Sinclair Lewis, the red-haired tornado from the Minnesota wilds

By Garren Hochstetler for Gere & Bethany Book Talks, May 2019
Why talk about Sinclair Lewis in 2019?

100th anniversary of *Main Street*
First American Nobel Prize for Literature
Sociological novels
Fun reads!
Early Life

Father – small town doctor (Swedish & German farmers; amputations)
Mother – died from Tuberculosis when Harry was 6
Step-mother – Suburbia to small town. Clubs and beautifying projects; read to Harry often
Harry – skinny bookish kid with a big mouth
Oberlin Academy in Ohio – Sunday school circuit
Yale, Helicon Home Colony janitor, Panama, and cattle boat to England. California then New York.
Early Writing and Wandering

Yale literary magazine

Interviews with poor workers and professionals. Jack London’s visit

Children’s magazines then added adult magazines

Editor for Waterloo, Iowa’s Courier. Anti-lynching article

Early novels written around day jobs, acting as own agent

Late Nineteen-teens: equivalent of $150k/year before breakout hit!
Hike and the Aeroplane – 1912

Tom Swift style emerging-technology-emphasizing adventure story for young readers

Republication forbidden

Wright brothers flight 1903
Tom Swift series 1910
Grace Hegger

Editor for Vogue magazine

Freelance writer after marriage

Strong influence & social connections
Inherits a fortune, quits his job, and has quaint wanderings. Tepid reception.

Chapter titles like:

Mr. Wrenn is Lonely
He Starts for the Land of Elsewhere
He Finds Much Quaint English Flavor
He Buys and Orange Tie
He Becomes Mildly Religious and Highly Literary
The Trail of the Hawk – 1915

A young man who struggles through a long series of blue collar and office jobs until he can realize his dream of becoming a pilot.

Fictionalized version of Lewis’ own early wanderings.
The Job: An American Novel – 1917

Una Golden working in commercial real estate

For the woman who works: Her own existence, not told as a pink romance but as LIFE.

For the business man: The novel which will enable him to understand the puzzling women who work for him.

For the lover of the real thing in literature: An American story demanding the most interested reading and serious discussion.
The Innocents: A Story for Lovers – 1917

An old couple (who call each other “Father” and “Mother”) runs off from their everyday life to open a tea room in Cape Cod, then have other adventures trying to live free.
Free Air – 1919

Claire Boltwood, from an upper-class Northeastern family, takes a cross-country trip by automobile to the Pacific Northwest and meets a down to earth, lower-class guy who suits her better.

One of the first road trip novels.

Model T 1908
Main Street – 1920

Alfred Harcourt: “This it the truest book I’ve ever read.”

10k copies with no advertising but reviews.

414k copies of the first edition. Passed two million with the cheaper second edition.

Best selling novel of 1900-1925.

Lewis’ cut in the first year was about $3 million in today’s money.
Main Street – 1920

The story of Carol Kennicott, the wife of a small town doctor from the big city who is filled with ideas for improving the town and leaving her mark.

Village Virus, class, women’s ambition

Jeanette Rankin U.S. House 1917 – first fed 19th Amendment 1920
Why “Main Street” Is the Best Seller

Because “Main Street” is the continuation of “main streets” everywhere.
Because the dialogue is so real that you will say to your family: “Here, just listen to this.”
Because there is true humor in it all.
Because everyone is saying, “Have you read it?” and its scene, its people, its title and its phrases have already entered into the daily life and talk of the American people.

WATCH FOR IT IN

THE LINCOLN STAR

Nebraska’s Best Newspaper
Excerpt and Willa Cather’s Letter
The story of George Babbitt, real estate business man who is solidly middle-class in a solidly middle-size city in the Midwest.


Outsold *Main Street*.
Arrowsmith – 1925

The story of Martin Arrowsmith, medical student then doctor.

Research vs. practical aide

Anti-Semitism

Collaboration with Paul de Kruif

Abraham Flexner’s Report 1910
Arrowsmith – Pulitzer Prize Declined

Still sore about *Main Street* being passed over for the Pulitzer for “moral” reasons.

“All prizes, like all titles, are dangerous. The seekers for prizes tend to labor not for inherent excellence but for alien rewards: they tend to write this, or timorously to avoid writing that, in order to tickle the prejudices of a haphazard committee.”
Mantrap – 1926

New York lawyer Ralph Prescott in Canadian outdoors

Based on “treaty expedition”

Bombed
Elmer Gantry – 1927

College football drunkard becomes a (hypocritical) preacher in Zenith.

Banned in Boston.

Burt Lancaster won Best Actor for the film version.
The Man Who Knew Coolidge – 1928

Series of first-person stories by a talkative fellow about how he knew the President etc.

Dinner with Babbitts

Bombed
Dorothy Thompson

Suffragist Reporter

Head of New York Post’s Berlin Bur.
1931 Hitler interview and book.
First western journalist expelled.

Two week broadcast marathon during Poland invasion

Ladies Home Journal and CBS
Dodsworth – 1929

A rich businessman and his wife take an eye-opening European trip and grow apart, finding new partners.
“[I]n America most of us – not readers alone but even writers – are still afraid of any literature which is not a glorification of everything American, a glorification of our faults as well as our virtues. To be not only a best seller in America but to be really beloved, a novelist must assert that all American men are tall, handsome, rich, honest, and powerful at golf; that all country towns are filled with neighbors who do nothing from day to day save go about being kind to one another; that although American girls may be wild, they change always into perfect wives and mothers; and that, geographically, America is composed solely of New York, which is inhabited entirely by millionaires; of the West, which keeps unchanged all the boisterous heroism of 1870; and of the South, where everyone lives on a plantation perpetually glossy with moonlight and scented with magnolias.”
Later Novels – Highlights


It Can’t Happen Here (1935) – Fascist takeover of the United States. [Willa Cather letter.]

Kingsblood Royal (1947) – A white banker discovers that he has some Black ancestry and is ostracized socially and expelled from his “whites only” neighborhood.
Later Novels – The Remainders

Work of Art (1934) – Hotel business
The Prodigal Parents (1938) – Old folks escaping from adult children
Bethel Merriday (1940) – Young woman working her way up in the theater world
Gideon Planish (1943) – Fundraising organizer
Harri (1943) – Widow and children move to a small town
Cass Timberlane (1945) – Small city judge marries a younger woman who cheats
The God-Seeker (1945) – Missionaries during American westward expansion
World So Wide (1951) – Colorado man goes out to see the world
Sinclair Lewis
In U.S. editor, he is still a force.

Books
Additional Texts Referenced


  - To Sinclair Lewis. April 14, 1921. p. 301