

The SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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CASTING NEWER PSYCHIATRIC LIGHT ON SINCLAIR LEWIS

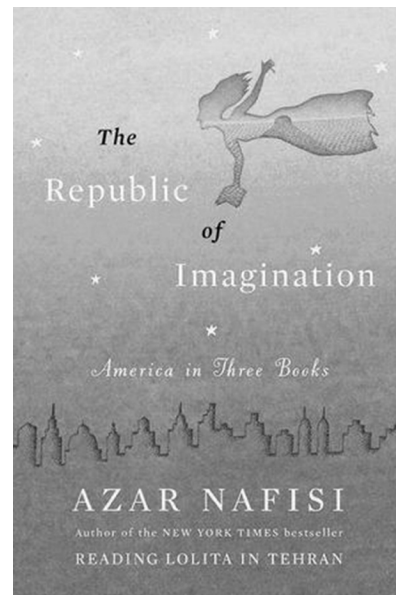
Roy Lacoursiere

In the early years after Sinclair Lewis's death, as I prepared for psychiatric studies, my father-in-law often chided me that psychiatry was like looking in a dark closet for a black cat. I would then routinely retort that I hoped to at least cast some light on the search. Sinclair Lewis's troubled existence seems like a place where such light can illuminate his story. In this brief essay I'll undertake this task, cognizant that light's "spectrum" and "speculation" are etymologically related. My focus will be primarily on aspects of Lewis's life that have their origins long before his well-known alcoholism. My Lewis sources for this essay are essentially the extensive biographies by Schorer (1961) and Lingeman (2002), sources I deem adequate.

Lewis's life story is striking for the difficulties the author repeatedly had in major areas, including relationships with both sexes, jobs, stable residences, and even being with himself. Although we might think that in a small town a doctor's son, and particularly one with two older brothers, might be well-liked, that was not the case with Sinclair, who was unpopular. He was too often grossly dominating in conversations and otherwise boorish, and lacked the understanding or the skills for the usual give-and-take required for peer interactions.¹ In his diary, and in other sources, Lewis repeatedly and quickly considered someone a great friend, and then as quickly that

——— Casting Newer Psychiatric Light *continued on page 4*

The Sinclair Lewis Society is sorry to announce that, due to unforeseen circumstances, the Sinclair Lewis Conference 2015 will have to be delayed to the summer of 2016. More details to follow.



THE BABBITIZATION OF AMERICA: REV. OF *THE REPUBLIC OF IMAGINATION*: *AMERICA IN THREE BOOKS*

Dave Simpkins
Editor/Publisher
Sauk Centre Herald

Real thinkers, smothering aunts, and redneck racists can make teaching literature in the United States as difficult as teaching literature in Iran. This is one of the messages of Azar Nafisi's latest book, *The Republic of Imagination*, which compares the works and characters of Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, and includes an epilogue on James Baldwin to demonstrate the dangers to free thought in a free society. Nafisi wrote about the difficulties of teaching literature in Iran in her 2003 book *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. In her current book, she argues that literature may have

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NEW ATTENTION TO *BABBITT* WITHIN AZAR NAFISI'S *THE REPUBLIC OF IMAGINATION: AMERICA IN THREE BOOKS*

Ralph Goldstein
California State University, Los Angeles

After reading a carping review in the *New York Times* of Azar Nafisi's new book, *The Republic of Imagination: America in Three Books* (Viking, 2014), I picked up a copy, went directly to the section on *Babbitt*, and enjoyed Nafisi's appreciation of Lewis's oft-neglected masterpiece. Then I went through the lengthy introduction, the sections on Huck Finn and Carson McCullers, the epilogue on James Baldwin, and considered it time well spent.

My respect for Nafisi derives in part from widening my literature students' perspectives by assigning her earlier book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, in conjunction with a comparative government class studying democratization efforts in Iran. Free from the repressive environment outside the walls of her class but mindful of the risks, Nafisi and her students read and discussed Western literature deemed by the regime to be counterrevolutionary. The seed for her newest work arose in a conversation she had with a young Iranian émigré who averred that Americans "don't care about books." Nafisi disagrees, noting the hunger for stories she witnesses at various US venues, and recognizing in Americans a shared interest in a "Republic of Imagination," a fictive world parallel to the real one, which she inhabited prior to making America her home, transcending borders, linking readers across time, requiring no passports or documentation but only "an open mind, a restless desire to know and an indefinable urge to escape the mundane" (4).

Nafisi's original outline for the book included twenty-four novels, which she narrowed down to three: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, focusing on Huck's rejection of roots and tradition; *Babbitt*, emphasizing George's alienation from an authentic self; and *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, with its characters longing for but not finding connectedness. The *Babbitt* section begins with biographical references to Lewis

as a rootless outsider well suited to create a "standardized" character, influenced by Thoreau and Emerson, disrespected by Hemingway and Fitzgerald but gaining posthumous plaudits from John Updike and Gore Vidal. Lewis's great achievement over a range of novels addressing conformity, commercialism, religion, women's rights, race, fascism, and medical science was, according to Nafisi, "bringing fiction into the arena of public discourse," and George Babbitt, she maintains, is "his most perfect creation" (159).

Not until her second reading of *Babbitt*, when she had begun the process of becoming an American citizen, did she realize that "Lewis had perfectly captured our hollow, thing-filled times, as if the characters he created almost a century ago mimicked us, gloating over the fact that we had turned out to be their true progenies" (166). Commenting on George's surrender to the god of business, his pursuit of higher social status, his adherence to the dictates of the Presbyterian Church and the Republican Party, and especially his willingness to allow advertisers to "fix the surface of his life," Nafisi observes, "The gadgets in question have changed, but the mentality that packages them and buys them is basically the same" (169, 171). Further, she identifies an American paradox laid open by *Babbitt*: the urge for novelty and constant change that impedes imagination and reflection, resulting in the standardization of thought against which George temporarily rebels. On this point Nafisi devotes several pages to what she calls the "Babbittized" condition of contemporary public education, with its devaluing of literature in favor of "informational texts" and its utilitarian obsession with career readiness. She calls special attention to David Coleman, president of the College Board, which devises

————— New Attention to *Babbitt* continued on page 14

CONTRIBUTORS

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person disappeared from his social circle. In late adolescence when Lewis was a school boarder, he had much trouble finding roommates who would tolerate him. Young women did not care for him, or even found him repulsive (Schorer 33, 55). And Lewis was not comfortable with his social situation, which left him lonely.

Lewis's problems and awkwardness with women extended into relationships with potential or actual intimacy. For example, while in college, Lewis rather insensitively discussed with Edith Summers details of marriage, but the plans were soon abandoned (Schorer 118–21). He did have two marriages, each with the birth of a son, and each technically lasting about ten years, although there were multiple geographical and emotional separations. However, when Lewis was away from a wife, he was often very lonely and would want to be back with her. Then, not long after returning, he had some reason to separate again, and the pattern repeated.

At times Lewis was also infatuated with young girls, not always quite aware of the impropriety of his feelings, such as with Helen Cooke. This infatuation began when she was twelve and he was in his early twenties (Schorer 122, 132; Lingeman 440). Decades later, when he was fifty-four and his second marriage beyond saving, he assiduously cultivated a relationship with eighteen-year-old Marcella Powers, whom he unconvincingly tried to pass off as his niece (Schorer 644–53 and *passim*). This relationship also broke up.

Indicative of Lewis's relationships with his sons, and a situation suggestive of his own upbringing (below), his infant second son and the boy's nurse were relegated to a separate building away from the main residence and Lewis (Schorer 537). Physical and emotional distancing characterized his filial relationships throughout his sons' lives. In 1926, during his first marriage, Lewis was involved with a woman with children. He wrote her: "And it is true that I, nervous, absorbed in work, cranky, cannot endure much of children" (qtd. in Lingeman 291). His first wife later more than echoed this: "...he knows nothing about children and less about parenthood..." (qtd. in Lingeman 426).

Lewis's early work history showed similar problems with attaching himself to jobs. As a young man and into his twenties, he had several short-term jobs. He either quickly left these himself or was terminated, at times for not doing what the job required (see Schorer 139–44). (Gradually he held longer-term positions, primarily in publishing, until his writing career was adequately developed.)

A similar pattern of transience characterized Lewis and his residences; he lived a very nomadic existence. In his

later successful years he repeatedly seemed to be in a desired residence, but then he would leave the place for some newly desired setting. Lewis described this as: "I have to combine being settled and working with having a taste of new lands. Fortunately I am one of the people who can in three hours feel as though a new desk in a new room had been mine always. I change my plans—at least to residence—so often that I hate to announce them" (qtd. in Lingeman 242). This lack of settling down was apparently one of the factors that led his first wife to divorce him. He purchased his first house when he was 43, after his marriage to Dorothy Thompson (Schorer 509). But even from this residence, his nomadic existence hardly changed. (While being struck with the dizzying unsettledness of Lewis's life, which he considered *fortunate*, one does marvel at his ability to repeatedly write in so many temporary locations.)

Lewis had great discomfort with being alone; there were people who noted him as the loneliest man they had ever met (Lingeman 500). It was not unusual for him to insist that a hired servant or other person sit in the room where he was reading or writing, otherwise alone. One of these persons was Marcella Powers's mother, whom Lewis required to sit essentially silent and immobile in the room with him (Schorer 733).

Is it possible to make some sense—cast some light—on these widespread difficulties of relating to, and of attaching himself, to others, to jobs, to his homes, and even to himself? It will not be surprising if I focus on Lewis's early childhood for some understanding of these patterns (Schorer 4–18 and Lingeman 4–8).

Sinclair's parents, Edwin J. and Emma Lewis, were married in 1873. Their first two children, sons, were born soon after and close together, in 1875 and 1878. In the interlude between these births, Edwin Lewis completed his medical studies, and in June 1883, the family moved to Sauk Centre, Minnesota. Harry Sinclair was then born, February 1885, seven years after his last brother, a hiatus worth considering.

Years earlier, Emma Lewis's father, a doctor, had moved his family to Minnesota, ostensibly to help his tuberculosis (TB). Nonetheless, he died the year before his daughter's marriage, with his cause of death unspecified (Lingeman 4). While TB cannot directly be inherited, it does occur in families due to the shared contagious environment. That is, the family home in which Mrs. Lewis was raised would not have been an uncommon place for someone to become infected with TB, which may be initially quiescent in an otherwise healthy person.

ELMER GANTRY JOINS THE GOSPEL CHOIR: A REVIEW OF *ELMER GANTRY*, THE MUSICAL

Sean C. Denniston

Elmer Gantry exists as a peculiar cultural totem. Even for those who haven't read the novel, the name Elmer Gantry has become shorthand for crooked preachers.

Others may be familiar with the Oscar-winning movie released in 1960 (nine years after Sinclair Lewis's death). Sinclair Lewis Society members have probably read the 1927 book and are likely familiar with the 2007 opera production. It can be said that *Elmer Gantry* rings a faint (church) bell for many.

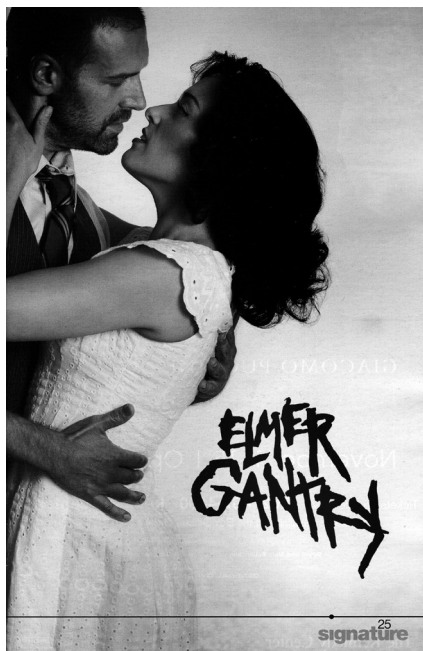
Elmer Gantry the musical isn't new. It premiered at Washington, DC's Ford Theatre in 1988, followed by periodic "regional" runs over the years. [See Robert McLaughlin's review of the Chicago production in the spring 1998 (6.2) issue of the *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*.]

This version, performed by Arlington, Virginia-based Signature Theatre, is different. According to lyricist Bob Satuloff and composer Mel Marvin: "In the arc of time from the first production to the current one, American culture changed, the musical theater changed, people's perceptions of religion, politics and sexuality changed, and in response, 'Elmer Gantry' changed too."

So, as the service was announced in the novel, the steeple was seen in the movie, and we heard the church bells in the opera, let's now enter the revival tent and hear this new sermon.

The Roaring Twenties of the novel is now the Depression era 1930s. The play begins with Elmer Gantry, who rather than being a "religious" symbol of a consumerist society on the go, is a traveling salesman, alone, perhaps drunk, and at a dusty railroad station in a Midwest that's not quite right. While initially jarring for those familiar with the Lewis novel, moving the setting from the Roaring Twenties to the Great Depression casts a pall on the theater and makes one feel the isolation of that train station. Scenic designer Daniel Conway made a major contribution to the production by his austere set of wooden planks and muted colors, punctuated by occasional revival banners dropping from the rafters.

Elmer Gantry was effectively played by Charlie Pollock. He had the talking, walking, and slight menace of Elmer Gantry. (Pollock attended the University of Texas and was a preacher in



New Jersey, which perhaps provided a background in preaching and grifting.) While not practical to take the audience through "Hellcat's" football playing and seminary training, some quick banter in the first scene established Elmer's religious training. Pollock's version of Elmer Gantry adds to the sense that like others he's trying to survive.

In the second scene we meet Sharon Falconer and her troupe. Sharon Falconer was played by Mary Kate Morrissey. Morrissey has a harder role than Pollock as Elmer Gantry. Whether it is Charlie Pollock or Burt Lancaster in the role, the actor can rely on physical gestures, yelling (or is that preaching?), and bombast to project Gantry. And they do. Morrissey "can't."

Falconer has to balance God, sensuality, naïveté, and a bit of hustle while at the same time at least appearing conventional. Of course, there were women preachers in the twenties and thirties, but in a bit of character development Falconer is shown as a business woman concerned about numbers in pews, expenses, and the logistics of moving from town to town. Morrissey, while a good singer and competent actress, lacked just that extra depth, a multifaceted complexity, to take her role beyond a "boy likes girl—girl doesn't like boy" formula of many a stage production. The sexual chemistry between Elmer and Sharon is there but it's a Charleston, not a tango. It's probably easier for the men to play Elmer Gantry than women to play Sharon Falconer. Part of this may be due to the impossibly high standard set by Jean Simmons, who played Sharon Falconer in the movie and was one of the great actresses of her time.

Sinclair Lewis's Sharon Falconer seems based on Aimee Semple McPherson. McPherson may not be familiar to modern audiences, but in the 1920s and 1930s she was one of the first evangelists to use radio, newsreels, and stage shows to promote the gospel. McPherson's possibly staged kidnapping and subsequent trial for fraud, rumors about her personal life, and facts surrounding her death in 1944 at 53 cemented her modern reputation as a female Elmer Gantry.

—Elmer Gantry Joins the Gospel Choir *continued on page 15*

Dr. Lewis was a work-oriented, fastidious person, parsimonious with money and affection. We do not know what he knew about TB, and when he would have learned it, in this era before anti-tubercular drugs, when the disease was often fatal. But he was likely aware of medical concerns surrounding a person like his wife, if not before, surely by the time he obtained his MD in 1877. Although there were some contrary medical opinion, the major medical position during these years relating to TB, marriage, and pregnancy, was subsequently summarized in an authoritative medical textbook: “With existing [tubercular] disease, fever, bacilli, etc., marriage should be absolutely prohibited. Pregnancy and parturition hasten the process in almost every case. There is much truth, indeed, in the remark of Dubois²: ‘If a woman threatened with phthisis [pulmonary TB] marries, she may bear the first accouchement well; a second, with difficulty; a third, never’” (Osler 247). Might such concerns as these, known to Dr. Lewis, and perhaps to his wife, have delayed her third, and final, pregnancy? Was her third child, maybe nonetheless, a wanted child? These and related questions are unanswerable.

Further regarding the relationship between Mrs. Lewis and her new infant, the medical advice was: “A mother with pulmonary tuberculosis should not suckle her child. An infant born of tuberculous parents, or of a family in which consumption prevails, should be brought up with the greatest care and guarded most particularly against catarrhal affections of all kinds” (Osler 248). Unfortunately, Mrs. Lewis was such a woman; by the time Harry was three, she had already “suffered for some years from tuberculosis” (Schorer 16).

We do not know if Mrs. Lewis nursed Harry and had the physical contact with him that such feeding provides, or the degree to which she was able to be with and hold him when he was an infant. A little later, “in the spring of 1888 [when Harry was three] she was stricken with a ‘pleuratic attack’ that developed into ‘quick consumption’” (Schorer 16). She was subsequently away from home in the southwest for at least two winters, starting when Harry was three or four (Lingeman 7), or possibly five (Schorer 16).

Even when Mrs. Lewis was at home, “The doctor-father, fearful of contagion, would have kept the child from her room. There was the whispered conspiracy of the sickroom, the worried adult faces, the palpable sense of something dark and terrifying about to happen” (Lingeman 7–8). To conserve his wife’s health, and life, Dr. Lewis may have tried to shelter her from maternal responsibilities. This may not have been a home where crying infant Harry would have easily been picked up and consoled by his mother, and more certainly, because of

her progressing illness or outright absence, not a home where older toddler Harry could have run into her reassuring arms whenever he wanted comforting from childhood’s frequent mishaps. Unfortunately, very ill Mrs. Lewis grew more debilitated during the last of her winters away, and a month after her return home, she died on June 25, 1891, when Harry was six.

We again do not know if Dr. Lewis hired help during his wife’s absences, or if he did, how much such a person was an adequate substitute for Harry’s otherwise maternal deprivation. And it is hard to imagine that Dr. Lewis, whose office was away from the home, would have given Harry extensive substitute hands-on care. We do know that during the period of his mother’s severe illness, when young Harry was four, that he had the additional strain in his life of moving (Lingeman 5). Even though this move was only across the street, the unfamiliar house likely further unsettled his already shaky world.

I have portrayed primarily certain crucial aspects of Sinclair Lewis, beginning with his childhood. He was also physically awkward and unathletic, and in later life his facial skin condition was unattractive. But he was highly intelligent, had a remarkable memory, and had great diligence in various matters to which he applied himself. Important in this regard, perhaps partly compensatory, was that from a young age he was a voracious reader, and began to write, and publish, subsequently becoming the great writer we know.

GROWING PSYCHIATRIC KNOWLEDGE AND DIAGNOSTIC SPECULATIONS ABOUT LEWIS

Sinclair Lewis was often a prodigious researcher for his books, but even if he had done comparable work to try to understand his subsequent relationship problems, beginning with the first one with his mother, he would have had trouble finding much information. It was only in the few years before his death that there began to be an awareness in the psychiatric community of the marked importance of this earliest relationship and attachment for adequate subsequent human development. In part this knowledge grew out of experiences with the many World War II orphans, some of whom had lost mothers as young infants. It was learned that infants and young children left essentially alone in their beds, but given nutritious diets, often did not develop well physically and mentally; they needed more than just food. This phenomenon led to the 1951 World Health Organization publication *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, written by John Bowlby, which was abridged for wider dissemination in 1953.³

**TECHNICAL ADVISOR FOR *ELMER GANTRY*:
JIM GREBE'S *DEMOCRACY'S DEFENDER: THE LIFE OF L. M. BIRKHEAD***

*Frederick Betz
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Jim Grebe's book (LuLu Publishing, 2013) is the first comprehensive biography of Leon Milton Birkhead (1885–1954), based on extensive research in the Birkhead Papers in the Kansas City Research Center of the State Historical Society of Missouri.

Birkhead, who would be instrumental in advising Sinclair Lewis as he worked on *Elmer Gantry*, majored in theology at McKendree College, a small Methodist school in Lebanon, Illinois, where he also studied geology, which caused him to begin doubting the Bible story of creation. However, after Birkhead graduated in 1910, he first attended the conservative Drew Theological Seminary in Madison, New Jersey, and then the more liberal Union Theological Seminary in New York, without earning an advanced degree from either school. Birkhead returned to St. Louis in 1912, where he served as associate minister at the Maple Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church, then became pastor of the Wagoner Memorial M. E. Church the following year, and soon acquired a reputation as the most radical Methodist minister in the area, preaching sermons dealing primarily with current social and political injustices.

In 1913, Birkhead married Agnes Schiereck, who shared his views on religion and social issues and would play a supporting role in his long career. Their only son, Kenneth, was born in 1914, and he would also assist his father in the 1940s. "Out of harmony" with Methodist discipline, Birkhead resigned from Wagoner in 1915 and became pastor of the First Unitarian Church in Wichita, Kansas, where his advertised sermons stirred up the community, increased attendance, and improved the church's finances. In 1917, Birkhead was called to All Souls Unitarian Church in Kansas City, where again he quickly established himself as the area's most controversial preacher, delivering highly publicized and controversial sermons throughout his 22-year ministry there, as well as pushing for civic reform and fighting against the political corruption of the Prendergast machine.

In July 1925, Birkhead and his wife assisted Clarence Darrow for the defense at the Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee, where they met H. L. Mencken, who was reporting on the trial for the *Baltimore Evening Sun*. Mencken recalls that when Lewis began gathering material for his "preacher novel" in early 1926, he advised Lewis to consult Birkhead. An admirer of Lewis's writing, Birkhead reviewed *Main Street* in

the *Kansas City Times* on April 12, 1921, noting that the "mediocre, commonplace and prosaic life of the towns of America need as many shocks and jars as possible.... The towns need their ears boxed and Mr. Lewis has done that very thing in his book" (qtd. by Grebe 39).

Birkhead first met Lewis during his visit to Kansas City in January 1926 at the invitation of William ("Big Bill") Stidger, pastor of the Linwood Boulevard Methodist Episcopal Church. Stidger was a hugely successful preacher, who employed vaudeville and salesmanship techniques to increase attendance (cf. *Standing Room Only* [1922]) and achieved notoriety by installing a revolving electric cross atop his church in San Jose, California. Stidger was preaching on the Chautauqua circuit in 1922, the year he met Lewis. He was offended by Lewis's portrayal of the preacher Dr. Drew in *Babbitt*, and suggested he write a book about clergymen "as they really were" (40). When Lewis was ready to start researching for his "preacher book" in early 1926, he spent several weeks with Stidger, who introduced him to local clergy, including Birkhead. They hit it off instantly and Lewis then asked Birkhead to help him as a technical adviser for his new novel. When Lewis returned to Kansas City in April 1926, he rented a hotel suite, which he turned into a religious reference library, and invited local clergy to attend his regular "Sunday School Class" in order to learn more about their professional and private lives. By the end of his visit, Lewis had produced a 20,000-word outline, and that summer he and the Birkheads spent three months at Pelican Lake, Minnesota, where Lewis fleshed out most of his novel.

The original title of *Elmer Gantry* was "Sounding Brass," but it was preempted by another author. Then Lewis thought that the title should be the name of the main character, but discarded his first choice "Elmer Bloor" as too ugly and scornful, prejudicing the reader too early. His next choice was "Myron Mellish," but Mellish was the name of an actual minister, so Lewis finally came up with "Elmer Gantry." Birkhead recalled that "Gantry" was the final choice because of its similarity to "cant" and "rant," but it also had the "sharp sound," as Lewis wrote to his publisher Alfred Harcourt in June 1926, that is, the hard "g" that Lewis also used for other odious characters

—Technical Advisor for *Elmer Gantry* continued on page 16

Bowlby's major conclusion was that to grow up mentally healthy, "the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment" (11).

Not all infants and young children were equally susceptible to the adverse effects of such maternal deprivation. But overall this work suggested three types of experiences that can each produce subsequent long-term mental problems. These are: lack of any opportunity during the first three years of life of forming an attachment to a mother figure, deprivation for a more limited period of at least three and probably more than six months during the first three to four years, and changes from one mother figure to another during this same period (Bowlby, *Child Care* 51). This first relationship, to a mother or mother substitute, becomes the foundation for subsequent relationships, and this first relationship is in the nature of an attachment to that first person, both emotionally, and for an infant and young child, physically. Harry is within this age span of young children who may be susceptible to maternal deprivation's long-term effects.

This early childhood material highlights difficulties in Harry Sinclair's attachment (relationship) to his mother, without our knowing more precisely the details of its severity. But it is appropriate to conjecture that this crucial attachment was not "good enough" to comfortably enable subsequent satisfactory relationships (Winnicott). "Good enough" in this context means not that the initial mother-child relationship is ideal, but that it is good enough for the required trust and give-and-take for subsequent human relationships. And this early difficulty in forming relationships, as discussed here, is more basic and foundational to human relationships and attachments than the subsequent death of Sinclair's mother by itself, which, of course, aggravated matters.

I have so far highlighted primarily the nature of the attachment between young Harry and his mother and how this itself leads to difficulties in forming subsequent relationships, difficulties Sinclair Lewis had. But some elaboration of his young intrapsychic life is warranted. It would not be surprising if he felt that he was kept from his mother or that she went away during the winters because he was a bad boy, because he misbehaved. And later, he likely felt that her death was in some way his fault.

Subsequently, a year after his mother's death, a stepmother entered Harry's life; she was usually caring and maternal. But Lingeman describes his underlying fragility and vulnerability in this later substitute maternal relationship: "When he disappointed her—threw tantrums, rebelled—she would threaten to go away and never come back, awakening fears of

his *real* mother's abandonment" (10, emphasis added), which, to reiterate, began in his short young life long before her death.

This area of knowledge of maternal deprivation's effects on children was eventually reflected in the various iterations of the American Psychiatric Association's manual of diagnoses, which currently uses the more general term of social neglect for deprivation (2013, 265).⁴ Anachronistically, had Lewis been seen by a mental health worker when he was a child or young adolescent, utilizing current knowledge, his relationship problems might have received one of these diagnoses as the focus of clinical attention. These types of disorders are now classified with trauma and stressor-related disorders, in his case related to the stress of maternal deprivation. In the full form of one of these disorders, Disinhibited Social Engagement, the narrative description includes, "In adolescence, indiscriminate behavior extends to peers [not only to adults]. Relative to healthy adolescents, adolescents with the disorder have more 'superficial' peer relationships and more peer conflicts" (270), a description fitting Lewis. Since from this distance he did not show the full criteria of one of the main manifestations of such deprivation, his more appropriate diagnosis might have been the limited form of the disorder, Other Specified Trauma- and Stressor-Related Disorder, due to maternal deprivation (289).⁵

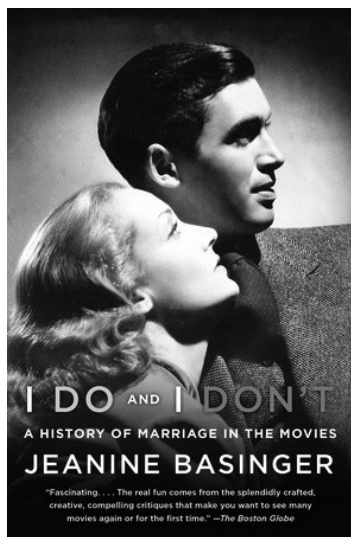
Lewis did present himself for psychiatric attention in later adulthood, and so I'll consider this retroactive speculation for him as an adult. In 1932, when he was in Vienna, he met with an unnamed male psychoanalyst for one session (Schorer 578)⁶; we do not know his reasons for this meeting. Later, in 1937, under the dire circumstances of severe alcoholic excess, he was admitted to the Austen Riggs Sanatorium in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. There personality problems were noted (Lingeman 420–21). For purposes here it is sufficient to consider that Lewis had enduring personality characteristics that were problematic in his life. Consistent with the above discussion of his childhood maternal deprivation, where he never developed adequate attachments to others, and with the limited information available, a residual personality disorder category of Unspecified Personality Disorder can be considered (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 684).

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THIS PSYCHIATRIC INFORMATION MAKE FOR UNDERSTANDING SINCLAIR LEWIS?

This psychiatric light on Lewis's early life bolsters his life story beyond his biographies. Yet, with biographers' wisdom,

CASS TIMBERLANE AND DODSWORTH CITED AS GOOD MARRIAGE MOVIES

Sally E. Parry
Illinois State University



Jeanine Basinger, author of *I Do and I Don't: A History of Marriage in the Movies* (Knopf, 2012), chose two movies made from Lewis novels, *Dodsworth* and *Cass Timberlane*, as exemplars of the portrayal of complexity in marriage. The *Dodsworths* are mentioned in the company of Nick and Nora Charles, Judge and Mrs. Hardy, Tarzan and Jane, and the Barkleys of Broadway.

Basinger praises the Lewis novels that were turned into Hollywood films:

The novels of Sinclair Lewis were very popular sources for American movies. His tales of small-town life, fraught with unhappy, uncommunicative marriages, had great appeal for both moviemakers and audiences.... One of Lewis's strengths as a writer was his ability to describe a specific milieu accurately, both physically and psychologically, so Hollywood art directors and writers found adaptation of his work easy to do. Lewis also had the ability to satirize his world, to point up its limitations and absurdities, as well as to create characters that were both sympathetic and immediately recognizable as American types. (190)

CASS TIMBERLANE

By 1945, when he published *Cass Timberlane*, Lewis was regarded as an aging enfant terrible and was being devalued as a literary figure. For Hollywood, however, his status as a reliable commodity had been established, so it embraced *Cass Timberlane*, even though the book was not appreciated by critics, who thought of it as a middlebrow offering. Perhaps it was inevitable—and somehow perfect—that the middlebrow studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer turned it into a hit movie for the middle class. The book had sold well as a hardcover, was serialized in *Cosmopolitan*, and was selected by the Book-of-the-

Month Club. That was all MGM had to know—the studio purchased the movie rights as a vehicle for the oddball romantic teaming of Spencer Tracy (as Cass) and Lana Turner as the young woman he weds. (190–91)

Basinger describes the marriage of Cass and Jinny as “*Main Street* boiled down and revisited from a more modern point of view” (191). Because of the casting of the two leads, the main characters were rethought to bring them more into line with the personae of Tracy and Turner.

Tracy had come to represent goodness, honesty, and reliability in men, and Turner a warmhearted sexuality in women. The original Cass and Jinny don't have a chance. Gone is Cass's smugness, his vacillation, his blindness to the faults of his world. In their place stands Spencer Tracy who, by way of his screen personality, presents the viewer with a man of instant decency, dependability, and excellent judgment. (192–93)

The film begins by the Judge lecturing a couple seeking a divorce on the sanctity of marriage and not granting the decree, a ruling that foreshadows the problems that Cass himself will face. Basinger contends that the movie's love story is warmer and happier from the beginning, although there is more of a focus on the differences of class as well as age in the romance. She also notes that in the novel Jinny walks out on Cass because she is bored, while in the film Cass abandons Jinny because he suspects her of adultery. “It's also reflective of the typical marriage-movie view of infidelity: women who do it are wrong, but they need love and are driven to sin by a man's coldness or indifference. In the end, they will still be losers, because society will vote against them. (Men do it because, well, they're men, and they'll usually end up all right)” (193).

Basinger notes that at the end of the novel Cass gives in to Jinny for the sake of their marriage. She doesn't mention the serious illness that Jinny has which causes the reconciliation. There is no ambiguity to the end of the film. “Cass takes Jinny back and is lucky to have her: after all, she's Lana Turner. And she didn't *really* sleep with Zachary Scott. It was Cass's snotty 'classy' friends who caused all the trouble, by just *thinking*

——— *Cass Timberlane* and *Dodsworth* continued on page 17

late in his book Schorer discusses Lewis's paucity of late life friends and concludes: "Through no choice of his own, he was left untutored in friendship as a boy and as a young man, found in his middle years that he himself could not endure it [friendship], and found in his age that he had no friends..." (Schorer 804). Yes, it was not through his choice that he was untutored in friendship, but to more fully understand Lewis it is necessary to understand "friendship" here to include rather all human relationships, and more broadly, his relationship to his homes, to himself, and to his early work.

At a similar juncture in his biography, Lingeman writes about Lewis, "He had an incapacity to express love and an incapacity to accept it. Perhaps those capacities had been buried with [his mother] Emma Kermott Lewis in Greenwood Cemetery or suppressed by a father whom he never could please" (546). His mother's death and his unapproving father are important, but Lewis's basic problems had earlier foundations. Biographer Lingeman's insight may have been previously hinting at these. Discussing Lewis's fantasy of a woman who would provide him unquestioned comfort, and whether it related to his fear of tenderness, Lingeman wrote, "Perhaps the fantasy had deeper origins, as well, in the hurtful loss of his mother's primal tenderness" (500). Yes, Lewis had a loss of his mother's *primal* tenderness, maybe beginning with suckling and embracing as an infant.

My psychiatric diagnostic and developmental speculations are not presented in order to discuss one of those imaginary "what might have been" situations had Lewis been treated as a child, or adult, with this knowledge if it had then been available. Rather, with this psychiatric focus I find myself *today* much more sympathetic and forgiving of his life's problems, for his boorishness, his difficulty with enduring relationships, his anger, and other troubles. I hope other Lewis admirers and students will share my sentiments. This still does not mean that Lewis would have been an easy person to have dinner with, even when sober, but with this knowledge it could have been a more tolerable repast.

These psychiatric speculations also cast light on the nature of Lewis's fiction. Consistent with the nature of his upbringing and his problems in relating to others, he was not a writer who could easily portray the complex characterological studies of novelists like Dreiser or Dostoevsky. His genius lay not in the deeper psychological processes and human interactions, but in less intimate portrayals like Babbitt in *Babbitt* (1922), and small town life in *Main Street* (1920), writing in which Lewis "...could document for an enormous audience the character of a people and a class..." (Schorer 813).

Notes

¹In the index for boorish social behavior beginning with Lewis's childhood, Lingeman has entries for over 37 pages (646).

²This opinion was widely quoted in the medical literature. The otherwise undocumented "Dubois" is likely the French physician Paul Antoine Dubois (1795–1871), and not the doctor A. J. Dubois that befriended young Harry in Sauk Centre, Minnesota (Schorer 14; personal communication, Christopher Lyons, Head Librarian, Osler Library of the History of Medicine, McGill University, Montreal, Jan. 6, 2015).

³The observations on human infants were extended to primates, where analogous deficiencies were found. Under these more controllable conditions, it could be further established that severely deprived primate infants would often subsequently not become satisfactory parents (Harlow and Suomi, 1971).

⁴While there were earlier American psychiatric diagnostic classifications, the first American Psychiatric Association diagnostic manual appeared in 1952.

⁵While another diagnostician may well disagree with my specifics, the main issues will remain, namely that Lewis suffered from maternal deprivation and had a consequent mental disorder related to the deprivation. A mental disorder is "characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotion regulation, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning. Mental disorders are usually associated with significant distress or disability in social, occupational, or other important activities" (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 20).

⁶In 1932 Freud was still in Vienna. We do not know if Lewis saw Freud, but he was ambivalent about novelists. Even though earlier Freud publicly had written approvingly about Dostoevsky, in 1929 he privately stated, "...in spite of all my admiration for Dostoevsky's intensity and pre-eminence, I do not really like him. That is because my patience with pathological natures is exhausted in analysis. In art and life I am intolerant of them" (Freud 196).

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————— Casting Newer Psychiatric Light *continued on page 12*

AMERICAN DYSTOPIA: REVIEW OF CLAIRE SPRAGUE'S *IT CAN HAPPEN HERE: JACK LONDON, SINCLAIR LEWIS, PHILIP ROTH*

Joshua P. Preston
Baylor College

In a new study of the American dystopian novel (Chipewa Books, 2013), CUNY professor emerita Claire Sprague writes in *It Can Happen Here* that even though fascism never took hold in the United States, “the potential was and still is [h]ere” (99). To support this, the author turns to Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1908), Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935), and Philip Roth’s *The Plot against America* (2004), each of which demonstrated that the threat is not an “invading army or ideology but...native fascist movements” (96). What is unique to these books is that they are not the dystopias of Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) or Kurt Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron” (1961), tales of a distant future, parables of how all utopias are undermined by the worst of man and dystopias by the best, but instead are rooted firmly in the present. To a contemporary audience, these were cautionary probes into the near future. Some could even call them propaganda.

According to Sprague, the emergence of the dystopian novel was an aberration, an historical response to the changing circumstances of the late-nineteenth-century. Although visions of utopia existed prior to Thomas More’s coining the term in his 1516 book by the same name, the notion of utopian communities was carried to the New World, and, in the author’s estimation, fomented by European naturalists imagining the landscape as a new biblical Eden. As this spirit took hold, the first century of the Republic was “a time when to think the good society was to try to create it” and thus during this period “[s]ome one thousand communes were founded in America,” including Robert Owen’s New Harmony and Upton Sinclair’s famous Helicon Home Colony (10). The literature this inspired, including Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888), depicted a society free of want and poverty. Yet, as the disparities of an industrializing nation grew and the United States expanded into Cuba and the Philippines, these visions reversed. Sprague identifies this shift with H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895), where the future is radically divided between social classes (so much so that one is literally monstrous), and notes, “If the twentieth century represents the coming of age of dystopia, then Wells is dystopia’s precocious prophet” (11). In his stead then were London, Lewis, and Roth, each sharing their own visions of dystopia. These writers did not need a time machine to see the descent: they had only to look into the eyes of their neighbors.

While best known for his naturalist novels, in *The Iron Heel* Jack London envisions the coming socialist revolution and its defeat at the hands of the nation’s monopoly trusts, whom he calls the Oligarchs. Through violence, these trusts reduce the laboring classes to impotence, farmers to serfs, and the military to a private army. The novel is written as the twentieth-century memoirs of a revolutionary, with the text annotated by a second character from the distant future, the year 2600, long after capitalism’s natural collapse. This juxtaposition of perspectives allowed London to remark not only upon the economic system’s long-term instability, but how the revolution would be bloody and not without its failures. When published, *The Iron Heel* was popular with theorists like Leon Trotsky, and his characterization of the Oligarchs led George Orwell to comment that London had prophesied the rise of fascism in Europe.

When at last fascism did spread across Europe in the 1930s and while the United States was in the vulnerable throes of the Great Depression, Sinclair Lewis speculated in *It Can’t Happen Here* that his country was a powder keg waiting for its match. In the novel, Lewis imagines this match being the populist Senator Buzz Windrip, who ousts FDR in the 1936 presidential election. When his administration curtails the rights of minorities, censors newspapers, and interns dissidents, Lewis wryly reports that many Americans “need no conversion; they are already Corpos,” supporters of Windrip’s government (qtd. by Sprague 52). Though the Corpos suffer minor defeats, Lewis’s light optimism is a contrast to London’s determinism, suggesting that if it does happen here, it is uncertain whether it will be undone.

Last in Sprague’s study is Philip Roth’s *The Plot against America*, which is drawn from his 1930s Jewish upbringing in Newark, New Jersey. Written as a fictionalized memoir (under his own name), the novel takes place in an alternative history where Charles Lindbergh, the famous aviator and America First supporter, defeats FDR in the 1940 presidential election. Under Lindbergh’s isolationist administration, nationalism takes hold and the Roth family struggles to overcome the anti-Semitism that follows. This dark period is impermanent, though, as by 1944, FDR returns to the White House and when Japan bombs Pearl Harbor, this alternative history neatly realigns with our own.

American Dystopia *continued on page 17*

The Babbitization of America *continued from page 1*

as much difficulty surviving in a free, affluent society as it does in a totalitarian society. Although her roots, mother tongue, and culture are Iranian, Nafisi is now citizen of the United States, but identifies herself with a new realm called the Republic of the Imagination. She describes her Republic as “a land with no borders and few restrictions.” The only requirements for entry are “an open mind, a restless desire to know and an indefinable urge to escape the mundane” (4).

Nafisi picked *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* because Huck, who rejected the concept of roots and tradition, became a parent to so many homeless protagonists of American fiction. Lewis’s *Babbitt* features an anti-Huck character who craves status and acceptance and all of the outward signs of material success America has come to symbolize. In Carson McCullers’s *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is a lonely band of listless misfits longing to connect, but helpless in a world built on longing and not fulfillment. She adds an epilogue on James Baldwin, a descendant of the “infinitely shaded and exquisite mongrel” that Twain once claimed kinship with (32). Through these books and authors, along with her life story and references to other American authors, she outlines the dangers to imagination in a free society.

I enjoyed the entire book, but as a Lewis fan I was first attracted to what she had to say about the red-haired, Nobel Prize-winning author from Sauk Centre, Minnesota. She noted Lewis isn’t remembered as much as a person as he is for his characters. The 46-year-old George Follansbee Babbitt stands out as the iconic material anti-intellectual. We first meet Babbitt on the sleeping porch of his Dutch Colonial house in the residential district of Floral Heights, right out of Cheerful Modern Houses for medium incomes. He is an all-American businessman, a defender of individualism, free trade, nationally advertised and quantitatively produced alarm clocks, with all

modern attachments. Babbitt’s personal possessions—fountain pen, silver pencil, gold penknife, silver cigar cutter, and the seven keys hanging from his watch chain—are all of eternal importance to him, much like our iPhones, iPads, and other latest advertised miracle products.

Nafisi says,

Sinclair Lewis’s genius was in capturing the spirit of modern advertising when it had not yet come to dominate the American landscape and define the soul of the nation. Advertising was in essence a twentieth-century phenomenon, and, like so many things belonging to that century, it was made in America. Its genius lies in its ability to hijack our “joy and passion and wisdom,” repackaging them and returning them to us as fantasies, transforming everyday instruments, from cars to vacuum cleaners, into exotic objects of desire. Novelists, who are in the business of joy, passion and wisdom, were the first to grasp the power of advertising and technology in their best and worst forms. (169)

She adds, “Anyone who has gazed with longing at a clean, well-lighted Apple Store on her way to work may understand why Babbitt yearns ‘for a dictaphone, for a typewriter which would add and multiply, as a poet yearns for quartos or a physician for radium’” (170).

Babbitt is the opposite of Lewis in his joy of materialism and distrust of learning. Babbitt believed “somebody’d come along with the brains to not leave education to a lot of book-worms and impractical theorists but make a big thing out of it” (qtd. on 177). Later he says, “whereas to a real thinker, he sees that spiritual and, uh, dominating movements like Efficiency,

————— The Babbitization of America *continued on page 14*

Casting Newer Psychiatric Light *continued from page 10*

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TWO LEWIS HOMES FOR SALE

TWO LEWIS HOMES FOR SALE

Two of Sinclair Lewis's homes are currently up for sale. So, if you're feeling rich, here are the descriptions.



THORVALE FARM

Looking to cure writer's block? Let the former home of noted author Sinclair Lewis inspire you with its rich history and eighteen acres. Known as Thorvale Farm, the Georgian Colonial was built in 1916 and is located on one of the most sought-after roads in Williamstown. In addition to housing Lewis during the time he wrote *Kingsblood Royal*, the historical home also includes traces of other former owners, the Carmelite Fathers, with their onsite chapel and dormitory. The main house includes six bedrooms and five bathrooms, and recent updates include a new kitchen with fireplace and radiant heat on the second floor. Listed for \$1.2 million by Stonehouse Properties.

Sinclair Lewis Society member Joyce Lyng writes: Any of you want to buy a very nice home and move out to

Williamstown, MA? It's located on Oblong Road. In 1992 I went out there to see the mansion. I spent about four hours there. One of the priests and the secretary to the Carmelite Fathers gave my three friends and me a tour of the house and grounds. I have a photo album of my trip to Thorvale Farm lying on the desk in the Interpretive Center [in Sauk Centre] where the video is shown.



EL DORADO PENTHOUSE

Sinclair Lewis's former El Dorado penthouse is being offered at \$29 million. A duplex penthouse in the Upper West Side's celebrity-filled El Dorado area has come to market for an asking price of \$29 million. The unit, according to its broker, is the very one that was once occupied by Nobel Prize-winning author Sinclair Lewis. Whether or not that claim is true, it's still a very impressive apartment with four corner terraces (one of which has been enclosed to create a solarium) and a large entertaining space on the upper level that was once used as a communal club by the residents of the building. ✍

MURDER MYSTERY WEEKEND AT TWIN FARMS

Susan O'Brien

This is for the Sinclair Lewis scholar, fan, or collector/connoisseur who must have absolutely every possible experience connected to the author. Note the 26,000-bottle wine cellar; he would have enjoyed that. And what a bargain at only \$1,450 per night. But is that PP/Double Occupancy?

I think it was Sinclair Lewis in the library with the typewriter. Therefore, since I already know the answer, I don't have to attend the weekend event.

In "Sleuths, Make a Weekend Getaway of a Puzzling Murder-Mystery in Vermont," Lauren Daley of the *Boston Globe* (Feb. 7, 2015) reports on a murder mystery weekend at Twin Farms in Barnard, Vermont, held March 13–15, 2015. This former home of Sinclair Lewis and Dorothy Thompson is described as "an all-inclusive, five-star luxury hotel and spa

————— Murder Mystery Weekend *continued on page 18*

The Babbitization of America *continued from page 12*

and Rotarianism, and Prohibition, and Democracy are what compose our deepest and truest wealth” (qtd. on 174).

Today’s Common Core State Standards are endorsed by 45 states and are standardizing education in the United States. Nafisi argues,

The American public school system is being Babbitized, with learning increasingly seen as a means to an end, a vehicle for job creation. We all need jobs, and there is nothing wrong with wanting to help people who are struggling to find them, but why should earning wages be at odds with nurturing genuine knowledge and independent thought? (178)

The Common Core State Standards are teaching children to pass a standard test rather than think for themselves. Reading classes are made up of 70 percent non-fiction and 30 percent fiction. She fears the standardization of American education is tipping us away from a nation of free thought into a nation of controlled thought. We are losing our bookstores, libraries, museums, and performing arts centers. Many leading daily newspapers are dropping their book sections and the Bloomberg News website has moved its book coverage to the Luxury sections alongside yachts, sports clubs, and wine.

For Nafisi, Lewis is an extension of Huck Finn. She writes, “Born a generation after Huck, Hal grew up at a time when the untamed wilderness Huck hoped to light out for was scarcer, the ‘smothery’ villages had expanded into a new kind of smothery city, slavery was officially abolished and had been replaced by segregation, and new forms of hope and horror were coming into being” (153).

Nafisi further discusses Lewis:

“Everyone ought to have a home to get away from,” Sinclair Lewis once wrote, and homelessness seems to

have been ingrained in his very being: he felt it as much when he was with his family as he would at Oberlin and Yale. Among the various groups he attached himself to, he always remained a “furriner,” as he used to put it. He was constantly on the move, afraid of settling down, living in many houses, none of which would be turned into a home, and despite the love of two intelligent and attractive women, fame and fortune, blockbuster bestsellers and the privilege of being the first American writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature, he died an alcoholic, alone and on foreign soil. (153–54)

Nafisi believes works of fiction “are canaries in the coal mine, the measure by which we can evaluate the health of the rest of society” (13). Fiction is an antidote, a reminder of the power of individual choice. Her students in Iran risked their lives to read a book. What do we risk? What will we do in the absence of this, the most enduring of all lands, this Republic of Imagination?

America needs its fiction. Writers like Lewis, Twain, and McCullers give us the creative wisdom of a well-trained soul. Literature and the arts spark the imagination that helps us make better decisions. Nafisi says, “to make the right choices, we need to be able to think, to reflect, to pause, to imagine, because what is being sold to you is not just toothpaste or deodorant or a bathroom fixture, but your next president or representative, your children’s future, your way and view of life” (197).

To thrive as a free and independent people, we must escape the standardized world of the real thinkers, smothering aunts, and redneck racists, seeking to know more and imagine the most.

Editor’s Note: Dave Simpkins has been the editor/publisher of the Sauk Centre Herald since 1988, serves on the board of the Sinclair Lewis Foundation, and is currently working on a coming-of-age biography of Lewis as a writer. ✍

New Attention to *Babbitt* *continued from page 3*

the SAT and Advanced Placement examinations, and who is one of the formulators of the Common Core standards sweeping the nation with a glut of standardized tests purporting to measure “evidence-based learning,” a preoccupation that Nafisi equates with the pedagogue Gradgrind’s overemphasis on “facts” in Dickens’s *Hard Times*.

Nafisi calls the ending of *Babbitt* “rather feeble and disappointing” (208) but I cannot agree, having attended in the 1980s the funeral of a young man, a talented diesel mechanic, who had tired of his father’s relentless insistence that he complete

the college engineering program he’d started years before, and took his own life. George Babbitt is complex, with some likable qualities, particularly at the end.

The other sections of *Republic*, on Huck Finn and Carson McCullers, deal with Southern separateness, with freedom and the fear of it. I’ve often wondered what Sinclair Lewis would have thought of the “appointment” to the presidency of George W. Bush by the Supreme Court, and what he would think of

————— New Attention to *Babbitt* *continued on page 15*

New Attention to *Babbitt* continued from page 14

the current Republican triumph, their indifference to climate change, decaying infrastructure, and economic inequality, particularly in Red States that lead the nation in rates of prenatal neglect, infant mortality, child poverty, cancer deaths, occupational fatalities, and individuals without health insurance.

The United States has been enriched by offering refuge to writers such as Hannah Arendt, Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Brodsky, and Czesław Miłosz, all of whom taught at major

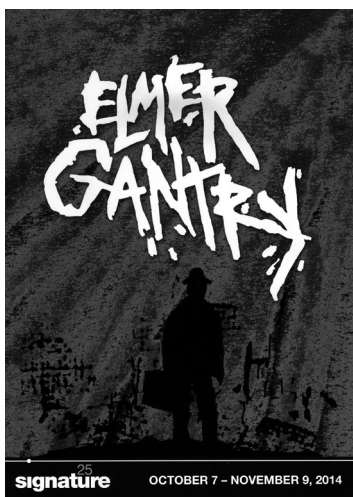
American universities, and all of whom possessed a personal nature that enabled them to resist tyranny in their native land and remain uncompromised by what Nafisi calls “the empty temptations of Western democracies” (16). In that tradition, she makes a convincing case for the study of literature as part of the development and maintenance of a strong inner self. May *The Republic of Imagination* help to place *Babbitt* back on the reading lists of high schools, colleges, and book clubs. ✍

Elmer Gantry Joins the Gospel Choir continued from page 5

Elmer Gantry's stage creators deserve some credit for shaking the audience and reminding us of the prejudices and realities of the time. When Sharon Falconer and her troupe were at their hotel in Sioux City, the white members were given their room numbers and the African Americans the name of a black family at whose house they'd be staying.

The music ranged from snappy musical numbers to the blues. The peppy “Carry that Ball,” which combined religion and football, i.e., carrying the ball forward for the Lord, may have been a hat tip to Elmer's football playing past *and* a nod to another great cultural touchstone—football! Probably to no one's surprise, Sharon is seduced by Gantry at the end of the first act to a tension-filled “No Greater Love.” The blues-singing Washington family trio (played by Ashley Buster, Daphne Epps, and Jade Jones) were by far the strongest singers of the production. Introduced by Gantry to liven up the Falconer troupe, they added rhythm and blues and depth to the music. The Washingtons were also a Greek chorus to the emotions and tensions of the main characters, whether it's Sharon about to be seduced, her bad judgment in falling for Elmer, or discovering his liaison with the infatuated troupe member Paula. The songs written for the musical were competent and carried the story along, but it was this trio and their singing, combined with a strong stage presence that made you feel you *were* in that revival tent.

Like the understated stage design, the costuming was period accurate to the 1930s. The cast wore clothes that one could easily imagine were repaired by their wearers. Among the striking clothing effects were the Washington Family singing the blues in sequined jazzy dresses and Sharon Falconer in a floor-length dress with a red cross—a knight for the Lord or a Joan of Arc martyred to temptation by a seemingly amoral preacher.



The second act was stronger than the first and had darker elements. Sharon is now in Zenith and has dreams of creating an entire religious community on undeveloped land. The land is also the target of crooked Zenith businessmen since it is on a valuable riverfront. The darker side of the revival racket is shown when Sharon's belief in her own power to heal brings a desperate father and his disabled son to her to be cured. One felt the heartache of the father and we all knew the boy would be cured, but it wasn't what it appeared. (The apparent cure was arranged by Elmer Gantry.)

The musical includes the attempted blackmail of Elmer by Paula of the Falconer troupe (Lulu in the novel). At the end, the onstage death of Sharon Falconer in the revival tent as it catches fire was very powerful. The circus tent went up in fire and smoke and the staging, lights, and dry ice were used to full effect. At last, Elmer Gantry was remorseful, quoting from Paul, “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (1 Corinthians 13:11). Elmer Gantry, ever the survivor, leaves Zenith from another train station to parts unknown.

Elmer Gantry the musical was enjoyable. While there were differences from the novel, moving the time period from the 1920s to the 1930s opened up new interpretations of the despair of the times and the vulnerabilities of people looking for certainty in a world turned upside down. The production also used music to the fullest, with the singing of the Washington Family stronger than the set musical pieces. As a member of the Sinclair Lewis Society, regardless of differences and deviations from the novel, if it sparks people's interest in Lewis's books it was a night worthwhile.

Elmer Gantry played at the Signature Theatre, Arlington, Virginia from October 7–November 9, 2014. ✍

Technical Advisor for *Elmer Gantry* continued from page 7

like Vergil Gunch in *Babbitt* or Mrs. Adelaide Tarr Gimmitich in *It Can't Happen Here*.

Elmer Gantry was published on March 10, 1927, and dedicated to H. L. Mencken. But according to E. J. Kahn's *New Yorker* profile of Birkhead in 1947, "Lewis had originally intended to dedicate the novel to Birkhead but finally decided that honoring his friend in such a work disparaging the ministry would ruin him" (49). It made no difference, as clergy in Kansas City and elsewhere attacked the novel as being grossly inaccurate and unfair. Birkhead was one of the few clergymen to defend the book, as he squared off with Stidger in *The Christian* ("A Journal of Progressive Religion") for March 17, 1927, with Stidger answering the question "Is 'Elmer Gantry' True?" with "No!" and Birkhead countering with "Yes!" To the charge that Lewis had betrayed the preachers in Kansas City, Birkhead responded that everyone knew that Lewis was gathering information for his book and all attendance was voluntary. It was, to be sure, a "laboratory," but one "in[to] which the specimens walked under their own free wills." Moreover, *Elmer Gantry* and other preachers in the novel such as Frank Shallard were composites of various preachers, some of whom Lewis had met in Kansas City (March 10, 1927). He noted, "Of course it is satirical. Its ridicule is not of genuine religion but only of pretense" (qtd. by Grebe 52).

In 1931, Birkhead visited Germany, where he witnessed Nazi rabble-rousing and "many Germans told him that Hitler was just a transitory pest and not worth worrying about" (89). But then Hitler became Chancellor in January 1933, and by March the National Socialists had absolute power. Birkhead returned to Germany in 1935 and sought out Nazi propagandist Julius Streicher, editor of *Der Stürmer*, a violently anti-Semitic weekly newspaper, as he believed that Streicher's campaign to increase its circulation was one of the factors that had caused the increasing anti-Semitic violence. Birkhead visited Streicher's office in Nürnberg, where he was able to provoke Streicher's secretary into bragging about their worldwide network of anti-Semitic sympathizers and showing him lists of their "friends" in the United States. In 1937, Birkhead founded

the Friends of Democracy (FOD); in 1939, he resigned his Kansas City ministry and opened the main office of the FOD in New York, while his wife Agnes ran the branch office in Kansas City.

Birkhead spent the remaining fifteen years of his life directing what he called "pitiless publicity" at purveyors of anti-democratic propaganda. Primary targets were Gerald Winrod, an anti-Semitic minister in Wichita; the radio priest Charles Coughlin; the anti-Semitic preacher Gerald L. K. Smith; the American Nazi leader Fritz Kühn; and the fanatical anti-communist Elizabeth Dilling, a copy of whose *The Red Network* (1934–35) Birkhead had seen in Streicher's Nürnberg office. (In *It Can't Happen Here*, Coughlin and Smith served as models for Bishop Prang, and Dilling for Adelaide Tarr Gimmitich, while Winrod's name may have inspired the name of Lewis's fascist leader, Berzelius Windrip.)

The year 1947 marked the zenith of Birkhead's crusade. The Friends had offices not only in New York and Kansas City, but also in Chicago and Boston. The FOD distributed fifty million pieces of literature, and Birkhead was averaging three hundred speeches a year. Their semi-monthly bulletin, *Friends of Democracy's Battle*, had approximately eleven thousand subscribers. Birkhead also gave John Roy Carlson access to the extensive files of the Friends for his phenomenal best-seller *Under Cover* (1943), which revealed in its subtitle *How Axis Agents and Our Enemies within Are Now Plotting to Destroy the United States*. But the tide began to turn against Birkhead later in 1947, as the Friends lost their tax-exempt status and as incautious statements by Birkhead led to libel suits, one of which was successful. More importantly, the fear of fascism in America was declining as the fear of communism was rising. By the early 1950s, the FOD had been reduced to a one-man operation. Birkhead's health and finances deteriorated, and he became estranged from his wife. The last targets in his regular column for *Exposé* magazine were Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee. On December 1, 1954, Leon Birkhead died in a Manhattan hotel room. ✍

NEW MEMBERS

Welcome to the new member who has joined the Sinclair Lewis Society since the last issue.

The Palmer House Hotel, Restaurant, & Pub
Sauk Center, MN

she did. The ending is happy. Their marriage prevails” (194). In the novel, it’s clear that Jinny and Bradd Criley have an affair. In the film they don’t, although given the persona that Zachary Scott had, an affair would seem likely. Overall, the movie is less controversial, softening the characters to make them more acceptable to the audience, “as opposed to Lewis’s often cynical relationship with readers” (194).

DODSWORTH

Basinger calls *Dodsworth* (1936) a “superb movie about a mature marriage grounded in a fundamental lack of communication” (221). After Sam Dodsworth retires, he looks back somewhat sadly at the end of his business career. “For Mrs. Dodsworth, life has not ended; it’s just begun. For Mr. Dodsworth, his job *was* his adventure” (222). Although Dodsworth loves his wife and wants her to be happy, he doesn’t really understand how stifled she has been by her obligations as the wife of a wealthy manufacturer and leader of society. “*Dodsworth* is the story of the death of a marriage in which the couple, when they begin to really spend time together without tasks to fulfill, discover they are incompatible. They talk to each other, but never really hear each other. . . . Neither of them knows what else to say, but the truth is, she wants out from under his management, and he tires of her ‘free’ behavior” (222).

Over the years, the Dodsworths have behaved according to accepted expectations by their society, he becoming a

business success, and she running a household and raising their children. “As their twenty years passed by, they were cohabitating, but really living apart in different worlds. She didn’t see how tough he really could be and how down to earth and unpretentious he was. He didn’t see her potential to become vain and fussy, or that she was afraid of aging, wanting some thrills, wanting to be admired” (222–23). This need for admiration on Fran’s part eventually destroys their marriage, as she embarks on a series of affairs, including one with a European banker played by Paul Lukas, and later one with an impoverished Austrian count played by Gregory Gaye.

Although Dodsworth is forgiving, he eventually gives up, as it’s clear that they have totally different expectations for life.

The great success of *Dodsworth* is that it eloquently says marriage is mysterious. You can go through it without thinking, carrying out its ritual, and then suddenly wake up and find you don’t know your mate. In *Dodsworth* can be seen on the surface many thoughts and ideas that were lying doggo under the surface of most other movies about marriage. It speaks about things people couldn’t articulate easily: lack of communication, marital boredom, a couple in which one is content to be a simple American and one aspires to European “glamour”; about how life goes by, just goes by, without really understanding what a mate might really want or who a mate might really be. (225) ✍

Considering these three texts together, Sprague’s conclusion is brief and lackluster, observing that, contrary to what these authors imagined (or in Roth’s case *reimagined*), there was never an “American reign of terror” or fascist takeover of democratic government (99). Yet, in the first half of the twentieth-century, the potential existed and, she ventures, still exists today: quoting Roth, she concurs that there is an “unpredictability” to history that “forbids our assuming that ‘a realization . . . of a certain potential in American political life’ can never happen” (99). But these kind of observations only raise the questions: *Why did it not happen here?* And, most importantly, *Why can it happen still?* Unfortunately, Sprague provides no adequate answers and her remarkable (though not implausible) claims rely more upon the reader’s intuition than any particular analysis. This kind of argumentation, which is distractingly prevalent, is the most glaring problem I have with *It Can Happen Here*.

While Sprague does an acceptable job outlining the historical shift from the utopian to the dystopian novel, there is almost no historical background on the three books themselves, the expectation being that readers have memorized their copies of Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* (which she cites extensively and incompletely). Literary dystopias are by their nature vessels for engaging with ideas existing within a context—and, as a reader, to understand them requires a glimpse into the world not only between but beyond the covers. The fact that two of these authors very explicitly wrote with eyes on the decade ahead makes this even more imperative. London, Lewis, and Roth wrote about politics in radically uncertain times and to not make these as central as the texts themselves undermines the entire endeavor. After all, without knowing where we were and where we are, how will we ever know if it can happen here? ✍

HOME AT LAST: MICHAEL BARRY'S *AMERICA'S LITERARY LEGENDS: THE LIVES AND BURIAL PLACES OF 50 GREAT WRITERS*

America's Literary Legends: The Lives and Burial Places of 50 Great Writers by Michael Thomas Barry (Schiffer, 2015) is a beautifully produced coffee table-sized book with wonderful illustrations and pictures not only of burial places, but of the writers and their homes. The list of authors reads like the canon of American literature, starting with Washington Irving and ending with John Updike. Many of America's Nobel Prize

winners are here, from Sinclair Lewis, Eugene O'Neill, and Pearl Buck to William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and John Steinbeck. Each entry contains a brief biography, a discussion of major works, place of burial, and a representative quote. There are occasional "Did You Know?" boxes as well. Very entertaining to dip into, and think to yourself, maybe I should read something by one of these authors again. ✍

IN MEMORIAM: PATRICK KILLOUGH AND DON HOOPLE

Two stalwart members of the Sinclair Lewis Society died last year, each of whom contributed to the study of Lewis.

Patrick Killough, of Black Mountain, North Carolina, was a great admirer of Lewis and reviewed many of his novels for Amazon.com, including later novels such as *The Prodigal Parents*, *Bethel Merriday*, and *Cass Timberlane*. A voracious reader, he taught a number of adult education courses, often with his wife Mary, on topics from Cardinal John Henry Newman to Sir Walter Scott. Their course on Lewis at Montreat College in 2005 was done in connection with Elderhostel. He also spoke on Lewis at various clubs in the area. Killough

retired from the foreign service in 1991. Mary donated his collection of books by and about Lewis to the Sinclair Lewis Society.

Don Hoople, of Brunswick, Maine, was a supportive member of the Society, providing information on Dorothy Thompson, who was his aunt Ruth's roommate at Syracuse. He and his wife Sally (Ed.: who received her PhD the same year I did at Fordham University) were members of the Society from the beginning. Don was a musician, and both he and Sally were great travelers, intellectually curious, and always up for adventure. She is still quite active, belonging to book and poetry discussion groups, and many service activities. ✍

Murder Mystery Weekend *continued from page 13*

with a 26,000-bottle wine cellar, guest cottages, art gallery, pub, private ski trails, skating pond, and miles of nature trails—nestled on 300 rolling acres at the foot of the Green Mountains.”

In association with Stave Jigsaw Puzzles, the “Vermont-based artisan creators of hand-crafted and hand-cut cherrywood puzzles,” Twin Farms's staff, along with planted actors from RjCrowley Productions, stage a murder mystery that the guests will solve, using Stave jigsaw puzzles especially made for the occasion and each containing a clue. [“Co-founded by Steve Richardson and Dave Tibbetts in 1974, Stave has been run by the Richardson family in Norwich, Vt., for years.... The company probably isn't far off when it calls its products ‘the Rolls-Royce of wooden jigsaw puzzles.’”]

Activities in addition to mystery-solving include snowshoeing, different types of skiing, ice-skating, or hiking

through the six miles of private woodland trails. Twin Farms will supply outdoor equipment at no charge. There is also a spa which houses a fitness center, Japanese furo, and a glass-brick steam room.

The murderer will be revealed at a seven-course black-tie dinner on Saturday evening.

Sinclair Lewis brought the 1795-era farmhouse and land as a wedding gift for Dorothy Thompson in 1928. They entertained at Twin Farms for many years, before it changed hands and became a hotel in 1993.

For the full article, go to <http://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/travel/2015/02/07/sleuths-make-weekend-getaway-puzzling-murder-mystery-vermont/HCGNDjgof5RyDGux7I-pxLN/story.html> ✍

WHAT WERE THEY READING THEN? *LOVE IN GREENWICH VILLAGE* BY FLOYD DELL

Ted G. Fleener

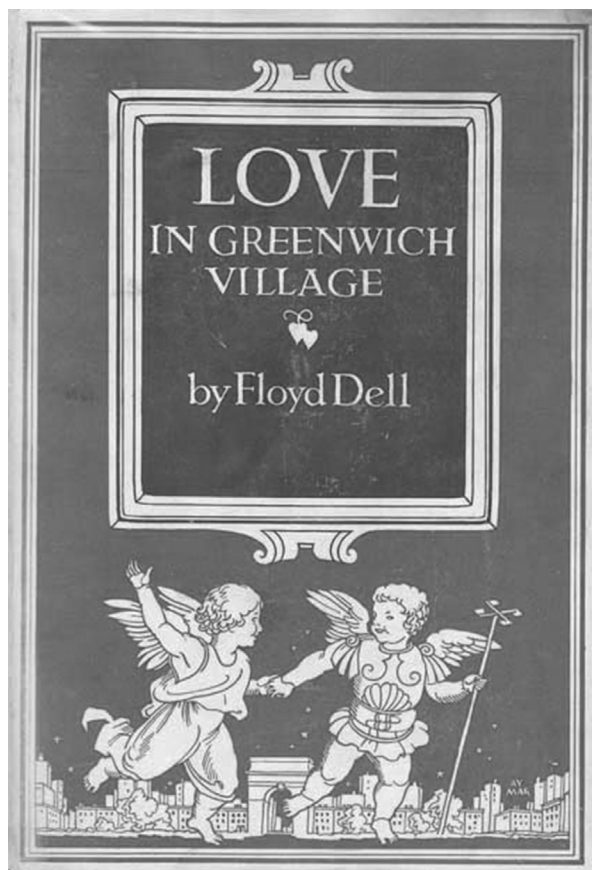
Waterloo Community Schools (Retired)

Floyd Dell is little known today, but his words from ninety years ago still speak to us. *Love in Greenwich Village* (1926) is a powerful series of short vignettes interspersed with poetry that speaks to us of a time and place that was long ago and far away, much like Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* does for the Paris of the twenties. This volume brings to life the sounds, smells, people, and passions of 1920s Greenwich Village.

The setting of this collection is the Greenwich Village as perceived and experienced by Floyd Dell between 1919 and 1920. Much of the material consists of thinly veiled autobiographical sketches. One of the stories has an exact description (with only the names being changed) that Dell related in a comment that later appeared in Nancy Milford's biography of Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Savage Beauty*.

While part of the anti-society experiment that was the Greenwich Village of that time, Dell met, and at times worked and played with, individuals who later became a prominent part of Who's Who in American literature. Many of these individuals flocked to the village before fame found them. Among his acquaintances during this time, as recounted in *Love in Greenwich Village*, were Sherwood Anderson, Max Eastman, Sinclair Lewis, Vachel Lindsay, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Eugene O'Neill. Some of these friendships were very genuine, such as his friendship with Max Eastman. In the case of Millay, there was also a physical attraction that turned into a deep and passionate love affair, also well recounted in the Millay biography by Milford.

Many of the stories in this book were previously published in various magazines. Like Sinclair Lewis, magazine articles were a regular source of income for Dell.



The stories themselves use some very creative imagery. Goddesses turn themselves into stone pillars, a young man experiences a glimpse of love as opposed to duty in a story that transports the reader to Japan, and a jaded banker spends a few peaceful and life-changing moments in a garden with a woman he has always dreamed of. Dell does an excellent job of weaving a web of word sketches for the vision and the mind.

Dell devotes considerable time and thought to the love life of the participants in his Greenwich Village. There were many couples who lived together without benefit of marriage, in defiance of contemporary morals. Often the couples would have cards with their different last names bravely posted above the mailbox. Dell recounts the ups and downs of

many of these relationships. Dell also made use of the term "free love" as a descriptor for these relationships, a precursor of similar words used by those coming of age in the 1960s.

These stories and poems are well written and touch on reality, myth, and magic. They are very descriptive and the words create strong mental images. Dell closes the collection with a bittersweet reunion with a friend, four years after the end of their Greenwich Village era. Two friends who were to join them are absent, one in prison and the other dead. The two recall the memories of old times and talk of how things have changed. Reading Floyd Dell is a very pleasant surprise. To find such written treasures from an author who is almost unknown in our time is a surprise akin to being blindsided by a wild baseball pitch. The quality and insight of his words have stood the test of time. Floyd Dell is well worth the read and his words keep and deserve your attention. ✍

DEPARTMENTS

SAUK CENTRE NEWS

Sinclair Lewis Foundation Holds Annual Meeting, Honors Volunteers

From the *Sauk Centre Herald*, Feb. 12, 2015



Left to Right: Ray Trisko, Irene Trisko, John Olson,
Jim Umhoefer. Not pictured: Bob Borgmann.

The Sinclair Lewis Foundation held its annual meeting on Saturday, Feb. 7, at the Palmer House Hotel. That day was the 130th anniversary of the famed author's birth in Sauk Centre.

Four long-time volunteers were honored at this luncheon meeting. Irene Trisko, who had served the Sinclair Lewis Foundation as treasurer for about 33 years, was honored on her retirement from that position. The post is now being filled by Matt Hoeschen. Also honored was Ray Trisko, Irene's husband, who always stepped up to keep watch over the plumbing and heating system in the Sinclair Lewis Boyhood Home for the past 30 plus years. John Olson, who served as chair of the Sauk Centre Lions Boyhood Home painting committee twice over the past twelve years, was honored, as well as Bob Borgmann, who has stepped up as the foundation's handyman.

Election Held

The annual election of officers was held during the annual meeting, and the present slate of officers was returned. They include Jim Umhoefer, president; Colleen Steffes, vice president; Matt Hoeschen, treasurer; and Roberta Olson, secretary.

The SLF board has two openings, and people who are interested in service should contact any of the officers.

President's Report

The Foundation had a good year in 2014, according to Umhoefer's annual report. The painting of the Boyhood Home and Carriage House, with the help of the Sauk Centre Lions and the Stearns County Sentence to Serve Program was completed. A grant from the Minnesota Beautiful 2014 program through the Central Minnesota Initiative Foundation and Valspar® Paint paid for the paint.

The 25th Annual Sinclair Lewis Writers' Conference was held October 11, with 120 people attending. Keynote speaker was Kevin Kling, who also entertained at a preconference gathering the night before the conference.

The Foundation was represented in the Sinclair Lewis Days Parade in July.

Looking forward, the Foundation is also in the process of writing grants and meeting with architects to accomplish needed restoration on the Boyhood Home foundation and electrical wiring, among other projects.

Annual Report

The Lewis Boyhood Home hosted 391 visitors during the 2014 season, with July seeing 152 tour the home. There were seven group/bus tours, along with five book clubs that toured the home and the Interpretive Center. Visitors came from France, the Netherlands, Austria, Wales, Puerto Rico, Japan, Hungary, England, France, Germany, Italy, and Scotland, as well as Canada. People from all 50 states also visited the Boyhood Home and Interpretive Center.

The primary goal of the Sinclair Lewis Foundation is to perpetuate the memory and works of Sinclair Lewis. Challenges include upkeep of the Sinclair Lewis Boyhood Home and the Interpretive Center.

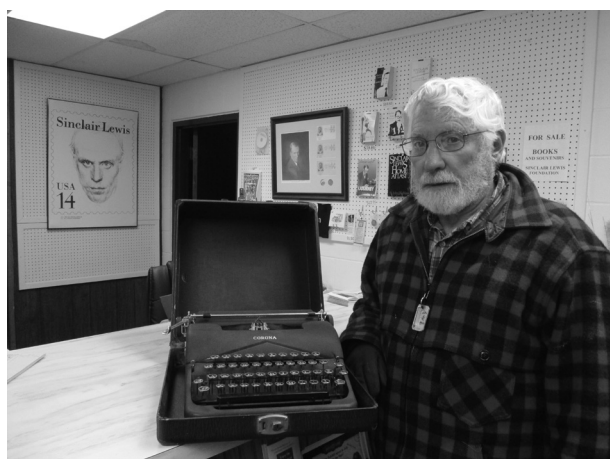
The Foundation continues to participate in long-range discussions about a potential new Cultural/Community Center, which would include the city, the Chamber of Commerce, the Sauk Centre Historical Society, and the Sinclair Lewis Foundation. Some research on similar facilities in other communities was held the past year.

The Interpretive Center remains open on shorter hours during the winter months. The Boyhood Home will reopen for the season in June, and be open through September.



Sinclair Lewis Typewriter Finds Its Way to Sauk Centre

From the *Sauk Centre Herald*, January 29, 2015



Dr. Paul Sawyer with the typewriter he donated.

A portable Corona typewriter dating back to the 1950s, and belonging originally to Sinclair Lewis, found its way to Sauk Centre in December. Dr. Paul Sawyer, Butte, Montana, delivered the Lewis artifact to the Sinclair Lewis Interpretive Center. He had transported it cross-country from the Sawyer Family Thanksgiving in Vermont and made the stop in Sauk Centre. Sawyer's father, Arthur Sawyer, worked for Sinclair Lewis at Twin Farms at Barnard, Vermont, along with his father's sister, Doris Sawyer Bates, who was a domestic at Twin Farms in the 1950s.

Lewis gave the typewriter to Doris, and she kept it until Paul and his brother Allen were college age. Doris then gave the typewriter to Allen, who used it at Cornell College. Allen kept the typewriter in the family all these years, and they agreed to donate it to the Sinclair Lewis Interpretive Center.

SINCLAIR LEWIS NOTES

In "Raw Material: Thomas Hart Benton and America's Modern Era" (*Smithsonian*, Dec. 2014, 58–67, 92, 94), author Paul Theroux writes about the ten mural-sized panels that make up a whole painted room, designed and painted by Thomas Hart Benton for the New School for Social Research in the 1930s. The room was on display in the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, as well as sketches and paintings that Benton made in preparation for it. Theroux calls it a "true portrait of the Jazz Age" (61) because it shows the various aspects of America, from the cotton fields of the South to the skyscrapers and subways of New York City. The

industrialization of America is clear from the depictions of planes, trains, and power plants. "Benton's art arises from a tradition of storytelling, and reporting from the road. The mural is news; and it is also a mirror of life observed firsthand. As Sinclair Lewis did around the same time in fiction (*Main Street*, *Babbitt*, *Elmer Gantry*), Benton showed us who we were as Americans" (65). The exhibit ran from September 30, 2014–April 19, 2015 and was a gift from AXA Equitable Life Insurance Company.



"It requires education and culture to appreciate a quiet place, but any fool can appreciate noise." —Sinclair Lewis to the Rutland Rotary Club, 1929

Yvonne Daley, in *Vermont Writers: A State of Mind* (UP of New England, 2005), quotes Lewis at length:

I have traveled through thirty-six states and have lived in eight or ten. . . . But Vermont is the first place I have seen where I really wanted to have my home. . . . I have found in Vermont precisely the opposite to that peculiar thing pointed out and boasted of as "very American": the desire for terrific speed. . . . I like Vermont because it is quiet, because you have a population that is solid and not driven mad by the American mania—that mania which considers. . . . a city of one hundred thousand, fifty times as good as a town of two thousand.

It is hard in this day, in which the American tempo is so speeded up, to sit back and be satisfied with what you have. It requires education and culture to appreciate a quiet place, but any fool can appreciate noise. . . . You are to be guardians of this priceless heritage and you are fortunate to have the honor of that task. . . .



Sally E. Parry writes:

I just finished reading an interesting article, "Sins of the Father," by James Wood (*New Yorker*, July 22, 2013, pp. 70–75) about recent biographies written by the children of famous authors, specifically John Cheever, Bernard Malamud, and William Styron. Wood discusses the family dynamics, the role of the wife, and the jealousy that these children, especially Saul Bellow's son, felt about their fathers' work.

I was wondering what Wells Lewis might have written, had he survived WWII, about his father? The wives of these authors all seem to be "women who enabled that creativity." Since both Grace and Dorothy had interests beyond their

husband, and for Dorothy Thompson in particular an important career, one wonders how much the children were affected by this dynamic.

Susan O'Brien responds:

A seminal moment in the relationship between Lewis and Wells, according to Schorer (641), came when Wells, "on his way back to Harvard for his senior year, arrived with the completed manuscript of his novel, a mildly comic affair about a young man continually frustrated in his determination to be free of the virginal condition." Schorer goes on to describe how this manuscript, for which Lewis gave the title "They Still Say No," became the strong tie between them: "It was probably the happiest moment in their lives as father and son, and a rare one."

Some years back, I attended a dinner at Boston University and a delightful, very elderly lady sat next to me. Somehow we got on a conversation about Lewis and it turned out she had been a close friend of Grace. I was absolutely mesmerized as she spoke of how Grace "never got over Wells's death," the famous huge portrait of Wells on the main wall of Grace's apartment, and so on. I gave her my address and later she invited me to her apartment to read letters from Grace. It is one of the deep Lewis regrets of my life that things were so chaotic then with moves I never was able to respond. But she gave me enough information that night to lead me to further understand Wells and his mother as complex human beings who were totally devoted to each other. From that conversation I came to believe that Wells had such support from his mother that he would have been able to be very objective about Lewis, even though his mother was probably not.

I think that Wells might surely have written the best, most intimate portrait of Lewis that ever could have been. Obviously he was a writer, and a good one, who passed the acid Sinclair Lewis test. His death was one of the many great tragedies of World War II. I think he would have written an objective portrait of his absentee father, without malice. He was described by my little old lady as a young man with incredible "people skills," as we would call them today. And we know that he did not inherit those "skills" from Lewis.

I have absolutely no doubt that the children of Sinclair Lewis were entirely and greatly affected by the "dynamic" of the careers of their parents. The little lady I met told me that in

her opinion, Grace was a consummate mother, utterly devoted to Wells and paramount in her concern for his emotional and physical health; Wells came first and Lewis second, which, she said, became an issue in the marriage. She felt that Wells truly had the prospect of greatness in some form, and would have succeeded in any endeavor he chose. (Thus it is quite interesting to me that Wells inaugurated his adult relationship with his father by writing a novel.) She felt that Grace knew this always and that Wells was the kind of child who was so easy, so agreeable, so intelligent and talented (gifted child in an era that did not know that term?) that in his own right, without his worshipful mother, he would have succeeded. Would Wells have written a novel that incorporated his relationship with his father?

As one who has lived in Boston and Cambridge for decades, in the shadow of Harvard and as a member of the Harvard Club, I know what it takes to get into this college (including the love and support of a parent such as Grace) and come out as Wells did: a fine young man and ostensibly a whole person. So many do not. Dorothy of course was devoted to him also and devastated by his death. It is a travesty of Lewis's history that Wells died before he could illuminate us about his father, but I have no doubt he also would have become well-known in his own right. I would love to learn more about Wells.



Joshua P. Preston writes:

I've enjoyed reading the articles/news folks have sent out, so I thought I'd send out some of my own. Although a lot of my historical writing gravitates toward Minnesota's populist movements, every once in a while Lewis slips in. I've written two recent Lewis articles:

"When Sinclair Lewis Met Floyd B. Olson at Northern Minnesota's Breezy Point Lodge," *MinnPost*, Jan. 3, 2014.

"I have never been there, but I have read Babbitt—and the villages are all Main Streetish, aren't they?" *A Prairie Populist*, Sept. 9, 2013.

The first article is self-explanatory. The second is about a University of Minnesota student (Class of '27) who reports back on her study abroad trip. I think it's a fun example of how Lewis's characters shaped foreign perceptions of the Midwest.

25th Anniversary Celebration

One of the longest-running, most
respected writers conferences in the
Midwest is celebrating its
25th Anniversary!

Save the
Date!

The Sinclair Lewis 2015 Writers Conference and the 25th Anniversary
Celebration of the Sinclair Lewis Writers Conference are both on
Saturday, October 10, 2015.

The Writers Conference is from 1:00-5:00 pm, followed by a catered dinner at 5:30 pm.

This is followed by our Celebration Event from 7:00-9:00 pm.

The events and dinner are at the Sauk Centre High School Auditorium.



SINCLAIR LEWIS Writers CONFERENCE

CONFERENCE SPEAKERS

Don Shelby
Faith Sullivan
Bart Sutter
Ross Sutter

CELEBRATION EVENTS

Featuring:
Don Shelby portraying
Mark Twain
Bart and Ross Sutter
performing their famous
poetry-folk music act

ADMISSION PRICE:

Adult: \$60
Senior Citizen/
College Student: \$55
High School
Student: \$15

For details: www.saukherald.com/writers

More conference information will be available on this site in July

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