

The SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME TWENTY-EIGHT, NUMBER TWO

SPRING 2020

CELEBRATING *MAIN STREET*'S 100TH BIRTHDAY!

There were many plans in 2020 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the publication of *Main Street*, the novel that brought fame to Sauk Centre and its author, Sinclair Lewis. However, because of the coronavirus, some of them have either been postponed until 2021 or remain tentative.

Dave Simpkins's new book on the young Sinclair Lewis, *Becoming Sinclair Lewis*, will be published in summer 2020. The book draws heavily on the diaries that Lewis kept as a teenager and young man and examines his life and writing from a variety of perspectives, including his enjoyment of traveling, his love of books, and his support for women's rights. The book shows how Lewis developed as a writer and ends with the publication of *Main Street*.



The Sinclair Lewis Society, in association with the Sinclair Lewis Foundation, has postponed its conference in Sauk Centre until July 2021. It will still be focusing on *Main Street*, but the due date for abstracts for the conference will now be June 1, 2021. More information will be available in the fall.



A special issue of *Midwestern Miscellany*, *Main Street* at 100, will be published in the fall. Scholars who wish to have their papers included in the volume will need to send them to Sally Parry at separry@ilstu.edu by June 1 for consideration.



LEWIS AND THOMPSON AND THE WRITERS' WAR BOARD

Robert L. McLaughlin
Illinois State University

Thomas Howell's recent book, *Soldiers of the Pen: The Writers' War Board in World War II* (U of Massachusetts P, 2019), tells the story of the generally forgotten Writers' War Board (WWB), a volunteer organization that rallied the talents of the nation's writers to help shape public opinion during World War II. The WWB came together informally after a late-1941 request from the Treasury Department to the Authors' League of America for help publicizing its Defense Savings Program (soon to be called War Bonds). The original members of the board included its chairman, mystery writer Rex Stout, *New Yorker* fiction editor Clifton

Fadiman, playwright and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II, playwright Russel Crouse, Nobel Prize-winning novelist Pearl S. Buck, and Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist John P. Marquand. Before the end of the war, a number of other writers served on the board, including novelist and sportswriter Paul Gallico, author Jack Goodman, and journalist William Shirer.

From the outset, the board asserted its independence from the Authors' League and from the government. Although it did receive funding from the Office of War Information (OWI) and took on assignments at the request of a range of government departments, the board was not accountable to the federal government or Congress and so (unlike the OWI) could promote positions the members felt strongly about, like racial equality, that the Roosevelt administration wanted to downplay or that anti-New Deal legislators would challenge.



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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.

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THE FILMING OF *FREE AIR*

Sinclair Lewis's 1919 novel *Free Air* was made into a silent film in 1922. The Sinclair Lewis Society recently heard from Tim Bode, who wrote, "My understanding is that in the movie, the crooked farmer, Adolph Zolzac, was played by my great-granduncle, Fred Tietgens (1863–1934), of North Dakota." This article is adapted from material that he provided.

From the *Fargo Forum* (Nov. 3, 1923, p. 10)

"Fargo Film Actor Receives Praise in Faraway London." Fargo has a motion picture player who has won fame as far away as London.

He is Fred Tietgens, who took a part in *Free Air*, during the summer of 1922, when scenes for that picture were shot near Fargo.

Those who saw the picture when it was shown at the Garrick Theatre here will remember the Fargo man [who] played the part of a farmer who "kept" a mudhole and made money by hauling out tourists who got stuck there.

Several of the London dailies commented on Tietgen's work in the picture, according to reports which E. H. Griffith, director of the production, brought back to New York from that city. Gregory Mallarian, who is with a large studio in New York, tells about it in a letter to his mother, Mrs. Louisa Mallarian of Fargo.

Marjorie Seaman, who played the lead in that production, adopted the North Dakota wild rose as her favorite flower while she was in Fargo.

A key part in the movie has the heroine, Claire Boltwood, and her father stuck in a mudhole created by an unscrupulous German farmer. Milt Daggett, a local mechanic, comes to the rescue and a long distance, cross-country romance is started. The director hauled two hundred gallons of water to create this mudhole and then it rained that night.

Bill Kahlert and Einar Berg were the young entrepreneurs from Hamline University who filmed *Free Air* through the production company Outlook Photoplays. While promoting the film, they followed much of the trip west that Lewis took with

his wife Grace, and also promoted business opportunities in Minnesota. However, they soon gave up the film business and both became stockbrokers in St. Paul where they married sisters.

The actors included Marjorie Seaman, who played the independent New York socialite Claire Boltwood. In 1921 Seaman appeared in the D. W. Griffith film *Dream Street* where she fell in love with star Ralph Graves. While filming *Free Air* Seaman and Graves eloped to Hudson, Wisconsin. After the movie they moved to Hollywood where she died in 1923 in childbirth. Tom Douglas, who played Milt, had a leading role in one movie before *Free Air* and continued acting until 1933.

The Great Northern Railroad sponsored the movie and was prominently featured. A camera was even put on the front of one of their engines for an action scene. Interstate State Park along the

St. Croix River east of St. Paul was the site of an important scene.

At one point, before Claire realizes that she loves Milt, she goes on an outing with her boyfriend Jeff, who fails to protect her from the villain Pinky.

Breaking many hearts, the Teal

car used in the film was sent off a cliff at Wisconsin Dells, which represented the Grand Canyon.

While the book ends with Milt proposing to Claire in a river, the movie showed the two heading for their honeymoon in a car.

The Dakota County Historical Society, along with Jerry Mattson of the Rosemount Area Historical Society, published a booklet on the making of *Free Air*. ✍



Marjorie Seaman, 1921



St. Croix River at Interstate State Park.

©Doug Kerr, <https://tinyurl.com/y9bt8Sr7>

NEW MEMBERS

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

Mike Baker
Manchester, NH

Paul Devlin
Central Islip, NY

Eve Goldstein
Los Angeles, CA

Dennis Morgan
Newington, CT

Kim Sheeter
Ormond Beach, FL

TRUTH-O-METER INVESTIGATES LEWIS QUOTE ON FASCISM

Truth-O-Meter from PolitiFact checked the most famous if unsubstantiated quote from Sinclair Lewis, “When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross,” and used information from the Sinclair Lewis Society website to confirm that Lewis didn’t say it, although it represents his ideas about fascism.

In “Sinclair Lewis Might Have Liked That Quote about Fascism and the Flag, but It Wasn’t His,” posted by Ciara O’Rourke on March 12, 2019, she discusses the posts that followed a speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference on March 2, 2019, by Donald Trump who embraced the American flag to the crowd’s cheers as “God Bless the USA.” by Lee Greenwood played.

These social media posts often included the quote attributed to Sinclair Lewis, including one tweet by Randy Bryce, a US Army veteran who ran as a Democrat for Wisconsin’s 1st congressional district and whose Twitter handle is @IronStache (original tweet: <https://twitter.com/IronStache/status/1101933830179557380>). It has been shared on Twitter nearly 22,000 times and more than 500 people replied to it, including some who said that it’s not a Sinclair Lewis quote. O’Rourke reached out to [Working Families](#), a political group where Bryce is a senior advisor, to ask about the quote. A spokesman for the organization said in an email that “it turns out Sinclair Lewis never wrote those exact

words, though they’re commonly attributed to him.”

Although Bryce updated his Twitter account to acknowledge it’s not a Sinclair Lewis quote, he “had also tweeted excerpts from the Sinclair Lewis Society at Illinois State University, which notes on its website that though the quote sounds like something Lewis might have said or written, the society has never been able to find the exact quote.” (This frequently asked question and the information we’ve found is on the Sinclair Lewis Society website under our FAQs.)

“In 2007, *Harvard Magazine* published a plea from a reader who sought ‘the definitive source’ of the quote, which he said was ‘attributed variously to Upton Sinclair, H. L. Mencken, and Huey Long, and to Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here*.’” Online searches couldn’t locate the origin of the quote and O’Rourke contacted *Harvard Magazine* “to find out if the publication has discovered the quote’s origins in the years since that reader’s request, but senior editor Jean Ann Martin said, ‘sadly, we have not located a definitive source to date.’”

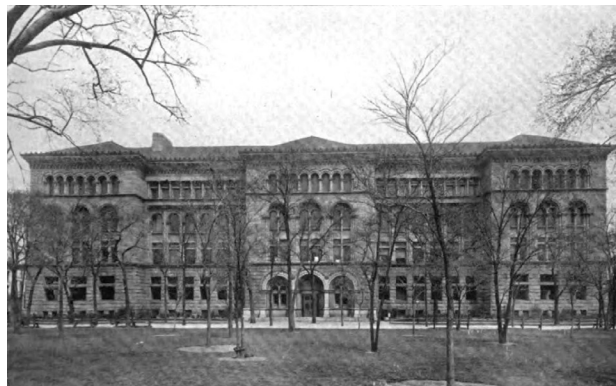
Since there is no credible, solid source for the quote, PolitiFact rated the Facebook post about it “False.” ✍

Full article from PolitiFact can be found at: <https://www.sharethefacts.co/share/e7020896-541f-49dc-9af2-1a0b-c2e53a21>.

Celebrating *Main Street* continued from page 1

On October 23, 2020, the Minnesota Historical Society, located in St. Paul, will be opening an exhibit on the 100th anniversary of the day that *Main Street* was published by the newly created publishing house of Harcourt, Brace and Howe. The 1,600 square foot exhibit, which will run seven months, will have Lewis’s awards, including the Pulitzer and Nobel prizes; historical papers, including letters to and from Lewis’s wives and sons; and other artifacts from the Sinclair Lewis Foundation, the St. Cloud State University archives, Yale University, and the University of Minnesota.

The exhibit will coincide with the opening of an original play, *A Minnesota Tumbleweed: The Life and Loves of Sinclair Lewis*, by James V. Gambone, which



Newberry Library in Chicago, circa 1920

will play at the History Theatre in St. Paul the last weekend in October. Don Shelby, who will be portraying Sinclair Lewis in the play, will also be the keynote speaker at the Sinclair Lewis Writers’ Conference on Saturday, October 3. [At press time these two events were still scheduled.]



The Sinclair Lewis Society sponsorship of two panels on Sinclair Lewis at the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature Conference at the Newberry Library in Chicago has been postponed until May 2021. Speakers at SSML will be Edward Agran, Cassandra Csencsitz, Ralph Goldstein, Robert McLaughlin, Steven Trout, and Keith Wilhite. ✍

AN INTERVIEW WITH KEN CUTHBERTSON, AUTHOR OF *INSIDE: THE BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN GUNTHER*

Susan O'Brien

This interview is connected to Susan O'Brien's article "John Gunther and Sinclair Lewis" from the Fall 2019 Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter.

The following is an interview with Ken Cuthbertson, author of *Inside: The Biography of John Gunther* (1992), shortlisted for the prestigious Canadian Governor General's Award for Literary Merit. His long list of writing credits includes *A Complex Fate: William L. Shirer and the American Century* (2015). He is at work on his sixth book.

1. Do you know how, and the approximate date, Sinclair Lewis and John Gunther actually met?

It's impossible to know exactly when Sinclair Lewis and John Gunther first met. That said, it seems likely that it happened in Berlin in the summer of 1927. That's when Lewis also met Dorothy Thompson at a tea for foreign journalists organized by the German foreign office. It was H. R. Knickerbocker—a friend of both Gunther and Dorothy Thompson—who made the introduction. And because the circle of American foreign correspondents in Europe in those days was relatively small, everyone knew everyone; they worked, traveled, and socialized together—for better and for worse. Gunther, being an enterprising journalist and a gregarious, outgoing bon vivant, unabashedly sought out and wrangled introductions to the rich, famous, and powerful. As a young man growing up in

Chicago and attending the University of Chicago in the 1920s, he'd aspired to write the Great American Novel, and he'd read

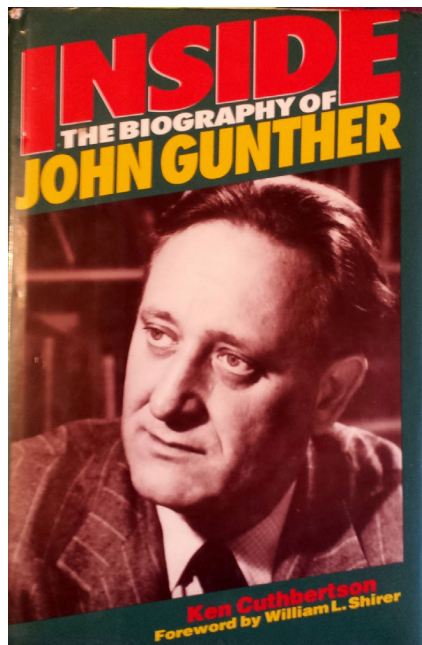
and admired *Main Street* and other books by Sinclair Lewis. Gunther wouldn't have missed an opportunity to meet Lewis. I don't know if Gunther was at that German foreign ministry tea (he was based in Vienna at the time but frequently traveled to Berlin), but I wouldn't be surprised if he was there.

2. You comment (p. 18:) "It was also while he was drinking that Lewis unleashed his acerbic wit, which otherwise was deftly channeled in his writings." Are there any particular books or works you had in mind when making that comment?

Sorry, I can't recall what books or other works I had in mind when I wrote those words 27 years ago. I do recall reading Mark Schorer's biography of Lewis, also

Vincent Sheean's book *Dorothy and Red*, and my thoughts may have been rooted in what those two authors wrote. (As you may know, I've also written a biography of journalist William L. Shirer. He was a close friend of Gunther and—like

————— Interview with Ken Cuthbertson *continued on page 8*



ERRATA

In the article "Sinclair Lewis at the Library" in the Fall 2019 *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter* there is an error that was drawn to our attention by Patricia Lewis. With her at the unveiling were her husband, Richard, and her brother-in-law, Ken Lewis, Sinclair's grandnephews, not her sons. We regret the confusion.

In the reprinted article "Why Writer Sinclair Lewis Keeps Paying Dividends from Pittsfield, and Will Forever," by Larry Parnass in the Spring 2019 issue, he mentioned that the four equal shares of the estate's value went to Marcella Powers Amrine, Carl Van Doren, Joseph Hardrick, and "Mrs. Sewell Haggard (her name lost in the mists of time)." Mrs. Haggard's first name was Edith and she was Lewis's longtime literary agent. She was an agent for William Morris for over thirty years and represented many major writers including Adela Rogers St. John, Ogden Nash, Daphne Du Maurier, and Richard Llewellyn, as well as Lewis. She died in 1995 at the age of 92, and rated a fascinating [New York Times obituary](#). ✍

The board would eventually register close to five thousand writers, editors, journalists, and broadcasters—some internationally known, others working for small, local newspapers—and send to them each month the *Writers' War Board Report*, which would contain ideas for articles, editorials, and letters to the editor. Board members also wrote or solicited articles, editorials, short plays, and speeches that were sent out to be used free of charge. The result, when successful, was that an idea—whether compliance with rationing, recruiting for the Women's Army Corps, support for our allies, or a host of other topics—would be promoted across a range of publications, radio broadcasts, and public gatherings, persuading the public to think and behave in line with the nation's war effort. Though not well known, the WWB was an enormously successful propaganda machine.

Not surprisingly, Sinclair Lewis and Dorothy Thompson, as two of the nation's most well-known writers, had some involvement with the WWB. Howell mentions Lewis only once: he wrote an article in support of the United National Clothing Collection, a January 1945 drive to gather clothes to be sent to people in countries being liberated from German occupation. Others who participated in this appeal included Humphrey Bogart, Fredric March, Clifford Odets, Cornelia Otis Skinner, Booth Tarkington, and Fannie Hurst. [Have any faithful readers come across Lewis's article in their researches?]

Thompson's dealings with the WWB were, as might be expected, more controversial and contentious. For some time, the board, under the influence of Rex Stout, had promoted a hate campaign against Germany. It feared the effects of the argument some writers and popular-culture media made that there was a distinction between Nazis and so-called good Germans, because Americans might be persuaded to make a soft peace with the German people, who were perceived as being as much the victims of Hitler as the French or the Norwegians. To Stout, all Germans were equally culpable, and all Germans needed to be punished under a hard peace to prevent World War III. In mid-1944, Stout, at the board's urging, composed a statement on the WWB's position regarding Germany. It attacked what it saw as a history of German nationalism and expansionism and called for severe treatment of the defeated country. The board sent the document to its advisory council for approval, one of the members of which was Thompson.



Thompson, of course, having been thrown out of Germany by the order of Hitler himself, was well acquainted with Nazism and with a range of German people. Her radio broadcasts, later collected in the volume *Listen, Hans*, were founded in the belief that there were good Germans who opposed Hitler and who would work with the Allies to rebuild the country. She was also affiliated with the Council for a Democratic Germany, which advocated a soft peace and which came under specific attack in Stout's position paper. Although she was friends with Stout, Thompson responded to the board and to the rest of the advisory council, writing of the position paper, "It is as a whole an insult to my intellectual integrity.... I protest against this statement being put out as representative of the thought of American writers"

(196). She also called into question the board's knowledge and interpretation of German history. Stout wanted to answer Thompson with a blistering attack, but the rest of the board was unnerved enough by her letter to call for a revision of their position paper after consulting experts in German history and culture. The result was a somewhat less harsh policy statement but one that Thompson nevertheless challenged in her newspaper column. She argued that the calls for a hard peace provided motivation for the Germans to keep fighting, a position Stout rejected as "fantastic" (200). The conflict calmed down after Thompson invited Stout to dinner to revive their friendship.

Lewis's and Thompson's experiences with the WWB illustrate the positive and negative aspects of that organization. Lewis contributed to the promotion of a worthy cause. Thompson rightly called attention to the danger of the outsized influence the WWB could have on the public's thought and the government's policy, especially in areas where prejudice and lack of expertise colored their positions. ✍

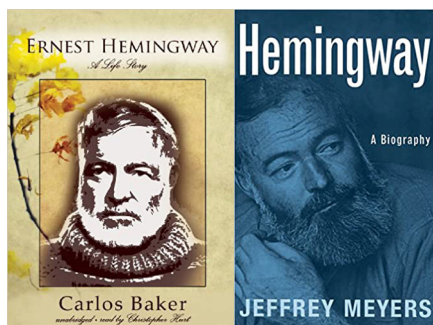


Dorothy Thompson, 1936

SINCLAIR LEWIS AS SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S BIOGRAPHERS

Sally E. Parry
Illinois State University

Sinclair Lewis and Ernest Hemingway were contemporaries who both won Pulitzer Prizes for Fiction, Lewis in 1926 for *Arrowsmith* and Hemingway in 1953 for *The Old Man and the Sea*, and Nobel Prizes for Literature, Lewis in 1930 and Hemingway in 1954. The best single article on the relationship between Lewis and Hemingway is Robert L. McLaughlin's "'only kind thing is silence': Ernest Hemingway vs. Sinclair Lewis" in the *Hemingway Review* [6.2 (1987): 46–53], which draws on Hemingway's *Selected Letters 1917–1961* (1981) as well as a 1941 letter by Hemingway to Lewis in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, a 1949 letter by Lewis to his brother Claude in the Lewis Family Papers at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, and a letter by Lewis to Dorothy Thompson in the George Arents Library [now named the Special Collections Research Center] at Syracuse University. McLaughlin concludes Lewis "could probably not understand that from Hemingway, a man for whom even close friends were competitors, public silence was usually the best thing for which one could hope" (53).



There are over two-dozen biographies of Hemingway, either on his life as a whole or on a portion of his life—in World War I, in World War II, in Cuba, in Sun Valley, in Africa, etc. Because he was more active than many writers—hunting, fishing, skiing, covering wars, etc.—biographers seem drawn to telling and retelling his life story. Hemingway may have more biographies written about him than any other twentieth-century author. This essay looks at the mentions of Lewis in some of the major Hemingway biographies, where Lewis is portrayed as his colleague, inspiration, antagonist, and critic. Of the biographies I surveyed, the two with the most mentions of Lewis are Carlos Baker's *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (1968), the most important early biography, and Jeffrey Meyers's *Hemingway: A Biography* (1985), considered at the time the most worthy successor to Baker's work.

The first mention of Lewis in the Baker biography is Hemingway's story in a 1922 issue of the *Toronto Star* about the "equestrian ineptitudes of Sinclair Lewis, the famous novelist, who had been rebuked by his Cockney groom while cantering down a bridle path in London" (124). Baker surmises that Hemingway didn't have much to write about now that the war was over.

At the end of 1925 Hemingway was ill and did a lot of reading. "Books like *Buddenbrooks* and *Fathers and Children* were much better reading, said he, than H. L. Mencken's white-haired boy-writer Sinclair Lewis, who was making a reputation by exploiting the 'much-abused American Scene.' This judgment surprised Hadley, who recalled how deeply and carefully Ernest had once studied *Main Street*" (Baker 208).

Occasionally Lewis and Hemingway socialized together. In 1927 they had dinner in Berlin.

On a quick trip to the six-day bicycle races at the Sportspalast in Berlin, they [Hemingway and his wife Pauline Pfeiffer, the second Mrs. Hemingway] met Sinclair Lewis, whom Ernest had known casually in Paris while he was still married to Hadley [his first wife]. Lewis had not heard of the divorce and remarriage and was shocked to discover, when they accepted his invitation to dinner, that this small, shy, rather gray-faced, and very silent woman was the new Mrs. Hemingway. The dinner took place in a small Rathskeller shaped like a Pullman car. The other guests were a jingoistic German woman called Agatha and a new friend of Lewis's named Ramon Guthrie, who taught French at Dartmouth College and had recently finished a novel. Agatha usurped the dinner conversation....Guthrie's great regret was that the lady's ruthless egotism had spoiled his chance to hear a conversation between two of America's most eminent novelists. (Baker 241–42)

Later, in 1940, they met again in Key West, where Lewis had stopped on his way to Havana: "They got along fairly well, and parted in amity" (Baker 451).

——— SL and Hemingway's Biographers *continued on page 10*

Interview with Ken Cuthbertson *continued from page 5*

Gunther—he, too, dreamed of being a novelist. Shirer met Lewis through Gunther, and he occasionally drank with Lewis.)

3. *Your biography references Sinclair Lewis throughout; what is your overall assessment of their relationship? Lewis was not known to keep close friendships, but it appears Gunther was at least still in Lewis's life after the divorce from Dorothy; do you agree? Do you know any details as to why Lewis admired Inside U.S.A. when he had otherwise never truly warmed to Gunther, and did that book draw them closer?*

Gunther delighted in rubbing elbows with a man who was as accomplished and famous as Sinclair Lewis. However, there was another equally compelling reason Gunther wanted to get to know Lewis: as I mentioned earlier, Gunther was an aspiring (and failed) novelist, and so he was eager to seek the older man's advice on writing. Lewis, who was no fool, knew what Gunther was about. But Lewis tolerated him because while he was in Europe, his heart and mind remained in America, and Gunther was nothing if not quintessentially American.

It seems that Lewis felt no special affinity for Gunther, but he renewed acquaintances with him in 1946 when Gunther came to Duluth, Minnesota, while gathering material for his book *Inside U.S.A.* A local real estate broker who was a mutual acquaintance of Lewis and Gunther organized a dinner party so Gunther could meet locals and “pick their brains” on topics he was keen to write about. Lewis sat beside Gunther at the dinner party, and the two had a grand time—probably because Gunther did his best to flatter Lewis and the two men were imbibing. However, the aftereffects of Gunther's flattery of Lewis were short-lived; in the notes for a never-written novel called *Friends*, Lewis mused about a character named “G” whose distinguishing traits were his “teasing banter and his flattery of women.” Was that “G” character John Gunther? We'll never know for sure, but if I was a betting man, I'd wager it was.

4. *In the sense of It Can't Happen Here and Gunther's analysis of both World War II Europe and postwar America, what do you think Gunther would find most connected from the past to today's White House administration? Does anything in your*

research indicate that Gunther prefigured or warned against a Donald Trump?

If there was a defining aspect to American foreign policy in the 1920s it was isolationism. The US retreated, withdrew from international engagements and commitments. Yet ironically, the Roaring Twenties was also the era of those American expatriates in Paris, particularly of that luminous group of writers—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, et al.—who traveled to Europe to seek escape from the stultifying effects of the kind of small-town myopia and hypocrisy (and prohibition) that Sinclair Lewis had railed against. It was also the golden age of the great American foreign correspondents—the select three hundred—who reported on events that roiled the European continent in a run-up to the outbreak of war in 1939, and in so doing shaped the American attitudes to the world for five decades to come. The parallels between events in the 1920s and the second decade of our new century are striking. And chilling. Journalists such as John Gunther, Dorothy Thompson, Edward R. Murrow, William L. Shirer, Vincent Sheean, and many others whose beat was Europe in the 1930s would be stunned, even appalled, by America once again busy navel-gazing while the world is slipping toward the abyss, and history might well be on a track to repeat itself. Let's hope not.

5. *You begin your biography with April 25, 1947, the day that changed John Gunther's life forever and resulted in his searing memoir of his son, Death Be Not Proud. What commentary would you like to make today about the tragedy that befell John and Frances Gunther when their only living child, Johnny Jr., died from a brain tumor at age seventeen? How do you think Johnny's death changed Gunther? How did Gunther avoid becoming embittered, having lost both his children—or did he?*

The death of the Gunthers' son Johnny was heart-wrenching and traumatic. It left both John Gunther and his estranged wife Frances forever changed and saddened. Gunther sought solace in the only way he could. He wrote about his loss in his 1949 book *Death Be Not Proud*. Despite the fact that Gunther

———— Interview with Ken Cuthbertson *continued on page 10*

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 John Baur, Mark Bernheim, Fredrick Betz, Tim Bode, Ken Cuthbertson, Dick Ebert, Ted G. Fleener, Ralph Goldstein, Patricia Lewis, Robert L. McLaughlin, Dennis Morgan, Susan O'Brien, George Simmers, and Catherine Smith.

SINCLAIR LEWIS, DANTE, AND THE JEWS

The following is a three-way email conversation about the presentation of Dante in Lewis's novels, which morphed into a conversation about anti-Semitism particularly in *Babbitt*, between Mark Bernheim, Ralph Goldstein, and Sally Parry. This opens up a larger conversation about how Lewis portrayed a variety of Americans in his writing in a way that was much more progressive than Ernest Hemingway or F. Scott Fitzgerald, who were both what they used to call "casually anti-Semitic." The exchange has been lightly edited. We welcome readers to write to the *Newsletter* and respond to this aspect of Lewis's writing.

Mark Bernheim: I am currently writing a comprehensive study guide for *Babbitt* for the Course Hero online resource, and am greatly enjoying this novel, which inspired me fifty years ago for my own dissertation at Rutgers. I used the first line about the bank towers being neither citadels nor churches for the title of my work, "The Monastery and the Fortress."

Now, I am finding in *Babbitt* so many echoes of Dante, a figure I also have taught for many years (before retirement)—the dream structure, the séance, Joe Paradise, Vergil, etc.

I've been looking around and have not seen commentary dealing with this. Can I ask if you are aware of any comparative work on the influence from *The Divine Comedy* on Lewis?

Sally Parry: I've been looking through various resources and can't find much of anything on Lewis and Dante, except in passing. The closest I can get is a very short article from the *Explicator*, "Lewis' *Babbitt*," by Robert L. Gale 39.3 (1981): 39–40.

Ralph Goldstein: There's mention on page 214 of Richard Lingeman's bio referring to Chapter 9 of *Babbitt* where Dante is brought up in a séance. He suggests Lewis is hinting that George "is consigned to a new circle of Hell—a consumerist Inferno." Rereading the scene again I see it as more humorous than dreary, laughing out loud at the reactions of the guests, especially Eddie Swanson's. Lewis pokes fun at how distant these moderns are from artistic tradition, but in a serious

note near scene's end shows George regretting that he hadn't read any Dante. Also mentioned on page 214 is the original manuscript's final sentence Lewis deleted about the tearing down of an old building to make room for a new tower. Again, this seems less disparaging or hellish and more admiring of Zenith's energy.

That's about it. With regard to the afterlife, Dante's obsession, it seems to me there isn't much in *Babbitt* other than George imagining heaven as a fine hotel with a private garden and not worrying much about hell.

Mark Bernheim: I think Ralph Goldstein's comments are very useful, but I also think there is more to it than the comedy and absurdity of the comments. *Babbitt* is on a self-discovery odyssey since page 1 and his dreams pursue him, much as Dante's pilgrim has his own midlife crisis out of a bewildering dream. I do not see a precise series of parallels but parts of some (Joe Paradise and Vergil, the 34 chapters/canti, etc.). Obviously, Lewis and Dante are eternities apart in religion, but Lewis

hardly ignores that impulse either. He spent a lot of time later in Florence and Rome, as we know. I think Dante may have mattered to him over a long period of time. Why else single out that one remote poet for the guests at the party rather than another they might have had more of a natural interest in? That is what intrigues me....

Sally Parry: I think the reference to Vergil was to Vergil Gunch, whom I suppose one could see as a guide who is trying to lead George in a new and more progressive direction.

Mark Bernheim: I would like a reaction from someone other than me about the anti-Semitism and other bigotry in *Babbitt*. I was especially struck by Sidney Finkelstein making nasty remarks a number of times about his "Old Folks" who are penny-pinching Jews whereas he is not, of course. He also has been formed in Christian values at the YMCA, he says.



Dante gazes at Mount Purgatory (holding a copy of The Divine Comedy); allegorical portrait by Agnolo Bronzino, painted c. 1530

————— Lewis, Dante, and the Jews *continued on page 16*

Interview with Ken Cuthbertson *continued from page 8*

wrote more than two dozen books in his literary career, many of them monumental best-sellers, and that he was one of the most widely read and popular nonfiction writers in the years 1936 to 1970, *Death Be Not Proud* is really the only book for which he is remembered now. Gunther remarried in 1949 and moved on with his life, but there was a fundamental sadness to the man. The sudden loss of a four-month-old baby daughter in 1929 and the June 1947 death of his son Johnny left psychological scars that never healed—for John and Frances Gunther alike.

6. *Do you know what happened to Gunther's desire to write a biography of Sinclair Lewis?*

Gunther had a keen eye for what would sell, and so he had ideas for many books that he never wrote. There were a couple of reasons he abandoned plans to write a Sinclair Lewis biography. One was his constant need for money. Gunther lived a frenetic, lavish lifestyle, and he often spent the advances he received for his books long before the books were finished. His agent and publisher were constantly after him to do what he did best—turn out another nonfiction book that followed the tried-and-true formula of his signature Inside books. Any Lewis biography would have been an ambitious undertaking, one that would have taken considerable time to complete. And after 1961, what could Gunther have said that Mark Schorer didn't say in his book about Lewis?

The other reason Gunther never got around to writing a Sinclair Lewis biography was that he simply ran out of time.

Gunther was in failing health in the late 1960s and when he died in 1970 at the age of 69 he left a book called *Inside Australia* incomplete.

7. *I believe I have located John Gunther's grave in Greensboro, in northern Vermont. His sister is next to him. Why is he buried so far from the places he lived?*

John and his sister Jean, who was four years younger than he, were very close. Beyond that, I cannot say. The only ones who could say for certain are members of the Gunther family—his widow Jane and the couple's adopted son, Nicholas.

8. *Are there other questions germane to Lewis I should have asked but didn't?*

None that spring to mind. As I mentioned, Gunther was someone who sought out and loved to rub elbows with the rich, famous, and influential. I'm certain he was delighted to have made the acquaintance of Lewis, who was a writer Gunther had read and greatly admired. Gunther was a master at stroking egos, and as I'm sure you know, Sinclair Lewis was a man with a sizeable ego.

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. ☺

SL and Hemingway's Biographers *continued from page 7*

In 1949 Lewis stayed at the Gritti Palace in Venice, where Hemingway and his fourth wife Mary were staying. Hemingway was hospitalized with a serious case of erysipelas, a contagious skin disease that caused his eyes to swell shut.

As Ernest later reported it, Lewis took the occasion of his absence to "nail" Mary with a three-hour diatribe on the theme of "I love Ernest, but ..." His chief objections were that Ernest was a snob, that his productivity as a writer was niggardly, and that he had never responded in kind for Lewis's generous praise of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Lewis concluded by expressing his sympathy



Gritti Palace Hotel in Venice

for Mary in her role as wife to a genius, and left her to pay for all the drinks. When Ernest returned from Padua with the ravages of erysipelas still evident on his face, he indulged the snobbery of which Lewis had accused him by telling the headwaiter at the Gritti that Lewis was nothing but a Baedeker-bearing bastard with a complexion that resembled

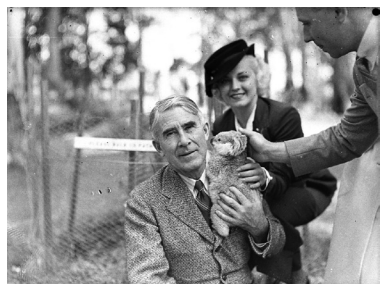
the mountains of the moon. (Baker 598)

—— SL and Hemingway's Biographers *continued on page 12*

“SINCLAIR LEWIS,” FROM THE *GREAT WAR FICTION* BLOG

George Simmers

Writing about Zane Grey the other week [*The Desert of Wheat* (1919) and *The Day of the Beast* (1922)], I asked if other writers had dealt with the situation of German-Americans during



Zane Grey with Lillian Pertka at Koala Park, Australia, 1935

Sinclair Lewis. (The older I get and the more I read, the more I become aware of how much more there is...), I was very pleased to find that his story turns out to be excellent—much more intelligently crafted than the Zane Grey novel.

Lewis’s central character, Hugo Bremschenkel, is seventy-five years old: “a fiery and affectionate little man, who could still plow all day and afterward whistle boyishly as he fed his cattle.” Lewis presents him as “a simple man,” but does not condescend to him. He is a man who “loved his country, his America, because he was one of the men who had made it.” On arriving in America he had fought on the Northern side in the Civil War and afterwards had made a farm from the untamed woodland: “A grim home for wolves he had made into a gardenland, therefore he loved it—and loved America.”

The outbreak of war in 1914 at first means little to Hugo and his wife. It’s a long way away, and he assumes that it will soon be over. Gradually it becomes clear that Germany will not have an easy victory over the “impudent frog-eaters,” and tensions arise between him and his French-Canadian and English neighbours. The American media turn against the Germans, and there are disturbing reports of atrocities in Belgium. News comes of German cousins killed in battle.

Before the war, Hugo had seen himself as simply American; now he becomes, in the eyes of others, “a hyphenate,” a German-American.

The crisis comes at a meeting of the G.A.R. (a veterans’ association, the Grand Army of the Republic). Hugo joins his old comrades wearing his blue coat and his “black slouch hat with the gold cord” and is moved to anger by a film show that presents the Germans as villains (the movie is called *Columbia Awaken!* and seems to be one that Lewis has imagined. Were there actual pro-Allied films in American cinemas early in the war?). He makes a scene, protesting that the propaganda is a lie. After this, he becomes increasingly committed to the German cause and increasingly alienated from his non-German neighbours.

His protest makes him something of a celebrity, and a German-American political group invites him to a rally. But when one of the speakers (a journalist who “looked like a cross between a naïve child and a malicious monkey”) pulls down and threatens to desecrate the American flag, Hugo refuses to allow it to happen. He takes charge of the flag and leaves, and the German Americans in the audience feel that he has done the right thing. They applaud him and begin to sing “America.” He goes home to his wife to concentrate on the farming.

In this story, Lewis shows the man’s identity created by two wars. The Civil War that made him an American, and the European War that made him an unwilling hyphenate. The treatment of identity is far subtler than in the Zane Grey novel. In that, the old man who is the hero’s father, has loyalties that are simply and uncomplicatedly pro-

German. In the melodramatic plot, he sides with the saboteurs and foreign agents, while his son is uncomplicatedly on the side of the angels.

Lewis was clearly a thoughtful writer. The first item in this collection is “Minnesota: the Norse State,” a 1923 essay that is very interesting on “the curious newness of Minnesota,” a melting-pot state discovering its identity. There are some other good stories too. One that I have enjoyed very much is “The Tamarack Lover,” about a woman taking very determined steps to get her man. I should have read Lewis before. I think I shall try his 1920 novel *Main Street* next. ✍

[Originally published Sept. 15, 2019, available at <https://greatwarfiction.wordpress.com/2019/09/15/sinclair-lewis/>]



Grand Army of the Republic Memorial in Washington, DC

SL and Hemingway's Biographers *continued from page 10*

Lewis was very generous in praising other writers in his Nobel Prize speech, among them Hemingway:

[H]e took the occasion to congratulate Scribners on having published two of the "most superb" novels of recent years—*A Farewell to Arms* and Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*. The deepening financial depression had seriously impaired the sales of both these books, and Lewis's boost was not unwelcome. But Ernest made it clear, at least privately, that he would have preferred to be boosted by someone else and in some other company. (Baker 281)

Either Lewis did not know of Hemingway's opinions or ignored them because he continued to be generous toward Hemingway the writer. In 1941, when *For Whom the Bell Tolls* had sold over half a million copies, Lewis honored his work.

The Limited Editions Club had decided to award it their triennial Gold Medal. Sinclair Lewis, as chairman of the editorial committee, sent Ernest a "damn nice letter" and was planning to make the presentation speech at a ceremony on November 26th. Ernest declined to attend ... and invented the excuse that he had already promised Martha [Gellhorn, his third wife] a trip elsewhere. But he was bursting with curiosity to know what Lewis would say, and asked Scribners to send a stenographer to take it all down in shorthand...

Despite his telegraphed request, they [Maxwell Perkins and Charles Scribner] had failed to appoint a stenographer to take down Lewis's speech at the Gold Medal ceremony. Lewis had spoken from notes and his laudatory sentiments had vanished into thin air. This, said Ernest heatedly, was the most careless and callous action he had ever met with in civil life. He planned to present the Gold Medal to Scribners as a reminder of their unforgivable ineptitude. He never wanted to see the medal, ever! For the moment, as he dashed off this angry communiqué in his suite at the Saint Anthony Hotel in San Antonio, the loss of the speech bulked as large in his mind as the loss of the capital ships at Pearl Harbor and the planes on Hickam Field. (Baker 469–70)

In the Limited Editions Club reprint of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* published in October 1942,

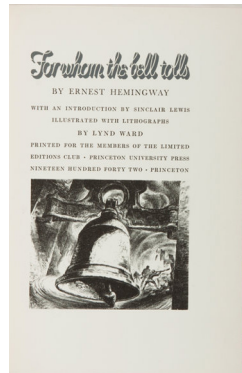
Lewis's preface was a slightly more formalized version of his remarks at the Gold Medal breakfast ceremony in New York. Ernest's childish disappointment in having missed the speech was now pacified, especially since the preface praised the same three aspects of the novel that he had pointed out: the love story, the adventure story, and Jordan's willingness to die for a cause. (Baker 479)

Hemingway's competitiveness revealed itself in many ways. In 1935 he wrote to editor Maxwell Perkins "that he was now outselling Dreiser, Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, and 'several other guys' among Russian readers" (355). In 1940 he told Perkins that "if he chose to write as sloppily as Sinclair Lewis, he could do 5,000 words a day year in and year out" (440).

In Meyers's Hemingway biography the first mention of Lewis draws attention to their similar beginning as journalists. The aggressiveness that Hemingway demonstrated toward other writers is more of a focus than in the Baker biography, as are the mentions of alcoholism.

His portrait of [Ford Madox] Ford—like those of Stein, Lewis, Fitzgerald and Dos Passos—was inspired by an intense personal animus which is never explained in the book [*A Moveable Feast*]... The treatment of Ford follows a recurrent vindictive pattern in Hemingway's life. He parodied Sherwood Anderson in *The Torrents of Spring*, satirized Harold Loeb in *The Sun Also Rises*, condemned Scott Fitzgerald in the first version of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," pilloried John Dos Passos in *To Have and Have Not*, savaged Sinclair Lewis in *Across the River and into the Trees*, and attacked Stein and Ford in *A Moveable Feast*. (Meyers 132)

Hemingway's ugliest insult to Lewis was in *Across the River and into the Trees*, and Meyers spends several pages tracing how their conflicts led to that (466–68). Lewis praised *A Farewell to Arms* in his Nobel Prize speech as "superb," which Hemingway repaid by stating in *Green Hills of Africa*, "Sinclair Lewis is nothing." Lewis reviewed this nonfiction account of a safari that Hemingway and his second wife Pauline took in 1933 for the *Yale Literary Magazine*, but not very favorably.



For Whom the Bell Tolls, introduction by Sinclair Lewis, printed for the Limited Editions Club, 1942

— SL and Hemingway's Biographers *continued on page 13*

He suggested that Hemingway enjoyed cruelty and said the volume “tells how extremely amusing it is to shoot lots and lots of wild animals, to hear their quite-human moaning, and see them lurch off with their guts dragging.” He also included a little squib on Hemingway’s obscene language:

Speak up, man! Be bravely heard
Bawling the four-letter word!
And wear your mind décolleté
Like Mr. Ernest Hemingway.

Lewis continued the critique, partly because Hemingway had attacked other writers in the same book, with “Literary Felonies: Obtaining Game under False Pretensions,” in the October 1936 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*. “The battle went on with Lewis’ attack in *Newsweek* on *To Have and Have Not*, ‘this thin screaming little book’ about ‘boresome and cowardly degenerates’” (Meyers 467).

Although Hemingway did not attend the ceremony at which the Limited Editions Club Gold Medal was presented to him, he was furious that Scribner did not send a stenographer to take down Lewis’s remarks. Meyers quotes a Hemingway letter, which Baker had paraphrased, probably because of its vulgarity.

It is over and I’m fucked on that. Had driven all the way from Idaho to Arizona looking forward, like a dope, to reading it and then from Arizona here [San Antonio]. Now know I never will and that something that could have had will never have. It was the only thing connected with writing I ever wanted to keep. (Meyers 467)

Although Hemingway always felt in competition with Lewis, Meyers contends that the main reason Hemingway so cruelly portrayed Lewis in *Across the River* was because of Lewis’s “Mr. Eglantine” (1948), about American tourists, which mildly satirized Hemingway’s drinking, fishing, beard, and preference for continental life:

[After the first Strega] Verny and Mitzy sighed and smiled and felt good—like a Hemingway hero after the seventh beer—they knew that in Europe there would never be a time when Americans too sensitive to cope with high schools and tarpon fishing and gum and airconditioning [*sic*] will not be able to find somewhere an asylum where the less-hairy Whitmans will sit together from 22:30 to 2 and tell one another how superior they are to all the Babbitts in Iowa. (qtd. in Meyers 467)

Hemingway, who hadn’t attacked Lewis in print since 1935, and also goaded by a meeting between Lewis and Hemingway’s wife Mary in Venice, felt he needed revenge, especially because Lewis implied that Hemingway’s best writing was behind him.

He felt Lewis was guilty on several counts. Lewis had won the Nobel Prize, Lewis had helped him, Lewis had foreshadowed his own alcoholic and literary decline, Lewis had a bad complexion which recalled his own unsightly skin disease. George Seldes, who admired Lewis, described him as the ugliest man he ever knew. Lewis suffered from skin cancer, which had to be burned off every few months by cobalt treatments and his raw, red skin had horrible pockmarks coated with white pus. Hemingway focused on Lewis’ ugliness, as he would later do with Ford and Wyndham Lewis in *A Moveable Feast*. In the novel [*Across the River*], Cantwell spots the unnamed Lewis in the Gritti bar and describes his thin ferret features and ghastly skin craters as looking “like Goebbels’ face, if Herr Goebbels had ever been in a plane that burned, and not been able to bail out before the fire reached him.” Lewis, bitterly hurt and angered by Hemingway’s cruelest passage, died three months after the novel was published. (Meyers 467–68)

There was terrible irony in store. “Hemingway, always handsome and photogenic, had satirized the hideous skin of Sinclair Lewis. Now (at the age of sixty) he was in love with a teenage girl [Valerie Danby-Smith] and distressed by the disfiguring effects of chronic skin disease” (539). Lewis also had a long relationship with a young actress, Marcella Powers, which started when she was just eighteen and Lewis was in his mid-fifties.

Hemingway considered himself an excellent stylist who often took “all morning to write a single perfect paragraph. But he said he could easily turn out five thousand words a day if, like Sinclair Lewis and Thomas Wolfe, he wrote ‘sloppily and shittily,’ ‘with all the ease of a man going to the toilet when he has amoebic [dysentery]’” (137). Baker refers to this same comment about Hemingway’s writing, but again paraphrases to make it less vulgar. Hemingway “thought the Nobel Prize of 1930 should have been awarded to Joyce or Pound instead of Sinclair Lewis” (83). He later criticized William Faulkner, as he had Lewis and Wolfe (431). He did occasionally talk to

Lewis about writing, telling him “that he could not write about anything until a long time after the event” (218).

Meyers is biased toward Hemingway, of course, concluding his biography with this over-the-top assessment: “Unlike Dreiser, Lewis, Anderson, Wolfe, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck, who are no longer widely read and greatly respected, Hemingway has survived his decline, his death, and his detractors. He is now recognized as the most important novelist of the twentieth century as well as a seminal influence on the modern American character” (570).

Kenneth S. Lynn's *Hemingway* (1987), which also focuses on Hemingway's whole life, from a primarily psychological perspective, has only two mentions of Lewis. When Hadley, soon to be his first wife, was being courted by Hemingway, she compared herself to Carol Kennicott. “Hadley observed to Hemingway that what Carol had ‘needed so much in the lonely town was someone to tell what she tho't to Whoops—I shudsay!’” (129). The other mention was of Hemingway's jealousy when John Dos Passos was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine. “Four older American novelists had previously made the cover of *Time*, Sinclair Lewis in 1927, Willa Cather in 1931, Gertrude Stein in 1933, and Upton Sinclair in 1934, but no novelist of Hemingway's generation had. That the honor of being the first should have gone to Dos Passos rather than himself was galling” (459).

There are a couple of biographies that focus on Hemingway's early life. Peter Griffin's *Along with Youth: Hemingway, The Early Years* (1985) relies on correspondence and meetings with Mary Hemingway, Jack Hemingway, and most importantly, Bill Horne, a friend of Hemingway's during World War I and his roommate in Chicago in 1920, whom he had told about his love for Agnes Kurowsky. Griffin discusses how Hemingway found the Chicago of the early 1920s: “Those with ambition in the arts followed the lure of the Chicago renaissance and created midwestern bohemia not unlike Greenwich Village in New York. To the new realism of Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Vachel Lindsay, and Carl Sandburg (championed in defiance of a cornfed culture), they brought, paradoxically, the smooth machinations of the commercial ad. The artist-advertising man

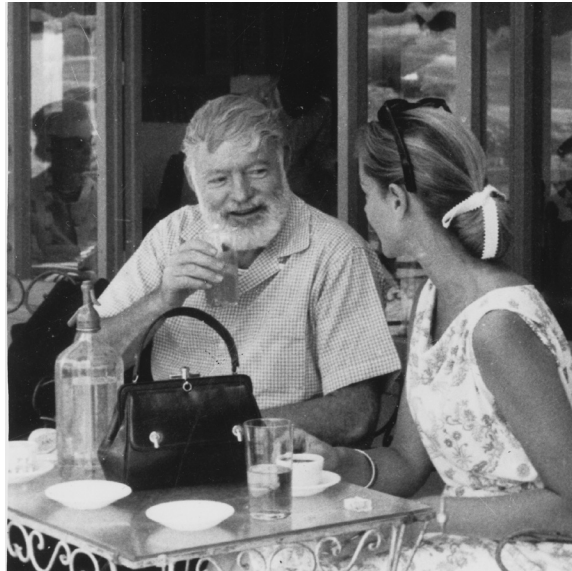
could be at once successful, creative, and superior” (139).

Michael Reynolds's *The Young Hemingway* (1986) also examines Hemingway's life until 1921, when he married Hadley. The focus is on the town of Oak Park where Hemingway grew up. In 1919, after Hemingway came home from the war, “In Cincinnati, Sinclair Lewis was gathering data on that epitome of boosterism, George Babbitt. When Hemingway read the book two years later, he knew he would never have to write about Uncle George [Hemingway's Uncle George was also a real estate broker]” (37). About Oak Park Griffin writes, “But while he lived there, Hemingway did nothing to offend the Village code. Sauk Centre had reason to dislike its son, Sinclair Lewis, who satirized the town in *Main Street*” (52).

Oak Park was very conservative and very Republican. “As a result, Hemingway understood as little of radical politics as the inhabitants of Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, which was sweeping the best-seller lists in 1921 and which both Ernest and Hadley read” (Reynolds 193). Reynolds continued to write on Hemingway, and in *Hemingway: The American Homecoming* (1992) he comments, “out of the blue came a letter from Sinclair Lewis, then the hottest literary property in America. *The Sun Also Rises*, Lewis wrote, ‘was one of the best books I have ever read, and I want to have the privilege of sending my great congratulations about it. I know of no

other youngster ... who has a more superb chance to dominate Anglo-American letters. Jesus you done a good book!’” (101). Reynolds's *Hemingway: The Final Years* (1999) mentions his Pulitzer Prize win for *The Old Man and the Sea*: “Having been disappointed when the Pulitzer Committee refused the prize to him for *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Ernest was not particularly thrilled with the announcement, but Mary was delighted. He informed Scribner's that he would not reject the award as Sinclair Lewis once did, but he hoped he did not have to do anything more than say thank you” (263).

Mary Welsh Hemingway, Ernest's last wife, in *How It Was* (1976), describes their fifteen years together. There is only one



*Ernest Hemingway with Lauren Bacall,
Spain circa 1956*

mention of Lewis, but it is an extended one of their meeting in Venice in 1949. I quote it at length because it expands on how Baker wrote about their meeting, and shows her very studied condescension toward Lewis, which she certainly picked up from her husband.

The concierge at the Gritti had sent a newspaper to E. at Cortina saying that Sinclair Lewis was at the hotel, which depressed him. He liked Venice the way it was.

Anyhow, we went up to Lewis's suite, a luxurious new one at the other end of the hotel and there ensued a brisk battle of roses, almost thornless. Lewis was traveling with Mrs. Powers, the mother of his ex-girl friend, Marcella, who had up and married somebody else. "Nice chap, too," Lewis said. Mrs. Powers appeared, a silent blinking little white-haired Trilby who, seeing Europe for the first time, Lewis said, was like the child pointing out, "But father, the king has no clothes." I found it just barely possible to look at Mr. Lewis. His face was a piece of old liver, shot squarely with #7 shot at twenty yards. His hands trembled when he ate, blobs of everything oozing out between his lips. His walk was more brittle, the hinges more rusty than those of G. B. Shaw, when I last saw him in Dean Street, London, aged eighty-seven. But his mind was still sharp and glib and slick and I could accept him because he loved Italy.

He went downstairs to sit with us while we ate dinner, told us of the eulogy he had made for Ernest when they awarded him some prize or other and how neither publisher, Charlie Scribner nor Bennett Cerf, had sent a stenographer to take it down. I could see E. growing weary of the overstuffed compliments, maybe also of looking at Mr. L., but we parted amiably. During the three hours, I watched Mr. Lewis grow older and feebler and shrink, and E. grow younger, boyishly more shy, more vigorous, letting out his wit and wisdom cautiously, rationing it.

Mr. L. was disillusioned at the reception of his later books after the Nobel Prize in 1930 and hopefully predicted the same thing could happen to Ernest. He had done a series of pieces for NANA (North American Newspaper Alliance) on his winter here and gave me the cuttings to read. A few of them were pleasant travel information, two on the importance of learning languages of which he arbitrarily insisted that an educated man must read, speak, and write at least eight. (But when our courteous Calsavara, the maître d'hôtel, asked me if I didn't want "*tout petit*

petit" of dessert, Lewis remarked that my Italian was excellent.) Several of his pieces were short stories of Americans in Italy, artificial and fabricated, I thought. The series ended with a one-paragraph bow to American chauvinism saying how he truly preferred a tarpaper shack in the U.S. to all the castles of Italy.

When Ernest went shooting with Nanyuki Franchetti, I took Mr. Lewis and Mrs. Powers to dinner at Harry's, he making overlarge sympathy with me at the problems of being married to a genius. He recalled bitterly Dorothy Thompson's homecomings after lecture tours, the dramatically quiet voice saying "I *do* think someone might have come to meet me," laying down her gloves. He was tormented apparently by never having time for his own work, but I pointed out that I didn't have any personal and sacred work.

Back at the hotel, I wanted to talk to the gondoliers and Lewis went into their hut for a bit to listen, but soon left. (234–35)



Hemingway in Oak Park, Illinois, 1919

Denis Brian, over the course of twenty years, interviewed scores of people associated with Hemingway in *The True Gen: An Intimate Portrait of Ernest Hemingway by Those Who Knew Him* (1988). In trying to "separate the man from the myth" (8), he encountered conflicting stories, much graciousness, and some stonewalling. It's telling that the book could not be published until after Mary Hemingway's death. He does ask several of Hemingway's biographers about "vicious things" Hemingway had written "not only about Fitzgerald, but about Gertrude Stein, Sinclair Lewis and other friends of his" (265). Most of these writers' responses focused more on Hemingway's psychiatric problems than on answering the question.

From George Seldes: "I think it was a coincidence and I rather like it, that the three great men of my time, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Ernest Hemingway, all became

SL and Hemingway's Biographers *continued from page 15*

newspaper reporters to be newspaper reporters and not as a stepping stone to be novelists or something else" (37).

From Milton Wolff: "The main thing was that Hemingway knew the score probably better than any of the other writers who went to Spain. It's not so much what he did, but what he didn't do. He could have made a tremendous contribution to left-wing literature and anti-fascist literature. I don't mean in terms of propaganda, but in the way that Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis did" (127).

The revised Twayne biography of Hemingway by Earl Rovit and Gerry Brenner (1986) comments that "he never knew how to create the kind of scene in which social normality parades in convincing figures—the kind of scene that Sinclair Lewis or John P. Marquand could do with their left hands" (151).

I looked at a couple of recent biographies to see if the take on the relationship between Lewis and Hemingway was being presented differently, but it was not, nor were there many mentions of Lewis at all. Although James Hutchisson has written widely on Lewis, his *Ernest Hemingway: A New Life* (2016) only mentions Lewis once. "Writing in *Newsweek*, Sinclair Lewis found the book [*To Have and Have Not*] dull and unoriginal" (149). Mary V. Dearborn, the first woman to

write a biography of Hemingway, in *Ernest Hemingway: A Biography* (2017) comments "Paris promised sexual freedom, a rich cultural life, and an escape from the stuffy, traditionalist values Sinclair Lewis was brilliantly sending up in his two best sellers of the time, *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922)" (112). Much later she writes, "For a long time Ernest had been tracking the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature, even as early as 1930, when Sinclair Lewis became the first American recipient. He told Archie MacLeish that he had always thought of the Nobel as something that came when you were very old; thus, he said, it 'was a hell of a blow to me' when Lewis won at age forty-five—which is a curious choice of words. The remark indicates he had been shocked that Lewis, to whom he had heretofore given little thought as a competitor, had taken the prize and Ernest had not. He had had some time to get used to Lewis since then, but when Faulkner was awarded the Nobel in 1950, it rankled" (569).

Reading about this abrasive, obnoxious man who seemed to feel his masculinity and talent compromised any time someone praised anyone other than himself, it feels good to donate many of these biographies to a used bookstore. Perhaps it is better to say about Hemingway, as he once said about Lewis, the "only kind thing is silence." ✍

Lewis, Dante, and the Jews *continued from page 9*

Of course, self-hating Jews are common enough but as literary examples this is rare, in my experience. What struck me as well was the absence of any comments from *Babbitt* or any of the other bigots, which I would have expected to read. They just accept his nastiness about his own family as perfectly natural. How hard he must have worked to get to that point with the "Roughnecks," myopic jerk that he is.

I have done a lot of writing in the past about such miserable stuff in media in the 1920s (*Vanity Fair*, etc.) so none of this is news to me, but Lewis is so offhanded about it I wondered if he was playing to his audience (Edith Wharton, etc.) or just distancing himself from that aspect of the times. Being a faithful reporter, etc.

I lean toward the latter...

Sally Parry: Are you aware of the essay "'Yours Sincerely, Sinclair Levy': Lewis and the Jews," by Barry Gross? It's from *Sinclair Lewis at 100* (1985) and is certainly the best take on Lewis's portrayal of Jews that I have read. There's a Jewish character in *It Can't Happen Here* who also makes

disparaging remarks about his heritage, and it seems partly so he can fit in and partly because of the extreme nationalism portrayed in the novel.

Lewis portrayed a variety of Jews in his novels and Gross's takeaway is that Lewis wrote of an America that was very diverse, not the America more commonly found in Hemingway and Fitzgerald. A more recent essay that makes a similar point is "It Happened Here: Sinclair Lewis, White Nationalism, and the 2016 Presidential Election," by Anthony Di Renzo, that was in the Fall 2017 *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*.

Ralph Goldstein: Arthur Chiel's 1975 article "Sinclair Lewis—A Pro-Jewish Stance" in *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* explains the circumstances surrounding Lewis signing off as Sinclair Levy in his reply to a German theater producer. Attached to the article available in JSTOR is Lewis's short story "That Passage in Isaiah," drawn from

————— Lewis, Dante, and the Jews *continued on page 17*

Lewis, Dante, and the Jews *continued from page 16*

his 1906 summer trip to England on a cattle-boat where a group of Jews were ridiculed by crew members. Chiel mentions Lewis's contact with the New Haven Jewish community when he was at Yale, his inveighing against Henry Ford's anti-Semitism in 1921, and the sympathetic portrait of Max Gottlieb in *Arrowsmith*, but he doesn't mention *Babbitt* or comment on the virulent anti-Semitism depicted in *It Can't Happen Here*.

Sidney Finkelstein's remarks indicate his desire for acceptance among Zenith Athletic Club's lunch bunch. He and the others are members of what Lewis's friend Mencken called the booboisie, uncultured strivers worried about maintaining their middle- or upper-middle-class status. None of them, especially not Sidney, could likely qualify for membership in the Union Club or Tonawanda Country Club. George says nothing to Sidney because he himself uses the phrase "jew down" in relation to real estate deals, and he entertains members of the Chatham Road Presbyterian Men's Club with his Irish, Jewish, and Chinese dialect stories. These and other instances of so-called polite anti-Semitism Lewis uses, it seems to me, to reflect negatively on the speakers. When a Russian-Jewish actor in a meeting with Zenith union officials quotes Gene Debs, one of Lewis's heroes, it's a better indicator of Lewis's sympathies.

In her memoir Grace Hegger explains why she nixed having a wedding at Saint Patrick's Cathedral: "I found myself rebelling at the required mortgaging to Catholicism—to any creed—the souls of my unborn children." So she and "Hal" Lewis got married at the Meeting House of the Society for Ethical Culture. Her father knew Felix Adler, son of a rabbi, who co-founded the Society for Ethical Culture as a universalist movement not requiring creedal tests, established a free kindergarten for the children of the working poor (which over time has morphed into the Ethical Culture Fieldston School, with tuition & fees around \$50k annually), and was

a member of the New York State Tenement House Commission. Lewis may have made use of his contacts in Ethical Culture when he wrote *Ann Vickers*, where we see that the title character, a social reformer with experience in settlement houses, "found a merchant who had gone through the stages of being poor and Jewish, and well-to-do and anti-Jewish, into the supreme stage of being wealthy and patronizingly pro-Jewish, and persuaded him to set up a camp for the Jewish Boy Scouts on his Long Island estate." It's definitely a far cry from Hemingway's Jake Barnes listening to his friend

Bill Gorton call Robert Cohn a kike, and from Fitzgerald's grotesque Meyer Wolfsheim.

Mark Bernheim: I think it 100 percent undebatable that Lewis was miles apart from FSF and Hemingway and his friend Edith Wharton and so many others. That is clear. Thank goodness for it, as it really becomes tedious after a while to keep running into that nonsense.

What I want(ed) to be different in that Club scene is for someone to

have simply batted an eye or even laughed or snickered. I am rewriting Lewis here, I realize. Just seems so odd for Finkelstein to talk that distantly and objectively about "them" and there he sits among his friends who for sure knew his roots and were accustomed to his pose, I am sure. Do they care so much about his obnoxious self that they let him go on and on, having taken him fully in to their sub-society? It is not of course that I would think they would question him or take issue with it, since they think this too. But coming from HIM, it does not strike them in any way worthy of a snicker or a word of ironic recognition, even echoing him with their own bigotry? Of course, irony is not known to them. I did not pause at and just took as proof of the deep nature of the prejudice but when Finkelstein says what he does, I was all ready for something else, which never came.

So, pardon me rewriting Master Lewis.... ✍



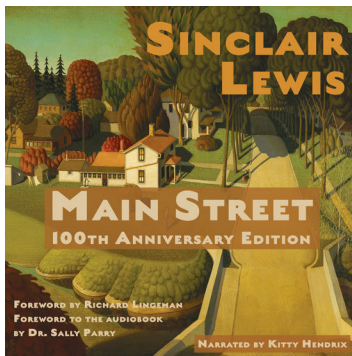
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DEPARTMENTS

BOOK NOTES

A Post Hypnotic *Main Street*:

Post Hypnotic Press has recorded a 100th anniversary edition of *Main Street*, narrated by Kitty Hendrix with a foreword by Richard Lingeman and an afterword by Sally Parry. It's available on Audible.com (www.posthypnoticpress.com/product/main-street), as an audio CD, an MP3 CD, a downloadable version, and at Amazon.com. The listening length is 19 hours and 15 minutes.



Main Speak: Quotes from the Work of Sinclair Lewis, by Michael Fridgen, is available on Kindle and in paperback at Amazon. https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0996857451/ref=dbs_a_def_rwt_bibl_vppi_i11

The book includes an introduction as well as commentary on each novel. Fridgen, a native Minnesotan, was introduced to the Minnesota authors F. Scott Fitzgerald and Garrison Keillor in school but didn't feel a connection with them. While watching his sister march in the Vikingland Parade in Alexandria one year, he picked up *Main Street*.

From the first page, I was enthralled with the plight of Carol Kennicott and her struggle with the village virus of Gopher Prairie. This, finally, was a part of Minnesota literature I could relate to. This was the Minnesota I knew... I knew Carol because I saw her inside myself... As I read through the vast work of Sinclair Lewis, I found many more complicated personalities that I both loved and hated. I'm proud to claim that the wonder and enthusiasm of Bethel Merriday is part of who I am. I love that Aaron Gadd's

skepticism is alive and well in my mind. And when I look in the mirror and see Doremus Jessup, I wink at him and hope he never leaves me. (5–6)

Fridgen is also the author of *College Street* (2015), a satire of higher education written in the style of Sinclair Lewis. <http://www.michaelfridgen.com/college-street.html>



Sinclair Lewis's Collected Works is advertised by Amazon as a Kindle-only collection of eleven works by Lewis. The title is misleading since it's really only eight short stories, "The Ghost Patrol," "Young Man Axelbrod," "The Willow Walk," "The Cat of the Stars," "Things," "Speed," "The Kidnaped Memorial," and "Moths in the Arc Light," most from *The Selected Short Stories of Sinclair Lewis*, plus three out-of-copyright novels, *Free Air*, *Main Street*, and *Babbitt*, all for 99 cents. It was done in 2013 and is enabled for Text-to-Speech and Word Wise.

SINCLAIR LEWIS MISCELLANY

Many thanks to Dick Ebert who has donated recordings of his interviews with two of Sinclair Lewis's neighbors. He writes,

In 1971, I created an in-depth audio about the life and works of Sinclair Lewis. It includes snippets of interviews with two neighbors who were his age while growing up in Sauk Centre. I had forgotten all about it until my wife and I revisited his boyhood home this summer. The two women providing tours said the Sinclair Lewis Foundation in Sauk Centre and your Sinclair Lewis Society might be very interested in getting a copy. After an extensive search at home, I found the tapes and fortunately they were still in good shape to copy. So, I am offering you four CDs of the following:

- 67-minute original audio on the life and works of Sinclair Lewis created in June, 1971.
- Two CDs of the uncut interview with Benjamin F. DuBois Sr. (1885–1981). He lived next door to the Lewis family and was a prominent banker in Sauk Centre.
- One CD of the uncut interview with Clara J. Moore (1887–1972). She lived down the block.

Both interviews provide great (and often humorous) insights into Red, Dr. Lewis, and his wife plus the town's reactions to Sinclair. (Editor: from what I've heard so far, these are a treasure. Clara Moore sounds like such a charming woman, remembering young Harry holding a dramatic funeral service for a dead bird.)



Susan O'Brien posted on the Lewis listserv that in 1998 the Modern Library had *Main Street* as 68th on its list of 100 best English-language novels of the twentieth century. To provide a different take on lists, Dennis Morgan submitted the August 1944 *Saturday Review of Literature* poll. They asked a number of their contributors to nominate the leading American novelist and leading American novel of the last twenty years. Ernest Hemingway came in first, followed by Willa Cather, John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, Thomas Wolfe, Ellen Glasgow, and Theodore Dreiser. Tied for eighth place were John Steinbeck, Kenneth Roberts, William Faulkner, and Marjorie Rawlings. The leading novel was *Arrowsmith*, followed by *A Farewell to Arms*, *U.S.A.*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. A lively discussion ensued.



In "The Rise and Fall of Booth Tarkington" (*New Yorker* Nov. 11, 2019) Robert Gottlieb comments on how this Pulitzer Prize-winning author (for *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *Alice Adams*) "dwindled into America's most distinguished hack."

The year before *Alice Adams*, 1920, was the year of *Main Street*, the crucial turning point in Sinclair Lewis's enormous career—one that immediately put Tarkington in the shade. *Babbitt* followed, and then *Arrowsmith*, in 1925, an annus mirabilis. That was the year of Hemingway's *In Our Time*; Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*; Cather's *The Professor's House*; Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*; Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*—to say nothing of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* and Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. And Faulkner's first novel, *Soldiers' Pay*, was coming off the presses. Neither in that year nor in any year to come did Tarkington write anything remotely of their consequence. But remember: back in 1900, when he was publishing *Monsieur Beaucaire*, Dreiser—that other writer (but not gentleman) from Indiana—was publishing *Sister Carrie*....

Yes, he lacked the fierceness and conviction of a Dreiser or a Lewis; his talent was descriptive rather than penetrating; and he was almost pathologically nonconfrontational. But ultimately what stands between him and any large achievement is his deeply

rooted, unappeasable need to look longingly backward, an impulse that goes beyond nostalgia.

The full article can be found at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/11/11/the-rise-and-fall-of-booth-tarkington>



Min Jin Lee, who was born in South Korea and moved to New York with her parents at the age of seven, is best known for her novels *Free Food for Millionaires* (2007) and *Pachinko* (2017). In her essay "Stonehenge," in the June 10 and 17, 2019, issue of the *New Yorker*, she writes how Sinclair Lewis helped her become accustomed to Americans. In high school, "my friend Andria told me about a book she'd loved: *Main Street*, by Sinclair Lewis. I read it. Then I went through *Babbitt*, *Dodsworth*, and *Arrowsmith*...."

Lewis wrote about white Midwesterners who struggled against provincial thinking, corporate greed, materialism, and fascism. It was calming to read old novels about big ideas. I wasn't looking for suspense on my train ride. My borrowed paperbacks told me that Lewis was from Minnesota, a place I'd never been. My family never went anywhere. Dad had to



Time, vol. 6, issue 25 (Dec. 20, 1925). Front cover illustration of Booth Tarkington by S. J. Woolf.

keep the store open six days a week, year-round, to pay the onerous rent to a landlord whose grown sons blew his money on cocaine. But I'd read so many novels that, in my mind, I'd sort of been everywhere.

Lewis had attended Yale University. I wasn't allowed to apply to any college that required plane travel. Yale was only a Metro-North train ride away. I applied and got in.

The full article can be found at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/06/10/stonehenge>



Victoria Riskin, in *Fay Wray and Robert Riskin: A Hollywood Memoir* (Pantheon 2019), writes about her famous parents, especially their time in the movie industry. She also mentions Sinclair Lewis's infatuation with Wray, which began at a theater in Cohasset, Massachusetts. Lewis was acting in summer stock as was she, and he became "besotted." Later in the summer, at a theater in Saratoga Springs, New York, he tried to get cast opposite her in a romantic role. Wray remembered, "I could admire Lewis, admire his brilliance and the mind he himself defined as 'chained lightning,' but I wouldn't want him to touch me" (183–84). He asked her to collaborate in writing the play *Angela Is Twenty-Two*, about an older man falling in love with a younger woman.

Being asked by a Nobel Prize-winning author to collaborate was heady stuff and she agreed, all the time struggling to maintain a friendship without hurting his feelings. It wasn't easy. Plays were not Lewis' métier. 'He wanted to be a great playwright,' my mother said, 'but didn't have a sense of dramatic structure. His plays were more ideas with conversation.' And his obsession with her was hard to manage artfully....(184)



Every week the *New York Times Book Review* asks someone, often in the book business, about their favorite books, fictional characters, and what they're currently reading. In the November 8, 2015 issue, Tony Award-winning actor Nathan Lane was asked, "If you could depict any fictional character, who would it be?" His answer, "Don't laugh—'Babbitt' by Sinclair Lewis. George Babbitt, remember him? Even though it falls under social satire, I still find it true and resonant and ultimately very moving. He's so proud of his booster's club button. Oy" (8). [Editor: I think he'd be great!]



In his 2013 autobiography *All in All*, actor Stacy Keach discussed his co-founding the group L.A. Theatre Works in

the late 1980s. The group produced a radio dramatization of Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, which featured the voices of Keach, Richard Dreyfuss, Héctor Elizondo, Julie Harris, Amy Irving, Harry Hamlin, John Lithgow, Marsha Mason, JoBeth Williams, and Ed Asner in the title role.



The following is from *Thurber: A Biography*, by Burton Bernstein (1975). James Thurber and his second wife Helen were vacationing in Bermuda in 1936 and had dinner with Ronald Williams, the editor of *Bermudian* magazine, and his wife Jane, as well as Sinclair Lewis. Thurber wrote to his friends E. B. and Katharine Angell White about Lewis's generosity:



Fay Wray

The Williamses—he's 28 and she 23—are the sought after people down here. They usually have a writer in their home, which is tough, but they like it. Sinclair Lewis is one of their great admirers and we all went to dinner with him one night.... We decided, though, that he would be quite a swell

guy sober. Maybe because he can, and did, recite most of the Owl in the Attic. The only drunken writer I ever met who said nothing about his own work and praised that of another writer present. He was poured onto the boat that took him home. He did one swell thing: he brought down here the 83 year old mother of his secretary, paid her way for two weeks in fine style. She was a wonderful old lady who had never been out of Rutland, Vt. before. Lewis went into a church with her, and knelt down when she did (and he brags about being the world's leading atheist). He was extremely fine with her and I liked him for it. (263–64)



John Sanford, an American novelist, was best known for *The People from Heaven* (1943), a frightening story of an African American woman who moves to Warrensburg, New York in the early 1940s and is raped by a white storekeeper. As she tries to seek justice, the community is thrown into a panic, and the storekeeper kills a Native American before the woman is able to kill him. The novel is modernist in the sense that there is a fragmented narrative, insertions of other racist, violent acts in American history as interchapters, and some poetic reflection.

Sanford was also Jewish, a member of the Communist Party, and sometime screenwriter. He wrote *The Battle of Russia* for Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series during World War II and was married to the very successful screenwriter Marguerite Roberts who wrote films from the 1933 *Sailor's Luck* to the 1971 *Shoot Out*. Among her best-known films were *Ziegfeld Girl* (1941), *Somewhere I'll Find You* (1942), *Dragon Seed* (1944), *Ivanhoe* (1952), and *True Grit* (1969). In volume three of his autobiography, *A Very Good Land to Fall With: Scenes from the Life of an American Jew* (1987), Sanford writes of his life in Hollywood and how Roberts supported him so that he could write *The People from Heaven*.



Movie poster for
Ziegfeld Girl, 1941

Sanford is a very engaging writer, but he's cranky about those who critique his writing and political ideas. As he tries to get his novel published, he deals with a representative of Harcourt Brace who tells his boss, "I can give Harcourt an author who will replace Dos Passos at his best. We launched Red Lewis, and we published Dos and Djuna Barnes and Katherine Anne Porter, and they reappear, these special ones, each in his generation — and here, by God, is Sanford" (246). Harcourt Brace does publish the novel to very mixed reviews, with one of the worst coming from Lewis's biographer Mark Schorer who entitled his review "Assorted White Trash" (254).

INQUIRING MINDS

Q: I'm writing because I came across a mention of a volume of Sinclair Lewis's letters in an essay from the 1950s by Elizabeth Hardwick — and now I cannot find the book itself either through an online search or a WorldCat search. I don't suppose you know any publication details that might help me locate it?

[Editor: Thanks for writing. I'm actually happiest when responding to Sinclair Lewis questions.

There are two collections of Lewis letters, plus two articles. My guess is that it's the first one you were referring to.

Smith, Harrison E., ed. *From Main Street to Stockholm: Letters of Sinclair Lewis, 1919–1930*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952. <https://archive.org/details/frommainstreet-to001034mbp/page/n7>

Koblas, John J., and Dave Page, eds. *Selected Letters of Sinclair Lewis*, Madison, WI: Main Street Press, 1985.

Morgan, Speer, and William Holtz. "Fragments from a Marriage: Letters of Sinclair Lewis to Grace Hegger Lewis." *Missouri Review* 11 (1988): 71–98. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/410755/pdf>

Perry, Constance M. "Sinclair Lewis's Romantic Role-playing: Reading the Lewis Correspondence to Marcella Powers (1939–1947)." *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter* 25.2 (2017): 1, 4, 6, 8–11.]



Q: I read *Main Street* many years ago. I seem to recall dialogue where middle-class Yankees are suspicious of their Scandinavian help. Can you tell me if my recollection is accurate?

[Editor: Your memory is fine. The town of Gopher Prairie has Scandinavians who live on the less good side of town, probably across the railroad tracks. Carol Kennicott, the main character, hires a young Scandinavian girl as household help. Carol is criticized by the other wives in town for paying her help too much and scandalizes people when she actually eats meals with Bea, the maid, when her husband is traveling. Bea and her son die from typhoid. Lewis is very insightful about the attitudes towards immigrants, although they provide services, help on farms, etc. I wish Lewis weren't still so relevant!]

Second question on *Main Street*: I won't bug you again. In my memory there is at least one minor character who is a socialist. There is at least one businessman who makes derogatory remarks about either socialism/communism/Bolshevism/ or events going on in Russia, not sure which. Is my memory correct?

[Editor: You have a good memory. The socialist is Miles Bjornstam, who is called "The Red Swede." He's half-Yank and half-Swede, considers himself an atheist and an anarchist, and says that the foreman at the flour mill is the real socialist (an interesting assertion given that Lewis's brother Fred was a foreman at a flour mill). He first shows up in chapter 10.

The businessman who's brought in to "boost" the town is Big Jim Blauser in chapter 35. He's against "Alien Agitators Who Threaten the Security of Our Institutions" and for "One Hundred Per Cent. Americanism." He thinks that the "Farmers' Nonpartisan League and the whole bunch of socialists

are right in the same category, or, as the fellow says, in the same scategory, meaning This Way Out, Exit, Beat It While the Going's Good.”]



Q: I have recently learned about Lewis's interviewing of African Americans while living in Duluth for his novel *Kingsblood Royal*. When he lived there, the Duluth lynchings were over twenty years in the past, but any of the longtime African American residents could have told him about the event. In your research of Lewis, do you know if Lewis transcribed his interviews with Duluth's African Americans? Did he identify them by name while taking down notes of their testimonies? If he did, those notes would be a great resource for people to read about the Duluth lynchings. As good as Michael Fedo's book *The Lynchings in Duluth* is, it does not mention Sinclair Lewis at all. Fedo's book does mention Eddie Nichols living in Duluth during the event and arming himself at his house, but the book does not mention that Nichols later became Lewis's personal bartender in the 1940s.

[George Killough responds: What you're hoping to find may not exist, although I can't say this with complete certainty.

Twice I spent about a week at the archive at Yale: the first time in 1986 and the second time in 1992. The Lewis material then was not fully catalogued (by which I mean, not catalogued with the detail a researcher might like), but I did sift through quite a few things from the Duluth period, and I don't remember any notes on the lynchings. I don't remember any notes on Lewis's interviews with Duluth's African Americans either. This is not to say for sure that there are none there, but my records of what I found do not include such things, and I don't remember such things.

Certainly he knew about the lynchings. People would have told him, and the St. Louis County Historical Society offices and archive were in those days just a few blocks from his house—an easy walk.

He of course knew Ed and Dorothea Nichols. I think Ed was a sort of maître d' for Duluth's Kitchi Gammi Club, a private

gentlemen's club with an elegant neo-Gothic building in the middle of Duluth, still in existence. (These days women can belong too, but in the 1940s they only entered the building as guests of their husbands.)

The name Nichols shows up in Lewis's appointment books—little vest-pocket booklets that are in the collection at Yale. There's also a note there from Ed and Dorothea to Lewis, dated August 17, 1947, praising *Kingsblood Royal*, which had come out earlier that year. They find it “splendid.” They say, “The facts couldn't have been put more perfectly.”

I copied this little letter into my records because the character Drexel Greenshaw, headwaiter at the Fiesole Room in the novel and portrayed as a fawning Uncle Tom, may have been

based on poor Ed Nichols. Certainly he would have seen the parallel, and yet he and his wife wrote this note of praise. This is hard to understand. Could it be that the Nicholises had already had conversations with Lewis about the behavior

expected from black maître d's in white clubs? Could it be that Drexel Greenshaw was portrayed as the Nicholises led Lewis to believe he should be portrayed? This seems like a stretch, but who knows? Maybe the Nicholises liked the overall novel so much that they could overlook the Greenshaw bit as if it were negligible.

When I dug up my notes this afternoon, I was struck by another point in the letter, which is as follows: “You told Ed at one time that Negroes would not care for the book at first. I think that you were wrong there.” Why Lewis might say blacks wouldn't like the novel intrigues me. I wonder if this was an advance apology to Ed for the Greenshaw portrayal. Or did Lewis have a better sense than is usually attributed to him of why the novel might be offensive, as indeed it was to James Baldwin? Again, it's hard to know.

Another African American whom Lewis knew in Duluth was Marjorie Kelley. She's almost certainly the prototype for Sophie Concord in the novel. Unfortunately Lewis's *Minnesota Diary* makes no mention of Marjorie Kelley. By summer 1945, when Lewis must have been gathering information for *Kingsblood Royal*, the diary seems to have run out of steam. There aren't many entries, and they are meager. We know about Marjorie Kelley because her name appears in the appointment books.



Myers-Wilkins Elementary School, Duluth, Minnesota

Mark Schorer saw her name there and probably interviewed her when he came to Duluth in preparation for his Lewis biography.

Perhaps my biggest mistake when researching Lewis and Duluth was my failure to interview her fully. I had at least two half-hour phone conversations with her, which were quite valuable, but I intended to visit her and talk at greater length. She was in her sixties, and it looked like there would be plenty of time. But then she died suddenly in 1992 at age 69. Lewis had cultivated her friendship, even corresponded with her briefly after he left town. She has historic significance here. She became Duluth's first black operating room nurse and then Duluth's first black nurse anesthetist, as well as a leader in the

local NAACP. One of Duluth's elementary schools, the Myers-Wilkins School, is now named partly in her honor, her married name having been Wilkins. Notice that she would have been quite young when Lewis knew her in the 1940s. The lynchings occurred before she was born.

I wish I could provide more hope about what can be found in the big cache of Lewis materials at Yale, but I'm doubtful about the existence of what you seek. Depending on whether or not the cataloguing has improved, you might find out what you want to know by writing the archivist in charge of the American Literature collection at the Beinecke Library. Or you might have to go there.]

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

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Sinclair Lewis's *Dodsworth*, Dramatized by Sidney Howard. With Comments by Sidney Howard and Sinclair Lewis on the Art of Dramatization. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1934. \$4500

First Edition. Special presentation edition signed by the authors Sinclair Lewis and Sidney Howard. This issue was made in a tiny quantity specifically for members of the original Broadway production with a special printed page, which reads "To Jo Mielziner for helping to turn 'Dodsworth' from a manuscript into a play with gratitude of [hand signed in ink] Sinclair Lewis and [hand signed in ink] Sidney Howard. New York—September 1934." Illustrated with photographs from the production. Fine bright copy in a fine dust jacket. An important presentation copy to Jo Mielziner who



Poster for the theatrical release of *Dodsworth* in 1936. © United Artists Corporation, 1935

designed the sets for the original production. Sidney Howard discusses Mielziner's contribution in his essay on adapting the novel into a play on pages xvi–xvii. Howard was a very successful Broadway playwright in the 1930s and wrote the screenplays for *Gone with the Wind* and film adaptations of Lewis's *Dodsworth* and *Arrowsmith*. Mielziner is arguably the most distinguished set designer in Broadway history, designing such classics as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *South Pacific*, *Carousel*, *Mister Roberts*, *Key Largo*, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, *Pal Joey*, *The King and I*, *Guys and Dolls*, etc. An excellent association copy of a highly successful Broadway play.

Susan O'Brien writes: After a hunt I located the film of Sinclair Lewis presenting a posthumous award to writer Sidney Howard, at the 1939 Academy Awards, for *Gone with the Wind*. Howard also was nominated for best screenplay adaptation for *Dodsworth*. The film of Lewis starts just after 8 min 30 secs, about the middle of the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpd6eQNmWY>

Howard, who also did the *Dodsworth* stage adaptation, suffered an untimely death. Wikipedia notes,

Howard died in the summer of 1939 at the age of 48 in Tyringham, Massachusetts while working on his 700-acre farm. A lover of the quiet rural life, Howard spent as much time on his farm as possible when he was not in New York or Hollywood. He was crushed to death in a garage by his two-and-a-half ton tractor. He had turned the ignition switch on and was cranking the engine to start it when it lurched forward, pinning him against the wall of the garage. "His death was a Broadway calamity," [Brooks] Atkinson wrote. "Broadway and the Playwrights' Company lost one of its most admirable people...in the midst of an active career and full of ideas for more plays."

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