those here who don't understand why people are coming here.

A brisk discussion of Lewis's relationship to Minnesota ensued in the audience. One talked of the love-hate relationship with its native son. Another said, "We have a steady stream of media fascinated." "We're honoring the man who vilified us," one man learned after having moved here thirty-five years ago.

And, this from another, "My father played with all three of the Lewis boys." She told us she is a Sinclair Lewis collector and doesn't like to hear him criticized.

About fifty people attended, plus the seven on the panel. Though not a large number on a very hot night in an auditorium without air-conditioning, it turned out to be a proud evening. . . .

We were all invited to the Palmer House afterwards. It was a pleasurable social time, in the Minniemashie Room. As well as being proud of its award-winning author, Sauk Centre can be proud of its hotel. Linda Frumkin, after spending her married life as an importer in California, is back in her home town; she bought the Palmer House two years ago. It's newly completely remodeled and is quite the showplace. . . .

The actual publication date of *Main Street* was October 23, 1920, but the book's 75th anniversary event was celebrated in

July at the time of the annual Sinclair Lewis Days in Sauk Centre.

Saturday morning, I walked down to the lake shore among the craft booths. At the Sinclair Lewis home the day before I'd watched tour guide Emma Thomas paint flowerpots. Emma not only is knowledgeable about Sinclair Lewis but she's also an artist. At the craft fair, I bought a flowerpot from her which now beautifies my desk and brings back memories of an adorable young woman from Sauk Centre.

I missed the rest of the weekend Sinclair Lewis Days celebration (band concert in Sinclair Lewis Park, dance in the park, auto show on Main Street, spaghetti supper at the American Legion, parade on Main Street) partly because of the wet weather and partly because I had to catch my plane.

But I was able to see the boyhood home, birthplace, the wonderful Palmer House, meet the president and members of the Sinclair Lewis Foundation, meet Sally Parry in person, walk on Main Street with Carol, see Dr. Lewis's sign in his office window, see the bronze bust of Sinclair Lewis, see Sinclair Lewis's hometown of Sauk Centre, attend the event celebrating the 75th anniversary of *Main Street*, read and rest and eat good Midwestern food, sit in the bakery over coffee and donut reading *Main Street* on Main Street, see the yellow brick buildings in Sauk Centre, put a rose on Sinclair Lewis's grave, go by McCloud, and fly into the twin cities, all on the Sinclair Lewis trail.

Sinclair Lewis has the perfect grave site. You go out of town through beautiful country, yet he's in sight of town and the St. Paul steeple. Beyond is one of my beloved (and no doubt his beloved) cornfields. I put a single rose above his gravestone in the Lewis plot as thunder rolled and lightning flashed.

The cemetery is covered with trees, and rat-like creatures scamper about. Sinclair is buried between his mother and father. I sat in my car, afraid of the lightning but unable to pull myself away.

SINCLAIR LEWIS NOTES

A collection of essays by Floyd Dell, *Floyd Dell: Essays from the Friday Literary Review, 1909-1913*, edited by R. Craig Sauter, has just been published by December Press. In a review in the *Chicago Tribune* on February 25, 1996, Mark Krupnick writes: "Dell wrote many books, but they all have to do with the same subject: the difficulty, in America, of growing up. Though he published 11 novels, he never really improved on his first, *Moon-Calf*. When that novel appeared in 1920, it was for a time as popular as Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*, which was published the same year. Although reviewers discussed the two books as if they reflected the same outlook, they were very different. Lewis was sharply satiric; he wrote in the spirit of debunking that, thanks to Mencken, had become the period style. Dell, on the other hand, was tender in describing the coming-of-age of his protagonist, Felix Fay, the details of whose life are very close to Dell's own" (14.4).

In the Library of America's *Reporting World War II, Part 1: American Journalism 1938-1944* (1995), Dorothy Thompson is

well represented with pieces on the Nazi diplomatic victories at the 1938 Munich conference and the occupation of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia.

In a review of *Below the Belt*, a play by Richard Dresser, critic Alexis Greene in the April 1, 1996 *Theater Week* notes that one of the characters is named Dobbitt. "[T]he name's similarity to Babbitt, the hero of Sinclair Lewis's great novel, is just one more indication of Dresser's lack of originality" (14).

In a March 10, 1996 *New York Times Magazine* essay on McDonald's, "Who Is the Best Restaurateur in America?" author Stephen Drucker writes that McDonald's CEO Michael Quinlan is "an unpretentious capitalist hero with the same enthusiasm for sandwiches that Dodsworth had for cars" (47).

New Sinclair Lewis member Edward Sprague sent the newsletter a copy of Lewis's business card @1917 with the inscription, "To Elizabeth, who made it all—made it a good Job!" This was from the free end paper of a copy of *The Job* that Mr. Sprague surmises was sent to Elizabeth Jordan of Harper & Brothers.

The First Edition Library is reprinting various classics to resemble the original first editions. "Restored to their pristine First Edition glory, here are the greatest works of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Styron, Michener, Mailer, Sinclair Lewis, Thomas Wolfe, and many more." For more information call 1-800-367-4534.

There are two new books concerning Dawn Powell, *The Diaries of Dawn Powell, 1931-1965*, edited by Tim Page, and *My Home is Far Away*, a novel of hers that was originally published in 1943. In the *New York Times Book Review* of November 26, 1995, reviewer Terry Teachout notes that she "was born in 1897 in Mount Gilead, Ohio, deep in the heart of the Babbitt belt." He continues, "Five of her first six novels are set in Ohio, and they are an odd amalgam of harshness and pathos, rather like a cross between Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis" (9).

On January 6, 1996, Tom Wolfe concluded a talk on C-SPAN 1 by quoting part of Lewis's Nobel Prize speech.

The *Chicago Tribune*, in a January 26, 1996 article entitled "Art That Sells," by Jeff Lyon, started off with a quotation from *Babbitt*, "In other countries, art and literature are left to a lot of shabby bums living in attics and feeding on booze and spaghetti, but in America the successful writer or picture-painter is indistinguishable from any other decent businessman." Lyon is writing about current artists, but his opening gibe is "Aw, Sinclair, you terminal sourpuss. Is it so bad that artists don't starve anymore?" Lewis's point, of course, was that successful ones didn't starve back in the 1920s either, but that art and commerce were more inextricably intertwined than many artists would like to admit.

Terry Teachout's "'None ever wished it longer': How to Stamp Out Book Inflation" in the *New York Times Book Review* of July 30, 1995 compares Mark Schorer to Dr. Frankenstein. Indicting Schorer as the first to cross breed the two genres of literary biography—comprehensive (long for a reason) and the elegant single-volume (short for a reason), Teachout writes that the "1961 biography of Sinclair Lewis weighed in at 867 fully packed pages. Little did Schorer know what havoc his monster would wreak" (3).

A children's book, *Broadway Chicken* by Jean-Luc Fromental (1995), features a chicken who dances like Fred Astaire and stars in both Broadway musicals and Hollywood movies including *Coop at the Top* and *Elmer Poultry*.

In Tempe, Arizona, the Wednesday Book Discussion Series at the end of February focused on *Elmer Gantry*.

Waubesa Press has recently reprinted Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett*, with an introduction by Dianne Lynch. This novel was, along with *Main Street*, one of the two best-selling novels of 1920. A dramatic version was produced on Broadway and won a Pulitzer Prize. For further information, write the Waubesa Press, P.O. Box 192, Oregon, WI 53575.

Timothy Spears has written *100 Years on the Road: The Traveling Salesman in American Culture* (Yale UP, 1995). In it, he looks at real salesmen and how they have been transformed through various kinds of literature and popular culture, including offering readings of works by Arthur Miller, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and Eudora Welty.

In the *Sierra* magazine of March/April 1996 an article, "A Natural History of the Yellowstone Tourist" by Geoffrey O'Gara, mentions the pleasure of "'free air,' as Sinclair Lewis called it half a century ago" (58) as a rationale for people to travel to national parks.

According to the Broadway home page on the World Wide Web, the musical *Gantry* is supposed to arrive on Broadway sometime in 1996. For more information, see http://artsnet.heinz.cmu.edu:80/OnBroadway/On_Bway.html. Also see "On the Road Again: *Elmer Gantry's* Odyssey" in *Theater Week* (Oct. 16, 1995: 59-61) by Norman Allen for a retrospective of the latest production of *Gantry* in Washington last fall (a review appeared in the fall *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*).

BOOK NOTES

Penguin is reprinting *Babbitt* with introduction and notes by Sinclair Lewis Society president James M. Hutchisson. This edition is available for \$9.95.

James Hutchisson's *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis, 1920-1930*, will be available from Penn State Press in May 1996 for \$29.95. Robert Fleming has said of this critical study, "Not only is this

study impeccably researched and well-written, not only does it bring forth a substantial amount of new material on Lewis's career, but its publication could not come at a better time. The book should enjoy a considerable audience among those who are committed to a reexamination of the canon."

Hutchisson also has had two new articles published on Lewis. "Sinclair Lewis Manuscript Collections: A Descriptive Survey" [*Bulletin of Bibliography* 52.3 (Sept. 1995): 229-39] discusses the libraries and other repositories for Lewis's work including drafts of novels and prepublication material, short fiction, plays, poetry, unpublished work including nonfiction, and correspondence including diaries. This is an invaluable article for anyone doing research on Lewis's work.

"The Rise of Sinclair Lewis" [*Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 26 (July 1995): 202-10] contains excerpts from Hutchisson's monograph on Lewis in Penn State's new series in the History of the Book. This article focuses on Lewis's relationship with editor/publisher Alfred Harcourt and Lewis's interest in publicizing his own books.

The University of Nebraska Press is currently offering three Lewis novels, *Ann Vickers* (1933), *Free Air* (1919), and *The Job* (1917). The *Spectator* said of *Ann Vickers*, "A great story, brilliantly done.... It has humour and satiric purpose, and it gives a brilliant summary of the changes in twentieth-century America." The *New Republic* noted of *Free Air* that Lewis "really seems to catch the sweep and exhilaration of the great open country over which his characters wind their way." The *Oxford Companion to American Literature* calls *The Job* Lewis's "first distinguished work of fiction."

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List 39

First Editions of the Classics of Fiction,
interspersed with some vaguely associated items only
incidentally printed.

Lewis, Sinclair

Elmer Gantry (1927).

1st edition, 1st binding. *The Dedication Copy*. On the endpaper is a printed presentation slip signed in ink by Sinclair Lewis, noting that he will be abroad when the book is published. Below this is an inscription from the dedicatee, H.L. Mencken, to silent screen star Aileen Pringle, "Dear Aileen: This will make you yell. H.L.M., 1927." Offered here is the dedicatee's own copy

of *Elmer Gantry*, sent to him by the publisher at Lewis's behest. Mencken had already read the book in proof and reviewed it, so it is not surprising that he would pass it along to a close friend in the same year. Unanswered, is whether Mencken was sent more than one copy (no other survivor yet). Cloth rubbed and spotted, inner hinges strengthened. A bright 1st state dustjacket is supplied. FINE full morocco case. Lewis declined a Pulitzer Prize in 1926. In 1930 he became the first American awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He accepted it (and the big bucks that came with it), breaching the Swedish citadel for the likes of Hemingway, Faulkner, and Steinbeck. *Elmer Gantry* is the flashiest of novels and a multi-layered expose of revivalism, but it's a pathetic reminder that there will always be Americans who demand "free speech" as a cheap compensation for "free thought."

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"When I speak to God it's prayer, when God speaks to me it's paranoia."

—Bishop John S. Spong

* * *

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Derry, N.H. 03038. Tel: (603) 432-9142.

Catalogue 98

246. Lewis, Sinclair. *MAIN STREET*. A Novel. Illustrated by Grant Wood. Limited Editions Club, NY, 1937. 1/1,500 numbered copies signed by Grant. With an Introduction by Lewis specially written for this edition. Major illustrator. Bookplate else fine in worn and broken slipcase box. \$350.00

* * *

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298. Lewis, Sinclair. *Free Air*. New York: Harcourt, Brace (1919). Blue cloth. Very good copy, dime-store bookplate. First edition. \$150

299. Lewis, Sinclair, *Arrowsmith*. New York. Harcourt, Brace (1925). Cloth backed boards, Fine copy in lightly used publisher's slipcase. First edition, one of 500 specially bound signed copies. \$1,500

300. Lewis, Sinclair. *Cass Timberlane*. New York: Random House (1945). Grey cloth, as new in dust jacket. First edition. \$125

* * *

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Nobel Prize Winner

Lewis, Sinclair. *Original pen and ink over pencil portrait of Lewis* by Maurice Bloch, boldly signed and inscribed in black ink by Lewis below drawing: "To E. Maurice Bloch, Sinclair Lewis. N.Y. Oct. 26, 1941"; also signed ("B") by Bloch. 4 3/4" x 3 3/4" image on 9 1/2" x 6 1/4" heavy stock (matted). Unique and unpublished. \$850.00

Lewis (1885-1951), American novelist/journalist/editor; most famous for novels of Middle American life ("Main Street," 1920; "Babbitt," 1922; "Elmer Gantry," 1927; "Dodsworth," 1929; etc.); married to Dorothy Thompson (1928; divorced 1942); won Nobel Prize for Literature (1930; 1st American winner).

* * *

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August 1995 List

230. **Lewis, Sinclair.** *Tennis As I Play It* by Maurice E. McLoughlin. New York: George H. Doran, 1915. First Edition of a book ghostwritten by Sinclair Lewis. Accompanying the book is documentation about Lewis's authorship. Ownership signature dated 1915. Illustrated with photographs. Very good. \$500.00

231. **Lewis, Sinclair and Fay Wray.** *Angela is Twenty-Two: A Play in Three Acts.* Skowhegan, Maine: Lakewood Theatre, 1939. Original playbill, bound in buckram with this summer theater's programs for the 1939 season. Lewis and Wray also starred in the production. Mark Schorer (*Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*) describes how Lewis, feeling he lacked a dramatic sense, collaborated with Wray, although she wrote none of the play. However, he insisted that they share

credit. Lewis toured in the play, but this production was the first (and apparently last) in which they both starred. Both Lewis and Wray have signed the playbill on the cast list. \$400.00

390. **Wray, Fay.** *On the Other Hand.* New York: St. Martin's, 1989. First Edition. Signed presentation copy to Joan Houseman, the wife of actor, producer and director John Houseman, dated May 1989. The acclaimed autobiography of the noted film actress who had relationships with Sinclair Lewis and Clifford Odets. Illustrated. Fine in dust jacket. \$225.00

September 1995 List

204. **Lewis, Sinclair.** *Tennis As I Play It* by Maurice E. McLoughlin. New York: Doran, 1915. First Edition of a book ghostwritten by Sinclair Lewis. Accompanying the book is documentation about Lewis's authorship. Illustrated with photographs. Hinges cracked, extremities and cloth rubbed, else very good. \$225.00

205. **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. 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. This novel, admittedly not one of his best, was published between two of his greatest successes, *Arrowsmith* and *Elmer Gantry*. Although never a favorite with critics, Lewis was America's great satirist of the middle class (perhaps sharing the honor with Mencken, who was not so good-natured in his satire). Galley proofs of this vintage are genuinely rare, and were distributed only to a few people for editing, submissions for serial rights, foreign printings, etc. Lewis was the first American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (1930). \$2,000.00

206. **Lewis, Sinclair.** *John Dos Passos' Manhattan Transfer.* New York: Harper, 1936. First Edition. One of 975 numbered copies. Foxed, else very good. \$35.00

* * *

Catalog 107

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276. **Lewis, Sinclair.** JOHN DOS PASSOS' *MANHATTAN TRANSFER.* New York: Harper & Bros., 1926. "This discussion by Sinclair Lewis of John Dos Passos' novel *MANHATTAN TRANSFER*, must take rank as one of the most remarkable tributes from one distinguished writer to another." One of 975 numbered copies. Edges of boards slightly faded, otherwise near fine without dustwrapper, presumably as issued. \$100.00

Catalogue 35. **Waiting For Godot Books**, POB 331, Hadley, MA 01035, phone (413) 585-5126.

810. [LEWIS, Sinclair]. **TENNIS AS I PLAY IT** by Maurice E. McLoughlin. Preface by Richard Norris Williams, 2nd... Illustrated with Seventy-two Reproductions of Photographs in action. New York: George H. Doran Company, (1915). First edition, *variant (possibly second issue?) binding*. 8vo [binding measures 8 5/16 by 5 3/4 inches; other copies examined measure approximately 9 1/4 by 6 1/4 inches], light green cloth stamped in black (or dark green) [other copies examined are dark green cloth stamped in gold] on front cover and on spine, 347 pages, illustrated. Laid into the book is a Xerox copy of a letter written by an attorney who was an acquaintance of Maurice E. McLoughlin, discussing *Tennis As I Play It* and stating that McLoughlin told him that "Sinclair Lewis was the 'Ghost Writer' of McLoughlin's book and McLoughlin had many conferences with the famous author." Binding moderately faded on spine and at extremities, with bit of wear at tips of spine, front hinge is slightly wormed, else a very good copy. \$150.00

811. LEWIS, Sinclair. **MADEN, DER SOGTE GUD**. Kobenhavn: H. Hagerup, 1950. First Danish edition [of *The God-Seeker*]. Large 8vo, pictorial wrappers, 406 pages. Light wear at fore-edge of covers, else a near fine copy. \$45.00

HUMOR, MYSTERY, MARKETED AT SINCLAIR LEWIS WRITERS' CONFERENCE

From the *Sauk Centre Herald* Oct. 24, 1995

Writers learned to do a setting for a mystery novel, how to market their magazine articles, and how to write and market off-the-wall humor at the Fifth Annual Sinclair Lewis Foundation-sponsored Writers' Conference Oct. 14 in Sauk Centre, Minnesota.

They heard from keynote speaker Will Weaver about "The Story in Life and Literature—The Long and Short of It." Weaver has just published his second young adult novel, *Farm Team*, which is a sequel to his first young adult book, *Striking Out*. He has two adult novels to his credit including *Red Earth*, *White Earth*, which was made into a TV movie by CBS in 1989.

Weaver prefaced his remarks with comments about Sinclair Lewis, who was the nation's first Nobel Prize for Literature winner. "(Lewis) had a gutsy outlook," Weaver said, "that we writers need in our story writing." Lewis carried off his remarks about the happenings in Gopher Prairie "through the vehicle of a story," Weaver said.

The story, Weaver said, "is on the short list of basic human needs: food, shelter, penmanship and the need for a story." "We

tell stories to instruct, explore, amuse, frighten and arouse," he said. "It's the way that humans explain the human existence to themselves."

Each presenter gave three sessions on their expertise. Marjorie Dorner, who has published several mystery novels, including *Blood King* in 1992, had a working session for writers attending, as they wrote settings for a mystery scene.

Bill Vossler, who has published more than 2,000 magazine articles, cautioned the writers not to quit their day jobs. "One month I had \$3,000 come in," he said. "One month I had no money in (partly because of surgery he underwent)."

Brian (Buck) Peterson, Sauk Centre native, whose claim to fame is *The Original Roadkill Cookbook*, and its follow-up humor books which sell like hotcakes all over the country, gave tips about being self-published if you can't find a publisher at first. It is what he did with *The Roadkill Cookbook*.

Following the individual sessions, the four writers, along with Jim Umhoefer, chair of the writers' conference and himself a published author, came together for a panel discussion, fielding questions from the audience about their work and their lives.

The writers' conference is sponsored by the Sinclair Lewis Foundation of Sauk Centre, with grants from the Stearns County Historical Society, The Loft with funding from the Bladin Corporation, the Minnesota Humanities Commission, the Central Minnesota Arts Board, the St. Cloud Area Allied Arts Fund Drive and the Sinclair Lewis Foundation.

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY ACQUIRES LEWIS LETTERS

The Minnesota Historical Society recently acquired some Sinclair Lewis correspondence from a rare book dealer in Los Angeles, paying \$24,000 from private donations, for material that will eventually be made available to the public. The following are excerpts from a feature, "Sinclair Lewis's Wry Affection for Minnesota," by Peg Meier, from the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, November 21, 1995.

The popularly held idea that author Sinclair Lewis detested small towns and looked down his nose on his home state of Minnesota takes a beating in a series of his letters acquired last week by the Minnesota Historical Society.

The bulk of the letters are from 1915 to 1920, when Lewis was writing *Main Street*, the novel that brought him international renown. To keep checks rolling in to feed his young family, he also submitted short stories to magazines. In some letters to his editors at the *Saturday Evening Post* and to his readers, he was positively a Minnesota booster.

"Please understand that I am a Minnesotan, by birth and

present residence, and that I want tourists to come here, quite as much for their own sake as for Minnesota's sake," he wrote in 1919.

Patrick Coleman, acquisitions librarian at the Historical Society, said generations of students have been taught that Lewis hated Minnesota. "But it's more complex than that," he said. "If he hated small-town life, why did he write *Main Street* in Mankato? Why not go to New York or Paris? Sinclair Lewis kept coming back, not necessarily just to see his family. This was his place."...

The series includes almost 200 unpublished letters between Lewis and his editors at the *Post*, the first magazine to publish a Lewis short story. In gratitude, he offered the magazine all his stories.

His editor wrote to him, "You may write 'em fast, but we can print 'em faster."

Mark Greene, head of manuscript acquisitions for the Historical Society, said the correspondence contains a wealth of information about Lewis's life, travels and novel-writing. Lewis comments several times, for example, on the progress of *Main Street*:

"I wasn't sure at all that it would be serializable. It's too long, too plotless and too critical—it's about life in Midwestern small towns, and it's rather impolite."

He also wrote about the birth of his son, Wells Lewis:

"I now have a wife at home again, plus one large child, one baby nurse, one baby scales and a large number of other things of whose use I have but vague ideas, and more or less elderly women who poke their fingers at the infant and assert, 'Is he the sweetsie weetsie.' Gaw!" (The son, a brilliant young man, was killed in World War II.)

The letters also show that Lewis was not a prima donna, Greene said. "He took his editor's criticisms seriously, and often reworked stories following [his editor] George Lorimer's suggestions. By the same token, Lorimer and the *Post* were not awed by Lewis even after he became a famous novelist. They were quite as willing to reject what they viewed as inferior quality in 1925 as they were in 1915."

Lewis frank about Minnesota roads

Among the Sinclair Lewis correspondence recently acquired by the Minnesota Historical Society is the following exchange. *The Saturday Evening Post* published a serialized novel, *Free Air*, by Lewis in 1919. H.G. Davis, secretary of the Minnesota Highway Development Association, wrote to the *Post*'s editor:

The opening chapter... is creating a great deal of unfavorable comment in Minnesota, owing to the fact that it is appearing at the opening of our tourist season, picturing the roads in Minnesota as actually impassable. Aside from that, however, the story bids fair to be entertaining. Minnesota prides itself upon the condition of its highways. . . .

The *Post*'s editor asked Lewis to respond. This is a portion:

First of all please understand that I am a Minnesotan, by birth and present residence, and that I want tourists to come here, quite as much for their own sake as for Minnesota's sake. . . . I do not say. . . that the roads are impassable, simply that there is mud after rain—which there is. The fact that Claire [a character in the story] finds mud will have far less effect on tourists than

the descriptions of the glory of the prairies. . . . Let me say that I have driven from one end of the state to the other, and do know the roads. The hole which I describe as the one in which Claire was stuck is the actual hole in which I was stuck, with my wife, and the cashier of the First National Bank of Sauk Centre. This hole was near Freeport, and we were stuck in it for four hours in 1916. . . . It is true that the whole road from Minneapolis to Sauk Centre is better now, but just two weeks ago I drove over it and I noticed. . . the whole road is rough.

. . . I want Minnesota to be helped instead of injured by my story. I want us to have everywhere such corking roads as that from Sauk Centre to Wadena. Then indeed we shall have our share of the tourist traffic; the tourists will come to appreciate our hills and prairies, lakes and woods, and not be disturbed by any bad roads.

How many writers are writing about Minnesota, Mr. Davis? Any one save myself? Any one else boosting our prairies, our lakes, our people? Then why do you want to tie my hands by insisting that I indulge in untrue glorification? Minnesota roads are not perfect. Let's make them so, and you'll have me right there boosting them.

And to his editor, Lewis wrote:

That damned fool Davis gets my goat. First, he lies about the Minnesota roads. Then, he doesn't appreciate my putting Minnesota on the map—and I'm the only writer doing it. Third, reading between the lines of his letter to you, he tries to threaten you with loss of advertising—Gawd only knows what advertising—if you don't come out and inform the world that however rotten other states may be, this one state is perfect. But in my letter to him, I try not to show any bad temper, without, at the same time, being too meek.

HOW ONE LITTLE TOWN CHANGED THE WHOLE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

75 years after Main Street, novel still holds up a mirror

by Roger K. Miller

*It is the rare novel, no matter how best-selling, that can be said to have changed our national life. *Even Gone With the Wind*, as commercially successful and beloved as it has been for nearly 60 years, cannot claim such an honor.

Probably the greatest example of such a novel is Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which Abraham Lincoln credited only half-jokingly, with starting the Civil War. A second that comes quickly to mind is Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, which helped bring about laws demanding purity in food and drugs.

Another that bids fair to be admitted to such august company is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year. Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, published on Oct. 23, 1920, altered not only the way we look at our collective life, but very likely the way we lived

it. After *Main Street*, small-town life was never the same.

The novel's effect was immediate and electric. Mark Schorer's 1961 biography of Lewis called its publication "the most sensational event in 20th century American publishing history." It was, Schorer said, "a kind of explosion" that led one reviewer to remark two years after its publication that "if *Main Street* lives, it will probably be not as a novel but as an incident in American life."

That reviewer was wrong. *Main Street* has lived as a novel—and that is where it parts company with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Jungle*: It exists not just as a social document, but as a work of art.

No thanks to Schorer, whose biography—the only major one of Lewis so far—took a pretty sour view of both Lewis and his work. On its last page, it concludes that the Sauk Centre native "was one of the worst writers in modern American literature."

No thanks, either, to John Updike, who barely managed to summon up two cheers for Lewis when he reviewed the Library of America's combined edition of *Main Street* and *Babbitt* for the *New Yorker* two years ago. (*Main Street* is also available in a Signet Classic paperback, \$5.95.)

I beg to differ. At times, Lewis' writing could be as awkward as he was, and his dialogue and characterizations boobish. Nevertheless, in the five major novels he published between 1920 and 1930—besides *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, they are *Elmer Gantry*, *Arrowsmith*, and *Dodsworth*—he created art of as high an order as his more critically favored fellow Minnesotan, F. Scott Fitzgerald, did in *The Great Gatsby*.

And he never did so better than in *Main Street*. Using his trademark satire and parody, he gave a shellacking to small-town dullness, mediocrity, smugness and conformity such as had never been seen before.

Less often remarked is that his sword was double-edged: It sliced at the townspeople of Gopher Prairie, Minn., certainly, but it also nicked the superficial intellectualism of those who despise them. He mocked the town's small-minded wowsers and Pecksniffs, but he also mocked his heroine, Carol Kennicott, who comes to Gopher Prairie as an enthusiastic young bride hoping to reform the town and ends up being subdued by it.

Two-thirds of the way through, Lewis summarizes his theme in one brilliant paragraph on small-town life, concluding that it is "dullness made God." The question remains: Is small-town life still the same as it was eight decades ago, the time of which Lewis wrote?

No—but even then, it wasn't entirely the way he depicted it.

As for mediocrity, toadyism, materialism, conformity and convention, they thrive everywhere in this era of enormous personal freedom, making one wonder what it is we have freed ourselves to do or be.

Would that we had a writer to take their measure, and ours, quite the way Sinclair Lewis did.

—Roger K. Miller is a freelance writer in Grafton, Wis. (population 9,340), and former books editor of the *Milwaukee Journal*.

*From the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, Oct. 22, 1995

SINCLAIR LEWIS'S GEORGE BABBITT WOULD BE AT HOME IN THIS CONGRESS

Essay by Jon Margolis

Abridged from

—*High Country News*—November 13, 1995

Paonia, Colorado

When I read recently that a couple of Republican congressmen were still fighting an impending ban on chlorofluorocarbons (CFC's), I was overtaken by a literary obsession: I had to re-read Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*.

Let me explain. About a year ago, while still gainfully employed, I wrote a column about Rep. Dan Burton of Indiana, who embarrassed his fellow Republicans by fulminating against a bill to provide more winter range for elk in Yellowstone National Park. The column argued that Burton ought to be cherished, at least by Midwesterners, as a survivor of an endangered species. He was one of the last "Babbitts."...

Policies of the triumphant Republican majority are based on a set of ideas; central to those ideas is a radical materialism which includes a willful, even gleeful, anti-intellectualism. Its enemy is neither the federal government nor the deficit; it is the life of the mind.

At this point, I should concede that as intellectuals go, I ain't much of one. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been a newspaper reporter all those years. I play no musical instrument, and I have no advanced degrees. So I don't feel threatened by anti-intellectualism. I'm just observing it. It was that observation which drove me to re-read *Babbitt*. I was trying to figure out what makes these guys tick.

If nothing else, the exercise was great fun. *Babbitt* never had much plot or subtlety, and by now some of it is dated. Still, it is written with such rollicking vigor that it's never boring, which cannot be said of all novels. As to illuminating today's anti-intellectuals, *Babbitt* is most instructive for revealing the difference between real estate salesman George Babbitt of Zenith, Ohio [*sic*], in 1920, and the followers of Newt Gingrich in 1995.

Babbitt was vulgar, in the way Rep. Burton is vulgar. Like *Babbitt*, he growls angrily at opponents and does not always use conventional grammar. But Burton, though a conservative Republican, is not part of the Gingrich Revolution. He's in his late 50s, and in both style and policies is more of a throwback to the grouchy Midwestern conservatives of an earlier day....

The neo-Babbitts are sophisticated, even when they scorn sophistication.

Salesman *Babbitt* had no choice. He could not help but be what he was. Near the end of the novel, after a brief rebellion which included a furtive, adulterous love affair, "he was on the Zenith train. He knew that he was slinking back not because it was what he longed to do but because it was all he could do."

Babbitt was uneducated. He had been to what he always called "the State U"—but griped about the "valuable time lost... studying poetry and French and subjects that never brought

anybody a cent." In Babbitt's day, before the profusion of fine state universities and National Public Radio, anyone who lived outside of New York, Boston or Chicago had to make an effort to find intellectual stimulation.

These days someone in Atlanta, Houston or Los Angeles has to make an effort to *avoid* culture. Many of the neo-Babbitts are graduates of great state universities and like Gingrich, who has a doctorate in history, possess intellectual credentials.

Yet they use intellect to denigrate intellect, or to employ it in the cause of sophistry, as Gingrich did when he tried to link the Susan Smith murder case to liberal policies. Unlike Babbitt, the neo-Babbitts have consciously chosen Babbitttry.

It's as though they've said: "We know there is culture, enlightenment, science and a civilized manner of life, *and we don't like it*. We reject it in favor of crass materialism and ignorance."...

This explains the almost manic choice they make for "economic growth," even when the "pro-growth" position does not in fact bring about more growth, as when logging or mining discourages other economic activity. The neo-Babbitts dismiss these cases because they refuse to recognize that other values— aesthetic, scientific, social—should be part of the equation. To the neo-Babbitts, people are *homo economici* and nothing else....

Every minute and calorie not needed for plowing, sawing and bolting can be spent playing the cello, gazing at the stars, learning to draw, fishing, making love. If only someone started thinking about it, the future could be full of both material wealth for everyone and...and more, also for everyone, more of what the materially wealthy George Babbitt knew he lacked when he declared: "I've never done a single thing I've wanted to do in my whole life."

It's a lesson the neo-Babbitts will learn, but perhaps not soon enough.

Jon Margolis used to write columns for the *Chicago Tribune*; now he gazes at stars, hikes and enjoys life in a small town in Vermont.

JEOPARDY TIME

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

From April 18, 1996: "Sinclair Lewis's novel *Main Street* is set in the town of Gopher Prairie in this state." The first guess in this Literature category for \$1000 was Illinois (perhaps the contestant was confusing the question with the home state of the Sinclair Lewis Society), but the second contestant correctly answered Minnesota.

From April 12, 1996: "Cliff Clawson is the medical school roommate of this Sinclair Lewis title character." This was a \$1000 Daily Double in the category Fictional Characters. The contestant guessed right, but only bet \$200.

From March 18, 1996: "When his *Elmer Gantry* was published, a New Hampshire minister tried to have him jailed." No one knew this Authors question for \$1000.

From March 5, 1996: "Floral Heights, a suburb of this fictional metropolis, is the setting for Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*. No one knew the answer to this \$800 question in Literature.

From February 2, 1996: "This *Babbitt* author published his 1st novel, *Hike and the Aeroplane*, under the pseudonym Tom Graham." The Literature question for \$400 was answered correctly.

From mid-January 1996: "Sinclair Lewis spent several months researching Midwestern Protestantism for this 1927 novel. This was a \$1000 Daily Double in Literature which the contestant got right.

MAIN STREET AS HISTORIC DISTRICT

Minnesota History published an article in its Winter 1994 issue concerning the trials and tribulations that went in making downtown Sauk Centre into a historical district. The article, "Original Main Street: Sauk Centre, Minnesota," by Britta L. Bloomberg and Dennis A. Gimmetstad details the discussions between the Minnesota Department of Transportation and the Minnesota Historical Society's State Historic Preservation Office and the criteria that was used. The article (164-69) contains a number of pictures as well. Below are some excerpts.

Outstanding among Minnesota's new listings on the National Register of Historic Places is the Original Main Street Historic District in Sauk Centre. Nationally significant for its association with Sinclair Lewis's 1920 novel *Main Street*, this district is a far cry from the typical National Register nomination for a Midwestern Main Street. In fact, little about the street or the process that won it a place on the register could be called typical.

Sauk Centre's most recent Main Street story began in the summer of 1991, when the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDot) announced plans to reconstruct state Highway 71 through this central Minnesota community about 100 miles northwest of the Twin Cities. The Minnesota Historical Society's State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) immediately began to receive phone calls and letters expressing concern about the fate of the famous stretch of road running through Sinclair Lewis's hometown. Although his acclaimed novel is set in the fictional community of Gopher Prairie, there has been little doubt that Lewis's own experiences in Sauk Centre were the primary source for his story's characters and settings.

At first, SHPO expected that its review of the highway project, required under state and federal regulations before MnDot can begin any road reconstruction, would be straightforward....

To review the Sauk Centre project, SHPO staff first went to Main Street. There, instead of a quaint collection of turn-of-the-century buildings, as some had expected, staff discovered only

a few outstanding properties, including the Palmer House Hotel, listed on the National Register since 1982, and the Bryant Public Library. Many of the town's early buildings had been replaced or remodeled, and only a few structures displayed any distinctive architectural styling....

"Modest" is the word that best fits this area. Most of the turn-of-the-century residential properties on the south end are simply designed and ornamented. The northern residences, predominantly from the 1910s and 1920s, represent popular styles of the period—bungalow, craftsman, and historic revival. The commercial buildings in the district's midsection are similarly modest structures which date to the turn of the century. Many have been altered, gaining new exteriors during the 1920s and 1930s, for example. In some cases, inappropriate changes in facades have ruined the buildings' historical integrity. Newer buildings added to the streetscape further challenge its historical unity. Three properties on Main Street's sole industrial block, on the other hand, authentically reflect Sauk Centre's working heritage: a dam over the Sauk River, a flour mill (now an apartment complex), and the Northern Pacific Railway depot (now a feed store).

Had SHPO been reviewing a similar highway project in another community, the office might well have recognized only a few buildings for their architectural or historical importance and considered the survey job done. Yet the signs proclaiming "Original Main Street" on almost every corner in town seemed to call for a second look. SHPO recommended a historic survey to evaluate whether any part of the district would be eligible for the National Register.

Determining whether a district meets the National Register's criteria is a rigorous process. Established after the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the criteria themselves are concise—only one printed page. They simply require that a property be associated with a significant person or event, have architectural or research importance, or comprise a notable collection of individual properties. But evaluating *why* a property is important demands careful documentation, now guided by more than 40 volumes of National Register Bulletins.

To begin the historic survey, SHPO staff compared the buildings along Main Street with Sinclair Lewis's boyhood home. A few blocks off of Main Street at 812 Sinclair Lewis Avenue, this modest, well-preserved building housed his family shortly after his birth in 1885 until he left Sauk Centre for preparatory school after 1900. Recognized for its tie to the famous author, the home has been listed on the National Register and designated a National Historic Landmark. When SHPO Staff compared late-nineteenth-century photographs of Main Street with today's streetscape, however, it was clear that the present version no longer closely resembled the Main Street of Lewis's boyhood. Lacking this historic link, it could not be placed on the register for its associations with Lewis's early life.

Next, SHPO staff intended to analyze places described in *Main Street* to see if they matched actual locations in Sauk Centre. If a sufficient number were found—and if they remained much as they were before 1920 when the novel was published—they could form a historic district....

Before this inquiry began, however, SHPO, working with MnDot and the historical consulting firm of Hess Roise, realized that the existing Main Street's primary importance lay not in events predating the novel but rather in what happened to the

town as the book's popularity grew. In surveying the buildings, therefore, Hess Roise paid particular attention to the district's appearance during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, the period when readers across the country—and attention from the media—transformed Sauk Centre's modest Main Street into a national cultural icon.

While many changes have occurred in the district since this period, Hess Roise's careful analysis showed that the essential elements and layout of Main Street remained intact and retained sufficient integrity. The firm's consultants, Jeffrey A. Hess and Heather E. Maginniss, suggested that the period of historic significance was from 1920 to 1947, from the publication of *Main Street* to the year *Life Magazine* visited and proclaimed the community a symbol of small towns across the nation. Unlike most historic districts in small communities, Sauk Centre's Main Street was neither architecturally distinctive nor an outstanding example of a town center. Rather, Sauk Centre was important as America's archetypical small town....

In the 1993 nomination, Hess and Maginniss made a strong case for Main Street's national significance under "Criterion A," social history. Cited is the district's close association with Lewis's 1920 novel, which "introduced the profoundly influential concept of 'main street' as a way of analyzing, visualizing, and symbolizing the American small town.... Because of its persistent and pervasive identification with Lewis's novel, Sauk Centre's Main Street became the living embodiment—the national symbol—of the American village." Twenty-seven years later, publication of the *Life Magazine* article "Main Street, 1947" acknowledged that this symbol represented "the mind and matter of Main Street."

The period of significance frames a time during which the meaning of "Main Street" shifted dramatically. When the novel was published, Lewis was bent on exposing the negative side of small-town mid-America. By 1947, the concept had taken on a nostalgic glow. A similar shift occurred in Sauk Centre; the authors of the National Register nomination discovered, in fact, that "the *Sauk Centre Herald* expressed its displeasure by waiting six months before acknowledging that a native son was responsible for the nation's most talked-about novel." The ensuing feud between the writer and his hometown captured national attention and strengthened the association between Sauk Centre and its fictional counterpart. But, "although Sauk Centre's association with *Main Street* initially had engendered ridicule," the 85-page nomination concluded, "it eventually conferred a special dignity."

That strong identity and special dignity persists today. It was apparent in May 1994 in the eloquent words spoken by city council members and district residents and in the impassioned letters from state legislators and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, read before the Minnesota State Review Board, a group of professional and citizen members responsible for overseeing National Register nominations. Previously, there had been considerable debate among district residents about the value of the designation....

Finally, after more reviews by state and federal authorities, the Keeper of the National Register in Washington, D.C. officially added Sauk Centre's Main Street to the list on August 5, 1994. It stands as a rare small-town district that represents the transformation of a real historical place into a cultural symbol.

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