

Sinclair Lewis Almanac

January

2, 1942

On this day in history, critically acclaimed American novelist Sinclair Lewis divorced his second wife Dorothy Thompson. Their marriage became the basis of the Broadway production *Strangers*, which opened in 1979 after both of their deaths. Initially wed on the grounds of love, their marriage became a struggle with the strain of both of their prolific literary accomplishments and constant travel. In 1930 they had a son, Michael Lewis, who remained, along with their Vermont residence, Twin Farms, in Thompson's custody after the divorce. The court ordered Lewis not to remarry within the next two years; Lewis immersed himself into his newfound freedom.

10, 1951

On this day in history, Nobel Prize-winning American author Sinclair Lewis died in a clinic on the outskirts of Rome of a heart attack. Bedridden at the Clinica Electra on Monte Mario since December 31, his doctor initially diagnosed Lewis with acute delirium tremens. However temporary the initial attacks were, any fully coherent moments before he was taken by ambulance to the clinic were his last. Lewis had his final heart attack on the 9th and died watching the sun rise the next day. Based upon his wishes, Lewis's body was cremated and buried in his place of birth, Sauk Centre, Minnesota.

19, 1951

Sinclair Lewis's ashes are buried in Greenwood Cemetery, Sauk Centre, Minnesota. His brother Claude is present; his former wife, Dorothy Thompson, is not, although she visits Sauk Centre in 1960 for a celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of his birth.

19, 1938

While author Sinclair Lewis was in Los Angeles for his lecture tour, his novel *The Prodigal Parents* appears in bookstores, but it was not well received. Many readers thought the book shockingly bad and no advancement to his career. Though the book did sell nearly 100,000 copies, sales were due mostly to the name Lewis had already made for himself.

February

7, 1885

Today is the birthday of American novelist Sinclair Lewis. Born in Sauk Centre, Minnesota to Dr. Edwin J. Lewis and Emma Kermott Lewis, Harry Sinclair Lewis was the youngest of three boys and most reserved. His authoritative father had trouble understanding his brilliant if unconventional son. During his lifetime, Lewis wrote many works ranging from poems and short stories to plays and novels. He was the first American to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

13, 1926

Today *Collier's* began its serialization of Sinclair Lewis's novel *Mantrap*, which lasted throughout May. Harcourt, Brace & Company published it as a novel in June of the same year. Harcourt felt skeptical of publishing *Mantrap* as a novel due to its breezy writing. Termed "whoring" by Lewis, the periodical hack writing turned into a novel was not received very well. Critics recognized Lewis's lack of concern when writing for serialization purposes. However, the novel was turned into a successful silent film of the same name starring Clara Bow, Ernest Torrence, and Percy Marmont, and directed by Victor Fleming.

23, 1917

Today Sinclair Lewis's novel *The Job: An American Novel* was published. Written in an attempt to receive more recognition than he did for *The Trail of the Hawk*, the novel actually is one of Lewis's first controversial ones. The novel accentuates Lewis's knack for harsh realistic commentary on American life. Perhaps a reflection of the increasing certainty of American intervention in World War I, the tone of *The Job* deviated from the hopefulness of Lewis's first two novels, *Hike and the Aeroplane* and *Our Mr. Wrenn*. The liberal press praised the strong feminist sentiments, while the more conservative press criticized Lewis's presentation of the American business community.

March

5, 1925

On this day in history Harcourt, Brace & Company published Sinclair Lewis's novel *Arrowsmith*. Steering away from the direction of his other novels, *Arrowsmith's* main character, Martin Arrowsmith, was a heroic man of integrity that Lewis's readership could actually admire. This novel earned Lewis praise across the board. Asserting that he had transcended the complications of *Babbitt*, critics commended the artistic humanity within *Arrowsmith*. Receiving complaints from only Upton Sinclair and a few doctors (being the subject of the novel) in regards to medical practice ignorance, the

novel went on to win the Pulitzer Prize a year later in 1926, though Lewis refused to accept it. Some saw the novel as a tribute to his doctor father.

10, 1927

On this day in history while author Sinclair Lewis was sailing from Cherbourg to the United States, Harcourt, Brace & Company published his novel *Elmer Gantry*, which turned the reading community of the United States upside down. Reviled particularly by clergymen, the book was banned from the shelves of many bookstores and libraries. Lewis himself received mountains of hate mail, and was very controversial. Gantry's strong sexual appetite, hypocrisy, and success despite his sexual escapades, angered religious readers. From the eyes of the publisher, the extreme resentment felt towards this novel resulted in quite a bit of free and much welcomed publicity for the famous author. The novel was later turned into the highly successful film of the same name in 1960 which won Oscars for Burt Lancaster as Gantry and Shirley Jones as Lulu Baines.

14, 1929

On this day in history, Harcourt, Brace & Company published Sinclair Lewis's novel *Dodsworth*. Lewis modeled his main character, Sam Dodsworth, partly on his brother Claude and partly on himself, especially in the relationships that Sam has with his wife and also his consoler, Edith Cortwright. Most reviewers approved of the significant change of subject from *Elmer Gantry*. Dodsworth's early retirement, fascination with England, and despair over the decline of his marriage marks a Jamesian turn in his writing. His portrayal of Americans overseas is very perceptive.

15, 1904

Harry Sinclair Lewis has his first poem published. While at Yale, Lewis submitted many short pieces of writing to the *Lit* magazine before any were accepted. His poem "Launcelot" was actually submitted more than once before being chosen to be included in the college's magazine. Having been heavily influenced by Tennyson at the time, a professor offered high praise of the poem in a review that appeared two days later in the *Yale News*. Lewis would continue to read reviews of his work until the day he died.

19, 1931

Today is the day many literature enthusiasts remember as the one when the conflict between Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser got physical. Having praised Dreiser's novels earlier in the day at a lecture he was giving in New York, Lewis refused Dreiser's congratulatory handshake at a dinner party in the Metropolitan Club that they were both attending. He then sat through his meal muttering threats and atrocities under his breath towards Dreiser. When invited to make a speech first, Lewis simply said, "I am

very happy to welcome Mr. Pilnyak to this country. But I do not care to speak in the presence of a man who has stolen three thousand words from my wife's book, and before two sage critics who have lamented the action of the Nobel prize committee in selecting me as America's representative writer" (Schorer 562). Fuming and red in the face, Dreiser was incapable of holding himself back. Asking Lewis to step aside with him, Dreiser implored Lewis to take back what he said at dinner and went on to slap him twice when he refused to do so. Lewis maintained that he thought Dreiser a liar and a thief and remained calm and cool throughout the whole indiscretion. By the next morning, every American was reading about the quarrel in the newspaper.

22, 1940

Today marks the publication of Sinclair Lewis's novel *Bethel Merriday*. Although this novel is concerned with what Lewis learned from his stint of play acting, the novel was not taken very seriously. This theater-centered, pale romance resulted in a commercial failure for the prolific author. The novel had the lowest sales since the publication of *Free Air* (Schorer 657), and did nothing but fuel Lewis's constant agitation and restlessness.

April

25, 1926

"Sister [what Lewis called Mrs. Agnes Birkhead, wife of one of the ministers that Lewis was friendly with while researching *Elmer Gantry*], I have been offered the Pulitzer Prize" (Schorer 451) were the words spoken by the first author in history to refuse the Pulitzer Prize and the \$1,000 cash prize that went along with it on this day in 1926. Awarded the prize for his novel *Arrowsmith*, published in 1925, Sinclair Lewis contended that he did not approve of contests of this sort for writers. He was also annoyed that the Board of Trustees of Columbia University did not feel as though he rightfully deserved to win [the Pulitzer Prize board had recommended both *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, but they were overruled by the Board of Trustees]. Together with his publisher Harcourt, the two took eleven days to draft and finalize a refusal letter which was published by the Associated Press.

May

6, 1926

On this day in history American author Sinclair Lewis publicly announced his refusal of the Pulitzer Prize by publishing his letter to the Prize Committee through the Associated Press in New York. Noting that the prize was "for the American novel

published during the year which shall best present the wholesome atmosphere of American life, and the highest standard of American manners and manhood," Lewis felt as though accepting would not be an acknowledgement of literary merit but conformity to a style deemed popular at the time. Awarded for his novel *Arrowsmith*, published in 1925, Lewis was the first author in history to reject the prize. For this reason, newspapers all across the United States jumped on this opportunity to print a shocking headline about it. Most attacked Lewis and questioned the motives he gave for refusing the prize. Recognizing in his letter to the Prize Committee that he also declined an offer for membership into the National Institute of Arts and Letters gave the newspapers grounds to accuse him of a passion for publicity stunts [Lewis was eventually inducted into the renamed American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1935].

14, 1928

On today's date American author Sinclair Lewis wed his second wife, Dorothy Thompson. Both worldly and prominent writers, the two married in London for all the right reasons, but wound up struggling to keep the flame alive under the strain of very active careers and lots of separation. Both of their prolific writing careers demanded extensive travel of each of them, and after one son and literary scandal, the two divorced on January 2, 1942.

June

5, 1902

Sinclair Lewis's first published works, a column detailing the events of his high school graduation and a short column of news, made their debut in the Sauk Centre *Herald*. After the publication of these two pieces, Lewis notes in his diary that he is going to continue to work for the *Herald* up until he is "sick of it." Unfortunately, there is no real record of Lewis ever having been employed by the newspaper as a writer, rather as a sales person.

25, 1891

Today we remember the life of Sinclair Lewis's mother, Emma Kermott Lewis. Suffering greatly from tuberculosis, pleurisy, and consumption, she relocated to New Mexico, California, and Texas from 1888 up until about one month before her death, in hopes that the different climates would better her physical state. She was mostly ill for the six years that she lived after the birth of Lewis. Though the death of Emma signified Lewis's loss of his birth mother, he gained an unprecedented maternal figure with the remarriage of his father to Isabel Warner.

July

7, 1903

On this day in history American novelist Sinclair Lewis received his sought after acceptance letter to Yale University. This was a turning point in his life; the prose of Lewis's journal entries becomes much more poetic the summer before his departure for New Haven, Connecticut. Unfortunately, his status as the butt of his childhood classmates' jokes did not improve much at his new school. His severe acne partnered with his intelligent speech found him few friends, just like in grade school. On a brighter note, while at Yale Lewis had his first piece of poetry published, and read his first formal review. Staying until only June 25 of the following year, Lewis walks out on Yale and heads for Europe to work on a cattle boat. He returns the next year.

8, 1927

American author Sinclair Lewis met his second wife, Dorothy Thompson. Their relationship grew to be one of great influence on Lewis's work. Already having toyed with the idea of divorce from his first wife Grace Livingston Hegger, when Lewis met Thompson in Berlin, Germany, he became enchanted with the most popular newswoman in Europe. Dorothy Thompson was a woman of intelligence and relaxed self-confidence who quickly became just as fond of Lewis as he was of her. The two got married less than a year later in London and remained together for just under fourteen years.

August

29, 1926

Today we remember the life of a man who nurtured Sinclair Lewis's writing talent in a perverse way. Dr. Edwin J. Lewis, Sinclair's father, died at midnight on August 29, 1926. A harsh man running a strict household, Dr. Lewis did not provide his son with a loving, nourishing space to grow into a congenial person. Subsequently, Lewis grew up internalizing many thoughts and eventually developing a knack for writing them down in a journal. Lewis's journaling, which he continued throughout his life, provided for him the writing practice necessary to produce timeless pieces of literature. Arriving on the scene the morning after his father's death, Lewis recounted how his father had never forgiven him for tainting the reputation of his hometown within the pages of his novel *Main Street*. Until the day Lewis died he struggled with his resentment and appalling regard he felt towards his father whose neglect Lewis's readers can thank.

September

14, 1922

Today is the day of the much anticipated publication of Sinclair Lewis's novel *Babbitt*. The unprecedented success of his previous novel *Main Street* had people eagerly awaiting the arrival of his next piece, and they were not disappointed. Critically acclaimed as actually better in technique and style than *Main Street*, *Babbitt* garnered Lewis personal admiration from both Edith Wharton and H. G. Wells. Having studied both their writing techniques in the past, letters from both proved to be a big achievement for Lewis.

27, 1916

American author Sinclair Lewis's novel *The Trail of the Hawk* was published. Anticipating Lewis's later satirical style, the novel contains a lot of fact turned fiction in regards to American society. Along with *Our Mr. Wrenn* and *The Trail of the Hawk* this novel established Lewis as an American realist novelist to be paid attention to. Dedicated to his first wife Grace Livingston Hegger, the novel received high praise from many periodicals and serious journals for its unconventional spirit and youthful liberalism. The novel was not very commercially successful, only selling about 3,665 copies.

22, 1902

American author Sinclair Lewis began his collegiate life at Oberlin Academy in Ohio. Although he passed the first round of Yale entrance exams, Lewis attended Oberlin to take courses in more advanced subjects to better prepare him for college. Oberlin proved to be a very different atmosphere for the gangly and socially awkward red-head. The six months he spent at Oberlin not only prepared him for Yale, but also offered inspiration for many of Lewis's novels, especially because of the highly religious landscape. Involved only briefly with Christian youth groups, Lewis became quickly disenchanted with organized religion and adopted an agnostic approach for the rest of his life.

October

3, 1945

American author Sinclair Lewis's novel *Cass Timberlane* was published. Similar in pattern to *Main Street*, *Cass Timberlane* had an air of sentimental affection and reflected Lewis's own love story with Marcella Powers. Serialized first in *Cosmopolitan*, the film industry took interest in the novel before it was even published. The adaptation came

out two years later, starring Spencer Tracy, Zachary Scott, and Lana Turner, the “sweater girl” of the time. Though the novel’s male narrative arc irritated some of Lewis’s female readership, total sales reached an astonishing 1,140,000 copies.

4, 1937

American author Sinclair Lewis began writing a weekly column titled “Book Week” for *Newsweek*. What became a popular blurb to read started to reflect Lewis’s lectures. One essay asserted that Ernest Hemingway’s novel *To Have and Have Not* was nothing but an atrocity, and another attacked Communist writing. The column proved to be quite successful and ran through April 18, 1938.

15, 1935

Sinclair Lewis’s first Broadway play makes its debut. *Jayhawker* opens in Washington on October 15, 1935, and then runs on Broadway November 5-24, 1935. Directed by Joe Losey, the play was relatively successful. Rewritten a few times after opening night, the play received surprisingly decent reviews. After closing night, Doubleday suggested publishing the play as a book. Lewis had no objections, and the book sold 1,076 copies. Lewis’s first play, *Hobemia*, ran briefly off-Broadway in 1919.

21, 1935

On this date in 1935, Doubleday published Sinclair Lewis’s politically shocking novel *It Can't Happen Here*. Though critics and readers across the board acknowledged the novel’s artistic achievement, more attention was given to the political commentary within the pages. Sure to make it clear that he did not support the radicals or Hitler, Lewis addressed the world’s sensitivity in terms of history with *It Can't Happen Here*. Reaching audiences far beyond American lines, total sales climbed to an astonishing more than 320,000 copies. A play version opened on October 26, 1936 under the aegis of the Federal Theater Project and twenty-one productions in eighteen cities opened on the same date.

23, 1919/1920

October 23 proved to be a significant day for American author Sinclair Lewis. Two of Lewis’s major novels were published today. Harcourt, Brace & Company kicked off its publishing history with Lewis in 1919 with its publication of *Free Air*, and celebrated the one year Harcourt/Lewis anniversary in 1920 with the publication of *Main Street*. Originally published as a two piece serialization, *Free Air* was initially criticized for its lack of attractive characters. However, when Harcourt published the novel as a whole, it received good reviews. The novel’s theme focuses on Easterners vs. Westerners and the sociology of travel.

Presenting to Harcourt the final manuscript for *Main Street* on July 17, Lewis had high hopes for this novel. Having promoted the novel's release for months now, Lewis' sales manager hoped to sell at least 25,000 copies. Predictions were wildly underestimated however and *Main Street* went on to sell 180,000 copies within the first six months of 1921. His most popular novel yet, *Main Street*'s sales surpassed one million copies and extinguished any risk of Lewis ever having to worry about income.

28, 1906

Sinclair Lewis had grown quite tired of sitting in classrooms and abandoned his education at Yale University. Though corresponding with Yale's literary magazine in terms of submissions and editing for quite some time afterwards, on this date Lewis leaves with friend Allan Updegraff to work as a janitor at Upton Sinclair's Helicon Hall. Remaining in Englewood, New Jersey at the experimental community for only one short month, Lewis and Updegraff collaborated on an article that would be published by the *New York Sun* on December 16 titled "Two Yale Men in Utopia." Helicon Hall is destroyed in a fire less than six months later. Lewis graduates from Yale two years later.

29, 1944

Today we remember the life of Sinclair Lewis's son, Wells Lewis. Serving overseas as the aide-de-camp to Major General John E. Dahlquist, Wells was shot and killed instantly by a sniper's bullet. Authorities were unable to reach Lewis due to a preoccupation with a debate in Kankakee, Illinois; news of his son's death was printed in the next day's paper before reaching him.

November

5, 1930

Today, in 1930, American author Sinclair Lewis received a phone call congratulating him for becoming the first American to win the Nobel prize in literature. His response could not have been more different than that of winning the Pulitzer. The prize is awarded to "the most distinguished work of an idealistic tendency," although it tends to recognize a body of work. For Lewis, *Babbitt* made him deserving of this recognition. Some critics approved of the Swedish Academy's choice over Theodore Dreiser and other American contemporaries and some did not. Lewis's publisher did his best to prevent Lewis from knowing that his main competition for the prize was Dreiser. His efforts were to no avail, and a rivalry between the two arose.

10, 1900

Over a century ago today, American novelist Sinclair Lewis kicked off his lifetime of

writing with the first entry into his personal diary. From 1900 up until 1908, Lewis kept his entries locked away from any readers by writing in his own made up code. He shared with his diary confessions, dreams, and sins of adolescence. Raised by his father's strict hand, Lewis suffered from school-yard tauntings and a very serious lack of friends. Significantly smaller than most boys his age, and a great deal smaller than his brother Claude and his gang of friends, Lewis was the butt of every joke and the victim of every prank. It is no wonder he took such a liking to keeping a diary as he really had no one to share anything with. Perhaps today we should extend gratitude to all Lewis' peers that repeatedly took advantage of his innocent gullibility.

December

16, 1906

On this day many years ago an article appeared in the New York *Sun* titled "Two Yale Men in Utopia." Written collaboratively by American authors Sinclair Lewis and Allan Updegraff, the article detailed in a fictionalized manner the physical labor of working as a janitor within Upton Sinclair's experimental society Hellicon Hall. An interview with Lewis later reveals that this account was mostly fictional as the majority of the work done by Lewis in Englewood was unsatisfactory. He described his own experience there to have been a "lazy time." Leaving with Updegraff on December 2 to head for New York, Lewis' plans were altered when he had to remain for a while in New Haven to be treated for jaundice.

30, 1938

American author Sinclair Lewis's play *Angela Is Twenty-Two* opens in Columbus, Ohio. Not only did Lewis write the play, but he starred in it as well, attracting a full audience. Though he wasn't a cast member for the entire two month long tour that reached over twenty cities, the play was very popular. The love triangle plot becomes the grounds for Lewis's novel *Bethel Merriday*. After the play ran in Minneapolis, Lewis gave up the role to settle down and finish the novel.

Biographical information comes primarily from
Lingeman, Richard. *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street*. New York: Random House, 2002.
Schorer, Mark. *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1961.

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