

The SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME TWENTY-SIX, NUMBER ONE

FALL 2017



Sally Parry and Robert McLaughlin in the Sinclair Lewis Foundation car at the Sinclair Lewis Days parade.

SINCLAIR LEWIS IN BUSINESS AND POLITICS CONFERENCE: A GREAT SUCCESS

*Alexis Foran and Taneka Newman
Sinclair Lewis Society Interns
Illinois State University*

The 2017 Sinclair Lewis Conference, which took place July 12–14 in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, during Sinclair Lewis Days, brought together a group of Sinclair Lewis enthusiasts from across the United States, as well as one from Armenia, to discuss Sinclair Lewis's influence on business and politics. Sally Parry and Robert McLaughlin participated in the Sinclair Lewis Days parade on Saturday evening by riding in the Sinclair Lewis Foundation car.

In more recent years, we have seen *It Can't Happen Here* rise in popularity with the election of Donald J. Trump; however, those of us who have been interested in Lewis for a long time have known of his works' importance. This year's conference focused on the themes of business and politics, as Lewis's

IT HAPPENED HERE: SINCLAIR LEWIS, WHITE NATIONALISM, AND THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

*Anthony Di Renzo
Ithaca College*

NOTES OF A FOREIGN SON

Thank you for inviting me to address this conference. For years, I have wanted to make a pilgrimage to Sauk Centre to honor Sinclair Lewis, who more than any other US writer has taught me about the perils and promises of becoming an American. If I should ever properly grill hot dogs at a Memorial Day barbecue, if I should ever pledge allegiance without ambivalence, it will be because the Man from Main Street sponsored my application for citizenship.

It has been a long and difficult process. Although born in the United States, I spent crucial, formative years in Italy and still feel like a foreigner. When flight attendants flounder to place my accent, when airport security detains me because I might be a Libyan spy, I am flooded with painful memories: my mother being barred from a segregated New York restaurant because of her dark skin; my father being threatened with deportation for opposing a zoning motion at a town meeting; my being denounced as a Communist by a sixth-grade teacher because my essay on Italian American history mentioned sweatshops, Sacco and Vanzetti, and internment camps. Her final anathema fell like a thunderbolt on my entire family. "Ingrates!" she said. "You people weren't even *human* until you came to this country!"

Fortunately, I possessed a library card, a ticket to "a land with no borders and few restrictions," which the Iranian writer Azar Nafisi calls "the Republic of Imagination," an imaginary America running parallel to the real one, whose occupants need no passport or documentation. The only requirements for entry

IN THIS ISSUE

FEATURE ARTICLES

- 1 Sinclair Lewis in Business and Politics Conference:
A Great Success
by Alexis Foran and Taneka Newman
- 1 It Happened Here: Sinclair Lewis, White Nationalism,
and the 2016 Presidential Election
by Anthony Di Renzo
- 3 *Gideon Planish* as Part of Lewis's Critique
of Language
by George Killough
- 4 German Author Weighs in on
It Can't Happen Here
by Frederick Betz
- 21 Mary Astor, Edith Cortwright, and *Dodsworth*

DEPARTMENTS

- 3 Contributors
- 9 New Members
- 19 Sinclair Lewis Notes
- 20 Sauk Centre News
- 20 Sinclair Lewis Scholarship
- 22 Collector's Corner

A NOTE TO SUBSCRIBERS

To receive an electronic version of the *Newsletter*, which includes color versions of the photos and images, e-mail Sally Parry at separry@ilstu.edu

The SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter is published twice a year with help from the Publications Unit of the English Department at Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-4240.

Editor: Sally E. Parry

Publications Unit Director: Steve Halle

Production Director: Holms Troelstrup

Intern: Kayla Jane Jeffers

Please address all correspondence to: Sinclair Lewis Society, c/o Sally E. Parry, Department of English, Box 4240, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-4240

OFFICERS OF THE SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY

PRESIDENT

Frederick Betz
Southern Illinois University
at Carbondale

SECRETARY-TREASURER

Robert L. McLaughlin
Illinois State University

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Ted Fleener
Waterloo [Iowa] Public Schools

George Killough
College of St. Scholastica

Quentin Martin
University of Colorado–Colorado Springs

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Sally E. Parry
Illinois State University

HONORARY BOARD MEMBERS

John-Paul Sinclair Lewis
Author

Patricia Lewis
Sinclair Lewis Foundation

Richard Lingeman
Author, *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street*

Joyce Lyng
Sinclair Lewis Foundation

PAST PRESIDENTS

George Killough 1998–2001
James M. Hutchisson 1994–1998
Sally E. Parry 1992–1994

GIDEON PLANISH AS PART OF LEWIS'S CRITIQUE OF LANGUAGE

George Killough
College of St. Scholastica

Describing the reception of Sinclair Lewis's 1943 novel *Gideon Planish*, Mark Schorer notes that, though reviewers were not enthusiastic, Lewis's assessment was positive (697–99). In the copy held in the University of Minnesota collection, Lewis inscribed this comment: "My most serious book—therefore, naturally, not taken too seriously" (qtd. in Schorer 698–99). In my view, the book is indeed serious in its purpose and worth more attention.

The purpose is to satirize the behavior and discourse of the organizational world in America, meaning the world of foundations, philanthropies, lobbyists, policy institutes, and cause-centered groups. The title character, Gideon Planish, starts as a small-college rhetoric and speech professor in Iowa and then develops a career as an "organizer," Lewis's word for a professional organization agent. Planish has skills as a newsletter-writer, a fund-raiser, a schmoozer, and a public speaker. He knows how to elbow his way to the top. He moves from one organization to another until at the end of the novel he is the "directive secretary" of the Dynamos of Democratic Direction (known as the DDD), which has the alleged goal of advancing democracy and the actual goal of promoting the statesmanlike image of the man who funds it, Colonel Charles B. Marduc (*Gideon Planish* 348–49).

In service of satire, Lewis amuses himself and us in coin-ing names for at least 36 different organizations during the course of the novel. Examples of full names include the Movement to Restore Christianity and Regular Church Attendance in Manhattan (366) and the National American Eclectic Institute for the Advancement of the Popular Principle in Education (393). Some organizations have a political agenda, for example the Citizens' Conference on Constitutional Crises in the Commonwealth, known as Cizkon (263), which promotes the cause of employers over unions, and some do not—for example the Get Together Alliance, whose mission is to promote hand-shaking (392–93).

To make sure we get the idea of something amiss, Lewis adds ethical concerns. For example, he shows Planish engaging in fraudulent fund-raising, especially when working for the Association to Promote Eskimo Culture, which exists mainly as a means for the owner to make money for himself (253–56). Since fund-raisers in general regard their work as at least partly a scam, they commonly refer to their lists of prospective donors as "sucker lists" (217). Another term, used by the novel for fund-raisers, is "philanthrobbers" (160).

Interestingly enough, the target for satire is not just unethical behavior. As in *Babbitt*, the critique goes further. Wells Lewis, the author's son, failed to understand this point when he complained that "as a social document" the book falls short because it does not "include just one decent organization, as contrast & as a representative for the number of honest & productive ones that do exist" (qtd. in Schorer 698). Instead, it seems to damn everyone who speaks in the public forum. The 25-year-old Wells, writing as an officer in a war zone, must have wanted the book to suggest a clear pathway toward social improvement, based on ethical considerations alone. But satire rarely works this way, and Lewis was exposing a more complex problem. Several groups mentioned in the book show no ethical flaws whatsoever, groups such as the Hawkeye Association of Agronomists (147) or the Riverdale Ladies' Sociological Study Club (363). Heavily endowed groups such as Colonel Marduc's DDD are featured for reasons other than fraudulent fund-raising, which is not needed. The role of Marduc's daughter, Winnifred Homeward, labeled the Talking Woman, who is a satirical focus in the last hundred pages, does not figure in the story as a representative of any kind of double-dealing or fraud. Her main flaw is simply endless talk. Shady behavior is not the only issue in this book.

————— Lewis's Critique of Language *continued on page 16*

CONTRIBUTORS

The editor of the Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter would like to thank everyone who contributed to this issue by writing articles or sending in notes.

Thanks to Frederick Betz, David Bond, Sean Denniston, Anthony Di Renzo, Alexis Foran, Ralph Goldstein, David Handleman, George Killough, Jackie Koenig, Roy Lacoursiere, Richard Lingeman, Joyce Lyng, Robert McLaughlin, Peter Munder, Taneka Newman, Susan O'Brien, Preston Spoonland, and Tom Steman.

Sinclair Lewis Conference *continued from page 1*

earliest works were critiques of businessmen and their ethics, although other aspects of Lewis's works were also addressed during the conference. This year was also the 70th anniversary of the publication of *Kingsblood Royal*, another novel that could potentially find its revival in our turbulent times.

We received much praise for this year's conference from everyone who attended, both those attending for the first time as well as veteran conference goers. The first night of the conference featured Anthony Di Renzo's keynote speech on fascism, racism, and general dissatisfaction with the country in *It Can't Happen Here* and how it is reflected in contemporary America (see page 1 for the full address, "It Happened Here: Sinclair Lewis, White Nationalism, and the 2016 Presidential Election"). Many conference goers praised Di Renzo's keynote for being wonderful, passionate, informative, and well executed. Di Renzo was animated as he used accents and dramatic gestures to bring Lewis's quotes and characters to life. He was a very well-informed presenter



Lewis Conference attendees listen to a presentation

with an enthusiasm for Sinclair Lewis's works and how those works still have influence today.

The second day of the conference started us out bright and early at 9 am at City Hall with a variety of presentations. We also had a large setup for a silent auction of Japanese art prints that were in Sinclair Lewis's home (the Palmer House won most of these art prints, much to the dismay of some of the conference goers). Our first presenter, Quentin Martin, opened up the conference with "It Was Already Happening Here: Foreshadowings of Fascism in *Main Street* and *Babbitt*," which was a great segue from the keynote speech. Then we had Ann Yeganyan, our guest from Armenia, present "Psychological Aspects of Babbittism: From Realism to Postmodern Literature." Robert McLaughlin finished our first group of presenters with "Zenith on the Liffey: Sinclair Lewis and James

————— Sinclair Lewis Conference *continued on page 5*

GERMAN AUTHOR WEIGHS IN ON *IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE*

Frederick Betz
Southern Illinois University–Carbondale

In light of the rise of the real estate tycoon, Donald Trump, as the Republican candidate for president of the United States in 2016, Peter Munder—a freelance journalist based in Hamburg, Germany, and author of a biography of the English dramatist Harold Pinter—posted an article on *CulturMag* (Sept. 1, 2016), in which he calls for rediscovery of Sinclair Lewis and his novel, *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), as a cautionary tale against the naïve assumption that a charismatic demagogue like Trump "can't" be elected "here." Lewis's message was that, of course, it could happen in America, just as it had happened in Italy (Mussolini) and Germany (Hitler). Indeed, the threat was real, especially in the person of Senator Huey Long (Louisiana), while Lewis wrote his novel at white heat between May and August 1935, and only the assassination of Long in September cut short this threat.

Munder takes issue with critics, including biographer Mark Schorer, who accused Lewis of not taking a clear political

stand in his novel, and argues that they misunderstood Lewis's use of the self-critical, liberal, small-town newspaper editor Doremus Jessup as his mouthpiece, for Lewis had always taken a liberal-democratic stance, but never wanted to be a mouthpiece himself for any political propaganda. "I am a diagnostician, not a reformer," as Munder quotes Lewis, calling him "the Zola from the prairie."

Munder goes on to discuss Dorothy Thompson's role in Lewis's writing of *It Can't Happen Here*, and then elaborates on Lewis's earlier works, with particular focus on *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922).

In conclusion, Munder compares Lewis to Dickens in their exuberant description of everyday life (*Alltagsdetails*), but adds that behind it there was also, as Alfred Kazin noted in *On Native Grounds* (1942), "the terror immanent in the commonplace, the terror that arises out of the repressions, the meanness, the hard jokes of the world." For Munder, this is what makes Lewis a truly great and relevant writer today. ✍

Sinclair Lewis Conference *continued from page 4*

Joyce,” exploring similarities between Joyce’s and Lewis’s techniques in representing their critique of the middle class. After some refreshments, we resumed our presentations with Rusty Allred’s “*Arrowsmith* for Modern Japanese Readers.” This wonderful presentation gave in-depth information on how Sinclair Lewis’s writings have been translated from English to Japanese and how Japanese readers benefit. The last presentation of day two was “Dr. Harvey Cushing’s *Life of Sir William Osler* and Other ‘Antidotes’ to *Arrowsmith*,” presented by Frederick Betz. During this presentation Betz demonstrated the dismay that Pulitzer Prize winner Cushing had for Sinclair Lewis’s portrayal of doctors.

Day three brought George Killough’s “*Gideon Planish* as Part of Lewis’s Critique of Language,” which considered the vapid language of philanthropy and how Lewis associated it with “a devotion to talk over action, self-promotion, a tendency to increase divisiveness, and a failure to foster love of individuals” (see page 3 for the full text of Killough’s talk). Ralph Goldstein continued the topic of *Gideon Planish* with “Sinclair Lewis in the Anthropocene: The Case of *Gideon Planish*,” and how the cultural critique of Lewis’s novels, especially *Gideon Planish*, remains relevant. The next panel focused on another late novel of Lewis’s, *Kingsblood Royal*, with Sally Parry’s “‘Are You Crazy?’: Neil Kingsblood, Trauma, and the Double V” and Cindy Kaplan’s “*Kingsblood Royal*: Who Gets to Decide Who We Are?” Parry’s presentation focused on the context of World War II and how Neil’s traumatic war experiences may have contributed to his coming out as a black man. Kaplan’s presentation discussed race relations, social stigmas, and today’s American culture in terms of identity politics.

In the last panel, Roy Lacoursiere and Charlie Pankenier gave some more general observations on Sinclair Lewis. Lacoursiere’s “Publishing Perspectives: The World of Sinclair Lewis and Otherwise,” focused on reasons that authors publish,

and how Lewis’s work fits into this paradigm. Pankenier’s “Sinclair Lewis and the Interpretation of Names” discussed how the language, names, and phrases included in *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, *Elmer Gantry*, and *It Can’t Happen Here* continue to resonate in our language.

After each panel finished presenting, we opened the floor to questions, which resulted in lively and thought-provoking conversations. Attendees had very different backgrounds to bring to our conference; we had retired guidance counselors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, and professors join us this year in Sauk Centre. The conference’s discussions after each group of presenters benefited from every single participant, even those that do not typically participate in academia. Many people came to pres-



Participants of the 2017 Sinclair Lewis Conference gathered at the Sinclair Lewis Boyhood Home

ent but others came just to observe and discuss Lewis’s works with like-minded people. We had many first-time conference goers make their pilgrimage to Sauk Centre; it was a wonderful experience for all who joined us. Ted Fleener said that the main reason he came to the conference was to “meet some of the people I have read about and been in touch with for years. I have never attended the conference before this one. I would definitely attend it again.”

We found ourselves spending a lot of time in the Palmer House between presentations and activities, discussing Lewis at length as well as sharing life experiences of our own. We had people joining us from both the East and West Coasts, as well as Ann from Armenia. Thankfully we did not have any inclement weather during our time in Sauk Centre and all of our travelers got home safely.

The conference’s location in Sauk Centre was praised numerous times; Rusty Allred said that there would be “no

————— Sinclair Lewis Conference *continued on page 6*

Sinclair Lewis Conference *continued from page 5*

better place in the world to talk about Sinclair Lewis than Sauk Centre.” We have to agree as one of our activities included touring Lewis’s Boyhood Home; built in 1889, it has been preserved and restored to how it would have existed in Lewis’s lifetime. We also had the chance to see Sinclair Lewis’s final resting place, as the cemetery he is buried in sits at the edge of Sauk Centre. Many attendees were very grateful for having the opportunity to visit both Sinclair Lewis’s grave and his Boyhood Home in the same trip.

Many people said that their favorite part of the conference was getting to know other Sinclair Lewis scholars and being able to meet the people that they have read in the *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*. We all gravitated toward Lewis’s writing for one reason or another and finding others that have the same passion and joy was an enriching experience. Some attendees came to present papers but found the entire experience of meeting and getting to know everyone to be delightful. All of the attendees have said that they hope to attend another Lewis conference or visit Sauk Centre again. Frederick Betz, president of the Sinclair Lewis Society, said, “I have attended the previous Lewis conferences of 1997, 2000, 2005, and 2010. I look forward to the Lewis Conference planned for 2020 to mark the 100th anniversary of the publication of *Main Street*; I am already investigating a topic for a paper.” I’m sure that we are all looking forward to that!

Anthony Di Renzo praised the entire conference as “the most rewarding and moving conference of my academic career. All the participants were passionate and articulate about Lewis’s work. Better still, not all were professional scholars so the entire event felt like a town hall. Lewis would have been pleased.” And we agree with him; Lewis would have appreciated the gathering of great minds from a variety of professions to discuss his work.

Lewis might have also appreciated the enthusiasm we all had for the trip to St. Cloud to visit the St. Cloud State University Library and Archives. The hour-long commute from Sauk Centre to St. Cloud led to a very intriguing afternoon. Tom Steman, the university’s archivist, greeted our large group with open arms and enthusiasm. We first visited the home of Claude Lewis, now the Alumni House, where we got to see where Sinclair Lewis spent some of his time writing and visiting

with his family. Next, we visited the University Library, specifically, the University Archives. St. Cloud State University has an enormous collection of Sinclair Lewis’s works. We were able to hold original, autographed copies of Lewis’s classic novels. In addition to books, the archives have some of Lewis’s letters and manuscripts. The grand finale of our trip to St. Cloud State University was being able to listen to a recording of Sinclair Lewis’s voice. Sinclair Lewis had been on a radio show and the archives had a recording of it that Tom Steman gladly played for us. Everyone was very surprised that Lewis had a higher-pitched voice than expected. It was great to see how much the entire group appreciated Steman’s presentation.



Conference attendees at Lewis’s grave

Although attendees mentioned academic and scholarly reasons for attending the conference, almost everyone enjoyed the less scholarly activities as well, such as the sing-along at Java Jitters Café where we got to sing actual songs that Sinclair Lewis sang; and the showing of the film adaptation of *Elmer Gantry*. All in all, participants

were happy they participated and most plan to return for the next conference.

Alexis Foran and Taneka Newman worked as interns on the conference. Both are students in the Department of English at Illinois State University. They read Main Street and It Can’t Happen Here before attending the conference and worked on the program, including gathering information about the presenters. They drove up to Sauk Centre from central Illinois, and provided support during the conference: helping with directions, giving rides, taking pictures, and doing whatever else needed to be done. They had a debriefing back at Illinois State, surveyed participants about their experiences, and put together this article. The Sinclair Lewis Society is greatly indebted to them for their hard work and good cheer. ✍



Conference attendees dining at Anton’s in St. Cloud, Minnesota

It Happened Here *continued from page 1*

are “an open mind, a restless desire to know, and an indefinable urge to escape the mundane” (3–4). Here I met Sinclair Lewis, a fellow “alien cynic,” who distressed pious nationalists by “speculating whether there may not be other faiths” (*Main Street*, epigraph). He inspired and encouraged me to satirize my adopted country to show how much I love it.

Lewis has always offered newcomers sanctuary. Barry Gross, who attended the Bronx High School of Science in the 1950s, describes the impact of reading his work on first- and second-generation Jewish American students: “*Not* to have been included at all in Sinclair Lewis’s America would have been for us disastrous, for he was the most inclusive, the most comprehensive, and, despite his renown as a satirist, the most generous of American novelists . . . Lewis legitimized us, naturalized us, conferred upon us, to borrow that evocative phrase Nick Carraway uses . . . the freedom of the neighborhood” (9).

That freedom, however, is terribly fragile. “America is a land settled by immigrants,” states Steven Michels in *Sinclair Lewis and American Democracy*:

but it has a long and storied history of seeing newcomers as a threat. It’s almost as if the assimilation process ends only when a new group arrives on the scene to take the place as “the other.” Research has found that immigrants quickly learn English, are more patriotic than natural-born citizens, and are good for the economy. But these facts, along with the decline of their numbers, have not done much to change the impression that immigrants are a threat to be contained or expelled. This is even true of the descendants of involuntary immigrants—that is, blacks. (133)

Worse, argues Toni Morrison, “all immigrants to the United States know (and knew) that if they want to become real, authentic Americans they must reduce their fealty to their native country and regard it as secondary, subordinate, in order to emphasize their whiteness. Unlike any nation in Europe, the United States holds whiteness as the unifying force. Here, for many people, the definition of ‘Americanness’ is color.”

As Sinclair Lewis knew, white nationalism is the flip side of American exceptionalism, a truth captured in Langston Hughes’s 1936 poem, “Let America Be America Again.” Interrupting a Fourth of July paean to “the pioneer on the plain,”

a disgruntled outsider declares: “America never was America to me.” When the orator asks who dares to “mumble in the dark” and “draws [a] veil across the stars,” the heckler replies:

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery’s scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

Hughes, who would help Lewis with his field research for *Kingsblood Royal*, published “Let America Be America Again” in July 1936, eight months after the release of *It Can’t Happen Here*. Eighty years later, Donald J. Trump, a billionaire real-estate mogul and reality TV star, was elected president of the United States by running on a disturbingly similar slogan: “Make America Great Again.” This surreal event, a backlash against demographic change and a culmination of the culture wars of the past thirty years, has divided our nation and shaken the foundations of our political institutions.

As an Italian American and a Sinclair Lewis scholar, I don’t know what to make of our new president. Is he Silvio Berlusconi or Benito Mussolini? George F. Babbitt or Berzelius Windrip? One thing, however, is certain: his grotesque campaign for the White House and his autocratic administration

have empowered and exploited the most beligerent nativism and aggressive racism since the teens and twenties of the last century.

For this reason, many Americans, here and abroad, are rereading Sinclair Lewis’s novels, not only *It Can’t Happen Here* and *Kingsblood Royal*, which particularly resonate in an age of the Alt-Right and Black Lives Matter, but also *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, *Arrowsmith*, and *Elmer Gantry*. Alice B. Lloyd, a columnist for the *Weekly Standard*, thinks America should “pivot to a proper Lewis revival.” Lewis’s entire work diagnoses the causes behind our current political crisis: the breakdown of unifying cultural narratives; the denial of our country’s ethnic and racial diversity; and the powerlessness

resulting from entrenched social and economic inequality. The resulting despair, resentment, and hysteria drive many white



Langston Hughes by Winold Reiss

It Happened Here *continued on page 8*

It Happened Here *continued from page 7*

Americans to scapegoat immigrants and minorities and to seek refuge in authoritarianism. The only antidote to such toxic tribalism, Lewis suggests, is to imagine alien identities, acknowledge divided loyalties, and engage in democratic dialogue.

THE REPUBLIC OF IMAGINATION

In “I Have Fallen in Love with American Names,” his acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation’s Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, Phillip Roth praises the great Midwestern and Southern regional writers of the early twentieth century, among them Sinclair Lewis, who “shaped and expanded [his] sense of America” beyond the confines of Newark, New Jersey. Their “mytho-historical conception” of America allowed Roth to disregard and overcome the prejudice that “stigmatized” and “excluded” his working-class Jewish parents. Reading and contributing to this collective epic has made Roth feel “irrefutably American.”

Roth, however, came of age during World War II, when Americans, whatever their differences, supposedly were united in a common cause and shared a common story. This is no longer true. As David Brooks argues in a recent editorial in the *New York Times*, America’s current political meltdown is also a narrative meltdown:

America has always been a divided, sprawling country, but for most of its history it was held together by a unifying national story. As I noted a couple of months ago, it was an Exodus story. It was the story of leaving the oppressions of the Old World, venturing into a wilderness and creating a new promised land. In this story, America was the fulfillment of human history, the last best hope of earth...

But that civic mythology no longer unifies. American confidence is in tatters and we live in a secular culture. As a result, we’re suffering through a national identity crisis. Different groups see themselves living out different national stories and often feel they are living in different nations.

The story that most affected the 2016 election, of course, is America First, the narrative Donald Trump told last year, which

resonated with so many voters. According to this story, our country has lost its “traditional identity because of *contamination* and *weakness* [italics added]—the contamination of others, foreigners, immigrants, Muslims; the weakness of elites who have no allegiance to the country because they’ve been globalized.” Consequently, good, decent, hard-working Americans have become aliens and exiles in their own land—mocked and betrayed by experts, menaced and displaced by minorities. George Saunders astutely analyzes the subtext beneath this story:

What unites these stories is what I came to think of as usurpation anxiety syndrome—the feeling that one is, or is about to be, scooped, overrun, or taken advantage of by some Other with questionable intentions. In some cases, this has a racial basis, and usurpation anxiety grades into racial nostalgia, which can grade into outright racism, albeit cloaked in disclaimer.

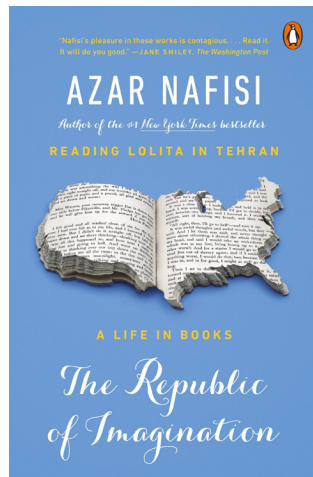
In the broadest sense, the Trump supporter might be best understood as a guy who wakes up one day in a lively, crowded house full of people, from a dream in which he was the only one living there, and then mistakes the dream for the past: a better time, manageable and orderly, during which privilege and respect came to him naturally, and he had the whole place to himself. (57)

Sinclair Lewis, who wrote during a similarly turbulent time—when Americans were abandoning small towns for the big city, when the *Smart Set* discredited traditional values, and when mass immigration threatened national identity—would have agreed. As he states in his Nobel lecture, “The American Fear of Literature,” he dedicated his life to disabusing the heartland of its most cherished illusions:

that the America of a hundred and twenty million population is still as simple, as pastoral, as it was when it had but forty million; that in an industrial plant with ten thousand employees, the relationship between the worker and the manager is still as neighborly and uncomplex as in a factory of 1840, with five employees; ... that America has gone through the revolutionary change from rustic colony to world-empire without having in the least altered the bucolic and Puritanic simplicity of Uncle Sam. (6–7)

To force his contemporaries to confront unsettling change, Lewis relentlessly deconstructed two comforting

It Happened Here *continued on page 9*



It Happened Here *continued from page 8*

American narratives: the *pioneer myth* and the *Horatio Alger story*. Since rugged individualism and entrepreneurship remain such important motifs in current political rhetoric, often in abusive and dishonest ways, Lewis's past insights can help us today.

BEWILDERED EMPIRE

When we first meet Carol Kennicott in *Main Street*, she stands "in relief against the cornflower blue of Northern sky," surrounded by the "shadows" of Chippewas and Yankee fur-traders (1). "The days of pioneering, of lassies in sunbonnets, and bears killed with axes in piney clearings, are deader now than Camelot," but their memory still haunts "that bewildered empire called the American Middlewest" (1). Transplanted from Minneapolis–St. Paul to Gopher Prairie, the city-bred Carol briefly convinces herself that "in the history of the pioneers was the panacea ... for all of America" (150). "We have lost their sturdiness," she tells herself. "We must restore the last of the veterans to power and follow them on the backward path to the integrity of Lincoln, to the gaiety of settlers dancing in a saw-mill" (150).

Carol changes her mind, however, after spending an afternoon with Mr. and Mrs. Champ Perry in their rooms above Howland & Gould's grocery. During her visit, the two former pioneers tell her that the Republican Party is "the agent of the Lord"; that "all socialists ought to be hanged"; that "people who make more than ten thousand a year or less than eight hundred are wicked"; and that "Europeans are still wicked" (153). Carol's hero-worship dwindles to polite nodding, and her nodding dwindles to a desire to escape, and she goes home with a headache.

Sinclair Lewis valued Minnesota's pioneer heritage but disliked seeing it embalmed or, worse, distorted to serve reactionary politics. (Yes, I mean you, Laura Ingalls Wilder.) There "was a time in our history," he reminds readers in "A Note about *Kingsblood Royal*":

and ever so short a time ago, when the Scotch-English in New England thought all the Irish were fundamen-

tally different and fundamentally inferior. And then those same conceited Yanks (my own people) moved on to the Middle West and went through the same psychological monkeyshines with the Scandinavians and the Bohemians and the Poles. (38–39)

For Lewis, all nativist interpretations of the pioneer myth are bunk. Consider the genealogy of his all-American hero Martin Arrowsmith, whose great-grandmother drove a wagon through "the forest and swamp of the Ohio wilderness" (1):

Martin was, like most inhabitants of Elk Mills before the Slavo-Italian immigration, a Typical Pure-bred Anglo-Saxon American, which means that he was a union of German, French, Scotch, Irish, perhaps a little Spanish, conceivably a little of the strains lumped together as "Jewish," and a great deal of English, which is itself a combination of Primitive Britain, Celt, Phoenician, Roman, German, Dane, and Swede. (2)

The American heartland was never a site of ethnic or racial purity but rather, as Richard White chronicles in *The Middle Ground*, "a heterogeneous place where a number of races and cultures, refugees and fragments, coalesced into a coherent community ... and not an indigenous one" (qtd. in Watts 94). The evidence, Lewis insists, is as obvious as the French Canadian, Finnish, German, Scandinavian, and Ojibwe inflections that form the Minnesota accent. Only the relentless brass band of Manifest Destiny could deafen Midwesterners to this truth.

According to Edward Watts, ethnic and racial pluralism was the norm, not the exception, in pioneer days, until the United States annexed the frontier:

The East, a distant capital that controlled finances, land distribution, and legislation, colonized the Midwest in the nineteenth century, just as the British were

It Happened Here *continued on page 10*

NEW MEMBERS

Welcome to the new members who have joined the Sinclair Lewis Society since the last issue.

Maggie Bandur
Los Angeles, CA

Tim Fleener
Gladstone, MO

Roy and Joanna Lacoursiere
Topeka, KS

Wadena City Library
Wadena, MN

It Happened Here *continued from page 9*

simultaneously colonizing western Canada or South Africa—also both places where a multiracial and multiethnic community was entrenched and subsequently displaced without being removed. Part of this process was culturally coercing those who did not fit the North Atlantic model of American identity into compliance with a pastoral, agrarian, individualistic, and, above all, marginal model of personal and collective activity. The ideal was developed in and for the East so that this new place and these new peoples would not disrupt the smooth establishment of the American empire, the country's Manifest Destiny, or the centrality of East in this empire. Like all postcolonials, then, Midwesterners live in between what they are and what they have been told to be. Exploring this space, this confusion and sense of disappointment, has characterized regional fiction from E. W. Howe to Jane Smiley. (95)

As a writer, Sinclair Lewis sought in nineteenth-century regional history the root causes of the unhappiness and alienation of twentieth-century Midwesterners. We can see this in *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and *Arrowsmith* but most overtly in *Kingsblood Royal* and *The God-Seeker*. Adam Gadd, the idealistic New England carpenter turned preacher, witnesses Yankee traders and missionaries destroy the Minnesota territory's "egalitarian, multicultural society" in the name of profit and white supremacy (Lingeman 527). Xavier Pic, Neil Kingsblood's pioneer ancestor—a black scout born in Martinique with a little "French and Portuguese and Spanish blood" and married to "a good Ojibway woman"—petitions General Henry Sibley to honor his services by not mentioning his color in future correspondence (68). Pic wants his children and grandchildren to pass as white because the frontier is now segregated.

Colonialization and the erasure of diversity and equality explain the unhappiness and alienation at the heart of Sinclair Lewis's work. Constantly denying a past that is "more complicated than they would like," Lewis's twentieth-century Midwesterners are "bigoted, office-bound, and anxious about their relationship to the East" (Watt 96). Frantically trying to stake their claim in the American Dream, they fear failure and the loss of white privilege.

REVOLUTION IN TERMS OF ROTARY

Such racially charged status anxiety dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, when many people began to wonder whether wage slavery might be as great a threat to American

democracy as chattel slavery. As Christopher Lasch explains in *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*:

[I]t had become increasingly difficult to deny the existence of a wage-earning class, even in the United States, or to pretend that every wage earner was a potential artisan, shopkeeper, or capitalist. The glaring contradiction between the prevailing ideology and the emergence of a proletariat class nevertheless required the fiction that wage labor was merely a temporary condition, a single step on the ladder of advancement most individuals could expect to climb, as Horatio Alger explained, with a little luck and plenty of pluck. In the Gilded Age, Algerism, with an overlay of social Darwinism, established itself as the dominant ideology of American politics, and many Americans cling to it even today. Failure to advance, according to the mythology of opportunity, argues moral incapacity on the part of individuals or, in a version even more implausible, on the part of disadvantaged ethnic and racial minorities. (206)

The industrialization of the agrarian Midwest, "which caught fire in the eighteen-seventies and which, by providing jobs for that horde of cheap unskilled immigrants, expedited the immigrant absorption into society and the Americanization ... of the immigrant offspring," had a profound impact on Sinclair Lewis (Roth 46). His early work, set mostly in the East, directly confronts the juggernaut of urban capitalism. Una Golden, the hard-boiled secretary of *The Job*, contemplates the power of this "vast, competent, largely useless cosmos of offices."

It spends much energy in causing advertisements of beer and chewing-gum and union suits and pot-cleansers to spread over the whole landscape. It marches out ponderous battalions to sell a brass pin.... It turns noble valleys into fields for pickles. It compels men whom it has never seen to toil in distant factories and produce useless wares, which are never actually brought into the office, but which it nevertheless sells to the heathen in the Solomon Islands in exchange for commodities whose very names it does not know. (43)

Under such intimidating and alienating conditions, Lewis asks, how can Americans maintain the courage, self-respect,

It Happened Here *continued on page 11*

It Happened Here *continued from page 10*

and independence necessary for citizenship? The eponymous hero of *Our Mr. Wrenn*, browbeaten by his boss, Mr. Guilfogle, lives in perpetual fear: “Suppose he lost his job; The Job! He worked unnecessarily late, hoping that the manager would learn of it. As he wavered home, drunk with weariness, his fear of losing The Job was almost as equal to his desire to resign from The Job” (7).

Lewis explores this issue more fully and subtly in his mature work, which shows the effect of Eastern commercialism and corporatization on the Midwest. Homespun frontier virtues cannot withstand the assault of ambition and venality. Even so, the region’s new business culture is engrafted onto its old pioneer myth to preserve unsavory notions of American purity. This occurs whether Lewis’s characters are producers or consumers.

Jim Blausen boosts to make Gopher Prairie as “big as Minneapolis or St. Paul or Duluth” but also to preserve Main Street from “knockers,” “socialists,” and “the pikers and tin-horns in other countries” (*Main Street* 414–15). George Babbitt hustles to sell real estate but also redlines Zenith’s districts and suburbs to bar blacks and minorities. He does not want the city to become “so overgrown that no decent white man, nobody who loves his wife and kiddies and God’s good out-o’doors and likes to shake the hand of his neighbor in greeting, would want live in them” (*Babbitt* 180–81).

But the most disturbing spectacle are the Just Plain Folks, who sit in their rockers “listening to mechanical music, saying mechanical things about the excellence of Ford automobiles, and viewing themselves as the greatest race in the world” (*Main Street* 265). With the Sears Catalog as their Bible, they convert Gopher Prairie’s immigrants to “American uniformity” and make them renounce ethnic customs and traditions that “might have added to the life of the town,” thus absorbing “without one trace of pollution another alien invasion” (266). Lewis ponders the global implications of assimilation:

A village in a country which is taking pains to become altogether standardized and pure, which aspires to succeed Victorian England as the chief mediocrity of the world, is no longer provincial, no longer downy and restful in its leaf-shadowed ignorance. It is a force seeking to dominate the earth, to drain the hills and sea of color, to set Dante at boosting Gopher Prairie, and to dress the high gods in Klassy Kollege Klothes. Sure of itself, it bullies other civilizations, as a traveling salesman in a brown derby conquers the wisdom of China and tacks advertisements of cigarettes over arches for centuries dedicate to the saying of Confucius. (*Main Street* 267)

Commercialism on behalf of the American Way is more overt in *Babbitt*. “In a society like Iran,” muses Azar Nafisi, “‘Inspiration’ and ‘Pep’ come at the barrel of a gun, a very straightforward method of persuasion. There is nothing complicated about the brute force of an ideological state. Babbitt’s god wants to sell, not to kill; its main weapon is seduction” (168–69). When threatened, however, Babbitt’s god resorts to coercion.

“What the country needs—just at this present juncture—is neither a college president nor a lot of monkeying around with foreign affairs, but a good—sound—economical—business—administration,” declares Howard Littlefield, professor of economics, and public relations council for the Zenith Street Traction Company (27). Much of the novel is set during the presidential election of 1920. Lewis parallels Warren G. Harding’s campaign with that of Lucas Prout, the mattress manufacturer who wants to be mayor of Zenith. Decades before the efforts to draft Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca during the Japanese trade wars; before Ross Perot complained of the “giant sucking sound of American jobs going South” (“1992 Campaign”); before the two-term administration of George W. Bush, our first MBA president, and the election of Donald Trump, Lewis warned about the perils of thinking that America should be run like a business.

“Why are you so afraid of the word ‘Fascism,’ Doremus?” asks R. C. Crowley in *It Can’t Happen Here*.

Just a word—just a word! And might not be so bad, with all the lazy bums we got panhandling relief nowadays, and living on my income tax and yours—not so worse to have a real Strong Man, like Hitler or Mussolini—like Napoleon or Bismarck in the good old days—and have ’em really *run* the country and make it efficient and prosperous again. (22)

It is only a small step from Babbitt’s Annual Address before the Zenith Real Estate Board to Buzz Windrip’s campaign speech at Madison Square Garden. In a “master stroke,” Windrip advocates “everyone’s getting rich by just voting to be rich,” even as he denounces all “Fascism” and “Naziism,” so that most Republicans are “ready to vote for him” (93). Commenting on Windrip’s campaign platform and the demographics of his supporters, Doremus Jessup states: “This is Revolution in terms of Rotary” (100).

It Happened Here *continued on page 12*

Windrip's real base is not the League of Forgotten Men but the Zenith Chamber of Commerce, provincial businessmen who aspire to an unobtainable power and success and dream of "a government of the profits, by the profits, for the profits" (*It Can't Happen Here* 441). But based on this disturbing Pullman conversation from *Babbitt*, the protection that they seek has less to do with free enterprise than with white supremacy.

The old-fashioned coon was a fine old cuss—he knew his place—but these young dinges don't want to be porters or cotton-pickers. Oh, no! They got to be lawyers and professors and Lord knows what all! I tell you, it's becoming a pretty serious problem. We ought to get together and show the black man, yes, and the yellow man, his place. Now, I haven't one particle of race-prejudice. I'm the first to be glad when a nigger succeeds—so long as he stays where he belongs and doesn't try to usurp the right authority and business ability of the white man. (150)

To protect their authority, Elmer Gantry learns, these businessmen join the "new Ku Klux Klan, an organization of the fathers, younger brothers, and employees of the men who had succeeded and become Rotarians." Many of the most worthy Methodist and Baptist clergymen support it and are supported by it; "and personally Elmer admired its principle—to keep all foreigners, Jews, Catholics, and negroes in their place, which was no place at all, and let the country be led by native Protestants, like Elmer Gantry" (365–66).

Toni Morrison's observation on last year's presidential election applies here: "To keep alive the perception of white superiority, these white Americans tuck their heads under cone-shaped hats and American flags and deny themselves the dignity of face-to-face confrontation." Ironically, such cravenness, often expressing itself in crude language and petty violence, undermines and discredits the very notion of racial superiority it so blusteringly seeks to defend. "Only the frightened would do that. Right?"

NIGHTMARES ON MAIN STREET

"There is indeed more significant terror of a kind in Lewis's novels than in a writer like Faulkner or the hard-boiled novelists," Alfred Kazin claims in *On Native Grounds*, "for it is

the terror immanent in the commonplace, the terror that arises out of the repressions, the meannesses, the hard jokes of the world Lewis had soaked into his pores" (220).

What is the source of this terror? Richard Lingeman argues that is the threat of "social ostracism," the "censorious whispers" of relatives, friends, and neighbors, that squelches spontaneity and silences dissent (213). Another factor, however, is the horror of contamination. Lewis's characters perpetually fear outside influence. Such anxiety, Charles Johnson thinks, springs from our country's long-standing confusion about race, ethnicity, and national identity. "[W]hat we have always had in America," he maintains, "is a White Problem," not a Black Problem, a Brown Problem, a Yellow Problem, or a Red Problem (xi–xii). George Saunders, analyzing the racism fueling Donald Trump's campaign, agrees:

From the beginning, America has been of two minds about the Other. One mind says, Be suspicious of it, dominate it, deport it, exploit it, enslave it, kill it as needed. The other mind denies that there can be any such thing as the Other, in the face of the claim that all are created equal.

The first mind has always held violence nearby, to use as needed, and that violence has infused everything we do—our entertainments, our sex, our schools, our ads, our jokes, our view of the earth itself, somehow even our food. It sends our young people abroad in heavy armor, fills public spaces with gunshots, drives people quietly insane in their homes. (61)

"Why, there's no country in the world that can get more hysterical—yes, or more obsequious!—than America," Doremus Jessup argues in *It Can't Happen Here*. To support his claim, he cites the Klan, the anti-German war hysteria that renamed sauerkraut "Liberty cabbage," Red scares, Catholic scares, Kentucky night-riders, and trainloads of fun-loving hicks attending lynchings. "Why, where in all history," he concludes, "has there ever been a people so ripe for a dictatorship as ours!" (21–22).

Indeed, as the novel shows, Americans will support any autocracy, no matter how outrageous, so long as it affirms their



idealized image of themselves and validates their prejudices. Buzz Windrip's down-home fascism mirrors Main Street values. "In the little towns, ah, there is the abiding peace that I love," he sighs in *Zero Hour*, "and that can never be disturbed by even the noisiest Smart Alecks from these haughty megalopolises like Washington, New York, & etc." (196). Like Donald Trump, Windrip lauds the superior wisdom of "uneducated" Americans. He also plagiarizes Aryan propaganda in a way that Richard Spencer and Steven Bannon would have approved:

The real trouble with the Jews is that they are cruel. Anybody with a knowledge of history knows how they tortured poor debtors in secret catacombs, all through the Middle Ages. Whereas the Nordic is distinguished by his gentleness and his kind-heartedness to friends, children, dogs, and people of inferior races. (237)

National populists, such as Windrip and Trump, practice what Timothy Snyder calls "the politics of eternity," a masquerade of history obsessed with the past but unconcerned with facts (121). It longs for events that never really happened during epochs that were, in fact, disastrous. "Eternity politicians bring us the past as a vast misty courtyard of illegible monuments to national victimhood, all of them equally distant from the present, all of them equally accessible for manipulation" (211). Every reference to the past seems to involve an attack by some external enemy upon—or some betrayal by some internal enemy of—the moral and racial purity of the nation:

In the politics of eternity, the seduction by a mythicized past prevents us from thinking about possible futures. The habit of dwelling on victimhood dulls the impulse of self-correction. Since the nation is defined by its inherent virtue rather than by its future potential, politics become a discussion of good and evil rather than a discussion of possible solutions to real problems. Since the crisis is permanent, the sense of emergency is always present; planning for the future seems impossible or even disloyal. How can we even think of reform when the enemy is always at the gate? (123–24)

Forever threatened, Lewis's characters form clubs and organizations to protect their collective identity and to police their communities against undesirables. These range from the merely petty, such as the Jolly Seventeen and the Zenith Booster Club, to the truly sinister, such as the Good Citizens' League

and Sant Tabac, an acronym for "Stop all Negro trouble, take action before any comes" (*Kingsblood Royal* 315).

Under the right conditions, heightened surveillance will lead to violence. After America enters World War I, Gopher Prairie cracks down on the National Nonpartisan League. A mob of a hundred businessmen, led by the sheriff, drag a visiting organizer from his hotel and ride him "on a fence-rail" (418). When Carol Kennicott objects, her husband Will physically threatens her. "I'm not going to stand my own wife being seditious!" he yells, "you and all these long-haired men and short-haired women can beef all you want to, but we're going to take these fellows, and if they ain't patriotic, we're going to make them be patriotic" (420).

But this atrocity is nothing compared to the riot that explodes at the climax of *Kingsblood Royal*. Lewis connects racial incidents in Washington DC and Grand Republic, Minnesota, to show the power of Jim Crow on both sides of the Mason–Dixon Line. After a group of Southerners prevent the US Senate from passing a bill that would forbid employers from refusing jobs on the basis of an applicant's color, a white mob feels justified to attack Neil Kingsblood's home because he "misrepresented" his race on his mortgage application. Lewis's description resembles accounts of the destruction of Greenwood, Tulsa, Oklahoma's prosperous African American suburb, nicknamed Black Wall Street, besieged and torched on May 31 and June 1, 1921:

The background of suburban street could not have been more placid, with the branches in a gently moving screen across the cool lamplighted windows over the way. But against this background, the menace grew rapidly. Dozens and then scores of men and excited women filled the yards opposite, oozed into the street. Aggressive men pushed forward in the center, men whose killer faces were the more grotesque above their pert ties, their near-gentlemanly tweed jackets.

They ceased to be human beings; they became bubbles on a dark cataract of hate. (345)

During the battle, Lewis compares three of Neil's courageous black allies to "the Continentals of 1776" (346). The novel's white racists, however, evoke US history in more dubious ways. The Southern caucus, opposing desegregation by "Federal fiat," "seceded from the American Constitution" and restaged the Civil War in the US Senate (258). Similarly,

the residents of Sylvan Park see themselves as homesteaders, defending hearth and home against savages.

Demagogues exploit such crazy fantasies to debase politics. Buzz Windrip, the “ringmaster-revolutionist,” who “promises bread and circuses but delivers only the circus,” entertains his base with Minutemen in tricorns and pioneers in coonskin caps (Scharnhorst 388). Tea Partiers and Civil War reenactors, George Saunders argues, serve the same purpose at Trump rallies. History plays in an endless video loop to reinforce a stultifying white nationalism:

And here it comes again, that brittle frontier spirit, that lone lean guy in our heads, with a gun and a fear of encroachment. But he’s picked up a few tricks along the way, has learned to come at us in a form we know and have forgotten to be suspicious of, from TV: famous, likably cranky, a fan of winning by any means necessary, exploiting our recent dullness and our aversion to calling stupidity stupidity, lest we seem too precious. (61)

“The politics of eternity is like hypnosis,” says Timothy Snyder: “We stare at the spinning vortex of cyclical myth until we fall into a trance—and then we do something shocking at someone else’s orders” (133–34).

ETERNAL TOWN HALL

Against the destructive monologue of white nationalism, Sinclair Lewis pits the creative dialogue of multicultural democracy. His entire work is a public forum in which everyone—blacks and whites, men and women, natives and immigrants—gets their say. William Soskin compares Lewis to “the fellow speaking out in town-meeting; speaking in the language of his fellow Americans; speaking with a knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses and problems; speaking, for all his healthy hatreds and for all his contempt, with a fundamental sympathy and with something of the wistfulness that Americans try valiantly to conceal beneath their aggressive front” (v).

Americans remain great talkers, of course, but genuine dialogue has become difficult. As Bill Bishop warned in *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*, political and cultural segregation is now the norm. Americans are consciously and unconsciously deciding to move near people who think like they do. The dominance of social media and the Balkanization of the news have further widened this divide. “If political polarization is problematic,” says Steven Michels, “social polarization will only make it

worse,” as was painfully obvious in last year’s presidential campaign (113).

Lewis’s sympathy for the contradictions of human nature is a welcome contrast to the reductive hostility that passes as contemporary civic discourse. “[N]either we nor our propaganda are as simple as we seem,” Ash Davis tells Neil Kingblood, commenting on the complexity of Grand Republic’s African American community. “Nor are you!” (155). Ash’s sound advice, derived from Lewis’s own political philosophy, consists of two parts.

The first is to accept that America is an interminable conversation of multiple voices. “Debate is the only freedom and dialogue the only art,” Perry Meisel declares in his spirited introduction to *It Can’t Happen Here* (12). The point is not to decide who is ultimately right but to perpetuate the conversation and imagine other points of view. Meisel praises Lewis for identifying “the precise tensions” that structure both democracy and the art of fiction (13):

It Can’t Happen Here is a particularly relevant text for any assessment of American culture at the present time. After all, Lewis portrays what we can very reasonably call a multicultural America in the book as a whole, and in its concluding image of the patchwork quilt. The principal question he raises is, how do you read a world, or a novel, full of contending tongues without succumbing to the fascism or theocracy of either Left or Right, or to the kind of “message” literature that *Zero Hour*, for example, recommends to control the polyphony? One guards against the fixities of belief to which Left and Right, and sociological literature, alike aspire by insisting, as Lewis does, on America as a poetic fiction—a poem by Whitman, if you will—and on its endless self-invention rather than on anything self-evident in its constitution. America’s precise and paradoxical virtue is that it is decidedly artificial, imagined rather than found. (11–12)

The second part is to affirm one’s own multiple identities and divided loyalties, no matter what the circumstances. During World War I, Hugo Bromenshenkel, the immigrant protagonist in “He Loved His County” (1916), refuses easy answers: “It did not occur to Hugo that he must not be just what he now was, a German-American: but that he must be either an American or a German. It was the phrase ‘hyphenated citizen’ which brought to him the doctrine of the red-blooded—that only traitors and

It Happened Here *continued from page 14*

weaklings can continue to love both sides in a disagreement” (32). Hugo’s ability to engage his Norwegian, Yankee, and French Canadian neighbors in respectful debate, his willingness to entertain opposing arguments, distinguish him from the area’s one-sided nativists, who embrace jingoism and 100 Percent Americanism to silence their doubts and misgivings.

As an Italian American, I’m grateful to have been allowed to express my own mixed feelings here on Main Street. Like Sinclair Lewis, I love America but don’t always like it, particularly at this troubling moment in its history. Raised by parents who suffered under Mussolini, I can’t help but be alarmed by certain signs: the cult of nationalism; the demonization of immigrants and minorities; the domestication of brutality and violence; the denial of objective truth. America is no longer flirting with fascism. It seems ready to hop into bed with it. Let me end, therefore, with these stanzas from Langston Hughes’s “Let America Be America Again.”

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America [great] again!

Works Cited

- Bishop, Bill. *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008.
- Brooks, David. “The Four American Narratives.” *New York Times* May 26, 2017: A27.
- Gross, Barry. ““Yours Sincerely, Sinclair Levy”: Lewis and the Jews.” *Sinclair Lewis at 100: Papers Presented at a Centennial Conference*. Edited by Michael Connaughton. St. Cloud: St. Cloud State University, 1985. 1–9.
- Hughes, Langston. “Let America Be America Again” *Esquire* July 1936.
- Johnson, Charles. Introduction. *Kingsblood Royal*, by Sinclair Lewis. New York: Modern Library, 2001. xi–xv.
- Kazin, Alfred. *On Native Grounds*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942.
- Lasch, Christopher. *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*. New York: Norton, 1991.
- Lewis, Sinclair. “The American Fear of Literature.” *The Man from Main Street: A Sinclair Lewis Reader: Selected Essays and Other Writings, 1904–1950*. Edited by Harry E. Maule and Melville H. Cane. New York: Random House, 1953. 3–17.
- . *Arrowsmith*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925.
- . *Babbitt*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922.
- . *Elmer Gantry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927.
- . “He Loved His Country.” *The Minnesota Stories of Sinclair Lewis*. Edited by Sally E. Parry. St. Paul: Borealis, 2005. 27–43.
- . *It Can’t Happen Here*. New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1935.
- . *The Job*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1917.
- . *Kingsblood Royal*. New York: Random House, 1947.
- . *Main Street*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920.
- . “A Note about *Kingsblood Royal*.” *The Man from Main Street: A Sinclair Lewis Reader: Selected Essays and Other Writings, 1904–1950*. Edited by Harry E. Maule and Melville H. Crane. New York: Random House, 1953. 36–41.
- . *Our Mr. Wrenn: The Romantic Adventures of a Gentle Man*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1914.
- Lingeman, Richard. *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street*. New York: Random House, 2002.
- Lloyd, Alice B. “4 Sinclair Lewis Novels More Relevant Than *It Can’t Happen Here*.” *Weekly Standard* Jan. 31, 2017.
- Meisel, Perry. Introduction. *It Can’t Happen Here*, by Sinclair Lewis. New York: Signet Classics, 1993.
- Michels, Steven. *Sinclair Lewis and American Democracy*. New York: Lexington Books, 2017.
- Morrison, Toni. “Making America White Again.” *New Yorker* Nov. 21, 2016.
- Nafisi, Azar. *The Republic of Imagination: America in Three Books*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2014.
- “The 1992 Campaign: Transcript of 2d TV Debate Between Bush, Clinton and Perot.” *New York Times* Oct. 16, 1992.
- Roth, Philip. “I Have Fallen in Love with American Names.” *New Yorker* June 5 and 12, 2017. 46–47.
- Saunders, George. “Who Are All These Trump Supporters?” *New Yorker* July 11 and 18, 2016. 50–61.
- Scharnhorst, Gary. Afterword. *It Can’t Happen Here*, by Sinclair Lewis. New York: Signet Classics, 2014.
- Snyder, Timothy. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. London: Bodley Head, 2017.
- Soskin, William. Introduction. *Arrowsmith*, by Sinclair Lewis. New York: Modern Library, 1933. v–ix.
- Watts, Edward. “*Kingsblood Royal*, *The God-Seeker*, and the Racial History of the Midwest.” *Sinclair Lewis: New Essays in Criticism*. Edited by James M. Hutchisson. Troy, NY: Whitston, 1997. 94–109. ❧

Nor is the target just Lewis's idea of unhealthy causes. Richard Lingeman, who has considerable knowledge of America in the 1930s, notes that the book satirizes groups of that era that had a "reactionary, anti-New Deal, antilabor message" (464). However, Lingeman also notes that Lewis deliberately intended to expose the organized advocacy of all kinds of causes. During the preparation phase, Lewis gathered information from his old friend Leon Birkhead and twitted him for being a "windmill-tilter" (qtd. in Lingeman 464). Birkhead was the former Unitarian minister who had supplied background for *Elmer Gantry* and who then headed a national anti-fascist organization. We might expect Lewis to be on Birkhead's side here, but that was not his purpose, and the satirical reach of the novel includes the causes Lewis probably considered healthy as well as those he considered unhealthy—the featured groups ranging from the Cultural League for the Colored Races to the reactionary anti-labor Cizkon (304, 269–73).

Beyond the ethical issue and the issue of unhealthy causes, the novel makes four criticisms of organization behavior. The first is that there is more talk than action. On the opening page, the ten-year-old Gideon dreams of a destiny, not involving any particular achievement, but of speaking to large audiences and being "rotund and oratorical" (3). His subsequent life follows this trajectory. Rarely, if ever, does he achieve anything of value, but he gives many speeches.

The second flaw in organization behavior is self-promotion and self-importance. The Heskett Foundation, for example, in addition to being a tax dodge, exists as a way to promote the Heskett family name; good works are a mere by-product (223–25). Colonel Marduc's DDD exists mainly to promote Colonel Marduc. Planish works for nothing more diligently than building his own importance.

A third flaw in the behavior of the organizational world is identified explicitly at the end of the novel. It is the idea that organizations divide the body politic into ever more contentious interest groups. A young sailor on a train tells Planish how frightening it is that a private organization in America can exert huge pressure, almost, he says, like "a private army—like the Brown Shirts" (424). A page later, "a quiet man" who hears one of Planish's speeches begins to think about the unhealthy fractiousness of interest groups, who crusade "to seize all the benefits of ... Democracy for themselves: the farm bloc, the women's bloc, the manufacturers' associations, the consumers' associations, the bar associations, the medical associations, ... the labor unions, the anti-labor unions" (425). Often each group spitefully believes that jailing their opponents would contribute to national well-being.

The suggestion is that democracy might work better without all these divisions.

Appearing at the end of the novel, this explanation of what is wrong with such groups seems like Lewis's final word on the problem, but there is yet a fourth flaw in the group world. It is easily inferred from the behavior of organizations throughout and it underlies the other three flaws, although Lewis states it more explicitly in *The Prodigal Parents*. In referring there to the protagonist Fred Cornplow's daughter Sara and her left-wing-organizer friend, Lewis says, "Both Sara and he did love humanity. Whether either of them loved a single individual human being was less certain" (49). This love in the abstract without love of any one person pervades all of Gideon Planish's organization activities and makes his efforts, even when devoted to a respectable cause, seem empty.

More evidence that the critique goes beyond unethical behavior and unhealthy causes lies in the fact that the book targets not only the actions of organizations but also their language. When Planish loses his job as dean at Kinnikinick College and launches himself into the organizational world, Lewis injects more than two pages of parody of organization discourse (158–61). Here is part of one paragraph, mentioning:

ideologies and ideological warfare and in general the use of the word "ideology" as meaning everything except Far-Flung and Coca-Cola, and the longing to serve and the need of discussion and constitutional measures and challenges and rallying-points and crises, lots of crises, practically daily crises, and basic appeals and spiritual ideals and the protection of the home, and directives, and the sickness in our civilization— (159)

Later in the story, during months of conferencing on the purpose and name of Colonel Marduc's new organization, Lewis injects a two-column list of 114 words and expressions used most frequently during the discussions, for example: "hail with enthusiasm," "brook no opposition," "white light of criticism," and "complexity of the modern world" (346–48).

In targeting organizer talk, Lewis is continuing a long-term exploration of the inadequacy of language, a problem revealed in the role-dependent discourse in *Babbitt*, *Elmer Gantry*, to a small degree in *The Prodigal Parents*, and finally

Lewis's Critique of Language *continued on page 17*

in *The God-Seeker*. As I have written elsewhere, Lewis found streams of serious words suspect, not really representative of value (Killough 162–74). So he creates voluble characters whose discourse sounds phony. Babbitt's patriotic assertions, Elmer Gantry's God-talk, and the political blather of the young left-wingers at the beginning of *The Prodigal Parents* all sound less than meaningful. Misplaced religious fervor on the Minnesota frontier in the nineteenth century is resolved at the end of *The God-Seeker* when the protagonist, Aaron Gadd, abandons the missionary effort in order to work as a builder, choosing action over words. He says, "I *don't* believe in fear of divine vengeance, and I do believe in justice and equality—but let's try not to use the *words!*" (379). Finding hope in this new approach, he advises his wife to "stop drinking *words!*" (379). The suggestion is that Gadd, in turning his back on the world of words, will, unlike Babbitt and Gantry, go on to live a fulfilling and useful life.

The novel *Gideon Planish's* critique of organizer language includes at least three points. The first is a heavy reliance on cliché, as illustrated by the two-page double-column list of words and phrases used in the DDD discussion. Expressions from this list such as "get down to brass tacks," "take with a grain of salt," and "feet on the ground" are all too familiar (346–48). Lewis apparently found clichés annoying. Very likely he considered formulaic expressions an indication of formulaic thought, having little potential for meaning.

The second flaw in organizers' language is its tendency toward inflation and dishonesty. This feature complements their preference for talk over action and their interest in self-promotion. Planish's speeches use flowery prose. During a staged debate with his friend George Riot, he delivers an elaborate sentence that goes on for a page and a half (372–73) and even then it breaks off with a dash, as if not finished. The style is grandiose and opaque. Much less opaque but equally grandiose is the definition of democracy formulated after days of work by Marduc's DDD:

Democracy is not a slavish and standardized mold in which all individuality and free enterprise will be lost in a compulsory absolute equality of wealth and social accomplishments. It is a mountain vista rather than a flat prairie. It is a way of life rather than a way of legislation. It is a religious aspiration rather than a presumptuous assertion that final wisdom inheres in man and not in the Divine, for it boldly asserts that whatever differences of race, creed and color the Almighty has been pleased to create shall also be recognized by us. (380)

In this florid utterance and in other instances of organizer prose lies the dishonesty of people more interested in themselves than their audience while trying to show otherwise. The language is hypocritical.

A third criticism of the language is the same as one of the novel's criticisms of behavior, and that is an over-reliance on generalization and abstraction. Here, as in *The Prodigal Parents*, Lewis expresses his annoyance with talk of "conditions and situations" (e.g., *Prodigal* 20; *Gideon* 160). In *The Prodigal Parents*, protagonist Fred Cornplow complains that his daughter, in her left-wing phase, wants only to discuss "Conditions and Situations" (17). Introducing Winifred Homeward, the Talking Woman, in *Gideon Planish*, Lewis asserts that she talks endlessly about "Conditions and Situations," even until after the audience has sneaked away (320). Lewis was known to complain about second wife Dorothy Thompson's conversation as largely devoted to conditions and situations (Lingeman 378, 464). So Lewis was expressing a pet peeve. The criticism must be against the tendency to discuss generalizations and abstractions rather than individual people. The result is an empty-sounding discourse, which in Lewis's mind seemed more given to noise than meaning.

To assess Lewis's achievement in *Gideon Planish*, one must acknowledge the weakness of the work as narrative art. The book does not have the same magnetism for readers as had his novels of the 1920s. Planish as a character is not as vivid as Babbitt or Elmer Gantry. However, the novel is significant as social commentary, which was Lewis's most brilliant strength throughout his career. Here, in 1943, he exposed a feature of American life that since then has burgeoned and enveloped us. Organizations have multiplied, and as we all know, the language that goes with them has burgeoned correspondingly. Public policy institutes such as the Brookings Institute or the Council on Foreign Relations, which numbered around a dozen in the early 1940s, proliferated to around 1200 by the start of the twenty-first century (Barrett). The number of charitable nonprofit organizations that were registered with the Internal Revenue Service in 1943 was 17,450, which does not include churches or groups with too small an income to be required to file. This number, though substantial, is minuscule compared to the 730,888 charitable nonprofits registered with the IRS in 1994, a quantity more than 41 times larger (Burke 2–857–2–858). The population

has not multiplied at anywhere near this rate. Lewis was prescient in identifying formal groupdom as a feature of modern life.

His novel is also noteworthy for its relative constraint in formulating the issue. It shows less overstatement, for example, than George Orwell's famous essay "Politics and the English Language," which appeared only three years later in 1946 and which has enjoyed enduring attention. The two works share a similar concern about language. Orwell found political prose lifeless. He wrote, "The political dialects to be found in pamphlets, leading articles, manifestos, White Papers and the speeches of Under-Secretaries do, of course, vary from party to party, but they are all alike in that one almost never finds in them a fresh, vivid, home-made turn of speech" (135). He complained about clichés such as "no axe to grind" or "fishing in troubled waters" (130). He denounced formulaic expressions such as "give rise to," "exhibit a tendency to," and "serve the purpose of" (130). He disliked pretentious multisyllabic Latinate terms such as "deregionalise" or "non-fragmentatory" and condemned words with variable meanings that people use dishonestly in political debate, words such as "democracy" or "reactionary" (132–33). Even further, he observed a tendency in modern prose away from concreteness and toward generality and abstraction (133).

One would think that satirical fiction would be in more danger of exaggeration than an expository essay, but Orwell, being Orwell, is the one who went too far. He suggested the source of the problem was not in ordinary human activity but in the great political convulsions of his time, particularly fascism and communism. He also suggested that the English language, not just the discourse of politicians, was suffering decline—was being debased. In support of this idea, he quoted a verse from Ecclesiastes and then paraphrased it in what he called "modern English." Here are the two versions:

[1] I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all. [Ecclesiastes 9:11—King James version]

[2] Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account. (133)

To Orwell's credit, he admits that he has written here "the worst sort" of modern English, but he also claims that this style is gaining ground, and people today are more likely to write something closer to the second version than the first.

Be that as it may, this likelihood does not indicate that the English language is in decline. Comparing a King James Bible verse to a paraphrase in modern bureaucratic prose is like comparing the 1927 New York Yankees to a modern college team. Yes, the 1927 Yankees were better, but that does not mean that baseball is in decline. The comparison must be made with a team of corresponding stature in the present. In like manner, for Orwell to show that English is in decline, he would have to show that high-grade religious expressions of the twentieth century, for instance T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, were substantially inferior in expressive power to Ecclesiastes, and that is something Orwell could not do, because English really is not in decline. Writers can still use it in eloquent ways. Strangely enough, Orwell appears to have some hope for effective expression in the future, for he gives detailed advice about how to achieve it, and in so doing shows more optimism than Lewis, whose panoply of groups, even the relatively good ones, all seem unable to escape the problem. But Orwell persists in the claim that English is decaying. Here, characteristically, he sensationalizes and overstates.

Lewis's view is more credible. He contextualizes the problem, not in world-changing ideological conflict, but in the organizational habits of ordinary people. He makes no claim about the historical trajectory of the English language. He simply creates a fictional picture illustrating how formal groups, from the local Adelbert College Socialist League (15–20) to the national, well-funded DDD (348), sound like they constrict human value. This effect, as Lewis shows in general, is associated with a devotion to talk over action, self-promotion, a tendency to increase divisiveness, and a failure to foster love of individuals—combined with a language that features clichés, dishonest inflation, and reliance on abstraction. Lewis provides a more complete and insightful picture, that helps to show why formal group culture and its language would, in fact, proliferate in succeeding decades, even long after the debates about communism and fascism were finished. As was often the case, his insight was superior.

Works Cited

- Barrett, Judith A. "Think Tanks." *Encyclopedia of American Studies*. Edited by Simon Bronner. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2016. <https://eas-ref.press.jhu.edu/view?aid=281>
- Burke, Colin B. "Nonprofit and tax-exempt institutions—number, employment, employee compensation, and applications for tax-exempt status: 1929–1997" (Table Bg55–64). In Chapter Bg "Nonprofit, Voluntary, and Religious Entities." Edited by Peter Dobkin Hall. *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present*, vol. 2, Part B Work and Welfare. Edited by Susan B. Carter et al. New York: Cambridge UP, 2006. 2–857–2–858.
- Eliot, T. S. *Four Quartets*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943.
- Killough, George. "Elmer Gantry, Chaucer's Pardoner, and the Limits of Serious Words." *Sinclair Lewis: New Essays in Criticism*. Edited by James W. Hutchisson. Troy, NY: Whitston, 1997. 162–74.
- Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922.
- . *Elmer Gantry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927.
- . *Gideon Planish*. New York: Random House, 1943.
- . *The God-Seeker*. New York: Random House, 1949.
- . *The Prodigal Parents*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1938.
- Lingeman, Richard. *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street*. New York: Random House, 2002.
- Orwell, George. "Politics and the English Language." *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*: Vol. 4 *In Front of Your Nose 1945–50*. Edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968. 127–40. Rpt. from *Horizon* (April 1946).
- Schorer, Mark. *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961. ✍

DEPARTMENTS

SINCLAIR LEWIS NOTES

A book-length work by Sinclair Lewis that has never been published in book form before, *Adventures in Autobumming*, has been published by Omo Press. This was originally published as a three-part series in the *Saturday Evening Post*. It is available on Amazon and at <http://www.omopress.com/Autobumming/index.html>. Watch for a review in the spring issue.



The *New York Review of Books* (March 23, 2017: 57) mentions the novel *Scattered Bones* by Maggie Siggins (Coteau Books, 2016). A brief description follows.

July, 1924: The famous American writer, Sinclair Lewis, arrives in a remote Saskatchewan village in Canada. Over the next three days he becomes a major player in a devious scheme to rob the Cree of their heritage. Based on true historical events.

Available on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), but only as a digital book for Kindle.

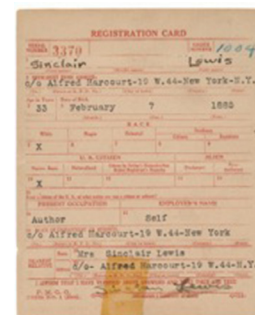


David Bond, who works in Special Collections in Southern Illinois University's Morris Library, sent in the following link to "The Origins of America's Unlucky Lottery," related to the 100th anniversary of World War I.

One of the artifacts is the registration card for Sinclair Lewis.

The draft was created on May 18, 1917, when President Woodrow Wilson signed into law the Selective Service Act, which compelled all men from ages 21 to 30 to register. Then names would be picked at random. "By the war's end in November 1918, 24 million American men had registered for the draft, and of the 4.8 million American troops who served in World War I, more than half had been conscripted."

The full story of the lottery is available at <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2017/05/04/the-origins-of-americas-unlucky-lottery/>



World War I draft registration card for Sinclair Lewis 1917–18. (National Archives Identifier 641771)



Frederick Manfred's prairie home, which once served as the interpretive center for Blue Mounds State Park in

southwestern Minnesota, is in serious structural trouble. According to Mark Steil, of Minnesota Public Radio (May 11, 2017), the house, which is owned by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, is starting to crumble. The house was built in the prairie style popularized by Frank Lloyd Wright and its back wall is a cliff. Unfortunately, the rock face leaks water, which



The back wall of the Fredrick Manfred House Visitor Center at Blue Mounds State Park is a natural rock cliff that cuts across the park. (Photo: Courtesy of the Minnesota DNR)

is ruining the building's wood frame. The cost to repair the house to usable condition is estimated to be about \$400,000. The Manfreds sold the house to the state in the 1970s.

Manfred was the author of numerous novels of the Midwest, including *Lord Grizzly*, the tale of a real-life frontiersman whose story also inspired

the 2015 Leonardo DiCaprio movie, *The Revenant*. He also gave the eulogy at the funeral of Sinclair Lewis and served as assistant campaign manager for Minneapolis mayoral candidate Hubert Humphrey.

Go to <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2017/05/11/dnr-mulls-fate-manfred-prairie-home-minn-blue-mounds> for the complete story.



The July–August 2017 issue of *Victoria* magazine features a pictorial article on Twin Farms, now a resort, under “Hotels We Love: An Idyllic Sylvan Sanctuary” (81). The text notes such offerings as “the Japanese ‘furo’ (private bath),” epicurean options “incorporating the estate’s homegrown herbs,” and a “15,000-bottle wine cellar.”

“Accommodations at Twin Farms offer the ideal combination of rustic charm and pure luxury” (for only a few thousand dollars a night). More information is available at twinfarms.com.



Shades of *Kingsblood Royal*: In “Sergeant Says He Faced Taunts at Work after Learning He’s Part Black” by John Eligon (*New York Times* May 14, 2017: National: 23), Sergeant Cleon Brown, a police officer in Hastings, Michigan, took a DNA test from Ancestry.com [rather than going to the Minnesota Historical Society] and discovered that he was 18% sub-Saharan African. He told colleagues at work about this, and shortly afterward became the target of various forms of harassment, so much so that he has filed a federal civil rights lawsuit.

SAUK CENTRE NEWS

The very successful 2017 Sinclair Lewis Writers’ Conference was held on October 14, 2017, in Sauk Centre and featured Faith Sullivan, the author of eight novels, including four set in the fictional town of Harvester, Minnesota: *Gardenias* (2005), *What a Woman Must Do* (2002), *The Empress of One* (1997), and *The Cape Ann* (1988). Her novel *Good Night, Mr. Wodehouse* was named one of the *Wall Street Journal*’s ten Best Fiction Books of 2015. Speaking on screenwriting was Judith Guest, author of *Ordinary People* (1976), which was turned in the 1980 Academy-Award winner for Best Picture, and more recently co-author of *Killing Time in St. Cloud* (1988) and *The Tarnished Eye* (2004). The other two speakers were Lorna Landvik, a novelist, actress, and stand up comedienne, speaking on firing up one’s imagination to write, and Erik Hane, a literary agent, speaking on developing a strong book proposal.



The following might be of special interest to those who stayed in the Palmer House during the conference this summer.

In 2012, the pilot episode of the *Borderlands* series brought paranormal investigators to Sauk Centre and the Palmer House Hotel. They contended that it was one of the most haunted structures in America. For more on this, go to <https://www.minnpost.com/minnclips/2012/07/palmer-house-sauk-center-one-most-haunted-locations-america> for an eight-minute video.

Sean Denniston also suggests “Ghost Adventures” on the Travel Channel for those interested in the paranormal, since that too has an episode on the Palmer House. www.travelchannel.com/shows/ghost-adventures/photos/palmer-house

SINCLAIR LEWIS SCHOLARSHIP

Thanks to Tom Steman, the archivist at St. Cloud State University, for directing Sinclair Lewis scholars to the correspondence of Lewis available at the Minnesota Historical Society’s Manuscripts Collection. The correspondence ranges from 1910 to 1950, takes up one box (0.4 cubic feet), and includes correspondence with *Saturday Evening Post* editors, primarily George H. Lorimer; some correspondence with Jack London concerning plot themes and scenarios developed

by Lewis; memoranda relating to the possibility of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer making Lewis's novel *Gideon Planish* into a motion picture; and some personal correspondence with various individuals. Go to mnhs.org and search for Sinclair Lewis. Much of the material is digitized and searchable. We also thank Tom for his hospitality during the Sinclair Lewis Conference this summer.



In "The Immunity of Empire: Tropical Medicine, Medical Nativism, and Biopolitics in Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith*" [*Literature and Medicine* 34.1 (2016): 185–206], Yeonsik Jung reads the novel as a colonial text, in which "tropical medicine disguises itself as a philanthropic, idealistic, and scientific endeavor that transcends the ugly politics of racism and imperialism, all the while reproducing a pseudo-scientific discourse of racism that consolidates the alleged biological superiority of white colonizers" (186). Jung interrogates Arrowsmith's "plague expedition" in light of twentieth-century ideas about eugenics and racial hygiene, contending that the primary purpose of his trip is to use the island as a lab with the islanders as guinea pigs. A second article on *Arrowsmith* by Jung, "The Rockefeller Institute and American Imperialism in Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith*" (*Explicator* 74, ii: 83–87) makes specific connections between Arrowsmith's employer, the fictional McGurk Institute, and the Rockefeller Institute, contending that both serve as agents of American imperialism. That American medicine succeeds in stopping the plague, where efforts of the British colonial authorities failed, "metaphorically foreshadows the decline of the British Empire and the hegemonic shift occurring in the Caribbean" (86).



Albert H. Tricomi's *Clashing Convictions: Science and Religion in American Fiction* (Ohio State, 2016) examines the adversarial relationship that developed between conservative theologians and Darwinian scientists in the nineteenth century and how the constructed nature of both science and religion is presented in American novels of the twentieth century. Two chapters focus on Lewis. "A Research Scientist's Religion: Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith*," pp. 115–34, discusses Lewis's critique of the medical profession through a satiric depiction of Christian culture, in which science and religion are opposed. However, *Arrowsmith*, the research scientist, experiences spiritual exaltation in his work. In contrast, "Satirizing Fundamentalist Education and Revivalist Preachers: Sinclair Lewis's *Elmer Gantry*," pp. 135–55, reverses the earnestness of *Arrowsmith* by foregrounding the opportunistic and

hypocritical title character's venal behavior. These novels focus on the clash between secular knowledge and moral authority, with Gantry, who rises high in the religion game, lacking any moral authority whatsoever. [An earlier version of Tricomi's work on Lewis, "Modern Science and Biblical Literalism in *Arrowsmith* and *Elmer Gantry*," appeared in the Spring 2014 (22.2) issue of the *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*.]

MARY ASTOR, EDITH CORTRIGHT, AND DODSWORTH

Sorel, Edward. *Mary Astor's Purple Diary: The Great American Sex Scandal of 1936*. Liveright/W. W. Norton, 2016.

Susan O'Brien: I've just seen the well-deserved credit given to [Richard Lingeman], for hard-to-find information for *Mary Astor's Purple Diary*, by author/artist Edward Sorel.

For those who haven't read it: it's a unique new rendering of the old Hollywood story of the court battle between Mary and her hostile husband, Franklyn Thorpe, for custody of their little girl, Marylyn. The main issue in the case, for which the book was named, was Mary's diary/account of her passionate affair with playwright George Kaufman, proving infidelity. Mainstream and tabloid newspapers of the time devoured the scandal with bottomless appetites, and poor Mary's leaked diary entries were quoted under glaring front-page headlines.

I won't go further and spoil the story, recounted in colorful detail and accompanied by some of the best, most detailed caricature art I have ever seen. Sorel has done dozens of covers for the *New Yorker* magazine, along with other publications too numerous to name, and won awards for his work. I'll go so far as to say my favorite drawing is the dragon-like attorney for Dr. Thorpe practically sinking his teeth into Mary's throat as she attempted to testify in her own defense. This abundance of artistic talent is half the reason to read the book.

While the trial was going on, Mary was filming her portrayal of Edith Cortright in *Dodsworth* (1936). At one point Mary became so exhausted from the nighttime courtroom ordeal that the judge agreed to suspend further testimony until the filming was over, in case she got sick and "500 people were put out of work." She carried on.

Sinclair Lewis said, "I do not see how a better picture could have been made." The film was nominated for Best Picture for the 1937 Academy Awards, as was Walter Huston for his portrayal of Sam Dodsworth. (It was nominated for seven Oscars and won for Art Direction.)

Sorel's art is augmented by his merciless descriptions of the people involved, such as Mary's "fathead" father and Kaufman as a "male..."; well, that's to save for future readers.

Thanks for a great addition to Lewis/Hollywood lore.

Sally Parry: I also read it and didn't enjoy it as much as Susan did. The review by Woody Allen in the *New York Times Book Review* (Jan. 1, 2017: 1, 16–17) made this biography, with copious illustrations by Edward Sorel, seem very humorous. Sorel has been fascinated with Astor for over 50 years and focuses on a major sex scandal that Astor was involved in while she was making the movie of *Dodsworth*. He treats it as major hijinks in Hollywood, although it's really a sad story of a beautiful young woman, exploited by her parents who rob

her of over half a million dollars, take her to Hollywood where she is seduced by John Barrymore when she is seventeen, and then makes many bad choices in men, possibly because of the rejection she felt from her parents. One husband dies in a plane crash, several take her money, and one physically abuses her and sues for custody of their child. Because she had a torrid affair with George S. Kaufman, Astor's husband claims the child would be better off with him. She eventually wins the case, but abuses alcohol and chooses more unworthy men. Sorel draws many comic illustrations and creates a silly séance where he speaks with her spirit, and he also inserts much about his own life and bad choices, which is more than one interested in Mary Astor really wants to know.

—Collector's Corner features catalog listings from book dealers as a sampling of what publications by Lewis are selling for currently. [Thanks to Jacqueline Koenig for her contributions to this section.]

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Swann Auction Galleries

104 East 25th Street, #6, New York, NY 10010

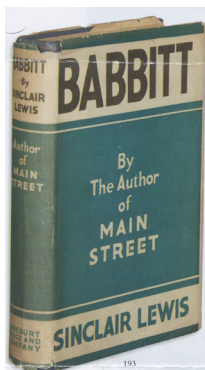
Phone: (212) 254-4710

E-mail: swann@swanngalleries.com

www.swanngalleries.com

PUBLIC AUCTION SALE 2448

MAY 16, 2017—19TH & 20TH CENTURY LITERATURE



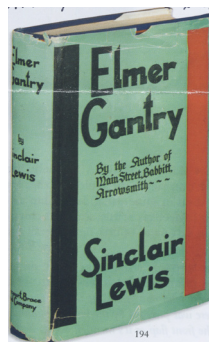
193. Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922. Price realized (with Buyer's Premium) \$1188.

Publisher's blue and orange cloth, rubbed, bend across front cover; front hinge cracked; dust jacket, price-clipped, chipped at spine panel tips, other tears and creases, several tape repairs on verso; front free endpaper excised; slipcased. First edition, first issue. Signed by Lewis on title. First issue point "Purdy"

for "Lyte" in line 4, page 49.

194. —. *Elmer Gantry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927. Price realized (with Buyer's Premium) \$500.

Publisher's orange-stamped blue cloth; dust jacket, corners clipped, few shallow chips not affecting letters, creasing to



front panel, light rubbing; endpapers toned. First edition, first binding with G resembling a C on the spine.

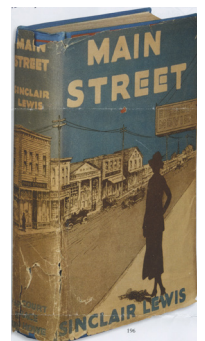
195. —. *Free Air*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1919. Price realized (with Buyer's Premium) \$1250.

Publisher's cloth; unclipped dust jacket, extensive cello tape repairs to verso, a few chips including to spine panel foot with loss of a few letters to imprint, short closed tears, scattered soiling; inked ownership inscription, bookplate tipped to earlier mounted additional bookplate. First edition in the scarce jacket, with bookplate signed by Lewis on front pastedown.

196. —. *Main Street*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920. Price realized (with Buyer's Premium) \$6500.

Publisher's cloth, hint of bowing to front board; dust jacket, three old cello tape repairs over closed tears on verso, particularly to bottom third of spine panel, 5 mm chip to center of front panel below title, rear flap detached along fold, edges brittle, scattered chipping including to spine panel tips affecting three letters in first word of title, light overall age-toning; contents clean and unmarked.

First edition with Harcourt, Brace and Howe imprint to spine, scarce second issue dust jacket showing matching imprint. Early printing with broken type on both the page 54 folio and "may" at the bottom of page 387. The exceedingly uncommon second issue jacket as here was preceded by the virtually unknown issue without the "Early Reviews of Main Street" on the front flap or its mention on the back panel.



Ken Lopez, Bookseller

51 Huntington Road, Hadley, MA 01035

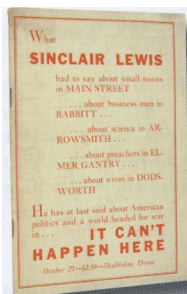
Phone: (413) 584-4827

Fax: (413) 584-2045

E-mail: mail@lopezbooks.comwww.lopezbooks.com

CATALOG 168—MODERN LITERATURE

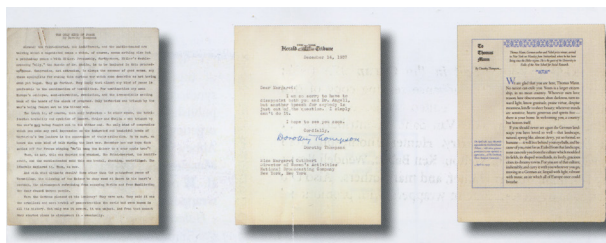
70. Lewis, Sinclair. *It Can't Happen Here*. New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1935. \$450.



An advance excerpt of Lewis's potentially prescient political novel, printing the first three chapters. 32 pages. A very good copy in stapled, glossy wrappers with promotional text on both covers. Scarce, ephemeral advance publication.

104. Thompson, Dorothy. Archive. ca. 1937–1941. \$3750.

A collection of works by Dorothy Thompson, journalist; radio broadcaster; wife to Sinclair Lewis (among others); dabbling lesbian; first American journalist to be expelled from Nazi Germany, in 1934; inspiration for the Katherine Hepburn film role (1942) and Lauren Bacall stage role (1981) in *Woman of the Year*; runner-up to Eleanor Roosevelt as *Time* magazine's most influential woman in America, in 1939; anti-Nazi, pro-Zionist supporter turned anti-Zionist (to the detriment of her career); who famously underestimated Hitler in 1931 while simultaneously personally pissing him off ("I was convinced that I was meeting the future dictator of Germany. In something less than fifty seconds I was quite sure that I was not. It took just that time to measure the startling insignificance of this man who has set the world agog.... He is inconsequential and voluble, ill-poised, insecure. He is the very prototype of the 'Little Man'"; and later quoted by President Obama in 2015: "It is not the fact of liberty but the way in which liberty is exercised that ultimately determines whether liberty itself survives.") As follows:



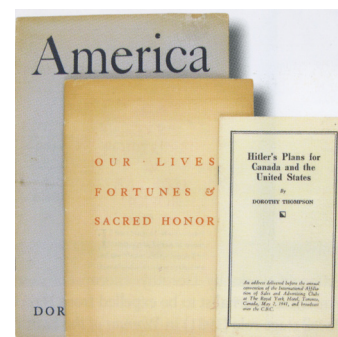
Original typescript of "The Only Kind of Peace." Three pages, undated, unsigned but with Thompson's name typed on all three pages. Argues passionately against a compromise with Hitler, based on the failures of the Treaty of Versailles. "Already the faint-hearted, the indifferent, and the muddle-headed are talking about a negotiated peace.... The truth is, of course, that only barbarism—in other words, the totalitarian brutality and cynicism of Messrs. Hitler and Stalin—can triumph by the war's not being

fought to its bitter end." Paperclip mark upper margin; folder in fourths; near fine. Provenance: papers of Harold Stearns.

To *Thomas Mann*. Stamford: Overlook Press, 1937. First separate printing of an article by Thompson published in the *New York Herald Tribune* the previous week, welcoming Mann to the United States from Switzerland where he had been in exile since the Nazi rise to power. In small part: "We are glad you are here, Thomas Mann. No nation can exile you. Yours is a larger citizenship...Wherever men love reason, hate obscurism, shun darkness, turn toward light, know gratitude, praise virtue, despise meanness, kindle to sheer beauty; wherever minds are sensitive, hearts generous and spirits free—there is your home. In welcoming you, a country but honors itself." One sheet folder to make four 10" x 13¼" pages. Fine.

Typed letter signed, December 14, 1937, on *New York Herald Tribune* stationery, written to NBC's "Director of Women's Activities," declining a speaking engagement: "I am so sorry to disappoint both you and Dr. Angell, but another speech for anybody is just out of the question. I simply can't do it." Thompson's signature is scarce. 5½" x 7¾". Fine.

America. Los Angeles: Modern Forum, 1939. The text of a lecture by Thompson, roughly 5500 words on the wonders of the American "race" and of American principles, in contrast to German imperialism. Foreword by Eddie Cantor. Sunned, stapled wrappers with a small chip at the upper edge of the front cover; about very good.



Our Lives, Fortunes & Sacred Honor. San Francisco: Windsor Press, 1941. The first separate appearance of this essay that first appeared in Thompson's syndicated "On the Record" column and is here published, without stated limitation, "in this time of urgency," following Nazi bombings of Westminster Abbey, the House of Commons and the British Museum, and urging US involvement in World War II. Twelve pages, printed in three colors. Saddle-stitched wrappers; edge-sunned; near fine.

Hitler's Plans for Canada and the United States. Winnipeg: Universal Life Assurance and Annuity Company, 1941. A small, twenty-page booklet printing Thompson's address, in Toronto, to the International Affiliation of Sales and Advertising Clubs, which was broadcast over the C.B.C., at a time after Canada had entered WWII but the US had not. In small part: "The swift, far-seeing man always knows that a forest fire is his business, even if it is raging miles away from his estate. He knows that the winds that blow across the earth, carrying the seeds of ideas, the germs of revolution and reactionism, the poisoned gases of conquest and war take no cognizance of boundaries. Slowly we are learning that we may sit dead at our desks or drop dead in our fields, while we minding our own business." Trace edge foxing and slight rust to the side staples; near fine.

Six items from a small span of her career, showing the journalist as an unwavering advocate for a cause she deemed worthy prior to the nation adopting the same view.

Join Today...

WE INVITE YOU TO BECOME A MEMBER OF THE SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY.

MEMBERS RECEIVE A SUBSCRIPTION TO THE *SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER*.

PLEASE CHOOSE A CATEGORY BELOW:

- | | |
|--|---|
| A. <input type="checkbox"/> \$60 ⁰⁰ sustaining member | D. <input type="checkbox"/> \$10 ⁰⁰ student/retiree membership |
| B. <input type="checkbox"/> \$20 ⁰⁰ family/joint membership | E. <input type="checkbox"/> \$60 ⁰⁰ institutional member |
| C. <input type="checkbox"/> \$15 ⁰⁰ individual member | F. <input type="checkbox"/> Additional donation to the Society \$_____ |

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip Code _____ E-mail Address _____

Send form, along with check, to: The Sinclair Lewis Society, Box 4240, English Dept., Illinois State University,
Normal, IL 61790-4240

The Sinclair Lewis Society
4240/Dept. of English
Illinois State University
Normal, IL 61790-4240