

## SINCLAIR LEWIS, AMERICAN PROPHET

### WHY HIS LEGACY DESERVES A REEVALUATION, BEYOND IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE

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*It Can't Happen Here*, a 1935 novel about the rise of a fascist government in America has been garnering plenty of attention post-election, but even as it muscles its way onto bestseller lists and inspires think pieces in publications like the *New York Times*, the man behind the tale remains in the shadows. Sinclair Lewis was one of the most prolific and prominent American authors of the 1920s and 30s. He was the first American to win a Nobel Prize for Literature and turned down a Pulitzer in a fit of pique. *It Can't Happen Here* might be the novel in the limelight, but his one-two-three gut punch of *Main Street*, *Babbitt* and *Elmer Gantry*, all written between 1920 and 1927, are more relevant today than they've ever been. The man himself deserves to have his reputation as one of America's finest homegrown satirists restored.

Sinclair Lewis, born in Sauk Centre, MN in 1885, used to be somebody. In addition to the Nobel Prize for Literature and the Pulitzer he rejected in response to being denied it for an earlier work, he was a major commercial success during his lifetime. He sold the first magazine serial rights to his novel *Arrowsmith* (1925) for \$50,000—what his publisher deemed to be the highest price paid for such rights at the time. The initial print run of *Elmer Gantry* (1927) was 140,000 copies. It was the largest first printing of any book at the time. He earned half a million dollars in royalties, serialization fees and movie rights for *Cass Timberlane* (1945), one of his later and weaker novels. In 1939, *Colophon* magazine asked readers to name the living American authors they thought people would consider “classics” in the year 2000. Sinclair Lewis topped the list.

This prediction did not come to pass.

Lewis himself wasn't even dead a decade when Lewis biographer Mark Schorer declared him one of the worst writers in American literature. By 1987, Harold Bloom wrote, “Lewis is of very nearly no interest whatsoever to American literary critics of my own generation and younger, so that it seems likely his decline in renown will continue,” while noting that Lewis had already been surpassed in reputation and acclaim by William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Willa Cather, and Theodore Dreiser. Even Lewis's own hometown, the aforementioned Sauk Centre, MN, has abandoned him. This past fall, the Sinclair Lewis Interpretative Center, devoted to showcasing the life of the town's most prominent native son, shut its doors for good. The land is being sold to a developer and is destined to become the site of a new chain store. “You talk to kids in school now, and they either don't know or don't care who he is. And it's not just the kids. I tried to read *Main Street*. I start it every winter. I still can't get through that book,” Sarah Morton, Sauk Centre's city planner told the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*.

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At first glance, the most common critiques leveled at Lewis's work are not without merit. His books are dense and sprawling. They're filled with clever but protracted monologues in the vernacular of the day. If you like Whit Stillman period-piece films built around pithy conversations meant to illuminate social classes or subcultures, you'll love Sinclair Lewis's novels. Most of them lack a coherent, forward-moving plot. Instead, there are loose vignettes or day-in-the-life recountings. You could easily summarize *Babbitt* (1922) as “insecure businessman feels as if there is something missing in his life, undertakes several minor intellectual and social rebellions to feel more alive, but is ultimately lead back to conformity by his lack of courage and fear of social and professional ostracism.” *Main Street* (1920) would be “ambitious young woman marries, moves to the Midwest, attempts to affect social change through sheer force of will, but ultimately learns to accept the strictures of geography and gender by which she's bound.” *Elmer Gantry* is “morally bankrupt

sociopath uses religion to manipulate those around him and society at large for his own gain and glorification.”

Yet, the critiques that Lewis was more sociologist than great author, that his novels don't hold together as works of art because they're too pessimistic and didactic, that his refusal to offer fully-fleshed counterpoints to the archetypes he mocks result in works more polemical than entertaining—these aren't weaknesses; they're the keys to his continued relevancy. Lewis was a satirist par excellence, but he was also a cultural sage almost a century ahead of his time, foreseeing our preoccupation with personal brands and self-curation, predicting the rise of the “business knows best” rhetoric that shapes policy and valorizes the entrepreneurial class, and laying bare the sociopathy at the heart of those who aspire to the greatest heights of power.

In his 1928 essay “Glass Flowers, Wax Works and the Barnyard Symphonies of Sinclair Lewis,” T.K. Whipple writes of Lewis's characters, “The central vacuum at the core of these people is the secret which explains their manifestations. Having no substance in themselves, they are incapable of being genuine. They are not individual persons; they have never developed personality. Having no guide, no standard, in themselves, they are driven to adopting the standards and ideas of the herd. Their only existence is in the pack—naturally they fight for their tribal taboos with the ferocity of savages.” It's easy enough to imagine the same being said today of “liberals” or “conservatives” or “Millennials.” Indeed, the critique Whipple makes of Lewis's fictional characters is the same critique that more inflammatory corners of the present-day internet are making about flesh and blood Americans. We have those thinly-sketched, group-thinking denizens of places like Zenith and Gopher Prairie to thank for giving armchair pundits everywhere an enduring if lazy rhetorical device.

Lewis was largely concerned with the power of conformity and how it shapes American life. Long before even TV, let alone the internet, his characters suffered FOMO—fear of missing out—as acutely as any one of us scrolling Instagram on Saturday night might today. A hundred years before social media, George Babbitt, Main Street's Carol Kennicott, and the eponymous Elmer Gantry were valiantly trying to curate their public personas and paper over the cracks in their personal selves.

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In addition to his characters' supposed sheeple-like qualities, Lewis has drawn criticism for creating contexts that lack dimension or nuance, with his detractors asserting that he was more concerned with hammering home a thesis on a particular aspect of American culture than in verisimilitude. “With Lewis, the subject, the social section, always came first; systematic research sometimes conducted by research assistants and carrying Lewis himself into ‘the field’ like any cultural anthropologist, followed; the story came last, devised to carry home and usually limping under the burden of data,” sniffs biographer Schorer.

In particular, the sociopathic, unbelieving evangelist Elmer Gantry has come under fire for his lack of realism. Gantry's feverish dreams of consolidating institutional power for his own gain were dismissed as “weird and crude” fantasy by D.J. Dooley in 1967's *The Art of Sinclair Lewis*, but just read the passage he cites through the lens of our current political landscape:

He would combine in one association all the moral organizations in America—perhaps later, the entire world. He would be the executive of that combination; he would be the super-president of the United States, and some day the dictator of the world.

Doesn't sound so ludicrous now, does it?

Literary scholar Howell Daniels also had harsh words about the implausibility of a real-life Elmer Gantry. In 1971's "Sinclair Lewis and the Drama of Dissociation," he declares, "Elmer Gantry, for example, the most pungent and unremitting of all Lewis's castigations of American life, is finally a novel that is difficult to take seriously. Written with considerable energy and gusto; it contains some of Lewis's wittiest prose; but Elmer himself in the final stages of his dictatorship of world morality so conclusively disappears into caricature that he ends as an almost medieval illustration of lechery and hypocrisy incarnate."

A little over 45 years later, we would go on to elect a billionaire reality TV star president who lives in a golden tower in the middle of New York City, refuses to separate his personal business dealings from the workings of the highest office in the land, uses Twitter as a bully pulpit to spread falsehoods about perceived foes, and has been caught on tape bragging about grabbing women by "the pussy" with impunity. Elmer Gantry could only dream of letting his freak flag fly so high.

Kingsblood Royal (1947), Lewis's novel about racial tensions in America reaching a breaking point, was initially dismissed by white audiences as his most credulity-stretching work. But it no longer seems quite so far-fetched in the face of ongoing police violence against African Americans, a president who derides inner cities as crime-ridden hellscape, and the recent, failed 'Muslim Ban' Executive Order. "What else, though, has Lewis fed on besides his own works that he continues to write so badly? His irresponsible exaggerations not only offend common sense but devastate fictional illusion," wrote Warren Beck in his 1948 essay on Kingsblood Royal, "How Good Is Sinclair Lewis?" What Lewis's detractors considered overwrought and histrionic at the time has, slowly but surely, been made real.

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Perhaps what has infuriated critics most about Sinclair Lewis was his refusal to definitively tell us how to feel about his work. For instance, T.K. Whipple writes, "Just as his people have no inner standards of their own, because they are not integral personalities, because they have not, in fact, developed any real personality at all, so Lewis himself shifts his point of view so often that finally we come to wonder if he has any."

Are you supposed to feel empathy for George Babbitt's chafing against the expectations of a middle-class lifestyle, or should you scorn his weakness and lack of self-awareness? Should you dismiss Carol Kennicott as a flighty naïf or, as I do, relate to her unquenchable desire to remake her circumstances to suit her inchoate vision of a just, emotionally satisfying community? Was Lewis a straightforward chronicler of middle American mores or was he trolling early 20th-century coastal elites by seeming to validate all their preconceptions about the "other" (greedier, more parochial, conservative, small-minded) America? Before there were politically charged social media bubbles, there was Sinclair Lewis confusing readers and critics alike about whether we should laugh at the subjects of his novels or whether he was the one laughing at us.

Today, we wonder who should come in for more criticism: the people who don't understand that Obamacare and the Affordable Care Act are one and the same, or those of us who share memes mocking fellow citizens for their ignorance? A fresh look at Lewis's tight-lipped approach to satire may help us to confront this question.

And there is at least one modern voice calling for a reexamination of Lewis's legacy. In 2014's *The Republic of Imagination: America In Three Books*, Azar Nafisi makes the case for Babbitt as a key tome for understanding American culture. She argues that the privatization of education and the reorientation of curriculums from knowledge-building to career preparation are current examples of the same "business knows best" boosterism that Babbitt the character espouses and Babbitt the

novel skewers. Yet, the novelty of her argument serves to show how far Lewis has fallen from public consciousness.

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With the 1984 film adaptation of George Orwell's 1984 set to return to theaters across North America, a miniseries version of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* coming to Hulu, and renewed enthusiasm for novels such as *Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451*, we're looking at modern dystopian classics through the lens of our current political context and assigning them a new relevance. Though this impetus is also responsible for bringing *It Can't Happen Here* back into critical discourse, it probably isn't enough to secure a full-scale Sinclair Lewis revival. While, for example, Orwell's and Atwood's works vividly sketch engrossing portraits of dystopian futures, Lewis's works meticulously pillory the venal but enduring human traits like insecurity, greed and pettiness that pave the way for those futures. The former may make for more gripping reading, but if novels like *1984* or *The Handmaid's Tale* show us where we might end up, ones like *Babbitt* or *Main Street* point to how we got there, inch by unglamorous inch.

In his 1966 essay "Lewis's Satire—A Negative Emphasis," Daniel R. Brown offers an argument for Sinclair Lewis's continued relevance: "The illiberality he exposed has not disappeared from the United States. Racial and religious bigotry, puritanical viciousness, business cheating and duplicity have not vanished. It is a serious mistake to dismiss Lewis's novels as charming and quaint books filled with interesting if out-dated thoughts of American life." Brown is right.

Indeed, if anything, these flaws in the American character have only grown more obvious and dangerous in the decades since Lewis documented them. Yet, what has also grown, especially in recent months, is a broader and newfound willingness to acknowledge them in our institutions, our leaders, and ourselves. "Sinclair Lewis," Brown writes, "quite possibly may have a revival if readers once again discover that he captured much that is wrong in American civilization." To truly question, without flinching, how and why our current political reality has come to be would necessitate reckoning with our own "illiberal" impulses. If we can do that, perhaps we will also be ready to re-embrace the oeuvre of an author who so aptly chronicled the public manifestations of Americans' inner demons.