

Sinclair Lewis's novel *Main Street* at 100

By James McDonald
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This year marks the 100th anniversary of the publication of Sinclair Lewis's novel *Main Street*, the breakthrough work of an author who would become, a decade later, the first American awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Harry Sinclair Lewis was born in 1885 in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, which he later described as "a prairie village in that most Scandinavian part of America, Minnesota," the son of "a country doctor." After a childhood and adolescence of voracious reading, he attended Oberlin College for one year and from there went on, at his father's insistence, to Yale University, earning money along the way by doing newspaper work and even, one summer, travelling to England and back as a hired hand aboard a cattle ship. And always he was writing.

In all, Lewis published 24 novels, including six books of varying seriousness prior to *Main Street*. The latter, his first important work, was an enormous success, selling 180,000 copies in its first six months and within a few years, an estimated 2 million.

In the following decade and a half, Lewis produced what readers and critics generally consider his most important books, namely *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), *Elmer Gantry* (1927), *Dodsworth* (1929) and *It Can't Happen Here* (1935).

Although Lewis, who died in 1951, has long since fallen from the syllabi of high school and college American literature courses, his major works merit reading a century or so later not only for their engaging storytelling and the vivid chronicle they offer of American middle class life in the first half of the twentieth century in particular, but also for their withering satirical attack on the hypocrisies, and worse, of that American life.

Main Street tells the story of Carol Kennicott. When we meet her, in the first decade of the last century, she is still Carol Milford, a highly sensitive but moderately talented co-ed at the fictional Blodgett College on the outskirts of Minneapolis.

Carol yearns "to conquer the world—almost entirely for the world's own good"—but cannot determine how to accomplish this feat. With a humor that is characteristically frank yet sympathetic, Lewis tells us that at "various times during Senior year Carol finally decided upon studying law, writing motion-picture scenarios, professional nursing, and marrying an unidentified hero." Such vacillation on Carol's part seems at first the result of youthful wistfulness, but the beauty of her character is that, as Lewis warns us early on, "Whatever she

might become, she would never be static."

After a few dull years working as a librarian in St. Paul, Carol meets and marries the "solid" Dr. Will Kennicott of Gopher Prairie, feeling for him an affection short of love that will evolve through moods and complications to form as clear-eyed a portrayal of a marriage as is to be found in American literature. (In the marriage to a doctor and the banality of small-town life, there are obvious hints of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, 1856.)

Kennicott's Gopher Prairie is a market town loosely based on Lewis's hometown of Sauk Centre, but generic of Midwest prairie towns of the time in its ad hoc ugliness and devotion to money-making. Kennicott persuades the relatively, and self-consciously, urbane Carol to travel back with him and make Gopher Prairie "artistic," pleading with her, "Make us change!"

The prospect of beautifying "one of these prairie towns" ignites in her a passionate enthusiasm, and the novel follows Carol's various schemes for accomplishing this mission, from attempting to build a beautiful town hall to wishing to produce edifying plays by George Bernard Shaw. Time and again her efforts bump up against the complacency and venality of her neighbors, and Carol contemplates what it is that makes "the more intelligent young people (and the fortunate widows!) flee to the cities with agility" and not come back in passages such as this:

"It is an unimaginatively standardized background, a sluggishness of speech and manners, a rigid ruling of the spirit by the desire to appear respectable. It is contentment...the contentment of the quiet dead, who are scornful of the living for their restless walking."

It is to Carol's credit as a character, and Lewis's as a novelist, that her understanding of Gopher Prairie and her relationship to it are not summed up in such passages. At times she is filled with compassion for the town's inhabitants and at others becomes swept up by the beauty of the countryside and is convinced that she loves Gopher Prairie. Such moments of peace, though, Lewis likens to "the contentment of the lost hunter stopping to rest."

Throughout *Main Street*, Lewis sees to it that Carol's consciousness develops, growing more complex as she continuously examines town life, her marriage and herself. Further, her restless spirit—her dedication to beauty, to

frankness, to justice for the farmers who are exploited by the town's businesses, to her own fulfillment as a human being—never flags, making her one of the most compelling female characters in American literature. As she says of herself near the end of the novel, "I've never excused my failures by sneering at my aspirations, by pretending to have gone beyond them."

As noted above, *Main Street* was an instant bestseller and its publication a national literary event. As Lewis's biographer Mark Schorer remarks in *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (1961), "It was the most sensational event in twentieth-century American publishing history." Part of the novel's importance at the time was that it partook of both fame and infamy. Schorer again: "No reader was indifferent to *Main Street*: if it was not the most important revelation of American life ever made, it was the most infamous libel upon it." The novel's popularity and influence were underscored by the fact that the phrase "Main Street" became a common term denoting a particularly American brand of philistinism.

In 1930, Lewis observed that the novel had been a *succès de scandale*, because one of "the most treasured American myths had been that all American villages were peculiarly noble and happy, and here an American attacked that myth. Scandalous. Some hundreds of thousands read the book with the same masochistic pleasure that one has in sucking an aching tooth."

Lewis's greatest strength as a novelist was his sensitive detection of large social forces as they work themselves out culturally and in the desires and behavior of individuals. Carol Kennicott, for instance, in addition to constituting an intensely detailed and convincing consciousness, serves for Lewis as an embodiment of middle-class liberalism. She imagines improvements to Gopher Prairie that will make the town more pleasant to look at and live in, and she significantly wants to ease the discomfort of the economically oppressed, as when she dresses up the rest room that Gopher Prairie grudgingly provides for the wives of farmers who have been brought to "G.P." on market day.

Yet Carol is also easily discouraged, giving way to personal emotion when she meets with resistance or ingratitude. And though she occasionally mouths "socialistic" sentiments, she has no stomach whatever for the hard, unglamorous work of political organization. (Toward the end of the novel she does lend a hand to the suffrage movement, but she notes the vast difference between herself and those women who are truly committed to the work.)

Among Sinclair Lewis's most astute observations along these lines are the connections he is able to draw between small-town politics and full-blown political reaction, as well as his recognition that the latter is primarily an anti-working class, anti-socialist phenomenon.

His remarkable novel *Babbitt* is his first to explore these themes in any depth, with the "boosterism" practiced by businessmen like George F. Babbitt (again, Lewis contributed

something to the English language) in the fictional city of Zenith, Ohio, shown to be at once inane in its promotion of "pep" and "zip," and sinister in its suspicion of those who would challenge the premises of the money-worshipping life. A glimpse of *Babbitt* can already be seen in *Main Street*, in the person of "Honest Jim" Blauser, a land speculator and hustler who comes to Gopher Prairie to "boost" it, that is, to make it grow, and who delivers demagogic speeches against "all knockers of prosperity and the rights of property."

In *It Can't Happen Here*, Lewis confronts fascism head on. While the novel may not compare favorably with novels of the 1920s as a work of art, its analyses of fascism—as a tool of capitalism, as ruthless toward opponents and as fundamentally irrational—and of specifically American demagoguery make it valuable reading in 2020 America.

Burzelius "Buzz" Windrip is a senator with dictatorial aspirations, intended by Lewis to echo the populist governor of Louisiana, Huey P. Long. "The Senator was vulgar, almost illiterate, a public liar easily detected, and in his 'ideas' almost idiotic. ..." Like Donald Trump and others, Windrip is a symptom of the objective conditions of his time, a worldwide depression and the rise of fascism in Europe, and in *It Can't Happen Here*, an obviously ironic title, Lewis considers seriously and with insight just what an American "corporatist" (Windrip's word) authoritarianism might look like and how the American people might respond.

Missing from Lewis's analysis in the novel, as from his social outlook generally, is any grasp of the working class as a potentially revolutionary force. And 1934, the year before the novel was published, had witnessed three historic strikes (in Minneapolis, San Francisco and Toledo) that shook the ruling class to its core.

What little hope *It Can't Happen Here* offers is concentrated in the liberal middle class, and at that in its most individualistic elements, as in the person of Doremus Jessup, the book's newspaperman protagonist.

Lewis's reputation has suffered sharply over the years, to the benefit of more or less contemporary figures, such as Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos and William Faulkner, and to more recent ones. However, despite their shortcomings, *It Can't Happen Here* and *Main Street*—along with Lewis's other novels of the '20s—are well worth reading, both as literary art and as contributions to our understanding of American life.

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