Sinclair Lewis—
Minnesota Rustic

By George Killough
College of St. Scholastica

American author Sinclair Lewis arrived in Duluth on Wednesday, May 17, 1944, with the idea of settling down. The weather in Minneapolis that morning was hot. Here, as he wrote in his diary, it was 20 degrees cooler with a stiff wind. He liked the change. The next day the Duluth News Tribune published his picture and announced he was house-hunting. By Saturday he had rented the neo-Tudor mansion at 2601 East Second Street, and a week later, May 27, he moved in. This was to be his main residence for almost two years.

He was fifty-nine years old and world-famous. He had gained enough wealth from his writing to live handsomely. Though his literary reputation was fading, he had been America’s most well-known novelist during the 1920s. Born in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, in 1885, he had his first big hit in 1920 with Main Street, the novel about small-town America. More successes followed, which led in 1930 to his becoming the first American ever to receive the Nobel Prize for literature. Wherever he went,

Minnesota Rustic by Killough continued on page 9

The Sinclair Lewis Society Elects
New Board of Directors for 1998-2001

The following people were overwhelmingly voted in:

President: George Killough, College of St. Scholastica;
Secretary-Treasurer: Robert L. McLaughlin, Illinois State University;
Board of Directors: Martin Bucco, Colorado State University; Margie Burns, University of Maryland-Baltimore County; H. Brooke Hessler, Texas Christian University; James M. Hutchisson, The Citadel (Past President); Jacqueline Koenig; Sally E. Parry (Executive Director), Illinois State University; Stephen R. Pastore, Deerfield Books.

Our congratulations to the new board and thanks to the previous board for all their hard work. Among the issues that the new board will talk about is the upcoming conference scheduled to take place in Sauk Centre in the year 2000 to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the publication of Arrowsmith and Lewis’s winning of the Pulitzer Prize (even though he turned it down).
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MAIN STREET SIGN
ERECTED BY THE MINNESOTA
HISTORICAL SOCIETY 1997

Nearly every small town has a Main Street—a town
center where residents gather to conduct their busi-
ness, greet their neighbors, and exchange news of the
day.

Today the concept of main street is suffused in a
nostalgic glow, as we remember the virtues and simplic-
ty of small-town life. But it wasn’t always so. The pub-
lcation of Sinclair Lewis’s novel Main Street in 1920
jolted Americans out of their sentimental view of their
hometowns.

Lewis, a native of Sauk Centre, set his novel in the
fictional town of Gopher Prairie, whose residents he
depicted in an unflattering light. Soon the term “Main
Street” took on a negative meaning, becoming synon-
mymous with narrow-minded, small-town provincialism.

Although Lewis intended Gopher Prairie to represent
the American village in general, it quickly came to be asso-
ciated with his own hometown of Sauk Centre. The local
newspaper expressed its displeasure by waiting six months
before acknowledging any connection to the nation’s most
talked-about novel. As the book gained popularity, how-
ever, Sauk Centre came to appreciate its celebrity status.

Gradually the phrase “Main Street” lost its negative
meaning as American filmmakers and writers in the 1930s
and 1940s returned to the glorification of small-town vir-
tues. Sauk Centre’s association with Lewis’s novel, which
had at first brought ridicule, eventually conferred on the
town a special dignity.

Now Sauk Centre’s Main Street stands as the living
symbol of the American small town. In 1994, to recog-
nize its importance in our cultural history, this Main Street
was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, the
nation’s official list of properties worthy of preservation.

CONTRIBUTORS

The editor of The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter would like to thank
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THE ANNIVERSARY EDITIONS
OF SINCLAIR LEWIS NOVELS

By Jeffrey M. Halperin

Anniversary issues of books which have become famous, sold well, or both are a fairly common phenomenon in the publishing business. Sinclair Lewis, despite the huge success of many of his books, had only two of his works celebrated with "anniversary editions": Main Street and Babbitt.

The Main Street "Anniversary Edition" was published not by Harcourt, Brace and Howe (or its successor, Harcourt, Brace & Co.) but by the famed reprint house of Grosset and Dunlap. Known more for their inexpensive editions of books that were established best-sellers, G&D (as it is known in the book trade) usually used inferior but serviceable materials to produce books from the original plates, which were aimed at what would soon become the paperback market. G&D usually, but not always, reproduced the jacket design as well (using the front panel only; the rear panel and flaps and even the jacket lining were used as promotional space for other G&D titles). Convincing authors to take lower royalties and offering percentage points to primary publishers instead of flat fees, G&D promoted their books in drug stores, 5 and 10s, and similar "lower end" retail outlets. It was a standard form of promotion dependent on posters and signs that often proclaimed that because the author reduced his royalties, the book could be sold at a lower price.

Main Street was something of a departure for Grosset & Dunlap. The book was issued in 1945 bound in a lavish, all silver-coated cloth cover with navy blue printing and no dust jacket, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1920 original. Blind stamped lines and a crown on the front panel with a reverse printed blue circle stating "Anniversary Edition" complete an extraordinary presentation from a company whose publishing reputation was syno-

Halperin continued on page 14

LEWIS NOVELS NAMED AMONG THE TOP 100

The Modern Library recently (July 1998) ranked the top hundred English-Language novels of the 20th century. Main Street was named 67, right between Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Edith Wharton's House of Mirth. Although the list was criticized for having few women (8) and only six books written in the last twenty-five years, it is still a great acknowledgment of Lewis's work.

In another listing, this one by students in the Radcliffe Publishing course (also July 1998), two books by Lewis were listed, Babbitt (94) and Main Street (99). Babbitt was between The French Lieutenant's Woman by John Fowles and Kim by Rudyard Kipling. Main Street was lodged between Where Angels Fear to Tread by E. M. Forster and Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie.

Daniel Boorstin, a Pulitzer-Prize winning historian and former Librarian of Congress, joined the act and nominated his top ten books that every American should read in the July 12 issue of Parade. Main Street also made this list.
By Martin Bucco  
Colorado State University

Toward the end of Dodsworth (1929), Sam receives a letter from his self-centered and pretentious wife, Fran, who has run off with Kurt Obersdorf, a poor Austrian nobleman. Fran praises the thickness of European life, as opposed to the thinness of American existence. Sam thinks of tradition, “of pioneers pushing to the westward, across the Alleghenies, through the forests of Kentucky and Tennessee, on to the bleeding plains of Kansas, on to Oregon and California, a religious procession, sleeping always in danger, never resting, and opening a new home for a hundred million people.” During his long writing career, Sinclair Lewis recorded his literary opinions in a variety of forms as easily and as readily as he expressed his other opinions. A great reader, Lewis delighted in good Western writing—in writing by natives of the Middle West and the Far West. He relished especially the clash between Beacon Street and Main Street, between Greenwich Villagers and what he called the Out-o-Doors Bunch.

Among an earlier generation Lewis extolled Mark Twain, Frank Norris, Jack London, and the early Hamlin Garland. Though Lewis esteemed Mark Twain as “perhaps the greatest of our writers,” he actually wrote little about him. Unlike Hemingway’s “all modern American literature comes from one book by Mr. Twain called Huckleberry Finn,” never quoted is Lewis’s “take out Tom Sawyer and [Huckleberry Finn] is the greatest book ever written.” By and large, Lewis uses Mark Twain (whom he saw through the eyes of Van Wyck Brooks) as a club to beat on the gendarme head of William Dean Howells (whom he saw through the eyes of H.L. Mencken). However instrumental we know the Dean of American Letters to have been in educating the public to the high worth of his friend Mark Twain by designating him the “Lincoln of our literature,” Lewis, in his Nobel Prize Address in 1930, did much to damage Howells’s reputation by referring to him as “a pious old maid” who managed to put “that fiery old savage” Mark Twain “into an intellectual frock coat and top hat.” In his amusing auto-obituary “The Death of Arrowsmith” (1941), Lewis pictured himself as a forgotten novelist writing essays on, yes, such little-read authors as Mark Twain.

If The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876) and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) are household American titles, not so McTeague (1890) and The Octopus (1901), but Lewis thought very highly of Frank Norris. Lewis thought nothing better in the California writer than the “galloping adventurous portion of McTeague”—the big chase scenes, culminating in the handcuffing of hunter and hunted in the desert. As “broad and visualizable” as Death Valley in McTeague is Norris’s picture of the San Joaquin Valley in The Octopus. Here, Lewis maintained, Norris penetrated into the hearts of men and women crushed by the railroad’s “dirty little agents,” with social injustice, for Norris at least, the necessary friction of progress.

Thanks to Walter Scott and Joseph Conrad, Lewis early learned to love stories and novels of adventure, even some by Rex Beach and Stewart Edward White. But Lewis deplored the popular Western story, especially Zane Grey. In his review of Jack London’s The Valley of the Moon (1913), Lewis notes that Golden Gate youths go tramping, no longer seeking gold but freedom, the Valley of the Moon. Lewis himself spent part of 1909 with the literary colony at Carmel. If Jack London’s athleticism was beyond Lewis—London ran the 100-yard dash in high school in 32 seconds—the young man from Main Street and the revolutionary from Oakland could find satisfaction, at least, in vilifying le maître, Henry James. In an early letter to his father, Lewis mentioned London “as a wonderful short story writer.” As we all know, London bought 27 plots from young Lewis for $137.50, of which London used perhaps 5. In 1914, Lewis pronounced London’s seven rugged stories in The Strength of the Strong “vivid and dramatic.” A born storyteller, London offered readers “no mental strain and no trick endings.” Like “most sizable writers” he produced too much, said Lewis, but the judicious selection in The Strength of the Strong makes for—what else?—a “very strong book.” In 1926 Lewis recommended to Alfred Harcourt that he send George Sterling a contract to write a volume on the golden days of California literature, featuring such personalities as Ambrose Bierce, Joaquin Miller, Gertrude Atherton, and Jack London. “It’s not so much that any of these people, except London, were very important,” Lewis added, “as that the old life was peculiarly brilliant, gay, and romantic, against a romantic background.”

But “the real romance of the land” (as Lewis put it) was first revealed to him not by Twain, Norris, London, or any of the Carmel Out-o-Doors bunch. Rather, it was revealed to him by Hamlin Garland—during the summer of 1905, when the Yale sophomore, back home in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, found “vastly exciting” Main-Traveled Roads (1891) and Rose of Dutcher’s Cooly (1895). Although Lewis had read about ordinary people in Dickens and Balzac, not until he read Garland had he realized fully the possibility of writing about Sauk Centre. Garland’s characters, young Lewis discovered, could be both vile and heroic, his villages both blissful and cursed. Thus Garland liberated Lewis, freeing him to try translating his hometown into prose. Perhaps out of respect for Garland’s early work, Lewis reviewed The Forester’s Daughter (1914) kindly. He described this tale of wholesome Amazonian Berrie McFarland who falls in love with a health-seeking tenderfoot as “pure romance, a love story without a moral.” Lewis then went on simply to quote several purple passages about piney Colorado scenery. Not unaware that Garland as chairman of the recommending committee blocked the satirical Main Street from winning the Pulitzer Prize, Bucco continued on page 18
By Ralph Goldstein

I first read *Babbitt* just a few years ago while sitting under a tree beside a public swimming pool where my children were taking lessons. The pool is within sight of a budding gated community that came into being after a long fight between conservationists and developers. Those of us who wanted to preserve the rustic, uncrowded character of the area, a place where hikers and equestrians could roam freely and encounter a variety of wildlife, were no match for the real estate interests eager to exploit some of the last available land within thirty freeway minutes of downtown L.A. New homes are now available starting at a mere $299,000. Reading about George Babbitt and his efforts to transform similarly “underused” land into Glen Oriole and other developments had me shaking my head and exclaiming, “Wow! Sinclair Lewis sure had it right.”

The reading lists during my undergrad and grad school days omitted Lewis. Instructors preferred the later American Nobel laureates (mainly Hemingway and Faulkner) over our first recipient, or magic realism over social realism, or that which could be easily anthologized over lengthier texts, or theory over anything else. For those and other reasons, Lewis was missing. Nevertheless, I decided to assign *Babbitt* to the Advanced Placement English classes in the all-boys Catholic high school where I teach. Even if it didn’t work well, the book would at least help my colleagues in the History Department better explain American life between World Wars I and II.

But *Babbitt* worked. After a semester that included comparing Holden Caulfield with John of *Brave New World*, wondering what brought Willy Loman down (and contemplating with horror a return at age 32 or 34, like Hap or Biff Loman, to the bedrooms they now use), and considering Gregor Samsa as a victim, my students—many of whom fancy themselves as rebels—were ready to study George Babbitt’s conformity and short-lived rebellion. I was pleased to witness them enjoying Lewis’s irony and sarcasm; to notice that the Babbitt house was not a home, that Glen Oriole lacks trees and birds, that Warren Harding was “appointed” President of the United States, that pillars of a religious community might be corrupt, that bigoted remarks can come from people who would deny that they’re racists. Alongside the novel I asked students to read sections of *Walden*. The contrasting values of the two books, particularly Thoreau’s notions that houses can own us and railroads ride us, made George Babbitt stand out in even sharper relief. Students could clearly see George’s identity formed by his business and what he could buy. George seemed even more pathetic in the Maine woods when held up to Thoreau’s reflections about being in tune with nature.

Particularly instructive for my Catholic high school boys were Thoreau’s allusions in “Civil Disobedience” to the Book of Matthew concerning the necessity of losing one’s life in order to save it (225) and rendering to Caesar and to God that which is theirs (232). It was beneficial for the students to regard one of American literature’s most notorious conformists next to one of our staunchest individualists.

Three projects came out of our study of *Babbitt*. In a salute to America’s “true genius” (the creator of the Prince Albert tobacco ads), adman Chum Frink, and the ridiculous correspondence course ads Ted Babbitt finds so appealing, I asked students to analyze an ad they found in a newspaper or magazine. After identifying the ad’s main idea, purpose, and

Goldstein continued on page 14

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**CALL FOR PAPERS**

The Sinclair Lewis Society is planning to hold a session at the 1999 American Literature Association conference that is set for May 27-30, 1999, at the Renaissance Harborplace Hotel in Baltimore. Margie Burns, English Department, University of Maryland-Baltimore, will be chairing the session.

We welcome submissions on any aspect of Lewis’s work. Please send an abstract by January 15, 1999 to:

Sally Parry, Department of English, Illinois State University, Box 4240, Normal, IL 61790-4240 or by fax at (309) 438-5414 or by e-mail at separry@ilstu.edu

All submissions will be acknowledged. An announcement of session participants will be made by late January 1999. Papers should be suitable for a twenty-minute presentation (about ten typed, double-spaced pages). The normal format is an hour and twenty minutes with three speakers and a chair.

The hotel will be offering special conference rates. Pre-registration information will be mailed to program participants about two weeks before the general mailing to all ALA members. Additional information is available on the ALA Website: http://english.byu.edu/cronin/ala.htm
**SINCLAIR LEWIS PANEL AT 1998 ALA**

Sinclair Lewis was well represented at the 1998 American Literature Association Conference which took place in San Diego in May. A panel devoted to Lewis and chaired by new Sinclair Lewis Society board member H. Brooke Hessler featured three panelists, including the founder of the Sinclair Lewis Society, Bob Fleming. Abstracts of their presentations are reprinted below:

**Sinclair Lewis and the Revolt against the Suburb**

Presented by Catherine Jurca, California Institute of Technology

This essay focuses on *Babbitt*, tracing the process by which Lewis replaced standardization with discontent as the paradigmatic feature of Babbitt’s middle-classness. Babbitt has every material advantage that his civilization has to offer but is haunted by a vague feeling of disquiet. Babbitt’s rebellion is not significant primarily as evidence of an incipient radicalism; rather, it is about learning to feel good about himself and his culture again.

**The Roots of Dodsworth: Lewis and Nineteenth-Century American Literature**

Presented by Robert E. Fleming, University of New Mexico

By the end of the 1920s, his fabulous decade, Sinclair Lewis had critically examined four major facets of American life—the small town, the tired businessman, the medical profession, and the business of religion. It remained for him to create a definitive work that would transcend his earlier topical novels and to claim a place for himself among the great writers of America, as opposed to the great satirists of the American scene. Just as he had turned to the literature treating the revolt from the village while writing *Main Street*, Lewis turned again to earlier American writers, allying himself with the literary tradition of the previous century.

The character of Sam Dodsworth can be traced back as far as the Ben Franklin of the *Autobiography*, but his most immediate antecedents can be found in the nineteenth century, in novels by W. D. Howells and Henry James and in Emerson’s “The American Scholar.” Basically, the question Lewis poses treats the difference between the businessman and the man. Faced with early retirement, Sam Dodsworth, creative automotive engineer and designer, must meet Emerson’s challenge to leave behind his specialization and become what Emerson had called Man Thinking.

**Burkeian Piety at Work: Symbolic Labor in Sinclair Lewis’s Early Business Stories**

Presented by H. Brooke Hessler, Texas Christian University

For the protagonists of Lewis’s early business stories, Business is not a job but a state of being. These incipient Babbitts engage life’s obstacles and opportunities as a series of transactions reflecting a cosmic order of profit and loss. Rhetorician Kenneth Burke describes this intense identification with work as “symbolic labor,” for the worker expresses his principal values and ideals through his occupation. Such labor can be most “pious” in that it demonstrates the individual’s devotion to his vocation. Yet, while Lewis’s businessmen are clearly devoted to a Business ideal, these characters appear to benefit from their transgressions as well as their piety. Applying Burke’s theory of symbolic labor to “Number Seven to Sagapooose,” “Jazz,” and other short stories enables us to consider how Lewis’s antithetical descriptions of each businessman’s success mirror the author’s own ambivalence toward the Vocation of Business.

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**THE SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER WELCOMES CONTRIBUTIONS**

*The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter* welcomes short contributions about Sinclair Lewis’s work, life, and times. We also welcome essays about teaching Lewis’s novels and short stories. Send books for review, notices of upcoming conferences, reports on presentations and publications relating to Lewis, discoveries of materials (correspondence, manuscripts, etc.) in and descriptions of collections in libraries, and all other items to:

Sally Parry, Editor
*The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*
Dept. of English
Box 4240
Illinois State University
Normal, IL 61790-4240
This collection of fifteen of Lewis’s early works, collected for the first time since their original appearance in popular magazines from 1915 to 1921, is necessary reading for fans of Babbitt. These stories feature salesmen of both the traveling and stationary varieties, managers, advertising men, bank tellers, con men, and would-be entrepreneurs—but the emphasis is definitely on “If I were boss.” Lewis effectively shows the average individual’s belief that superiors are inevitably inhuman—yet that he could do the job better himself without forfeiting his own humanity. If the collection can be said to have a moral, it is that once a person gets to be boss, he or she will be seen by employees as sarcastic, arbitrary, and bullying—and will feel that he or she is a noble person, grossly misunderstood.

As should be expected from apprentice work, these stories are uneven. They range in tone from the humorous to the poignant to the nasty. While Lewis aficionados will be pleased to see early signs of his eye for telling detail, many of the stories are poorly plotted. One of the most promising, “The Good Sport,” features impressively well-developed characters and inaugurate a powerful story of a disastrous marriage—only to run aground because of Lewis’s inability to figure out what to do with the plot. The primary merit of this collection is thus not that it provides new evidence of Lewis’s literary genius, but rather that it shows him testing out material that he would handle more fully and effectively in Babbitt, Main Street, and other novels.

Many of these tales are at least in part satirical. As will be familiar to veteran readers of Lewis, when he wants to expose vices either petty or serious, he often lets the sinner damn himself. Lewis’s recounting of a newspaper reporter who quoted a particularly obnoxious character verbatim might stand as a description of the storyteller’s own method: “The reporter did not write a humorous account; he did something worse—he quoted Mr. Small’s indignations word for word, so that Mr. Small thought he had been grossly misrepresented” (“Commutation: $9.17,” 18). Many of the satirical tales, such as “The Whisperer” and “Snappy Display,” follow the fairly predictable pattern of the bad guy finally getting his just desserts.

The most winning stories, however, move beyond satire to sympathy. One of them begins, “This is not the history of the bland Professor Tonson, but of a man who became flamboyantly ridiculous and then became human . . .” (“Nature, Inc.,” 22). That description, which predicts what Lewis will do in Babbitt, also characterizes several other stories in which Lewis demonstrates his fondness for the human race. Not surprisingly, then, some of the best stories take a setting or cast of characters drawn from the business world and examine the question of romance within that world. For instance, “Nature, Inc.” is a touching story of the attraction a stodgy older businessman has for a younger woman. “A Story with a Happy Ending” daringly takes up the scenario of a woman as boss and asks whether such a supervisory role destroys a woman’s “femininity” and ability to feel. (Lewis is progressive enough to answer that question in the negative.)

The satire is also tempered by Lewis’s admission that business is not entirely bad. “If I Were Boss,” for instance, ends up manifesting considerable sympathy for the boss. In “Honesty—If Possible,” the office turns out to be an enabling setting for an otherwise ordinary young middle-class woman. And as proof that Lewis is not confined to any particular point of view on business, in “Way I See It” he cleverly follows a lengthy first-person account of a firing as told by an employee who has an inflated sense of his own importance with the boss’s version of the same story.

In several of the stories, Lewis describes his role as that of a historian, and indeed these tales comprise a useful history of office culture. Lewis is particularly insightful about advertising: several of the stories provide hints of how advertising came to be such a dominant force in the United States. “The Whisperer” even takes a peek at the revolutionary decision on the part of businessmen to hire professional psychologists to help market their products, a decision that continues to inform all of our lives.

As is often the case with history well told, Lewis’s stories will no doubt surprise many people by their continuing relevance today. Lewis touches on the monotonous emptiness of work for many people, examines office flirtations and sexism on the job, recounts the strangely edifying nature of office gossip, and even takes up the question of smoking on the job. The repeated emphasis on women in business, in particular, makes the stories seem surprisingly contemporary. While it is often difficult to work Lewis into a syllabus because his books tend to be bulky, a selection of these short stories could be welcome in many an American literature class, particularly the stories with a contemporary feel.

Anthony Di Renzo has performed a welcome service by collecting these stories. His introduction combines biographical, literary-historical, and sociological details effectively so as to contextualize Lewis’s early work. Di Renzo appropriately emphasizes Lewis’s complicated relationship with The Saturday Evening Post, which originally published some of these tales and “single-handedly created the market for business fiction” (xx). Di Renzo also comments suggestively about some of the stories—particularly those about women who were skilled copywriters. He also deplores Babbitt’s claim that Sinclair Lewis embodied the contradictions of the business culture that he so famously wrote about.
had a sense of humor that expressed itself in youth in pranks, none of which sounds particularly cruel. Especially charming is the decision of his high school graduating class in Sauk Centre in 1895—twelve girls plus Claude—for each of them to bring a rocking chair to sit in during the graduation ceremony.

Isabel portrays the relationship between her Uncle Hal and Claude as comfortable and easy. If Uncle Hal feared he could never impress older brother Claude, she thinks Uncle Hal feared in vain. Claude, she says, was “very proud of his younger brother.” The two of them had “great respect and affection for each other.”

Her recollection of Sinclair Lewis’s appearance is also pleasantly positive. Though she concedes that by 1949 the X-ray treatments had taken a heavy toll on his face, she had never before then thought of him as homely. He simply had, she says, “the delicate pinkish skin of a redhead” (36).

One of the most interesting memories of her famous uncle is from 1926 when she was ten years old and he had invited her older sister Virginia and her to Pelican Lake for a week while he worked on Elmer Gantry. There she met the family of the Rev. Mr. Birkhead, in attendance as consultant for the novel. Her main memory is of having fun. The Birkheads had a son her age, and there were two puppies to play with and a lake to swim in. She includes photos of the place, including one of the hut where Lewis did his writing.

And she does not leave out the emotional upset in midweek. For some unknown reason, Uncle Hal became angry, fired his Hawaiian cook, and had him driven immediately to the closest bus station. She remembers later seeing Uncle Hal sobbing at the dining room table, filled with remorse.

This memory of a remorseful Sinclair Lewis will attract the attention of future biographers. Even if fueled by drink, the remorse suggests a side to Lewis that scholars have not explored enough.

Among the interesting pictures in the large appendix to this memoir are photos that show two Kermott uncles of Sinclair Lewis (his mother’s brothers), some attractive photos of Grace Hegger, good photos of Isabel as a child with her older siblings Freeman and Virginia, and a page of photos of Sinclair Lewis’s son Michael, his two wives, and his children. A reader may wish for cleaner images than photocopying can produce, but the reader will also recognize that these images would not be available if it were not for photocopying.

You may order the memoir from Isabel Lewis Agrell, P. O. Box 10114, Prescott, Arizona 85565. Her phone is 520-445-1790. Ten dollars will cover the cost of photocopying and mailing.
the press paid attention.

He had made a career of gaining this attention, sometimes through deliberate public cantankerousness. In 1926, for example, he refused the Pulitzer Prize. That same year, while researching for *Elmer Gantry*, he led a chaotic meeting in Kansas City, where, in refuting the idea of a personally vindictive God, he defied this God to strike him dead. Because his main talent was for satire, his novels had gained notoriety for debunking American culture. His life seemed bumpy and noisy. By the time he got to Duluth, his public persona revealed few hints of any quiet recesses in his heart.

But the man who arrived here on May 17, 1944, had a deep sensitivity to the American landscape and American ideals. His private papers show a quiet voice, self-aware, reflective, appreciative. One of his motives for returning to Minnesota to live was, in fact, to have an experience like Thoreau's, to get close to a Midwestern equivalent of Walden Pond.

Given Lewis's public image, this desire is hard to believe. Also, his advancing years, diminishing health, inescapable celebrity status, and determination to keep writing novels would seem to get in the way of a full-fledged Walden retreat.

Still, he would do what he could. He had started the experiment in April 1942, when he arrived in Minneapolis to spend the summer and look for a permanent home. He began a new diary and titled it "A Minnesota Diary." As a teenager in Sauk Centre, he had kept a diary from 1900 through his student years at Yale until 1908. Now he was beginning anew and putting the focus on his home state, especially its landscapes and weather. He was chronicling the changing surface of his own version of Walden Pond and trying to derive vitality from it. During the four years of this Minnesota experiment, 1942-46, he kept the diary going when he was in the state, making only a handful of entries during many months spent elsewhere.

In spring and summer 1942 he lived in a big house on Lake Minnetonka, and between bouts of work on the novel *Gideon Planish* motored around the state to rediscover its beauty. He moved into Minneapolis in the fall and taught a creative writing course at the University of Minnesota. Wintering in New York, he was all set to plunge back into his Thoreauvian experiment in the spring but got sidetracked by an invitation from Hollywood to work there on a screenplay. Before this diversion, he headed off to Minnesota, the *Walden* idea still very much in mind. The "People" section of *Time* magazine reported his departure from New York as follows:

Bolstered by the complete works of Henry David Thoreau, newly bought, novelist Sinclair Lewis abandoned his Manhattan duplex for rustic life in his home state, Minnesota. He told a reporter that a reading of Thoreau would explain all, but admitted: "I don't mean I want to go around in a sheet like Ghandi." Next fall, he will do some public debating on rusticity, said he. (24 May 1943)

Characteristically Lewis's public voice here takes center stage, in this case to protect the private ideal. With a glib joke, he exaggerates his own romantic aspirations in order to preempt the mockery of the worldly-wise gossip columnist. Lewis also knows a Thoreauvian experiment will include compromise. By ridiculing purism, he opens up room for private aspiration to develop in its own way. His motive remains clear—a deep interest in Thoreau, Minnesota, and provincial connections.

To these goals he made a firmer commitment in spring 1944 when he showed up in Duluth, planning to settle down. Since he had been restless and impulsive all his life, he knew how difficult settling down would be. Still, he liked it here well.
BACKWOODS ISOLATIONISM VERSUS MEDICAL IMPERIALISM
IN SINCLAIR LEWIS’S ARROWSMITH: AN ABSTRACT

By Stephanie Browner
Berea College

Sinclair Lewis’s novel Arrowsmith is, of course, a sweeping study of progressive-era medicine. The novel follows the idealistic Martin Arrowsmith from medical school to country practice, from well-to-do urban practice to laboratory research at a privately funded New York institute. Most obviously, the novel tells a typical Lewis tale: crass commercialism and petty power struggles thwart the true man of science. But embedded in Lewis’s version of this tale are the tensions in U.S. foreign policy between imperialism and isolationism, a tension made evident if the novel is read against the background of U.S. military medical work in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In 1900 human experiments were conducted in Havana, Cuba, upon U.S. military and Cuban civilian volunteers by the American Army Command in an effort to investigate the theory that yellow fever was transmitted by mosquito. By September 1901, under the direction of William Crawford Gorgas, U.S. occupational forces had eradicated yellow fever from Havana. In 1904 another campaign was led by Gorgas in Panama in an effort to make the area safe for U.S. military and civilian engineers who would soon arrive to begin building the canal. In 1913 the Rockefeller Foundation established an International Health Commission and, upon the suggestion of Gorgas who was now Surgeon General of the U.S. Army, the Foundation dedicated personnel and money to eradicating yellow fever in other Latin American cities. Between 1918 and 1920, campaigns were undertaken in Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, and Mexico. These campaigns testify to the intimate connection between medical research into tropical diseases and U.S. imperialist interests in Latin America.

Lewis’s novel interrogates this history. The climax of Arrowsmith centers on the hero’s efforts to prove through human experiments the effectiveness of a bacteriological cure for bubonic plague during an epidemic on a fictional island in the West Indies. In these scenes Lewis satirizes the most obvious symbols of imperialism—foppish British officials and naive American missionarics. And Lewis acknowledges the awkward connections between medical research and imperialism. It is, no doubt, a humanitarian deed to save the West Indians from plague, but such a deed is also an imperialist act that protects the trade interests and local power of the British. In his desire for scientific purity, Lewis can envision no solution to this entanglement other than isolationism. Lewis ends the novel with the hero’s retreat to the Vermont woods to pursue research untainted by worldly demands.

Written at the height of U.S. expansionist activities and only a few years after victory in World War I, Arrowsmith opens questions it cannot answer and finds closure only in an anachronistic nineteenth-century literary trope: the retreat to the wilderness.

LEWIS AND THE JACK LONDON SOCIETY

By Jackie Koenig

Sinclair Lewis’s literary friendship with Jack London was more conspicuous than was any other authors at the Jack London Society 4th Biennial Symposium held at The Huntington Library, San Marino, California, October 7-10, 1998. The symposium is sponsored by the Jack London Society at the University of Texas-San Antonio.

Dr. Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin, University of Ottawa, gave a paper, “A Little-Known Collection: The London Papers at Utah State University.” She listed among its holdings originals of plots purchased from Lewis, some in Lewis’s hand.

Sara S. Hodson, Curator of Literary Manuscripts at the Huntington, co-sponsor of the event, assembled a Jack London exhibit to coincide with the symposium. She displayed what she called Jack London’s Invoice to Sinclair Lewis. It appeared to me to be Lewis’s invoice to Jack London, Lewis listing the plots he had available for sale to Jack London. Jack London checked off the plots he wanted and sent a check to Sinclair Lewis for $52.50 on October 4, 1910.

In her note, alongside the invoice, Sara Hodson points out that London admitted to his friend Cloudesley Johns that he couldn’t construct plots worth a damn. Hodson goes on to say that Mary Austen suggested a different, humanitarian reason for fellow writers. This is supported by Sinclair Lewis’s letter to London, prompting the business-like invoice: “I hope to gawd that you will feel like taking a considerable part of [the plots], because, if you do, it will probably finally give me a chance to get back to free lancing—nothing but writing—which I haven’t done for over a year; can the job and really get at decent work.

The Invoice and letter from Sinclair Lewis to Jack London are held in the Jack London collection at The Huntington Library. Sara Hodson also mentions Sinclair Lewis in her cover story about the exhibit in Calendar/The Huntington September-October, 1998.
enough to stay through the summer as a renter at 2601 East
Second Street. He was away in fall and winter but bought the
house in January 1945, invested in redecorating, and moved in
for the spring and summer. In fall 1945 he was away again but
returned in December and stayed until March 1946.

His interest in Thoreau had endured many decades. In
August 1907, as a temporary Yale dropout doing hack writing
in New York, he enjoyed reading Walden in a park on his lunch
hour. He imagined feeling the vitality, even there in the city,
that Thoreau felt. In his "Book Week" column in Newsweek in
the late 1930s, he gushed about the ideals of Walden, portray-
ing them as a remedy to the Babbittry of Dale Carnegie and
hailing Thoreau as the best symbol of American freedom for
counteracting menaces like Italy, Germany, and Japan (22
Nov. 1937).

During the Duluth years, ideals from Walden persisted in
Lewis's thinking, even though he was living in a mansion with
servants. His loyalty was to deeper values. In accord with the
mandates of Walden, he had always pursued his dreams, always
tried to dig through the mud and slush of opinion in
search of rock bottom reality, and now he was paying closer
attention than usual to land and sky. People who corrupted
these Thorecan principles brought down his wrath. In
October 1945, he blasted writer Louis Bromfield's book about
country living, Pleasant Valley, in a review in Esquire. The
trouble with Bromfield, wrote Lewis, was that "with the power
to make an enduring book, a true Walden, he should have
cluttered...it with all the pert vanities of the money-grabbing,
He did not listen to the quiet of his own fields and of his own
heart."

Lewis himself may not have listened always to the quiet of
his own heart, but he clearly wanted to and during this period
he was concentrating quite deliberately on the quiet of his own
fields. The diary shows a rich interest in Minnesota landscapes
and weather, set down lovingly. Here are sample views from
the Duluth home:

[August 7, 1944] Mountain ash berries are reddening
for autumn now; already are yellow and orange.
From this house, not only incredibly beautiful pros-
spect, soft brilliance of the demure hills, radiance
of the lake, trees hiding the houses below, but also
delightful sounds: train whistle, deep demand of the
steamers, rustle of leaves, idle dogs not too close.

[February 18, 1946] Sunrise with trails of light
seemed to turn frozen Lake Superior back into open
water. First light on Eastern horizon now at six AM.
By 6:10: at top darkish sky, then pale blue strip
against which are pine silhouettes with streak of
apricot below. The pale blue turns into luminous
gray; the apricot to purple robes. Neighbor: "The
back of the winter ought to be broken by now."

In passages like these, and the diary is full of them, Lewis
shows the quiet joy of a poet. His voice is not agitated or
aggressive but calm and appreciative. He is not straining to
entertain the target audience, as in the novels, but commun-
ing in private with the land of his birth.

Though Lewis's reputation is rising in the 1990s, it endured
a long decline. Most egregious of the attacks it suffered was
from Hemingway in Across the River and into the Trees in 1950.
The protagonist observes a writer drooling in a bar, a "caricature
of an American," a "pock-marked jerk," "who has never worked
at his trade" and "is presumptuous in some annoying way." This
is fiction, of course. Lewis is not named, and the protagonist
observer may not be a fully reliable witness, but Hemingway
certainly had Lewis in mind. Witnesses from the 1940s always
recall Lewis's pitted, inflamed face. He had a chronic skin
ailment that Hemingway unfairly made symbolic of decadence.

The anecdotal record about Lewis in Duluth has not en-
hanced his reputation. Addressing the Chamber of Commerce,
he said Duluth needed a half dozen funerals. He behaved rudely
to hostesses who gave dinner parties for him. He cut friends over
imagined slights. At a large party at his house, he was stinging
with the liquor—ironic in view of his known history of exces-
sive drinking. Sensitive observers attribute his erratic conduct
to loneliness and the struggle with alcoholism. Mrs. Frances
McGiffert, who still lives in the neighborhood where Lewis did,
recalls that by the time he bought the house, "He had failed at
two marriages, lost a son in the war, and was trying to stay dry.
He was doing pretty well, considering." She also noted, "He was
a very good neighbor."

No doubt many of the stories are true about the alcoholic
behavior he exhibited from the 1920s forward, but judgments
against him mount up higher than against other heavy-drinking
American authors of the twentieth century, like F. Scott Fitzgerald
or Hemingway himself. These judgments against Lewis’s char-
acter helped propel the negative criticism of Lewis's work,
climaxing in the massive biography by Mark Schorer in 1961,
Sinclair Lewis: An American Life. This book claimed that Lewis
had no ability to feel or express lyric joy and that he was short
on self-knowledge and subjective understanding. Schorer noto-
riously concluded that Lewis "was one of the worst writers in
modern American literature."

Partly due to this verdict and partly to a diminishing appetite
for social realism, Lewis's readership shrank enormously dur-
ing the 1970s and 1980s. Literate Americans over forty remem-
ber him dimly for his satire on the small town. Most literate
Americans under forty have not read him.

He had phenomenal talents. Although he preferred not to
think of himself as a satirist, he was a master of the fictional
exposé that would attract public attention. Recent scholarship
has shown that, in revising drafts, he had consummate ability to adjust for market appeal. The books sold very well. His first big hit was *Main Street* in 1920, one of the earliest literary texts to reveal small-town America as less than paradise. *Babbitt* in 1922 portrayed the loudness and shallowness of the American businessman. *Arrowsmith* in 1925 championed good medical research but also exposed the unheroic side of medicine. The most bitter satire, *Elmer Gantry*, 1927, attacked the charlatan preacher. Another big attention-getting exposé, *It Can’t Happen Here*, 1935, imagined a native-born fascist takeover in the USA.

More than any other novelist of his generation, Lewis created a typology by which to explain America. His types survive in our vocabulary today—Main Street, Babbitt, Elmer Gantry—even among people who have not read the books.

Lewis was also ahead of his time in finding causes. He wrote three novels about the situation of women: *The Job* (1917), *Main Street* (1920), and *Ann Vickers* (1933). While in Duluth, he started his novel on northern race prejudice, *Kingsblood Royal*, which for a white author in 1947 was revolutionary.

A further strength lay in his prodigious discipline. By the time he died in Rome in 1951, he had written a total of twenty-three novels plus numerous short stories and articles. Before *Main Street*, he wrote six books. During the 1920s, he wrote seven, five of which had blockbuster sales. He continued to turn out a novel every two or three years for the rest of his life.

Scholars are giving him fresh attention today. Publishers have issued new editions of several novels. Random House is sponsoring a new biography.

Lewis’s desire to strengthen his provincial identity and his desire to connect, like Thoreau, with the land were the two primary motives for him to try to settle in Minnesota. There was also a third motive. He wanted to keep writing novels, and he needed to gather material. Writing novels about American society was his profession, and he could not give it up, even if it inhibited transcendental aspirations. It would mean, of course, living in circumstances different from the hut at Walden Pond. He had to be in a setting where his next two stories could take place. Duluth filled the bill.

This choice was not for the sake of revealing Duluth’s soul in the same way he had bared the soul of the small town in *Main Street*. Duluth was just to provide background. Along the way, of course, dirty laundry from small-city Midwestern America would come to light, but the place was not the theme. The theme of the first Duluth novel, *Cass Timberlane* (1945), was December-May romance and the unraveling fabric of American marriage. Lewis had had both these experiences already. He was twice-divorced and conducting a romance with the very young Marcella Powers, whom he had met doing summer theater in Provincetown in 1939. In 1944, she was still just twenty-three. Beginning a career in the New York magazine world, she could visit Duluth only on holidays. Lewis wrote charming letters to keep her interest, but he also advised her to see men her own age, and in 1946, after he left Duluth, she announced she was going to marry one.

In the novel, a well-connected, middle-aged, divorced judge, Cass himself, falls in love with a young woman. They marry. Then she falls prey to the blandishments of one of Cass’s best friends and runs off. She discovers her new lover is fickle. She gets seriously ill, and Cass speeds to the rescue. This story of a salvaged marriage takes place against the backdrop of numerous marriages, most of them gone sour, described in vignettes between the main chapters. Though Cass’s marriage ultimately offers hope, the novel in general portrays romantic love as difficult, unpromising, often perverse.

Grand Republic, Minnesota, where Cass lives, has character-
istics like Duluth's. It is described as being eighty miles north of Minneapolis with a population of 85,000. Its wealth arose from the exploitation "of forests, iron mines, and soil for wheat." One step in Lewis's disciplined preparation was to sketch elaborate maps of states, cities, even floor plans in the fictional setting. His map showing Grand Republic's location in Minnesota reveals a correspondence to Duluth very similar to the correspondence between Sauk Centre and Gopher Prairie, which are also drawn side by side on the same map.

An interesting absence on this map, at least from the point of view of Duluthians today, is Zenith, the setting for *Babbitt*. That city has a population of 361,000 and belongs in the fictional state of Winnemac, which borders Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. Despite the name Zenith, an appellation of Duluth even in the 1920s, the city where Babbitt lives is in a different league, much more like Cincinnati or Minneapolis. CBS chose the wrong location in 1968 when it featured middle-class Duluthians in an uncomplimentary documentary designed as an updated view of *Babbitt*.

Many houses in Cass Timberlane's blue-blood neighborhood in Grand Republic have the same architecture as houses in Lewis's neighborhood in Duluth. The house across the street from Cass has "fake half timbering and wavy shingles missing thatch," just like the house a block away from Lewis at 2432 East Second Street where Carlisle and Charlene Heimbach lived. Another of Cass's neighbors owns a "hulk of grim dark native stone," a "donjon," suggesting the house inhabited by Cecil and Francis Myers at 2505 East First Street. A third neighbor has a "white pillared brick Georgian mansion." Lewis had only to look across the avenue to see this one at 2525 East Second Street, where lived Mrs. William Richardson and her daughter Mrs. J. G. Harrison. Other descriptions, including a Spanish stucco tiled-roof structure and a New England colonial cottage, match houses in the Duluth neighborhood.

Among people in Duluth who influenced characterization in the novels was Judge Mark Nolan, whom Lewis followed around so as to be able to describe accurately the life of Judge Cass Timberlane. In the diary Lewis pictures Nolan as a "big Irish Catholic" product of Notre Dame and the Iron Range, "a learned and good judge." The novel portrays Cass positively too.

Another Duluthian from whom Lewis derived details was Marjorie Kelley, a student in St. Mary's nursing program, who went on to a long career as a nurse anesthetist at St. Luke's Hospital and as a human rights leader in Duluth. Lewis cultivated a friendship with her which no doubt influenced his portrayal in *Kingsblood Royal* of Sophie Concord, a young black nurse, sharp-witted and attractive, who helps introduce Neil Kingsblood to his new life as a black man. This second Duluth novel, *Kingsblood Royal* (1947), tells the story of an upper-middle-class white man who, after discovering his lineage is one-thirty-second black, loses his job and, with his family, suffers multiple abuses. The setting is again Grand Republic. To prepare for this book, Lewis cultivated the acquaintance of blacks in the Twin Cities and made an expedition to the deep South. He also had friends in Duluth like Marjorie Kelley.

Lewis entered Duluth society vigorously and had dozens of acquaintances so as to be able to describe Grand Republic. As a satirist, he could not help grinding some of the grit into uncomplimentary flour. Few characters end up with portrayals as positive as Cass Timberlane and Sophie Concord. But no individual Duluthian becomes a main negative focus, at least not according to surviving witnesses and the evidence of the texts themselves. Lewis's themes are larger than that.

The process of gathering details put Lewis into a public role. His public persona had often been boisterous and insistent, obscuring private aspiration. Even the public voice of the novels, reaching hard for the reader's attention, masks the private Lewis of dignity and peace. If he had not been so determined as a novelist to grapple with public American culture, he might have had a quieter profile.

When he left Duluth in March 1946, he was responding to the restlessness that had kept him on the move all his life. He had mined the ore Duluth could provide for fiction, and he wanted to prospect elsewhere. Completely aware of the comedy in his inability to settle, he wrote Marcella Powers on March 7, 1946, "As with Cass, I could never have written the new book if I hadn't been living here. But enough of Duluth now. Hail Hartford! Cheer Chatham! Banzai the Berkshires! Lo, London! California, I call!"

If novel-writing impinged on his private mission, it never removed his sense of value. He had always had intimate acquaintance with the peace of rural landscapes. Even the diary of his youth in Sauk Centre records habitual long walks, sometimes solitary, for five miles, ten miles, once eighteen miles. He liked the stability of rural life, and as an honest hayseed and Thoreauvian moralist, he did not want to hear any lies about it or about life anywhere. Through novels he could combat lies, make a living, adventurously research the great world. Though this work may have obscured the private self, the landscape descriptions in the "Minnesota Diary," persisting to the end, show he could never entirely forget the quiet of his own fields and his own heart.

Notes

Used with permission of *NorthLife* magazine © 1998, Duluth, Minnesota. An abridged version of this essay appeared in *NorthLife* in March 1998.

Lewis's "A Minnesota Diary," quoted in this article, is in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The letters to Marcella Powers, also quoted here, are in the Lewis Collection at the St. Cloud State University Archive.

The University of Idaho Press is bringing out George Killough's edition of Lewis's "A Minnesota Diary" in spring or fall 2000.
mous with frugal. It was printed in a larger format than both the original Harcourt and standard G&D editions, but utilized the second state text plates from the Harcourt original (broken “y” on last line of page 387); to obtain the larger more impressive size, the publisher simply used larger paper. A mere 1000 copies were produced and it sold out immediately. Interestingly, Lewis, himself a former “promoter” in his early days at Harper Brothers, opposed the G&D method of advertising books in such places as drug stores. However, he could not argue with the success of the approach and willingly agreed to reduce his royalties. Today’s booksellers would probably ask $350-400 for the book which, in 1945, sold for $2.50.

_Babbitt_ was published as an anniversary edition as well, not by G&D, but by its original publishing house, Harcourt, Brace. The war years were over and Americans were consuming at a feverish pace. _Babbitt_ had never been out of print since its first appearance in 1922. As part of a promotional plan to capitalize on Lewis’s waning but nevertheless sound reputation with the reading public, Harcourt republished _Babbitt_ in its original format. It produced only 100 copies of the book in a replica of the original dust jacket, changing only the color of the typeface (from light blue to dark brown) for Lewis’s name at the bottom of the front panel and the publisher’s name at the base of the spine. The book itself was a replica of the original, of course, using the second state plates (Purdy/Lyte on page 49). Inserted in the book was a card which stated “In celebration of the 25th Anniversary of Sinclair Lewis’s _Babbitt_, an American Classic.” The book was issued in a glassine over-jacket and a fairly flimsy light weight cardboard unmarked slipcase and distributed to the trade only. The re-issue of _Babbitt_ under the Harbrace Modern Classics logo was simultaneous. The anniversary edition in the original slipcase and glassine should bring over $1,500 in today’s market; the jacketed book only would probably fetch $1000 or more depending on condition and the avidity of collectors, it being considerably scarcer than the original edition.

Both the _Main Street_ and _Babbitt_ “anniversary editions” make a wonderful addition to any Sinclair Lewis collector’s library; they offer an interesting glimpse into publishing history and, in some small measure, paid homage to Lewis a few short years before his death.

# Goldstein continued from page 5

target audience, students examined the devices used, particularly the use of language and nonverbal symbols. Students who had difficulty identifying imagery and other rhetorical devices in reading passages found this activity to be helpful. D.G. Kehl’s article, “How to Read an Ad: Learning to Read between the Lies,” is valuable to any instructor wishing to encourage students to be skeptical in the face of the daily barrage of advertising by being able to distinguish between an ad’s truth and falsity.

Most students enjoyed a writing assignment that flowed from Babbitt’s college reunion. I asked them to imagine their thirtieth high school reunion, describing in particular one member of the class. The responses ranged from the amusingly absurd to the uncomfortably serious. While some envisioned spectacular professional achievements and glamorous wives, others wrote of classmates who would compromise their ideals like Paul, Chum, and Babbitt.

The last major assignment associated with the book was a paper in which students examined how one aspect of Babbitttry continues to exist in American life. There were papers on overconsumption, deceptive advertising, business ethics, substance abuse, immorality in religious communities, crooked politics, biological explanations of adultery, the future of marriage, and social conformity. It was a rather impressive collection coming from a group of high school juniors.

At the end of the academic year I asked students to identify the single work among the many we studied that best exemplifies the characteristics of important literature and explain in writing why that particular work is likely to endure over the years. About twenty-five percent of the students selected _Babbitt_. One of my brightest students, Michael, remembered Lewis’s “two-layered portrait of the conformist, with both the utopian ‘if everyone likes you, good things will come’ and the inner anguish that George Babbitt truly feels beneath his outer shell.” Another very capable student, Monish, cited George Babbitt “as an example of what not to be like.” And Ryan, a student who experienced difficulty during much of the year, wrote, “Although times are changing fast, moral lessons about materialism, conformity, and non-monogamous relationships will continue to be taught through books like _Babbitt_.”

I’m not surprised that most of my students liked the book. The makers of reading lists in both high school and college should make room for George Babbitt alongside Hester, Jake Barnes, Addie Bundren, Tom Joad, and Sethe.

# WORKS CITED


THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
AND THE IMPROVEMENT OF MAIN STREET

The following is an excerpt from the response of Britta L. Bloomberg, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, to the plans of the Minnesota Department of Transportation to both preserve the historic character of Main Street and deal with traffic concerns. (See the Fall 1997 [vol. 6, number 1] issue for the proposals of MnDOT.)

The project has been reviewed pursuant to the responsibilities given the State Historic Preservation Officer by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and the Procedures of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (36CFR800), and to the responsibilities given the Minnesota Historical Society by the Minnesota Historic Sites Act and the Minnesota Field Archaeology Act.

We have greatly appreciated the opportunity to participate in the discussions of the T.H. 71 Advisory Committee over the past several months. The Minnesota Department of Transportation and its consultant, OSM and Associates, should be commended for organizing and implementing a process to bring historic preservation and other community concerns together to develop a highway design that meets the traffic needs of Trunk Highway 71 and preserves the historic character of the Original Main Street Historic District.

We believe that the process has worked well, and the result is in keeping with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation Projects. Although restriping the roadway and reorganizing some of the traffic patterns will constitute some change to the area, the retention of the curb lines and the rehabilitation and replacement of many of the important elements of the streetscape will serve to preserve and strengthen the historic character of this nationally significant district.

Based on our review of the material in the task force report, we concur with your determination that the project should have no adverse effect on the historic district. We ask that the final designs for all elements in the historic district— including, but not limited to, trees, lighting, sidewalk/boulevard improvements, hydrants, railings, and curbing—be developed in consultation with our office and that the final designs be submitted to us for concurrence.

We would also ask that the designs for the project segments outside the district be submitted for review, since these areas define a context for the historic district. The concerns that have been discussed for improving access to the Sinclair Lewis Interpretive Center are included in this area.

We do have one specific comment on the proposed lighting. The design of the suggested light standard is based on historic precedence and is appropriate. However, further study and field review of the lighting specifications of the suggested lamp are needed to address the concerns detailed in the third paragraph on page 3 of the task force report.

Finally, we believe that a project of this importance merits some sort of public education component to reinforce the significance of the area and the efforts that have been made to preserve it.

Please note that our review of this report and our concurrence with the "no adverse effect" determination is based on an integrated comprehensive project package in which amenity development and highway improvements create an overall result. If portions of the project are eliminated or if the project is segmented, our concurrence no longer stands and consultation must be re-initiated to reassess the project's effect to the historic district.

Again, we congratulate MnDOT and the representatives of the City of Sauk Centre on a successful and productive collaboration.

NEW MEMBERS

The Sinclair Lewis Society welcomes the following new members who have joined since the publication of the Spring 1998 newsletter.

Dr. R. W. Allred
3712 Dentelle Drive
Plano, TX 75023

Dave Simpkins
Sauk Centre Herald
Sauk Centre, MN 56378

Florence Buchanan
499 Banning Beach Road
Tavares, FL 32778

Mathew M. Sonnenberg
415 Granlty
Elmhurst, IL 60126

HIKE AND THE AEROPLANE
TO BE REPRINTED

Sinclair Lewis Society board member Steve Pastore has purchased the property rights to Hike and the Aeroplane from the estate of Sinclair Lewis and is planning to have the text reprinted with new illustrations next year. Members can place an order from him by calling 717-448-9377. He notes that the cost will be $75.00 per copy less 30% for Sinclair Lewis Society members. He's anticipating an 8 1/2" by 11" hardbound format with 8-10 b/w illustrations. He's also contemplating a paperback edition in the $15.00 range. For more information he can also be contacted by e-mail at deerbook@ptd.net.
LEWIS AND THE WEB: INFORMATION REQUESTS

The editor of the newsletter has received such good response to the “Lewis and the Web” feature that it is being continued with this issue. Here are some questions that we have received over the summer. Material in brackets are either answers that were sent or comments by the editor.

Plan to check out the Sinclair Lewis website in December 1998. Illinois State University student Brett Lettiere is doing an honors mentorship on the project of updating the website. Among the improvements will be biographies of Grace Hegger and Dorothy Thompson, more pictures, more hyperlinks (including the text of the Nobel Prize acceptance speech, the St. Paul Pioneer Press, and various library holdings of Lewis material), and more recipes.

Were any of the characters or companies (particularly in Dodsworth) real or based on actual historical facts? Thank you for your cooperation.

I heard a rumor that Sinclair Lewis was an alcoholic. I was wondering if this held any truth. If you know, please e-mail me.

Last year there was a conference on July 17th about Sinclair Lewis, no? Would it be possible for me to obtain a written transcript or some type of record of the speeches made? I’m really interested in seeing other people’s views and ideas on Babbitt, and my local library contains no books which offer commentary and criticism on Sinclair Lewis. Any info would help. Thank you very much!

I was looking through Sinclair Lewis’s biography at the beginning of my copy of Main Street, and I noticed that it said that in 1926 he won the Pulitzer Prize for Arrowsmith. The bio goes on to say that he refused this award. I wanted to know if you have any information on his reasoning behind the refusal.

I was wondering if it was possible to get a copy of the silent film Babbitt. If there is anyone in your group who could help me figure this out? I would be most appreciative. [If any Sinclair Lewis members know where this film could be obtained, please e-mail or write the newsletter and let us know.]

In Sinclair Lewis’s Babbitt, what word was introduced to the English language? A friend and I have a wager. We are torn between “by golly” and “zip.” [Interestingly enough, the word Lewis introduced in Babbitt is “Babbitt,” meaning a self-complacent, smug, middle-class businessman. “By golly” dates from 1848 and “zip” circa 1900.]

I am working on a book on 20th century American writers and their alcoholism. Obviously Lewis is of particular interest, and I would like to correspond with any scholars or researchers (or anyone else) interested in the topic or with knowledge of it. [Please contact Jack Cobbs at cobweb@enter.net]

Student Messages

I am a high school student doing research for my senior thesis on Sinclair Lewis and his novel Babbitt. I’d like to take this opportunity to thank you for the great resource your website has provided to me (and no doubt to many other young researchers). Thanks again and continue the good work.

I am a sophomore at the Wellesley High School outside of Boston Mass. I am doing my sophomore author thesis on Sinclair Lewis, and I request a little help if any can be given.

Here is the introduction to my thesis:

“I was brought up to believe the Christian God wasn’t a scared and compromising public servant, but the creator and advocate of the whole merciless truth” (Elmer Gantry 357). This statement, “the whole merciless truth” seems to sum up the world of Sinclair Lewis in a few brief words. Sinclair Lewis was a promoter of this truth in his writings. Through the lips and lives of his characters, Lewis discourses about how easily people conform to a socially acceptable status, and how materialistic modern American society is.

In many of his books, the characters Lewis portrays are on a quest, fighting or defending a certain aspect of the American society. After a struggle, the character either advances cheerfully, or gloomily retreats back into the society they had been so ardenty fighting against. Using his biting satirical style, and through the dialogues and monologues of his characters, Lewis is able to generate cutting social commentary on any aspect of American society.

I read Babbitt, Elmer Gantry, Main Street, Arrowsmith, Dodsworth, Kingsblood Royal and Cass Timberlane. Are there any more books I should read that would help my thesis? Also, what is Cass Timberlane about, I don’t quite get it. I was able to answer almost all of the quiz questions on the web site.
As a high school student, I am doing an oral report on Sinclair Lewis. I’ve done a moderate amount of research on this author. I must admit that I have never read any of his works, but I now plan to do so in the near future. I became deeply interested when I learned of the themes of his major novels, especially Main Street and Babbitt about the middle-class and how they blindly conform to the monotony and standards of their environment, and their lack of spiritual and intellectual values. The reason I am writing this is I would like to know how I could research more information on Lewis, and if you have any suggestions on how I could better present a report on him. Thank you.

I am doing a report on Sinclair Lewis. Could send me some information about your club?

I appreciate you taking the time to respond to my e-mail. Your sources were a great help in completing my paper.

I am doing research for an impact paper on Sinclair Lewis. I want to either focus on his influences on the medical field or his relationship with Upton Sinclair. I am having a difficult time finding information on him and was hoping that you could help me in my study. Please contact me if you can be of any assistance.

Thank you very much for your quick response! Via the Internet I couldn’t find anything when I searched on “Babbitt” or “Babbitry.” So I was very pleased when I found out how to associate the term. I’m sure I can use some of your message! [This was in response to the question, “What’s a Babbitt?”] The answer we sent was, “George F. Babbitt is the eponymous hero of Sinclair Lewis’s Babbitt, a novel which was published in 1922 by Harcourt Brace. Babbitt is a real estate salesman who seems to be very much a product of his time and culture, interested in material possessions and concerned with education for his children as long as it’s practical. Much of the first half of the novel seems to be primarily satire against various aspects of society, the church, the men’s club, high school and college education, business, etc. However, in the second half of the novel, Babbitt begins to realize the sterility of his life and experiments with radical politics, engages in an affair, and attempts to find solace in male bonding in the Maine woods. All of this fails and at the end of the novel Babbitt is back with his family and hoping that his son will have a life different from the one he has had (although it doesn’t look like it). ‘Babbitt’ is often used to define someone who is a middle-class social conformist, although as you can see from the plot description, this is based primarily on the first half of the novel. The most recent book focusing on Babbitt is Babbitt: An American Life, by Glen Love (1993).”]

I am very much interested in your society. I chose to read Main Street for an English term paper. I am a student in high school. I am writing about Lewis’s satire of small town life displayed through the setting and characters in Main Street. I would very much appreciate any information you could give me pertaining to this topic. Regrettably, I did not discover this website sooner, because my term paper is due on Thursday. However, any information you could provide would be appreciated, even after Thursday.

I am senior medical student at the Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine and I have recently been given a project which includes reading Arrowsmith, writing an essay on my views of the novel, and then researching the opinions of others, particularly those in the medical field. I have done a search on the Internet for Arrowsmith and also for Sinclair Lewis, but I cannot find any kind of commentary on this particular novel. Do you have any suggestions for my search? Please let me know via e-mail and thank you for any help you might be able to provide. [We responded to this e-mail and heard later that not only did this medical student successfully complete the project, but he received his medical degree this spring.]

Hi. I am doing a report on Mr. Lewis. We were assigned questions that we have to find the answers to. I have been unable to locate a few of these. I was wondering if maybe you could help me. 1) How did Lewis feel about winning the Nobel prize, and where was it given to him at? 2) Why specifically did he move to Italy? 3) What was the George H. Company, and why did he leave it? Your response on this would be greatly appreciated!! I need this as soon as possible.

I am a student and I am writing a critical essay about Sinclair Lewis’s work Babbitt, which I enjoyed VERY much. I am trying to find resources in which critics offer insight to this work and I am having a hard time doing so. I would APPRECIATE any help or leads of any kind you could give me. Please help me if you can.

**Book Values**

I have an old book Main Street by Sinclair Lewis. I believe it is the first edition. Inside the cover is an autograph that says “To my friend, Amy MacNamara, ‘MAIN STREET’ Lots of Luck signed Sinclair Lewis. The print date is 1920. New York Harcourt, Brace and Howe. The copyright date is also 1920. Can you give me any information about this book.

Sirs; I just purchased this book and was wondering why Mr. Lewis found that he had to write as Tom Graham?

I have a rare book of Sinclair Lewis written under his penname-Tom Graham. Could you please put me in touch with interested buyers? The book is Hike and the Aeroplane. Thank you for your assistance.
Lewis commented that Garland would be “acutely annoyed” to know that Main-Traveled Roads made it possible for the author of Main Street to write about America as he saw it. Lewis as his Nobelist, however, paid Garland back by informing the world that this literary pioneer had allowed himself to become Howdellized, had changed from “a harsh and significant realist into a genial and insignificant lecturer.” Still, Lewis could applaud A Son of the Middle Border (1917) for its many “real and vital” scenes—the awakening boy, the blizzard, the wagon trip, “the thrill of the first trip into the mellow and magic East.”

While Lewis acknowledged his early debt to Garland, he maintained that he had been influenced by Edgar Lee Masters’s Spoon River Anthology (1915) not “in any slightest degree.” Lewis never tired of repeating that he had broken Main Street (“The Village Virus”) in 1905. Nevertheless, Lewis proclaimed Masters a truly original and vital poet, his Spoon River “utterly different,” coming like a revelation and creating a new school of native American poetry. Among Western poets Lewis also paid tribute at various times to Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, and Robinson Jeffers.

Theodore Dreiser’s poetry he thought surprisingly watered down, but in spite of his personal grudges against the man, Lewis’s judgment about this novelist’s place in American literature remained unclouded. Often Lewis acclaimed Dreiser as above all other living writers, hailing him as the emancipator of American literature, the head of the native tradition, a literary trailblazer who cut through “Victorian and Howellsian timidity and gentility” to “honesty and boldness and passion of life.” From his platform in Stockholm, Lewis announced that 25 years earlier he had first read Dreiser’s “great” first novel. To “housebound and airless America” Sister Carrie (1900) came “like a great, free Western wind, and to our stuffy domesticity gave us the first fresh air since Mark Twain and Walt Whitman.”

Although Lewis could not say the same for another famous Hoosier writer, Booth Tarkington, he yet expressed a certain respect for this writer’s craft and concerns, for Tarkington was one of the few writers who had treated the American medium-sized city before Lewis himself had created Zenith. And in Turmoil (1915) and in The Magnificent Ambersons (1918) Tarkington had “touched” the Average Capable American before Lewis himself had written Babbitt (1922). Though he had to say about any obligations to yet another popular Indiana novelist, Meredith Nicholson, Lewis in 1914 favorably reviewed Otherwise Phyllis. Interestingly, Lewis describes the character Amy Montgomery, who stands in front of his bank and watches Main Street, “its miniature picture of the world.” Lewis also had good things to say about Brand Whitlock and Robert Herrick. Later Lewis generously indicated that Sherwood Anderson had made the American village important to all modern letters, defending him against charges of humorlessness and excessive sexuality. In his review of A Storyteller’s Story (1924) Lewis believed that Anderson’s memoir helped explain the Middle West and its generally misunderstood literature.

Not only Main Street in 1920, but two novels published earlier that same year, contributed to the new direction of provincial realism—Zona Gale’s Miss Lulu Bett and Floyd Dell’s Moon Calf. Lewis liked the new Zona Gale even more than he liked the old, the author of 83 highly optimistic Friendship Village stories. Lewis judged Dell’s Moon Calf his first and best novel, “remarkable.” This story of the intellectual development of a young dreamer and poet in conflict with the humdrum—along with Dell’s earlier plea for educational reform—Were You Ever a Child? (1919)—are worthy, said Lewis, of study by Froebebl and Montessori.

Despite their radical dissimilarities of temperament and artistry, Lewis had from early on celebrated Willa Cather. Even after O Pioneers! (1913) and My Antonia (1918), Lewis was dismayed that the public did not know her better. Cather’s West does not smack of “obvious heroisms” but is, instead, the “actual grain-heightened, wind-sharpened land of today.” In one of his Newsweek “Book Week” columns in 1938, Lewis, ever the cataloguer, nominated 28 writers as candidates for the title: “The Greatest American Novelist”—and after a bit of dallying finally cast his vote—for Willa Cather. Lewis’s choice is especially interesting in light of his unfavorable review of One of Ours (1922) in the New York Evening Post and in his later disappointment when the Pulitzer Prize went to One of Ours instead of to Babbitt. “No other,” asserts Lewis, “has so preserved our frontier—from Nebraska Lutherns to Quebec padre—as she has.... Yet no one has more lucidly traced the post-pioneer than she has....” For Lewis, Cather’s greatest work is A Lost Lady (1923). For 35 years Willa Cather has “gone on creating beauty.” Other writers have chased after novelty and nihilism, but “quiet and alone, Willa Cather has greatly pictured the great life.”

Lewis appreciated the urbanity of Iowa-born Carl Van Vechten, his civilized wit, dexterity, and charm. In his Saturday Review assessment of The Tattooed Countess (1924)—the story of a woman from Maple Valley, Iowa, who returns to her birthplace after her 35-year marriage to an Italian nobleman—Lewis did not fail to praise Van Vechten’s picture of “townmower” innocence, the bizarre catalogues, and the “lugubrious” village personages. The reviewer wryly comments that Van Vechten has made his Midwest “at once real and amusing”—“like the worthy though sometimes depressing authors of Winesburg, Ohio, Main Street, and O Pioneers!” Though Lewis did not prophesy that the author of The Grapes of Wrath (1939) would some day win the Nobel Prize—as he prophesied for the author of A Farewell to Arms (1929) and For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940)—he publicly recommended Of Mice and Men (1937) and confessed to the Bemidji College faculty: “I like Steinbeck.”

Besides using Mark Twain as a stick on Howells, Lewis also used him as a balm to Bernard DeVoto from Ogden, Utah. Lewis was saddened to learn that Mark Twain’s future reputation would depend on DeVoto as his literary executor. When, in The Literary Fallacy (1944), DeVoto declared that folly and lying in literature should be denounced, Lewis, defending Van Wyck Brooks, angrily responded: “Very well,” he wrote in the pages of Saturday Review, “I denounce Mr. Bernard DeVoto as a fool and
a tedious and egotistical fool, as a liar and a pompous and
boresome liar.” Since no serious critic would think deflecting
DeVoto was worth while, Lewis indicates that he will take on the
job. The Literary Fallacy (a “dull pamphlet” in “stumble-footed”
style) attacks Brooks for not writing about Francis Parkman in the
approved DeVoto method, which sounds to Lewis like the old
John Fiske method. Unable to challenge DeVoto’s monumental
history, The Year of Decision: 1846 (1943), or DeVoto’s vast
knowledge of the American West, Lewis resorts to iify invention
and other points of the compass: “If Brooks ever tackles Proust or
anything east of Massachusetts or south of New Jersey, then
DeVoto is sunk for life.” By alluding to DeVoto’s frog-like face,
Lewis (no Barrymore himself) plays the man, not the board. The
malignancy and carnage do not abate. In the end, Lewis attacks
DeVoto’s second-rate fiction written by the pseudonymous “John
August.” Still, Lewis concludes, this hack stuff combining Tarzan
and MGM is superior fiction to the fiction in The Literary
Fallacy.

“Incomparably” better than DeVoto and the other “cultural
quacks” at Harvard, Lewis asserted, was Wallace Stegner. Among
the young Western writers Lewis championed in his conversations,
letters, lectures, and articles were August Derleth, Vardis
Fisher, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Oliver La Farge, H. L. Davis,
Paul Horgan, and George R. Stewart. After reading Big Rock
Candy Mountain (1943), Lewis looked upon Stegner as “one of
the very best of the younger writers.” He hoped that Stegner,
without “pietistic regionalism,” would “go back to Utah and Iowa,
and put on the mantle of greatness that is awaiting him.” Unlike
Stegner, Lewis noted in Esquire magazine, August Derleth does not
“wander” far from Sauk City, Wisconsin, the “Sac Prairie” of
his fiction. Derleth’s formidable “Sac Prairie Saga”—a series
of novels and short stories—demands our attention. Though a
champion of and justification for “regionalism,” Derleth
unfortunately has never planned or molded from this saga a single unified
work. His “gush of variegated compositions,” Lewis points out,
makes Louis Bromfield “look like a secluded perfectionist.”
Derleth’s literary ambitions remind Lewis of Babbitt’s real estate
development. “Yet—yet if August Derleth could ever, by some
unsuspected magic, be persuaded that he isn’t half as good as
he thinks he is, if he would learn the art of sitting still and using
a blue pencil, he might become twice as good as he thinks he is—
which would rank him with Homer.”

During this period—the 1940s—Lewis also promoted the
reputations of four Middle Western women writers. For The Three
Readers (1943) an omnibus compiled by Lewis, Carl Van Doren,
and Clifton Fadiman, Lewis selected novellas by Eleanor Green
and Ruth Suckow—The Hill (1936) and Country People (1924)—
“opposite,” noted Lewis, “in almost every mood.” Though Eleanor
Green had lived in the East, she had the good sense to return to
Wisconsin. And Ruth Suckow, “with apparent contentment” after
sojourns east and west, found material for many books in her own
Iowa back yard. The Bonney Family (1928), The Folks (1934), and
New Hope (1942) are, Lewis noted, “genuinely native.” As the
Great Valley created Green and Suckow, so in turn Green and
Suckow have created the Great Valley.

Forgotten today are two younger Middle Western writers that
Lewis boosted. In Maritta Woolf from Michigan, Lewis saw “a
quiet, relentless observer,” without opinions, without egotism.
Her Whistle Stop (1941), written in the tradition of Farrell,
Steinbeck, and Caldwell when she was only 22, is about a
struggling village family. Night Shift (1942) details the seamy and
sordid side of an industrial city. Though today Maritta Woolf’s
novels seem undisciplined and stereotypical, Lewis saw them as
neither “drab” nor “propagandistic.” Like Maritta Woolf, Ann
Chidester, of Stillwater, Minnesota, can be melodramatic, but this
daughter of a pioneering family, Lewis remarked, has “no more
humor than a ration book.” Young Pandora (1942) and No Longer
Fugitive (1943) exemplify “impressionism.” Chidester’s love of
nature and of courage are poetic and passionate, but Lewis
thought that she seems at times too aware of her own cleverness.

In January 1946, Lewis invited Ann Chidester and another
young Minnesota novelist, Frederick Manfred, to spend a week
with him in his big Tudor house in Duluth. Four years earlier the
Frisian-American Manfred—writing under his birth name Feike
Feikema—had written to Lewis for advice on marketing his
unpublished novels. Teaching a class at the University of
Minnesota at the time, Lewis snapped back: “Quite impossible.” Later,
however, looking over a list of the previous year’s fellowship
winners, Lewis noted the title of Manfred’s first novel—The
Golden Bowl (1944)—and (for the obvious reason) registered a
protest. Nevertheless, Lewis eventually read Manfred’s manuscript
and quietly sent it to The American Academy of Arts and
Letters. In 1945 The Academy awarded Manfred and Jean Stafford
each a $1000 grant-in-aid. Soon afterward Lewis invited the robust
Chidester and the Bunyanesque Manfred to his hotel room in
Minneapolis, and so famously did the trio get along that Lewis
extended his grand Duluth invitation. Besides talking literature and
Midland writers for days, Lewis at one point tore a sheet from a
notebook, handed it to Manfred, and told him just to look at it—over
a few comments on his second novel, Boy Almighty (1945).
“You’ve got a little too much bull in it,” said Lewis. Afterward he
showed Manfred how he laid out his plots, built his settings,
collected notes, made up names, wrote the various drafts—and then
pointed out that, after all, every writer has to find his own methods.
Before the week was out, Lewis persuaded Manfred to let him help
him find an Eastern publisher—for the sake of wider distribution—and
told Manfred how to handle reviewers and, in due time, declining

Only three brief times did Manfred see Lewis after the Duluth
visit. The fourth time the prolific Manfred (who gave the impasioned
funeral oration at frozen Sauk Centre Cemetery on January 28,
1951) saw his mentor as only an escaping cloud of urn-vapor and
some ashes returned home from Rome. As restless as the
American pioneers before him, Sinclair Lewis—try as he might—
was never able himself to settle down once and for all in the
Middle West. Yet always, he advised the literary aspirant from the
Corn Belt or the Big Sky Country: Stay at Home—or Return
to Your Native Place.
In a review of Kudzu in the May 8 InTheater, critic Michael J. Bandler refers to a number of musicals “that are finding homes around the country without necessarily venturing into Broadway’ s heady environs” (35) and mentions Elmer Gantry as a good example. (See the Spring 1998 Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter for a focus on Elmer Gantry including reviews of the musical.)

Chicago critic Lucia Mauro also mentioned Elmer Gantry in the July 3 InTheater as one of the “adventurous” offerings that Marriott’s Lincolnshire Theatre has done recently. She discussed it in light of the vigorous theater community in Chicago (24).

Elmer Gantry is cited as a superb salesman by Stephen McCauley in the New York Times article, “Selling Anything, Enthusiastically, at 3 A.M.,” (Arts & Leisure section, July 26, 1998). In this feature on infomercials he says, “These barkers on adrenaline overload are the direct descendants of the snake-oil hucksters who have held the rapt attention of teeming masses at state fairs for more than a century. Part Elmer Gantry, part Lucille Ball, they are American archetypes who hook me every time with their fanaticism and the sheer force of their personalities” (27).

In Notes on Contemporary Literature (28.3, May 1998), Martin Kich writes about the critical grudge Alfred Kazin held against John O’Hara. Kazin apparently considered O’Hara a “pseudo-intellectual with an easy facility with words who snipes at the foibles of the rich and prominent because he envies them” (6). Kich argues that Kazin’s attitude toward O’Hara is illustrative of the sort of received critical wisdom that is passed on from reviewer to reviewer and teacher to student in a vicious circle. Because of people relying on critics rather than reading the novels themselves, “is O’Hara a lesser Fitzgerald, or even a lesser Sinclair Lewis, or some strange amalgam of the influences of Hemingway and Dreiser? If he were all three, would it be remarkable or pathetic?” (7).

In response to an article on Jack London in Smithsonian, Peter S. Beagle writes in the April 1998 Smithsonian, “In the last decade or so of his life, London bought story plots from other authors. At the time of his death, he was working on his last novel, The Assassination Bureau, Ltd., which was based on an idea by the young Sinclair Lewis. Robert L. Fish finished the book in the early 1960s, and it was later made into the 1969 British movie The Assassination Bureau, starring Oliver Reed and Diana Rigg” (16).

David Streitfeld, in the Washington Post Book World (November 9, 1997), writes about “Wobegon Writer” Garrison Keillor and how he has contributed to the language a “phrase that becomes so much a part of the vernacular that neither a definition nor the writer’s name is necessary for the reader to get it.” Keillor is compared to fellow Minnesotan Sinclair Lewis in this regard. “The presumed Lake Wobegon isn’t too far from Gopher Prairie, the fictional setting of Sinclair Lewis’s Main Street. [Keillor says] ‘He did a sort of vengeful cartoon of the Midwest. Now I think everything has changed 180 degrees. Where Minnesotans were embarrassed in 1925 [sic] by a writer who made fun of a small town, now it’s fair to say they’d be embarrassed by someone who wrote lyrically and lovingly about a small town’” (15).

Oops! The Chicago Tribune on July 19, 1998 noted that The Jungle by Sinclair Lewis was one of the top ten best sellers at the Museum Store of the Chicago Historical Society. There was a correction about the author in the main section of the newspaper that same day.


The Californian of the Salina Valley mentions Lewis in connection with the opening of the National Steinbeck Center Museum in Salinas. J. Kyle Henry asked the third Mrs. Steinbeck, Elaine, if her husband would have approved of the museum. She refused to say and Henry draws a parallel with Lewis. In Travels with Charley, Steinbeck notes that Sinclair Lewis’s book Main Street spawned
‘violent hatred’ in Sauk [Centre], Minnesota, Lewis’s hometown but that the hatred subsided in Sauk [Centre] after Lewis’s death. Steinbeck wrote of Lewis: ‘And now he is good for the town. Brings in some tourists. He is a good writer now’” (1A).

Jeffrey Toobin’s article, “Starr Can’t Help It,” (The New Yorker, May 18, 1998), compares independent counsel Kenneth Starr to George Babbitt. “According to Clinton’s defenders Ken Starr is Babbitt with a badge—a minister’s son from San Antonio who shined shoes for fun as a kid, jogged to the cadence of hymns as an adult, and now calls down legal hellfire and brimstone as a prosecutor” (33). Loren F. Schmidtberger, writing on June 15, seems to have read more Lewis than Toobin has. He notes, “Mr. Toobin’s analysis of the Starr investigation contains a puzzling reference to the hero of a Sinclair Lewis novel: ‘According to Clinton’s defenders, Ken Starr is Babbitt with a badge.’ But Toobin’s description of Starr as a Goody Two-shoes who ‘now calls down legal hellfire and brimstone as a prosecutor’ seems less George Babbitt, the epitome of the small-minded philistine, than Elmer Gantry, the eponymous hero of another Lewis novel, who got ‘everything from the church and Sunday School, except, perhaps, any longing whatever for decency and kindness and reason.’”

In a review in The Nation of Notorious Victoria, a biography of Victoria Woodhull by Mary Gabriel (May 11, 1998, 43), reviewer Aimei Wallach mentions Sinclair Lewis’s description of minister Henry Ward Beecher as “the greatest preacher since St. Paul” and a “a powerful writer of trash.” Woodhull had exposed Beecher’s affair with Elizabeth Tilton and it became one of the major scandals of the 1870s. Shades of Elmer Gantry.

The Literary Companion to Medicine, edited by Richard Gordon and published by St. Martin’s in 1993, has an excerpt from Arrowsmith. The section chosen was from part III, chapter 1 where young Martin Arrowsmith is being shown scientific curiosities by the alcoholic Doc Vickerson. The headnotes at the beginning call the book Martin Arrowsmith (the British title) and say that it was published in 1923 (perhaps someone saw a gleam in Lewis’s eye of what was to be!).

Lewis is in good company in the new anthology Closers: Great American Writers on the Art of Selling, edited by Mike Tronnes and published by St. Martin’s Press in 1998. Edna Ferber, Arthur Miller, and John O’Hara join Lewis in this collection. In the introduction, Tronnes says, “When he was researching Elmer Gantry, Sinclair Lewis posed as a door-to-door Bible salesman. Today, he would take a job hawking Bibles on QVC or the Christian Broadcasting Network” (xii). The selection that was chosen was from chapter 11 of Elmer Gantry when Elmer has temporarily given up the ministry and become a salesman.

Martinis and Lewis are mentioned together in the American Heritage article “There’s Something About a Martini” by Max Rudin (July/August 1997). In a paean of praise to this beverage, he writes that “the martini features in major works by Sinclair Lewis, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Mencken, and John O’Hara and, overseas, in Maugham, Coward, and Graham Green, to name just a few.”

In an article on Paul Robeson and Film, “A Giant Denied His Rightful Stature in Film,” (New York Times, March 29, 1998), Martin Duberman notes that there were very few good roles in film for African-Americans in the 1930s and 40s. An exception he mentions is Arrowsmith, directed by John Ford. The film uses a character from the novel, a black doctor, Oliver Marchand (Clarence Brooks). He has a practice on St. Hubert, the Caribbean island where Arrowsmith (Ronald Colman) has been sent to test a vaccine against the plague, and they work together as equals.

Bill Jennings, a Sinclair Lewis Society member who lives in Australia, writes that he quoted from Arrowsmith in a letter to the Sydney Morning Herald to refute the notion of Anglo-Saxon purity. “Martin was, like most inhabitants of Elk Mills before the Slavo-Italian immigration, a Typical Pure-bred Anglo-Saxon American, which means that he was a union of German, French, Scotch, Irish, perhaps a little Spanish, conceivably a little of the strains lumped together as ‘Jewish,’ and a great deal of English, which is itself a combination of primitive Briton, Celt, Phoenician, Roman, German, Dane, and Swede.”

Bill also brought my attention to a chapter in Dale Carnegie’s Five Minute Biographies on Sinclair Lewis called “Fired from Four Newspapers—He Won the Nobel Prize and Thought it was a Gag.” The book was first published in 1937. “He has written an unceasing stream of excellent novels. And if you don’t think that’s a man’s job—try it” (141).
Collector's Corner features catalog listings from book dealers as a sampling of what publications by Lewis are selling for currently.

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1998 Summer Miscellany


First edition. Some foxing to title page and frontispiece, gilt on spine a little darkened, otherwise a solid and near fine copy lacking the very scarce jacket. Lewis’s first book published under his own name.


First edition. First issue lacking quotation marks at beginning of “Dodsworth” on title page. Some minor soiling to covers. Very good in wrappers. Laid in is a letter from the United Textile Workers to Lewis’s secretary at the time, Louis Florey, forwarding a copy of Cheap and Contented Labor.


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Catalogue 96—Modern Literature


A novel of fascism coming to America, written by the author of Babbitt and Main Street at a time when Europe was coming under the sway of various fascist dictators. Inscribed by the author: “To Roy Grimmer/ from his friend/ + sometime patient/ Sinclair Lewis.” Light flaking to spine gilt; near fine in a very good dust jacket with light edge-chipping.

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Stephen Pastore’s book, Sinclair Lewis: A Descriptive Bibliography, brought his name to the attention of serious collectors and scholars. Within weeks of its publication, he was receiving calls and letters from persons with bibliographical queries and he also gained access to some of the finer collections of Lewis material. His collection now comprises some 2,500 Lewis-related items, beyond doubt the largest collection in private hands. The new book catalogues a culled listing from that collection with annotations, setting forth those items (about 800) which the author believes would be of most interest to scholars and collectors. Mr. Pastore states, “Surely there are items out there which are not on the list and not in the larger collection either; such an amalgamation with a criterion as broad as this one (anything to do with Sinclair Lewis) could never be truly complete. At this writing new proposed editions of Lewis’s works are awaiting publication. Collections which have been closed for years, open and new material, particularly ephemeral items, come on the market. Fortunately, such a collection can go on and on, limited only by the endurance and resources of the collector.”

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1. to give the serious collector a framework on which to build a true completist collection;
2. to discuss the width and breadth of Lewis’s impact on Twentieth-Century American and world literature in a form which can lead the scholar to other avenues of research;
3. to answer as many questions about the scope of collectible/researchable Lewis material;
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Perhaps as much as anything, this is the record of a completist’s adventure. It is a diary of the dedication of a collector to re-create the life of a respected, controversial, and important writer and personality who did much to shape the literary heritage of this country and whose reputation has grown and diminished and grown again over time. The items listed in the book are the building blocks for scholars and collectors alike to arrange in such a fashion that they may come to understand and appreciate Lewis.

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