

The SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME TWENTY-EIGHT, NUMBER ONE

FALL 2019

MAIN STREET TURNS 100!

The Sinclair Lewis Society, in association with the Sinclair Lewis Foundation, will be celebrating the 100th anniversary of the publication of *Main Street* during the annual Sinclair Lewis Days, July 15–17, 2020, in Sauk Centre, Minnesota. There will be a conference focusing on *Main Street* and its influence on American culture. The Society will welcome papers on any other aspect of Lewis studies as well.



In addition to the panels, there will be a keynote speaker, a tour of places connected with Lewis's boyhood, and the unveiling of Dave Simpkins's book on the young Sinclair Lewis, *Becoming Sinclair Lewis*. Accommodations are available throughout Sauk Centre, including the Palmer House where Lewis worked as a young man.

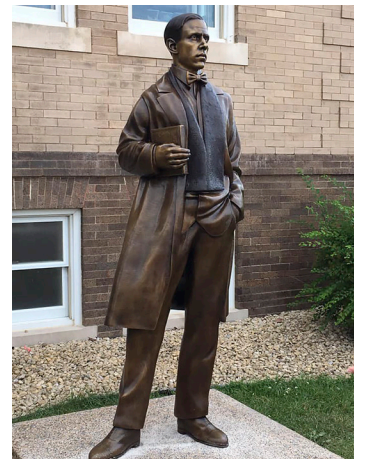
Abstracts of papers are due May 1, 2020, but are welcome earlier. For more information, please e-mail Sally Parry at separry@ilstu.edu.

SINCLAIR LEWIS AT THE LIBRARY

On July 1, 2019, a new bronze statue of Sinclair Lewis was unveiled at the Great River Regional Library in Sauk Centre. The statue is of Lewis as a high school student with book in hand, outside of the library that he loved to visit.

"This is probably the biggest project that we have started so far," said Pam Borgmann, Visit Sauk Centre Executive Director. "This is one of the biggest pluses we have for Sauk Centre. There are many people outside this community that relish the books and person of Sinclair Lewis."

Among the people attending were Roberta Olson for the Sinclair Lewis Foundation, Mark Roberg for the Sauk Centre Area History Museum, Marisa George for the Friends of the Library, and Patricia Lewis and her sons Richard and Ken Lewis, grandnephews of Sinclair Lewis. It was funded with donations as well as a grant from the Central Minnesota Arts Board. ✍



Sinclair Lewis statue on display at the Great River Regional Library in Sauk Centre.

JOHN GUNTHER AND SINCLAIR LEWIS

Susan O'Brien

What would Dr. Will Kennicott and Carol find if they walked today in Gopher Prairie? . . . Does the tawdry provincialism and vulgarity that shocked Carol still exist? Do the good qualities symbolized by the stout Kennicott—devotion to hard work, neighborliness, frugality, deep roots in sound native soil—still play their role?

—John Gunther, *Inside U.S.A.*

John Gunther was "in his day probably the most famous American newsman of them all," as Eric Sevareid described him.

—Ken Cuthbertson, *Inside: The Biography of John Gunther*

————— John Gunther and Sinclair Lewis continued on page 4

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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

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TEACHING RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN* FOLLOWING SINCLAIR LEWIS'S *KINGSBLOOD ROYAL*

Paul Devlin

United States Merchant Marine Academy
Book Review Editor, African American Review

This is a slightly revised and expanded version of a talk given at the 2019 American Literature Association convention as part of the roundtable "Teaching Ellison in the Context of Other Writers," organized by the Ralph Ellison Society.

Sinclair Lewis's 1947 novel *Kingsblood Royal* is a lacerating indictment of racism in which Neil Kingsblood, a white banker in Minnesota, discovers that one of his ancestors had black ancestry. Teaching *Kingsblood Royal* immediately preceding *Invisible Man* can help to prepare students for themes and content they'll encounter in *Invisible Man*. While *Invisible Man* is highly accessible and teachable—I believe I have taught it twelve or thirteen times—Ellison does create a rhetorical glaze—or haze—around certain concepts that benefit from unpacking for maximum comprehension. *Kingsblood Royal*—even more accessible and more teachable—provides a superbly light first course ahead of the heavy entrée that is *Invisible Man*. When I say light, I mean light in terms of instant comprehension. Lewis's deadpan realism is wry. Student engagement with *Kingsblood Royal* is consistently higher than with almost any other text I've taught, partially because of its immediate relevance to the Black Lives Matter movement and other 2010s topics, and partially because Lewis's clarity and attention to detail make students feel the past as alive and relevant in ways they generally have not encountered before. The dynamic and exciting class discussions *Kingsblood Royal* unfailingly provokes guarantee a wave of momentum and goodwill heading into *Invisible Man*.

Neil Kingsblood discovers his black ancestor because his father sends him on a wild goose chase to find out if their

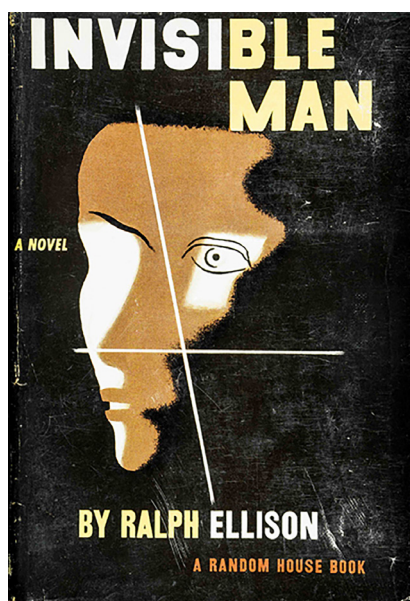
surname derives from an illegitimate son of Henry VIII. Neil soon discovers an unexpected ancestor on his mother's side: he learns he is descended from the Martinique-born explorer and trapper Xavier Pic, who settled in the Great Lakes region in the early nineteenth century. After a long and surreptitious study of African American culture, struggles, and history in the African American district of Grand Republic, a midsized Minnesota city, Neil makes his ancestry public, destroying his career and once-robust social life in a slowly unfolding process. A wide-ranging and acidic satire, *Kingsblood Royal* is a fascinating novel for many more reasons than its prefiguring some of the themes with which Ellison is concerned.

Kingsblood Royal specifically helps to set up *Invisible Man* by exposing students to digestible and pedestrian versions of some of the ideas and situations in *Invisible Man*. I will discuss three major points

of prefiguration, though there are more: (1) social in/visibility, (2) the Invisible Man's grandfather's deathbed speech and by extension A. Hebert Bledsoe's explanation of how to handle the black college's white trustees, and (3) the scene at the Chthonian Hotel in which the Invisible Man is asked to sing.

(1. Social In/visibility) In chapter 16 of *Kingsblood Royal*, after Neil has discovered his black ancestry and begun

—————Teaching Ralph Ellison *continued on page 6*



NEW MEMBERS

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

Steven Beuning
Edina, MN

Jeffrey Diluglio
Newton, MA

Teo Zagar
Barnard, VT

SINCLAIR LEWIS AT THE AMERICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

Four members of the Sinclair Lewis Society participated in a panel at the American Literature Association Conference on May 24, 2019. The panel, "Sinclair Lewis: A Humorist Takes on Main Street," was cosponsored with the American Humor Studies Association.

Sally Parry presented "'You meet such interesting people on the road': Humor in Sinclair Lewis's Early Travel Writing," Susan O'Brien presented "Humor in the Commonplace: From Alarm Clocks to Boosters in *Babbitt*," and Ralph Goldstein presented "Moving Targets: The Shifting Emphasis of Sinclair

Lewis's Satire." Robert McLaughlin chaired the session and also provided voices for the quoted characters in Parry's paper, which focused primarily on *Free Air*.

The session was well attended with great questions afterwards. Another paper on Lewis was presented on a Ralph Ellison panel, "Teaching Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* following Sinclair Lewis's *Kingsblood Royal*" by Paul Devlin (see page 3 for this essay). Also in attendance at this panel was Charles Johnson, the author of *Middle Passage*, who wrote the introduction to the Modern Library edition of *Kingsblood Royal*, and who spoke enthusiastically about Lewis during the question and answer session. ✍



The panelists, from left to right: Susan O'Brien, Sally Parry, Robert McLaughlin, Teresa Prados-Torreira of the American Humor Studies Association, and Ralph Goldstein.

John Gunther and Sinclair Lewis *continued from page 1*

Johnny and I talked about many things. We discussed Sinclair Lewis and I told him about the ups and downs in the life of an artist, of the deep perplexing down-drafts a writer may have.

—John Gunther, *Death Be Not Proud*

John Gunther's son was dying.

On the last day of Johnny Jr.'s life, his mother, Frances Fineman Gunther, read to him from *Arrowsmith*, the Lewis novel which most connected to the boy's serious interest in science. The book "lay beside the bed, open like a broom," John Gunther wrote in his memoir of his son, *Death Be Not Proud* (109).

At Thorvale Farm in western Massachusetts, Sinclair Lewis was hosting Dr. Cornelius Traeger, one of the doctors who had attended Johnny. Traeger also had been physician to Lewis and Dorothy Thompson. "I have a feeling that Johnny Gunther will die today," Traeger told Lewis (108). The physician left immediately for the New York hospital where Johnny was about to be admitted in the final throes of malignant glioma, a most aggressive form of brain cancer. It may have been a shadow moment for Lewis, who had lost his oldest son, Wells, three years earlier in World War I France. Also Lewis's younger surviving son, Michael, was the same age as Johnny and had gone to some of the same schools.

At this point in 1947, both John Gunther and Sinclair Lewis were international literary superstars. Gunther aspired to be a novelist but instead published the Inside series of books, highly detailed chronicles of Asia, Latin America, and Europe, with *U.S.A.* published in May 1947. *Africa*, *Russia*, *South America*, and *Australia and New Zealand* (posthumously) were to come. *Inside Europe* (1936) included a 4,000-word profile of Adolph Hitler, which was a forerunner of Gunther's 1939 book, *The High Cost of Hitler*.

All told, Gunther's books were translated into ninety languages, and sold more than 4.5 million copies at a time when a sale of 100,000 copies was still considered extraordinary. His name appeared on the international bestseller list seven of the eleven years between 1936 and 1947. . . . As Richard Rovere of *The New Yorker* observed in 1947, Gunther occupied an exalted position alongside Franklin Roosevelt and Charles Lindbergh. . . .

A revised version of Gunther's 1939 *Inside Asia* was on President Harry Truman's desk as he broadcast his V-J speech in 1945. (Cuthbertson xvii)

— John Gunther and Sinclair Lewis *continued on page 5*

John Gunther and Sinclair Lewis *continued from page 4*

Gunther also wrote countless newspaper and magazine articles and made hundreds of radio broadcasts, many during the pioneer days of the industry.

Gunther, like Lewis, knew fame and financial success provided no bulwark against tragedy. The first and only other Gunther child, baby Judy, died at four months in 1929 from a rare noncancerous illness.

Despite his wealth, Gunther, unlike Lewis, was a spender way beyond his means. Although he wanted to devote as much time as he could to support Johnny, including searching out every established, experimental, and crackpot cure, he was instead forced to continue the hard work of completing his work-in-progress, *Inside U.S.A.* Gunther needed the money.

Gunther met Dorothy Thompson before he met Lewis. A popular American radio commentator, Raymond Gram Swing, introduced Gunther to Thompson in Berlin. Lewis, already a Nobel Prize winner for fiction, joined a collegial group of ambitious, competitive but supportive young American foreign correspondents who gathered in Vienna to report on the European situation (Cuthbertson 48). Lewis and Gunther did not immediately become friends, partly because of the age difference; Lewis was sixteen years older than Gunther.

Gunther always recalled how, in 1935, Lewis predicted that *Inside Europe* would not sell more than 3,000 copies.

A decade later, as John was researching *Inside U.S.A.*, Lewis had chided him for wasting time on an ‘impossible’ project. Now, a few weeks after the publication of *Inside U.S.A.*, John was a weekend guest at the Lewis home in Thorvale, Massachusetts. Lewis’ latest book, *Kingsblood Royal*, was number one on the fiction list while at the time *Inside U.S.A.* was number one on the non-fiction list. The two authors had fun joking about it. (Cuthbertson 278–79)

Overall, Gunther and Lewis had a few things in common:

- Both had early careers on newspapers, but Lewis found journalism unsatisfying and turned to fiction. Gunther would do outstanding reporting on Germany, Hitler, and the European scene before beginning his *Inside* books at

the suggestion of Cass Canfield, president and publisher at Harper & Brothers. Yet all his life Gunther aspired to be a highly regarded novelist, while Lewis never had any desire to turn back to journalism.

- Both men were extensive world travelers.
- Both men had books on the best-seller list; both had books banned in Boston.
- Both authors—one a Nobel prize winner for fiction, the other the recipient of a second prize from the National Book Awards for *Inside Africa*—were extraordinarily celebrated during their lives with numerous awards for outstanding literary achievements, both critically and commercially.
- Both men divorced their first wives.
 - Both lost promising sons.



John Gunther sitting in a chair outdoors with his son John Gunther Jr.

The last is where similarities diverged, especially in the manner in which each father grieved. Lewis would remain almost completely silent, particularly avoiding any public expressions of emotion, once openly insulting Dorothy Thompson’s brother-in-law when he dared mention Wells’s death (Schorer 722). Never a hands-on parent, Lewis would neither openly grieve for his loss nor turn back to the past to blame himself for parental faults.

A caveat to this portrait of Lewis as an unemotional father, however, is contained in a December 3, 1944, letter from Lewis to Sgt. Fred Armstrong, who took a photograph of Wells in wartime France. As a Tech Sergeant of the Texas 36th Infantry Division attached to Wells’s Commanding General John L. Dahlquist, Armstrong worked with Wells and described the young man as “well-dressed, gentle, quiet, and unassuming” (qtd. in Hollis 7). Lewis’s letter read, “I am extremely grateful to you for your letter & for the photograph of my son—the most recent one I have ever seen, and one much to be prized. Thank you.”

This letter is a very rare view into Lewis, the father, and his obvious love for his son. He simply did not wish to make his emotions public, and as Dorothy Thompson noted in her

————— John Gunther and Sinclair Lewis *continued on page 8*

to ponder its implications, he is visited at his desk at the bank by Dr. Ash Davis, an African American chemist and Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. The wily narrator states that Neil

looked now at Ash Davis, but he did not see a “Negro,” a “colored man.” He saw a curiously charming man of the world who seemed also to be a scholar. . . .

He was, in fact, deciding, “This Davis is a bright-looking fellow. I didn’t know there were any Negroes like him. Well, how could I? I’ve never even had the chance to see them.”

(As a matter of fact, a few months before, Neil had sat opposite Dr. Ash Davis in a bus, had heard him talking to a large Negro with a clerical collar, and had never looked at either of them.) (85)

This is a blunt, easy way to introduce a simplified idea of social visibility. It would not be accurate to claim *Kingsblood Royal* as a source for the concept—Ellison adapted it from Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*—but *Kingsblood Royal* provides a succinct introduction.

Shortly after this visit, in which Davis asks Neil if the bank would consider hiring African Americans, Neil begins to attend African American churches. Initially he romanticizes African American culture but slowly develops much more nuanced and sophisticated perspectives. By chapter 23 one might say that Neil has done what the Invisible Man admonishes Brother Tobitt to do in chapter 22 of *Invisible Man*—he has explored the unrecorded history of African American neighborhoods.

(2. The Invisible Man’s grandfather’s deathbed speech and by extension A. Hebert Bledsoe’s explanation of how to handle the black college’s white trustees) In chapter 29, during a discussion with older African American service workers, Neil is told by a head waiter, “Ain’t but one way to handle a white man: uncle-tom him. Be humble, tell him how smart he is, tickle his shoulder-blades and pick his pockets . . . I mean, that’s what *some* fellows says, Captain!” A Pullman car porter replies, “I don’t like this uncle-tomming. Course I *can* do it — —.” A shoe shiner chimes in, “You can and I does! They’s just like babies—got to have a sugar-tit” (*Kingsblood Royal* 179). None of this would be news to Bledsoe, the president of the black college the Invisible Man attends, who tells the Invisible Man, in similar terms that this is how he manages the college’s white trustees. Of course, the Invisible Man’s grandfather’s deathbed speech is more complicated than this, especially through his allusion to Langston Hughes’s statement about Booker T. Washington (“live with your head in the lion’s

mouth”), but the way Lewis stages the concept can introduce students to the idea of strategic misdirection—an idea that will become an obsession for the Invisible Man. This is an easy way to begin discussions of appearances versus reality, masks versus actual selves, and rhetorical survival techniques.

(3. The scene at the Chthonian Hotel in which the Invisible Man is asked to sing) One of the moments in *Invisible Man* that I’ve found students can be a little mystified by is the scene in chapter 14 when the drunk guy at the Brotherhood’s party says to the Invisible Man, “How about a spiritual, Brother? Or one of those real good ole Negro work songs?” (312). One thing students don’t always follow, and which benefits from explanation, is why Brother Jack gets so mad so quickly on the Invisible Man’s behalf.

“The brother does not sing!” Brother Jack roared staccato.

“Nonsense, *all* colored people sing.”

“This is an outrageous example of unconscious racial chauvinism!” Jack said.

“Nonsense, I *like* their singing,” the broad man said doggedly.

“The brother *does not sing!*” Brother Jack cried, his face turning a deep purple. (312)

The Invisible Man does not feel strongly about the issue one way or the other. After the exchange he realizes that the drunk man had confronted him with his cultural heritage in order to elicit a reaction from him much the way he (the Invisible Man) had fantasized about embarrassing Bledsoe with dishes associated with African American culinary traditions (313). The narrator’s interior monologue focuses on his own reading of the drunk man’s behavior but not on Jack’s reaction. Jack’s reaction is critically important because it dramatizes the fine line he is trying to walk in the organization even as he leads the organization. Jack’s triangulation will become central to the plot.

A similar moment in *Kingsblood Royal* helps to explain. When we hit chapter 14 in *Invisible Man*, a few hands always go up ready to discuss this moment from *Kingsblood Royal*. An ostensible if already shown to be condescending white ally named Diantha Marl says at a party:

All you colored people sing spirituals so beautifully. It’s the high point of American art. So now you two boys go ahead and sing us some spirituals . . . Shut up

ALCOHOL AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION: A REVIEW OF *ALCOHOLITE AT THE ALTAR: THE WRITER AND ADDICTION* BY ROGER FORSETH. CASSANDRA CSENCSTIZ, 2017

Jimmy J. Pack Jr.
Penn State Abington

Roger Forseth, a recovering alcoholic since 1975, passed away in the fall of 2016. His book *Alcoholite at the Altar: The Writer and Addiction*, posthumously published in 2017, is a collection of essays revolving around the subject of the writer and addiction. Within this collection are many pieces studying Sinclair Lewis and his relationship with his own alcoholism. Most of the essays are critically informed—cited in MLA, published in academic journals—but in their critique and review, it's clear that much of the motivation for these pieces is a highball kinship Forseth shared with Lewis.

In the introduction of the book, Cassandra Csencsitz, Forseth's granddaughter, explains that

most revelatory was his posthumous and imaginary relationship with Sinclair Lewis, a complicated and tragic man whom my grandfather was uniquely suited to understand, and who dearly needed understanding. With Lewis, he shared Minnesota. . . . They shared a love of letters, of driving, of drink (unfortunately at times the two at once), of pastime turned to habit to disease. They shared their wives' first names (Grace), a certain physical insecurity, and, most importantly, a Romantic view of life as meant to be, well, drunk—but in a Whitmanian sense all too easily confused with the Dionysian. (xi)

Indeed, Forseth, in his sobriety and academic work, founded the journal *Dionysos* (1989–2001), one of the first publications in the field of study in addiction and literature. *Alcoholite at the Altar* is a collection of his most passionate and revered essays on the subject of the writer and alcohol addiction. Also in his sobriety, Forseth expunged any romanticism artists and their fans may have had of the effects of “the drink” on the writer. In short—drinking has never helped an author actually create a work of literature.

Forseth spends much of his work excoriating Mark Schorer for his failure to analyze what effect Lewis's alcoholism had on his writing; in many of the essays Forseth contends that the two are, tragically to Lewis's health, inextricably intertwined. “All of his friends noticed how when he was not working he drank; what has not so often been observed is that, particularly

after *Babbitt*, he worked in order *not* to drink” (59). Forseth noted, “the obsession with alcohol is always present, though its influence is often difficult to detect because the temporarily sober alcoholic is the most devious of people. It is the latter condition—the condition of apparent remission from compulsive drinking—that is most relevant, I believe, to Sinclair Lewis” (38).

Schorer's work isn't completely disregarded by Forseth. “While biographer and subject then were, by Schorer's own admission, a mismatch, it must also be urged that his research was careful,

thorough, and for any future student of Lewis's life and art indispensable” (165). Forseth spent his own time investigating the papers of Schorer while doing his own scholarly work, finding that much of the information about Lewis's addiction was mostly kept from the reader's view.

In a later essay, “Sinclair Lewis—Biography and Short Fiction” (2007), Forseth gives credit to Richard Lingeman for correcting the record and “produc[ing] a richly detailed and carefully documented narrative” (347), but it is the only essay to reference Lingeman's book and is the one Lewis piece that is not as critical as it is informative. Most of the essays that analyze Lewis's work aren't a deep dive, but they read as refreshing and would make for a quality introduction of Lewis's work to those who have never read him.

The works Forseth spends most, but not all, of his time on are *Main Street* and *Free Air*. Of the former, “Carol



Roger Daniels Forseth in Washington state, 1986.
From *Alcoholite At the Altar: The Writer and Addiction*.

——— Alcohol and Literary Imagination *continued on page 11*

John Gunther and Sinclair Lewis *continued from page 5*

comments to Gunther about Johnny, believed such grief was best not mentioned or discussed.

Gunther would agonize over whether or not to write about Johnny, but in the end, as a writer, it was his way past—though not out of—the grief burning through his soul.

The portrait of his son in *Death Be Not Proud* would become Gunther's signature work, a fierce memoir of a family in the deepest, most soul-destroying crisis any could experience. It is not recorded if Lewis ever expressed sympathy to Gunther and his wife, but in *The Life of Dorothy Thompson*, author Peter Kurth recorded Dorothy's deep feeling about Johnny's death: "When Wells was killed, Red wrote me, 'Never mention it again to Michael!' Poor Red! Poor Michael, if I had followed that advice. . . . The miracle of death is no less than the miracle of birth, and everything is in the process of *becoming*. . . . Whatever becomes of Johnny will be a miracle . . . a great renewal of life" (466).

During a period when Johnny's health seemed to stabilize, Gunther traveled to Duluth to visit Lewis and research *Inside U.S.A.* Lewis originally called Gunther a "brain picker," a derogatory term he also labeled his wife Dorothy (Schorer 736); but after twenty years of a lukewarm relationship with Gunther, he admitted he was wrong after seeing *Inside U.S.A.* He wrote the following to Marcella Powers:

John Gunther has been here, along with his book, and I take back everything I have ever said about his pomposity or other evil quality, and almost everything about the impossibility of his doing TVB (The Very Big) book. Seeing him, not gasping in an alcoholized salon of logrollers, but really at work, he was wonderful: keen, persistent, informed, easy, pleasant . . . talking to people who really had something—Judge Nolan and a radical lawyer, Henry Paull—John was a marvel of perception, memory, efficiency. (Schorer 736)

During Johnny's illness, Gunther received support from a New York writer and divorcée, Jane Perry Vandercook. They married in 1948 and soon adopted a son, Nicholas. Gunther continued to travel and write, his new wife supporting him by arranging travel plans and providing emotional sustenance after Johnny's death.

John Gunther died May 29, 1970, at the age of 68, outliving Lewis by nineteen years. According to the *New York Times* obituary, "He traveled more miles, crossed more borders, interviewed more statesmen, wrote more books and sold more copies than any other single journalist of his time" (Krebs 18). *Inside Australia and New Zealand*, his final book, was published posthumously in 1972.

Having served with great honor, Wells Lewis died on October 29, 1944, shot by a sniper in the Piedmont area of France. At the time of his death he was a First Lieutenant with the US Army, Headquarters, 36th Infantry Division. He was awarded the Bronze Star, Purple Heart, and the French Croix de Guerre.

John Gunther Jr. died on the night of June 30, 1947. He attended his June 4th graduation from Deerfield Academy, was an outstanding graduate, and had gained acceptance to Harvard University. At the time of his death he was corresponding on a scientific issue with Albert Einstein. He was seventeen years old. ✍



John Gunther.

I am indebted to and most appreciative of the encouragement and tangible support I received from author Ken Cuthbertson; his research and writing in this detailed biography made this article far more complete than it would have been. Thank you, Ken.

Thank you to Fred Betz for suggesting this article.

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WHAT WERE THEY READING THEN?

THE TYRANNY OF THE DARK BY HAMLIN GARLAND, 1905

Sally E. Parry

An occasional feature on books that were popular when Sinclair Lewis was writing.

Sinclair Lewis became a professional author in the year 1905. Although he had published brief articles in the *Sauk Centre Herald*, the *Sauk Centre Avalanche*, and the *New Haven Journal and Courier*, as well poetry and short stories in the *Yale Literary Magazine* and *Yale Courant*, in June of this year he made a charge of plagiarism in “Did Mrs. Thurston Get the Idea of ‘The Masquerader’ from Mr. Zangwill?” in the *Critic* and had the short story “Matsu-No-Kata: A Romance of Old Japan” published in the *Pacific Monthly*. He received \$20 for the first and \$7.50 for the second. He was on his way.

In contrast, *The Tyranny of the Dark*, by Hamlin Garland (1860–1940), was the work of one of the most notable authors at the beginning of the twentieth century, best known now for *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), his first major success. He wrote fiction, poetry, essays, and short stories, plus a biography of Ulysses S. Grant. His autobiography, *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917), was followed in 1921 by a sequel, *A Daughter of the Middle Border*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography. By 1905 he had written eighteen novels and had become a national figure.

In his Nobel Prize speech, Lewis dismissed Garland’s writing as old-fashioned and harmed by the puritanical mores of William Dean Howells. Lewis claimed that Howells

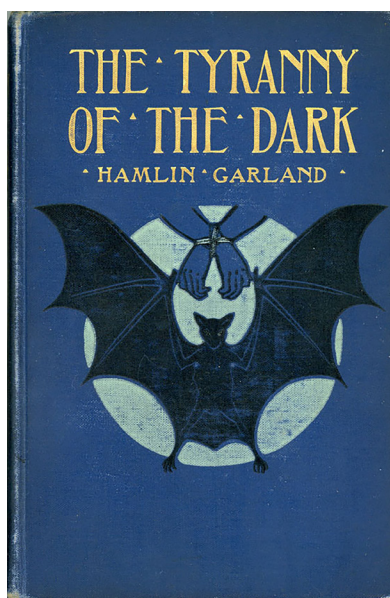
is still worshipped by Hamlin Garland, an author who should in every way have been greater than Howells but who under Howells’ influence was changed from a harsh and magnificent realist into a genial and insignificant lecturer. Mr. Garland is, so far as we have one, the dean of American letters today, and as our dean, he is alarmed by all of the younger writers who are so lacking in taste as to suggest that men and women do not always love in accordance with the prayer-book, and that common people sometimes use language which would be inappropriate at a women’s literary club on Main Street. Yet the same Hamlin Garland,

as a young man, before he had gone to Boston and become cultured and Howellized, wrote two most valiant and revelatory works of realism, *Main-Travelled Roads* and *Rose of Dutcher’s Coolly*.

Sadly, *The Tyranny of the Dark* is one of those novels written in a plodding, Victorian style, and despite its sensational topic, seems very dated. Dr. Morton Serviss, a physiological chemist and biologist from New York, takes a summer vacation in Colorado, where he meets Viola Lambert, a young woman who is sensitive to manifestations from the spirit world. She is encouraged by her mother to respond to promptings from the “other side” so that her mother can converse with her first husband and her dead child Waltie. A minister in their town, Anthony Clarke, becomes fascinated with spiritualism after his wife dies, and he sees Viola as a way to communicate with his wife. Serviss, who finds Viola attractive, dislikes her seeming passion for spiritualism and leaves town rather abruptly, going back to his research.

Two years later he meets Viola again. She has been groomed by Clarke as an intermediary with the spirit world. He has taken her and her mother first to Boston then New York to conduct a number of séances with wealthy people. Clarke has become involved in a Spiritual Temple and has big plans: he wants to introduce Viola to the world and challenge all comers to try and debunk her powers. He also plans to publish a book on psychic phenomena that will be underwritten by Simeon Pratt, a wealthy man whose wife and two daughters died in a shipwreck, who has invited Clarke, Viola, and Mrs. Lambert to stay with him.

Morton’s sister Kate sees Viola at a séance and requests that her brother visit her to judge whether she really is psychic. He also goes to a séance, is seemingly addressed by a deceased



————— *The Tyranny of the Dark continued on page 13*

everybody, will you! These colored fellows are going to do some spirituals.”

“Don’t know any,” growled Neil.

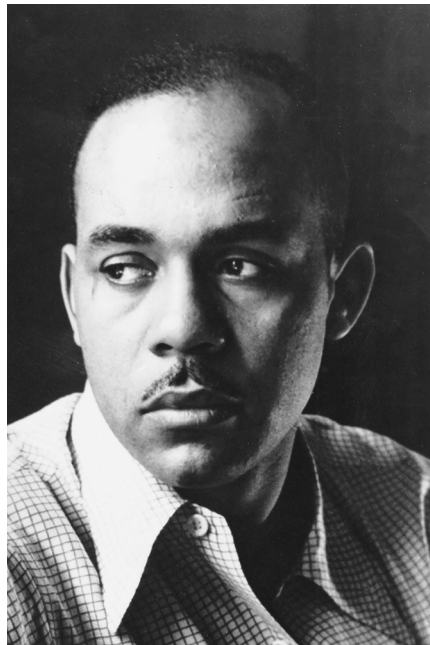
Ash Davis had a wistful love for spirituals, and he did not intend to parade them for drunken whites. To him they meant that half of his ancestors who had been Negro and Indian limping on the old trail of thirst and horror, singing low that they might not whimper. He said, “Thank you, but I’m rather ignorant of them, and I’m afraid I’ll have to slip away now.” (301)

This passage gives students insight into the subtext of Jack’s reaction. At this point the Brotherhood is trying to recruit the Invisible Man to be a speaker because of the oratorical skills he demonstrated at a Harlem eviction earlier that day. Jack is in a panic at this moment because he does not want the Invisible Man to think that the Brotherhood wants him in order to exploit his cultural heritage. The question of exploitation is a larger question than the question of subscription to a stereotype (“*all colored folks sing*”). The novelist Amitav Ghosh, in his story “Tibetan Dinner” (1988), writes “It cannot be easy to celebrate the commodification of one’s own suffering” (541). That is what is at stake. (Teaching Ghosh’s very short story earlier in the term can be a great way to introduce the concept.) Jack is aware of the exploitative impulse at the core of the drunk man’s request and is keen to silence him.

Those are three moments among many in *Kingsblood Royal* that can help set the stage for *Invisible Man*. I should add that *Kingsblood Royal* informs students about many important issues that *Invisible Man* does not. An important theme

in *Kingsblood Royal* is the diversity of African American communities. The African American community portrayed in *Kingsblood Royal* is far more diverse and complicated than any portrayed in *Invisible Man*.¹

Incidentally, when teaching these texts together I tend to avoid the question of influence. Ellison may or may not have read *Kingsblood Royal* (published five years before *Invisible Man*), but when asked if I think Lewis influenced him, I say it could be so, but we just do not know. But I also mention the following: in a letter to Albert Murray, April 16, 1950, Ellison writes that he, along with his wife, Fanny, once had dinner with Sinclair Lewis (Callahan and Murray 12). He does not mention where or when, nor does he go into detail about Lewis’s work. ✍



Ralph Ellison.

Notes

¹ Novelist and critic Charles Johnson, who wrote the introduction to the Modern Library edition of *Kingsblood Royal*, was in the audience. During the Q&A he offered eloquent support for this claim and for the paper in general.

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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 Paul Devlin, Ted G. Fleener, Ralph Goldstein, Michael Goodell, Darryl Henriques, Patricia Lewis, Robert McLaughlin, Susan O’Brien, Jimmy J. Pack Jr., Samuel Rogal, and Jim Umhoefer.

Kennicott as Expatriate” (2005) is a deep dive that explores the “vagabond fallacy,” where Forseth contends Carol “retains essentially *her* self. She discovers that a degree of social conformity does not of necessity require her to abandon the integrity of her original vision” (335) because she returns from Washington to Gopher Prairie after her exile to find freedom from the “main street” she feels has quashed her own spirit, but as Forseth (and Lewis) points out, “She had her freedom, and it was empty” (341). In this analysis, Forseth proves that it is possible, in the United States, to expatriate oneself merely by going to another state or another area of the country. What would have helped this essay, though, would be a closer look at Kennicott’s agency, but this essay was written in the pre-#metoo movement. It does make for a quality start on future scholarship on this topic.

Free Air is treated with kid gloves, but it’s hard not to love and be fully engaged in Forseth’s essays about Lewis’s early road trip novel (and take on a woman’s agency for the time, dare I say!). In “A Romance of Manners and Class” (1993), Forseth forges the connection between Lewis and himself with a personal comparison between Claire Boltwood’s (and her father’s) stop for lunch at a local dining establishment in Reaper, North Dakota, and his own remembrance of early American road-tripping. Predating the Duncan Hines ratings that would start over fifteen years later, Lewis captured the dangers of eating at mom-and-pop establishments while on the early roads of the US in his description of the Eats Garden:

It was Claire’s first bad day since the hole in the mud. She had started gallantly, scooting along the level road that flies straight west of Fargo. But at noon she encountered a restaurant which made eating seem an evil.

That they might have fair fame among motorists the commercial club of Reaper had set at the edge of town a sign “Welcome to Reaper, a Live Town—Speed Limit 8 Miles perhr.” Being interpreted, that sign meant that if you went much over twenty miles an hour on the main street, people might glance at you; and that the real welcome, the only impression of Reaper that tourists were likely to carry away, was the welcome in the one restaurant. It was called the Eats Garden. As Claire and her father entered, they were stifled by a belch of smoke from the frying pan in the kitchen. The room was blocked by a huge lunch counter; there was only one table, covered with oil cloth decorated with venerable spots of dried egg yolk.

The waiter-cook, whose apron was gravy-pat-

terned, with a border and stomacher of plain gray dirt, grumbled, “Whadyuhwant?”

Claire sufficiently recovered to pick out the type from the fly specks on the menu, and she ordered a small steak and coffee for her father; for herself tea, boiled eggs, toast. (Lewis 74–75)

Forseth’s own account of the classic American road trip mirrored Claire’s, vicariously connecting Forseth to Lewis via a “greasy spoon”:

In 1935, on a trip from Aberdeen to Seattle aboard a Chrysler touring sedan, our family stopped at the only café in Lemmon, SD for dinner. My mother, knowing what Lewis knew, demanded to inspect the kitchen before we ordered; it flunked, so on to Hettinger we went, where we were at least not poisoned. I have made that trip many times since, and can report that Lewis’s 1919 description is still as accurate as it is vivid. (181)

Forseth takes the time to gloss *It Can’t Happen Here* in a compelling essay titled “Two Notes to a Low and Dishonest Decade” (2001), in which he compares Lewis’s totalitarian (dare I say prescient?) and still relevant novel to an early story of Saul Bellow’s, titled “The Hell It Can’t,” a line echoed from Lewis’s novel and a theme which does the same. Forseth writes only a little over ten pages comparing the two—Bellow’s story only 1,300 words—but does an excellent job exposing the fears both revered writers were consumed by in the mid-1930s.

Throughout the book you will find more surprises and analysis, and while not all the essays speak of Lewis’s alcoholism, the placement of essays in the book prove they are carefully curated to help the reader understand that Lewis’s writing was always influenced, in some way, by his need to drink. Lewis’s addiction is always in the back of your mind as you read through the collection. Forseth’s book is an excellent time capsule of scholarship, much of which begs further research and discussion. ✍

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WHAT WERE THEY READING THEN?

THE VOICE OF BUGLE ANN BY MACKINLAY KANTOR, 1935

Ted G. Fleener

An occasional feature on books that were popular when Sinclair Lewis was writing.

In 1935, when Sinclair Lewis's It Can't Happen Here was published, MacKinlay Kantor published The Voice of Bugle Ann, a story of foxhounds in the Ozarks, which became a best-seller and was turned into a film the following year.

MacKinlay Kantor (1904–1977) was an Iowa native who wrote over 30 books, many short stories, and a number of screenplays. His most famous book is *Andersonville*, which won a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1956. As a young man, I became aware of Kantor's work because he was one of my dad's favorite authors. As noted in a piece I wrote some years ago for the *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*, I met Kantor when I was eighteen. He was doing research in Columbia, Missouri, for the book *Missouri Bittersweet* (1969). He spent about a week in the historical society library where I had a summer job and was always very polite and courteous to us young people. It was a real honor to have met him. Kantor loved Missouri almost as much as his home state and visited there often, so it was only natural that he would write *The Voice of Bugle Ann*, the story of an Ozark foxhound.

The men of the Ozarks often went fox hunting at night with hounds, each proud of his dogs and the dogs' breeding. They would sit by the fire and listen to hound music as they ran the fox. The goal was to run the fox till it holed up, but not to kill it. As a young man teaching in Howard County, Missouri, in the 1980s, a few of the older men I knew still sat around a fire late at night to listen to foxhounds run the fox.

The tale of Bugle Ann runs from her birth as the runt of the litter to her mysterious disappearance. In the novel, Springfield Davis, a Confederate veteran of the Civil War, owns Bugle Ann who grows up to have the sweetest voice a foxhound was ever blessed with: "This was no hound-voice such as he had ever heard before, and he would never hear its like again" (18). She sounded like a sweet bugle and her voice stood out from that of the other foxhounds. In the book, Kantor describes well

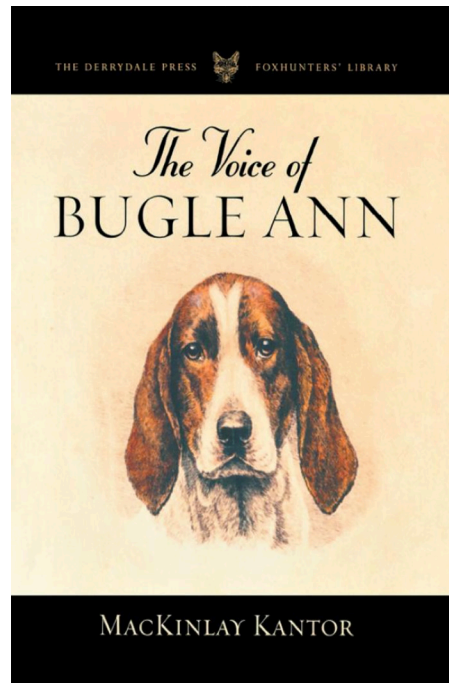
the personalities and language of the men around the campfire who listen to the music of the hounds.

Jacob Terry, an angry man, moves into the area and fences his farm to keep his sheep in and dogs out. He threatens violence against his neighbors, including Davis, and their dogs, and fights with his daughter Camden. Although she knows the risks, she becomes romantically involved with Davis's son Benjy. One evening during an argument Terry slaps her, so she takes her car and leaves home. Bugle Ann disappears that same night in the vicinity of Terry's home and later, in an armed confrontation, Davis kills Terry because he suspects that Terry has killed Bugle Ann. Davis is arrested and tried for murder. The film version of the novel dramatizes the depth of Davis's feeling for his dog in his closing words to the judge: "Oh, yes sir, Judge, I'd seen that more than once. I'd kill any man that killed a friend of mine for no reason and a hound's just as much a friend as any man, 'cept he ain't got none of a man's faults. No sir, I ain't denying I killed Jake Terry because he killed Bugle Ann. I didn't want to do it judge, I just had to." He is found guilty of murder and sent to the penitentiary.

When Davis is in the Jefferson City prison, he tries to come to terms with his plight.

You wouldn't think that a man like that could ever be tried for murder, or become a convict.

Those things did happen to Springfield Davis, at eighty-two... . Whenever he heard the gongs and whistles



The Tyranny of the Dark *continued from page 9*

uncle, and becomes convinced that the control that Clarke and Pratt have over her is bringing her close to a mental collapse. He decides that he must rescue her from this psychic bondage, and restore her to normality, as well as make her his wife.

There is an interesting connection between this novel and Lewis's *Arrowsmith*. Serviss works with a German scientist, Dr. Rudolph Weissmann, who is a mentor to him, both in life and in science, just as Max Gottlieb would be to Martin Arrowsmith. Weissmann and Serviss discuss at length various scientific theories, as well as the question of life beyond the grave. The description of these scientists is similar to the way that Lewis would celebrate scientific researchers twenty years later.

The men behind these bald, bleak doors are tireless workers as well as seers and sages. They toil (at ridiculously low salaries) in the avowed hope of eradicating disease. They do not pause in dismay of the insoluble. . . .

With quickening breath they watch electrons flame and fall, seeing the ultimate constitution of matter almost within their grasp, and yet they do not permit

their dreams to blind or weaken them in their wearisome, hopeless quest. (104–05)

Rather than trying to cure the plague though, Serviss and Weissmann seek to rescue Viola from the “mental gangrene” (145) of spiritualism. They engage in long discussions about theories of spiritualism including transference and telekinesis and how some distinguished scientists like Sir William Crookes not only believe in but celebrate the spirit world.

Serviss sends to Colorado for Viola's father and together they rescue her and her mother from Pratt's home and Clarke's plans. Clarke commits suicide and Serviss goes with the Lambert family to Canada to escape the notoriety that will be occasioned by Clarke's death. He proposes to Viola, promising to restore her to normal young womanhood and to become her “chief ‘control’” (439).

In 1929 Garland moved to Hollywood, California, where he spent the remainder of his life trying to prove the legitimacy of psychic mediums, including in his last book *The Mystery of the Buried Crosses* (1939). ✍

The Voice of Bugle Ann *continued from page 12*

which sent him about his gray routine at Jefferson City . . . He must have imagined instead that he was sitting by a fire at the edge of Bachelor's timber, listening to the dogs as they hunted out of Chilly Branch Hollow, with Bugle Ann's cry echoing against the blackness of the sky. (10–11)

The story concludes with Davis being pardoned and released from prison. His neighbors put together a festive meal in his honor. After that, he insists on going fox hunting with his son and a few friends. To their surprise they hear the voice of a hound very much like Bugle Ann. Heading in the direction of sound, they come across Camden Terry, who has returned home and is waiting for them. Beside her is a beautiful lady foxhound, the image of Bugle Ann. The night her father was killed she inadvertently hit Bugle Ann with her car, then took the dog and nursed her back to health. She bred Bugle Ann, and of her five puppies Little Lady is the one with the voice closest to that of her mother. The bones and collar of Bugle Ann are found several years after her disappearance; apparently she died after being caught in a tangle of wire. What will happen next? Will the romance of Camden and Benjy resume? Will the beautiful lady foxhound continue

in her mother's tradition? A sequel by Kantor, *Daughter of Bugle Ann* (1953), tells the tale.

The following comments are taken from the inside dust jacket of a signed limited first edition of the book that is in this reviewer's library.

The music of the pack runs through this story like a chain of silver bells. Music, tragedy, dignity and humor are all here . . . A small but distinguished epic of America, which also may well be one of the greatest dog stories ever written. Out of the Missouri hill country he has drawn the elements for a legend which should long haunt the hearts of his ever widening public. For a hundred years, men bred fox hounds in the green valleys of the middle west; like these other men, Springfield Davis of this story is one whose spirit arose when the hounds bayed at night. The cry of Bugle Ann, greatest voice among all the dogs, led him through the gray gates of the Jefferson City prison—and out again. Those who read *The Voice of Bugle Ann* will feel their pulses

—————The Voice of Bugle Ann *continued on page 14*

The Voice of Bugle Ann *continued from page 13*

quicken as they listen to the crash of Spring Davis's rifle, the rattle of Camden Terry's old Ford, and always the baying of a white dog who would "come back to those black-dark hills when the bugle called her home."

The book was serialized by the *Atlantic Monthly* before being published in hardcover. *Kirkus Review* raved, "It is the story of a hound, pride and joy of an old farmer . . . and how he ranked the honor of Bugle Ann above all else, when it came to a showdown with the neighbor who fenced his sheep in with barbed wire. It's a natural."

The Voice of Bugle Ann was Kantor's first novel to be made into a film. Released the year after the book was published, the movie received good reviews. Maureen O'Sullivan does a lovely job as Camden Terry and Dudley Digges is appropriately nasty as Jacob Terry. Lionel Barrymore,



An illustration of Bugle Ann.

the well-known actor, plays Springfield Davis. His deep love for his dogs, especially Bugle Ann, should warm the hearts of dog lovers everywhere. His closing statement at his trial is a movie classic of feeling and emotion. Among the eleven Kantor novels to be filmed, the most famous was the novel

in blank verse, *Glory For Me*, which became *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Frank S. Nugent, in reviewing *The Voice of Bugle Ann* for the *New York Times* in 1936 wrote, "Out of it, more importantly, has come a picture that should be excellent entertainment for every lover of dogs and still should be entirely satisfactory to those who can take them or leave them alone." The movie is incredibly true to the book, something that rarely happens with Hollywood adaptations.

This reader wonders over 80 years later about whether the foxhounds still run the Heaven Creek Hills and hollows of the Missouri Ozarks. Somehow, I hope that they still do. ✍

DEPARTMENTS

SINCLAIR LEWIS MISCELLANY

In a review-essay of *Mr. Straight Arrow*, the new biography of John Hersey by Jeremy Treglown, in the *New Yorker* ("The Art of Fact," April 29, 2019: 66–70), critic Nicholas Lemann discusses Hersey's career, including his working as a secretary for Sinclair Lewis in 1937. Like Lewis, Hersey also graduated from Yale University and won a Pulitzer Prize, for his World War II novel, *A Bell for Adano* (1944), which was turned into both a successful Broadway play and movie. Hersey is probably best known for "Hiroshima," published in

the *New Yorker* in August 1946, which looks at the lives of six survivors of the atomic blast. He taught writing at Yale from 1965 to 1984, was active in the civil rights movement, and although better known for his journalism, wrote a number of novels, including *The Wall* (1950), *The Child Buyer* (1960), *White Lotus* (1965), *The Algiers Motel Incident* (1968), and *The Call* (1985).



Herman Wouk, an author best known for *The Caine Mutiny*, *The Winds of War*, and *War and Remembrance* died May 17, 2019. The *New York Times* obituary discussed the mixed critical reception that his works received and the theatrical, film, and television versions of his works. "His sympathy for the middle-class virtues led *Time* magazine to call him 'a Sinclair

Lewis in reverse.’ Reviewing *Marjorie Morningstar* (1955) for the *Times*, the critic Maxwell Geismar shrewdly focused on it as a drama of Jewish assimilation.” The focus on a young girl who wants to be an actress has echoes of Lewis’s *Bethel Merriday* (1940).



Charles Van Doren, a former Columbia University professor, who confessed in 1959 that his performances on the television quiz show *Twenty-One* were rigged, died April 9, 2019. In a *New York Times* obituary, “Charles Van Doren, A Quiz Show Whiz Who Wasn’t, Dies at 93” (April 10, 2019), Robert D. McFadden notes that Van Doren came from a distinguished literary family. “He and his younger brother, John, were raised in a milieu of literary figures: Franklin P. Adams, Joseph Wood Krutch, Sinclair Lewis and others.”

His father, Mark Van Doren, taught at Columbia for 39 years; served as an editor at the *Nation*; won a Pulitzer Prize for his *Collected Poems 1922–1938*; wrote critical studies on John Dryden, Shakespeare, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau; and served as president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His mother, Dorothy Van Doren, was an editor at the *Nation*, worked for the United States Office of War Information during World War II, and wrote novels and some humorous autobiographical works. His uncle, Carl Van Doren, taught at Columbia until 1930, won a Pulitzer Prize for Biography for *Benjamin Franklin* (1938), and was instrumental in helping to establish American literature as a legitimate field of study in universities. He wrote the admiring *Sinclair Lewis: A Biographical Sketch* in 1933, provided notes for “A Map of Sinclair Lewis’ United States, As It Appears in His Novels,” published by Doubleday, Doran in 1934, and was a close friend of Lewis.

Charles Van Doren served as a host on *The Today Show*, but after revealing the rigged nature of the show to congressional investigators, Van Doren was dropped from NBC, lost his job at Columbia, and moved to Chicago, where he worked for *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and edited, wrote, and co-wrote dozens of books, including *A History of Knowledge* (1991) and *The Joy of Reading* (1985), and some with the philosopher and educator Mortimer J. Adler, including *Great Treasury of Western Thought* (1977). He was portrayed in the 1994 film *Quiz Show* by Ralph Fiennes.

■ ■ ■

In a review of *Ben Hecht: Fighting Words, Moving Pictures*, in the Yale Jewish Lives series (2019) by Adina Hoffman in the *New Yorker* (“Nothing Sacred” Feb. 11, 2019: 62–67), critic David Denby says that *Nothing Sacred* “is Hecht’s Sinclair Lewis novel on film” (66). A satire on sensational newspaper reporting, the film focuses on an editor and a reporter who are so hungry for copy that they “convince themselves that a beautiful young woman is dying of radium poisoning; they foist this swindle onto their tearful and fascinated readers” (66). As it turns out the young woman is healthy and the reporter falls in love with her instead.



In the essay, “Making the Rules” (*New York Times Book Review* Mar. 16, 2019: 14), Ben H. Winters writes about how authors of speculative fiction create

laws, policies, and government agencies, usually as an eerie commentary on the politics of the moment. He mentions Len Deighton’s *SS-GB*, Omar El Akkad’s *American War*, George Orwell’s *1984*, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Jasper Fforde’s Thursday Next series, Nisi Shawl’s *Everfair*, Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, and Philip Roth’s *The Plot against America*. But he starts with Lewis. “Such imaginary law-giving has long been a staple of the genre. Sinclair Lewis, in his 1935 satire-cum-cautionary tale *It Can’t Happen Here*, doesn’t just elect a demagogue-populist president, but has him then establish a ‘new cabinet position, that of Secretary of Education and Public Relations,’ as well as the post of ‘High Marshall, or Commander-in-Chief, of the Minute Men . . . an innocent marching club.’”



Nothing Sacred (1937) directed by William A. Wellman and written by Ben Hecht.

SINCLAIR LEWIS NOTES

From *Lew Ayres: Hollywood’s Conscientious Objector*, by Lesley L. Coffin (University Press of Mississippi, 2012): “MGM continued to look for possible projects to tap into Lew’s

talent, such as . . . a romantic comedy based on Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*" (85).

Susan O'Brien, in an email to the Sinclair Lewis listserv, quotes Mark Schorer's *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961) on MGM canceling production of the film *It Can't Happen Here* on February 15, 1936. "The first news releases announced that Will Hays of the Film Production Code Administration had banned the film for fear of international complications and the displeasure of the Republican Party" (615).

Samuel Goldwyn said that the film had been halted because of casting difficulties. Sidney Howard [screenwriter, *Dodsworth*] announced he had seen a lengthy memorandum from Joseph I. Breen, director of the Production Code Administration, pointing out the "dangerous material" in the film and suggesting a drastic revision of the script. . . . Bulletins from both Germany and Italy approved the decision of the studio and the German Film Chamber in Berlin called Lewis "a full-blooded Communist." Lewis himself made lengthy statements to the press in which he pointed out he had no financial interest in the matter but that he was shocked by such a blow as this to the right of free expression. (616)

Schorer conjectures that the decision may have been "less political than economic" (616).

O'Brien notes "we see today openly aggressive attempts to control all kinds of media. No doubt Lewis's shock would turn to extreme outrage, but he might see the advantage of having such attempts out in the open. Finally, if it's true that a 'romantic comedy' for *ICHH* was under consideration, canceling the production may have been a blessing in disguise! It seems such an approach would have truly diluted the ultimate message: It has happened before, it's happening now, and it will happen again.

"As you may have read, death threats were issued against staff at the *Boston Globe* for the newspaper's initiative against the present administration's continuous assault on the media. That's how low it has all sunk, making the abandonment of the film of *ICHH* for political reasons seem almost mild in comparison."



Michael Goodell, author of *Zenith Rising* (2008), which was reviewed by the *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter* in spring 2010 (18.2), has written a new book, *The World Shifted* (White Bird, 2018), about his wife's battle with cancer. Despite the cruelty of the disease, Mary Northcutt lived for six years after the diagnosis, and "taught those around her how to live, to love, to never compromise with life." It is available on Amazon and Barnes & Noble, in both paper and electronic formats.



"*It Can't Happen Here*' is an argument for journalism as a basic pillar of democracy." — Alexander Nazaryan, the *New Yorker*, Oct. 19, 2016.



A new edition, in Swedish, of *It Can't Happen Here* has been published by Bokförlaget Polaris.

Adlibris.com. <https://www.adlibris.com/se/bok/sant-hander-intill-och-och-sinclair-lewis>

Translation of the blurb (courtesy Google translate): *Things do not happen here.*

What would happen if America was ruled by a dictator? Sinclair Lewis already asked that in 1935 in the satirical novel that *It does not happen here*. In 2019, the issue is more topical than ever.



Sinclair Lewis references appear in all sorts of books.

Darryl Henriques sent a January 1, 2000, book review from the Dana Foundation's *Cerebrum* of a biography on the biologist Seymour Benzer, "A Real-Life Arrowsmith Finds His Sinclair Lewis: *Time, Love, Memory: A Great Biologist and His Quest for the Origins of Behavior*," by Samuel H. Barondes, MD:

In the end, the distinguishing feature of this book is how it celebrates science by celebrating a remarkable life. During the time that he was working in his basement laboratory in Brooklyn, Benzer read *Arrowsmith*, Sinclair Lewis's novel about an idealistic young medical scientist, a book whose main characters recur

as leitmotifs throughout *Time, Love, Memory*. Weiner repeatedly makes clear how strongly Benzer still identifies with Lewis's hero, Martin Arrowsmith. He also describes Benzer's admiration for Max Gotlieb, the German scientist who was Arrowsmith's hero. It was from Gotlieb that "Arrowsmith learns to scorn the kind of careerist in medicine who thinks only about the practice and the fee: or the kind of plodding scientist who never ventured on original experiments which, leading him into a confused land of wandering, might bring him to glory or disaster."

If Benzer is Arrowsmith and Delbrück is Gotlieb, Jonathan Weiner is their Sinclair Lewis. All three share an old-fashioned view of science as idealistic and collegial. Just as Arrowsmith's story inspired so many, so too will Benzer's. The only difference is that, in the hands of a gifted writer like Weiner, truth is even more inspiring than fiction.

Excerpt:

As soon as Benzer finished reading *Arrowsmith*, he bought the finest-pointed fountain pen and the blackest ink he could find and began to imitate Max Gotlieb's handwriting, just as Sinclair Lewis describes it in the novel, "that dead-black spider web script." (37)

He [Benzer] was making the first detailed map of the interior of a gene. In the novel, when Arrowsmith discovers bacteriophage, he leaves his laboratory dawn after dawn, "eyes blood-glaring and set," and after a few weeks goes slightly mad with tension and exhaustion, "obsessed by the desire to spell backward all the words which snatched at him from signs." Benzer, driving home from his laboratory dawn after dawn on the long flat roads of Indiana, noticed his mind playing the same tricks (55).



Samuel Rogal shared this from Humphrey Carpenter's 1977 biography of J. R. R. Tolkien.

Tolkien himself only found the time or inclination to read a limited amount of fiction. In general he preferred the lighter contemporary novels. He liked the stories of John Buchan [1875–1940], and he also read some of Sinclair Lewis's work: certainly he knew *Babbitt*, the novel published in 1922 about a middle-aged American businessman whose well-ordered life gradually comes off the rails.

Odd ingredients go into literary melting pots, and both the *Marvellous Land of Snergs* (1927) by E. A. Wyke-Smith

and *Babbitt* played a small part in *The Hobbit*. Tolkien wrote to W. H. Auden that the former "was probably an unconscious source-book: for the Hobbits, not of anything else," and he told an interviewer that the word *hobbit* "might have been associated with Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*. Certainly not *rabbit*, as some people think. *Babbitt* has the same bourgeois smugness that hobbits do. His world is the same limited place."

SINCLAIR LEWIS SCHOLARSHIP

In *World War One, American Literature, and the Federal State* (Cambridge UP, 2018), author Mark Whalan has two extended references to Lewis, including titling the first chapter "Freeloading in Hobohemia." In the chapter he discusses Lewis's short story "Hobohemia," which the *Saturday Evening Post* published April 7, 1917, as an example of the magazine's hostility to modernist experiments. He gives a detailed plot summary, noting how the story "charts a complex relationship between modern American business and experimental, bohemian modernism. Primarily, modernism has unacknowledged concordances with consumer capitalism, which Lewis's work seeks to impishly uncover. Brown [whose fiancée has gone to Greenwich Village to find artistic fulfillment] finds modernism's hunger for conceptual novelties, especially ones that can be easily formulated and quickly circulated, to be akin to his experience with public relations." The connection between business and modernism is that, "for Lewis, business serves as the unacknowledged R&D arm of modernism" (44).



Jurrit Daalder's "Wallace's Geographic Metafiction," pp. 220–34 in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, edited by Ralph Clare (Cambridge UP, 2018), discusses how Wallace explores the Midwest's cultural meaning in his fiction, especially in *The Pale King*. The sense of place is understood from geographical intertexts, especially two urtexts of the Midwest, Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. Although Wallace plays around with stereotypes of the Midwest, he also uses them to explore the cultural impact of 9/11 and create a regional poetics. "More so than any other text, it is *Main Street*'s portrait of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, that established the myth of the archetypal prairie town, which has come to capture the popular imagination. . . . Lewis made the Midwestern small

town synonymous with the interests of everyday people, and the term ‘Main Street’ continues to function as a shorthand for these interests” (223–24).



American Literature in Transition, 1920–1930 (Cambridge UP, 2018), Ichiro Takayoshi, ed., is a valuable collection of essays focusing on different aspects of literature during this dynamic decade, including influences of the war, urbanization, Freudianism, secularization, Prohibition, and modernism; intersections with other arts such as cinema, jazz, and theater; and the publishing industry, including new publishers, small magazines, pulp magazines, and the obscenity trials in which new publishers battled enforcers of literary morality. There is a wide range of authors represented, including late Victorians, middlebrows, innovators in prose and poetry, women, immigrants, radicals, African Americans, Americans abroad, columnists, and humorists. Takayoshi neatly summarizes many of the issues at play: “a fast-paced evolution of literary conventions, a slow but steady change in morals and mores, a shift in the meaning of culture and civilization, the advent of new media technologies, the rise of modern cities, the maturation of democratic capitalism, new social policies, foreign affairs, aesthetic trends in Europe, and many more” (2). This important collection should become a standard in the study of 1920s American literature.

There are a number of mentions of Sinclair Lewis throughout the book, with the most detailed discussion by Lewis scholar Clare Eby, in her survey of “The Late Victorians” (27–42). She classifies writers born between the 1860s and mid-1880s as late Victorians or “protomoderns,” including among them Edith Wharton, Joseph Hergesheimer, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, and Lewis, all of whom were conscious of living in a transitional era. She mentions Lewis’s praise of Dreiser in his Nobel Prize speech for having “cleared the trail from Victorian and Howellsian timidity.” She connects Cather and Lewis for evincing “profound resistance to—at times even contempt for—modernity. . . . [They] see modern America defined by an escalating commercialization contaminating even the domestic sphere that Victorians upheld as a haven from the market. Cather’s and Lewis’s male breadwinning protagonists respond obliquely to the threat of modernity, retreating not so much from materialism but rather from domestic heterosexuality. Fleeing to homosocial relationships, Cather’s Godfrey St. Peter and Lewis’s George F. Babbitt seek queer—albeit platonic—retreats from modern commercialism . . .” (37).

“extremely married” George F. Babbitt also seems to embrace heterosexual domesticity. Lewis brilliantly

fuses these two qualities—the character’s commercialism and his domestication—in his occupation. Babbitt is the first, and probably will remain the only, major literary character who is a realtor. As the narrator explains, he “made nothing in particular, neither butter nor shoes nor poetry, but he was nimble in the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay.”

Lewis maintains his acid-sharp satire to indict the flattening of American life into rituals of consumption. His parody of American culture is caricatured yet still distressingly familiar. Babbitt’s creed is the “religion of business, a faith passionate, exalted, surpassing common men.” Profoundly anti-intellectual, his fellow citizens of Zenith, Ohio [*sic*—Zenith is in the state of Winnemac], consider poetry “high-brow and degenerate” and refer to Dante as “the wop poet.” This city of boosters applauds the recommendation of a particularly odious character to “capitalize Culture,” agreeing that nothing better advertises a community than a little—a very little—art. Not surprisingly the state university, even more degenerated than in *The Professor’s House*, has become a “great department–store.” Religion has lost its soul and become “Christianity Incorporated.” Writing one decade after Henry Ford’s assembly line originated mass production, Lewis also emphasizes how commercialization breeds standardization. In Zenith, homes follow the same boilerplate, the consumer goods furnishing them are uniform, social interactions are hackneyed, and most chillingly, thought itself is standardized. Babbitt himself nails the problem in a speech praising what he calls the “Standardized Citizen.”

Lewis modulates his pitch-perfect satire with a profound study of the subversive potential of any deviation from conformity, no matter how minor. Babbitt is not an entirely flat character; even he fanaticizes about “quit[ting] the whole game,” and his rebellious impulses comprise a welcome relief. At the beginning of the novel, Babbitt’s closet rebelliousness surfaces only unconsciously, during what Lewis ambiguously describes as “dreaming of the fairy child.” But as the novel proceeds, Babbitt’s mild rebellion emerges in waking hours, surfacing in his “domestic revolution” on one hand and his homosocial attachment on the other.

Strongly identified with the houses he sells and proud of his own, Babbitt appears to be the typical family man. But domestic life has grown tedious, and his wife Myra come to seem “sexless as an anemic nun.” The realtor’s true soulmate is Paul Riesling, a roofing manufacturer whom Babbitt idealizes as someone who “could have been a great violinist or

painter or writer,” and admires “with a proud and credulous love passing the love of women.” Over lunch, Babbitt confesses that while he has raised a family, built a business, enjoys a comfortable home, and drives a late-model car, “I don’t know that I’m entirely satisfied.” Paul half-jokingly warns that voicing any discontent with domestic commercialism is no less than “seditious.” The friends take a vacation together in Maine for male bonding, “incredibly without their families.” While a romantic relationship between males would be unthinkable to Babbitt—or for that matter, to Lewis—there is no doubt that this relationship constitutes the realtor’s deepest intimacy. It is interrupted when Paul, more actively dissatisfied with marriage than Babbitt, tries to kill his wife, landing him in jail for three years. Deprived of his companion, Babbitt is forced to “face a world which, without Paul, was meaningless.”

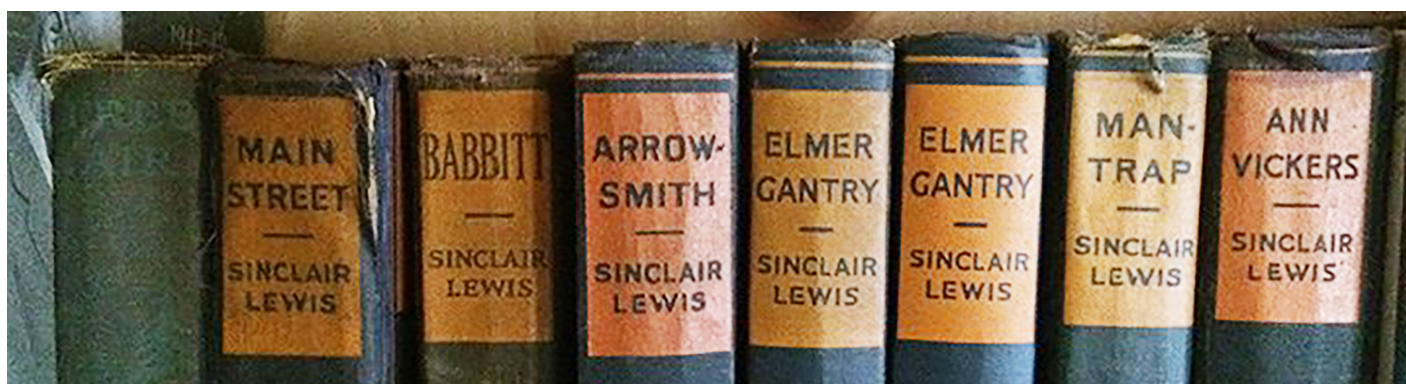
The previously shallow realtor becomes sympathetic during his existential crisis as readers see him unable to “regain contentment with a world which, once doubted, became absurd.” With Paul literally behind bars, neither Babbitt nor Lewis has to plumb the potentially subversive force of queer desire (although we glimpse the realtor’s true longings when he returns to Maine by himself “to seek Paul’s spirit in the wilderness”). Instead the realtor heterosexualizes his cravings, again directed toward the “fairy girl”—only now he seeks the tabooed fantasy woman “in the flesh.” In a scene immediately after Babbitt visits the now-broken Paul in prison, a flirty widow enters his office, ostensibly looking for real estate. During his adulterous affair, Babbitt throws himself into a “suburban bacchanalia.”

Both Babbitt’s open affair and his public expressions of discontent are anathema in Zenith. Self-appointed enforcers of morality calling themselves the Good Citizens League apply heavy pressure, and the realtor is not strong enough to resist. But the event precipitating Babbitt’s flight “back to the security of conformity” is his wife’s illness, during which he

rediscovers his buried love for Myra. It is to his wife of many years that Babbitt declares, “I’m back again,” officially ending his domestic rebellion. But even as he positions Babbitt again inside the family home signifying heterosexuality and perpetual consumption, Lewis suggests—echoing Wharton at the end of *The Age of Innocence*—that lasting change may be brewing in the next generation. At the end of *Babbitt*, the realtor counsels his only son not to cave to family expectations, civic pressures, nor to limit himself to his own half-hearted rebellion. (39–41)

There are other authors in *American Literature in Transition* who refer to Lewis as well. In “Middlebrows,” Joan Shelley Rubin writes that the “canonical novelistic treatment of the precarious place of culture in America in the years immediately before and after World War I is Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*” (49). In her discussion, Lewis’s satire of both middlebrow and highbrow culture leaves “no figures for readers to emulate” (50). All of the characters who dissent and try for something different, whether Carol Kennicott, Erik Valborg, Raymie Wutherspoon, Guy Pollack, or Vida Sherwin “each fall short” (51).

Babbitt is mentioned in passing in chapters about “Urbanization” and “Prohibition”; *Arrowsmith* comes up in chapters on “Freudianism,” connected to Martin’s struggle for integrity, and “Prohibition” (Arrowsmith frequents a speakeasy/poolroom). Lewis’s scathing indictment of fundamentalism in *Elmer Gantry* is discussed in a chapter on “Secularization,” especially as Gantry’s followers “embody the menace of theocratic fascism” (286). And in “Transatlantic Modernism,” Richard Pells comments that Europeans were fascinated with a new generation of American authors and snarkily remarks, “This curiosity was accentuated when Sinclair Lewis became the first American writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930 (although his achievement was probably due as much to his telling the European elite what they already believed about the banalities of the American middle class as for his talents as a novelist)” (330).



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