

# Sinclair Lewis

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**Sinclair Lewis**



**Born:** February 7, 1885  
Sauk Centre, Minnesota, USA

**Died:** January 10, 1951  
Rome, Italy

**Occupation:** Novelist, Playwright, Short story write

**Nationality:** American

**Sinclair Lewis** (February 7, 1885 — January 10, 1951) was an American novelist, short-story writer, and playwright. In 1930 he became the first American to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, "for his vigorous and graphic art of description and his ability to create, with wit and humour, new types of characters." His works are known for their insightful and critical views of American society and capitalist values. His style is at times droll, satirical, and yet sympathetic.

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## Biography

### Boyhood and Education

Born Harry Sinclair Lewis in the village of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, he began reading books at a young age and kept a diary. He had two siblings, Fred (born 1875) and Claude (born 1878). His father, Edwin J. Lewis, was a physician and, at home, a stern disciplinarian who had difficulty relating to his sensitive, unathletic third son. Lewis's mother, Emma Kermott Lewis, died in 1891; little is known of whatever influence she may have had on him. The following year, Edwin Lewis married Isabel Warner, whose company young Lewis apparently enjoyed. Throughout his lonely boyhood, the ungainly Lewis -- tall, extremely thin, stricken with acne, and somewhat popeyed -- had trouble gaining friends and pined after various local girls. At age 13, he unsuccessfully ran away from home, wanting to become a drummer boy in the Spanish-American War.<sup>[1]</sup>

In fall 1902, Lewis left home for a year at Oberlin Academy (the then-preparatory department of Oberlin College) to help himself qualify for acceptance by Yale University. While at Oberlin, he developed a religious enthusiasm that waxed and waned for much of his remaining teenaged years. He entered Yale in 1903 but did not receive

his bachelor's degree until 1908, having taken time off to work at Helicon Hall, Upton Sinclair's cooperative-living colony near Englewood, New Jersey, and to travel to Panama. Lewis's unprepossessing looks, "fresh" country manners, and seemingly self-important loquacity did not make it any easier for him to win and keep friends at Oberlin or Yale than in Sauk Centre. Some of his crueller Yale classmates joked "that he was the only man in New Haven who could fart out of his face." Nevertheless, he did manage to initiate a few relatively long-lived friendships among students and professors, some of whom recognized his promise as a writer.<sup>[2]</sup>

## **Early career**

Lewis's earliest published creative work -- romantic poetry and short sketches -- appeared in the Yale Courant and the Yale Literary Magazine, of which he became an editor. After his graduation from Yale, Lewis moved from job to job and from place to place in an effort to make ends meet, write fiction for publication, and chase away boredom. While working for newspapers and publishing houses (and for a time at the Carmel writers' colony), he developed a facility for turning out

shallow, popular stories that were purchased by a variety of magazines. At this time, he also earned money by selling plots to Jack London. Lewis's first published book was *Hike and the Aeroplane*, a Tom Swift-style potboiler that appeared in 1912 under the pseudonym Tom Graham. His first serious novel, *Our Mr. Wrenn: The Romantic Adventures of a Gentle Man*, appeared in 1914, followed by *The Trail of the Hawk: A Comedy of the Seriousness of Life* (1915) and *The Job: An American Novel* (1917). That same year also saw the publication of another potboiler, *The Innocents: A Story for Lovers*, an expanded version of a serial story that had originally appeared in *Woman's Home Companion*. *Free Air*, another refurbished serial story, was published in 1919. Each of Lewis's serious books -- *Our Mr. Wrenn*, *Trail of the Hawk*, and *The Job* -- demonstrated a steady development in skill and brought increasingly positive reviews, despite lackluster sales.<sup>[3]</sup>

## **Commercial Success**

As early as 1916, Lewis began taking notes for a realistic novel about small-town life. Work on that novel continued through the summer of 1920,

when he finally completed *Main Street* (published in October of that year). As biographer Mark Schorer has stated, the phenomenal success of *Main Street* "was the most sensational event in twentieth-century American publishing history."<sup>[4]</sup> Based on sales of his prior books, Lewis's most optimistic projection was a sale of 25,000 copies. In the first six months of 1921 alone, *Main Street* sold 180,000 copies, and within a few years sales were estimated at two million.<sup>[5]</sup>

## **Private Life**

Lewis married the writer Grace Livingstone Hegger, whom he met while working in New York City, on April 15, 1914.<sup>[6]</sup>

Lewis was known for giving strong characterization to modern working women and for his concern with race. Some of his most famous books were *Main Street* and *Babbitt*. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1926 — which he rejected — for *Arrowsmith*, a novel about an idealistic doctor. *Elmer Gantry* was the story of an opportunistic evangelist, if not an outright charlatan. It was banned in Boston and other U.S. cities; *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, *Kingsblood Royal*, and

*Cass Timberlane* all were banned in their turn. In his Nobel Prize lecture, he lamented that "in 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," and that America is "the most contradictory, the most depressing, the most stirring, of any land in the world today."

In 1928 he married journalist Dorothy Thompson and in 1930 their son Michael Lewis was born.

The restless Lewis traveled much, and in the 1920s would spend time with other great artists in the Montparnasse Quarter in Paris, France where he would be photographed by Man Ray. His last great work was *It Can't Happen Here*, a speculative novel about the election of a fascist U.S. President.

Alcohol played a dominant role in his life; he died of advanced alcoholism in Rome.

He created the fictional cities of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota and Zenith, Winnemac.

## **Quotations**

- "I love America, but I don't like it."
- "This is America - a town of a few thousand, in a region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves. The town is, in our tale, called 'Gopher Prairie, Minnesota'. But its Main Street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere."
- "When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross."
- "Advertising is a valuable economic factor because it is the cheapest way of selling goods, particularly if the goods are worthless."
- "Winter is not a season, it's an occupation."
- "There are two insults which no human will endure: the assertion that he hasn't a sense of humor, and the doubly impertinent assertion that he has never known trouble."
- "American professors like their literature clear and cold and pure and very dead."

## Timeline

- 1885 Born in Sauk Centre, Minnesota to Dr. Edwin J. Lewis and Emma Kermott Lewis.
- Father marries Isabel Warner in 1892.
- 1902 Attends Oberlin College in Ohio.
- 1903-1906 Attends Yale University, serves as editor of Literary Magazine, works on



cattleboats during two summers.

- 1906 Spends months doing odd jobs at Upton Sinclair's Helicon Hall (utopian community).
- 1906-1908 Works at temporary jobs, graduates Yale in 1908.
- 1908-1915 Travels U.S., works in New York publishing houses.
- 1912 *Hike and the Aeroplane* published (first book, a boy's adventure story).
- 1914 Marries Grace Hegger. *Our Mr. Wrenn* published.
- 1917 *The Job* and *The Innocents* published. Son, Wells, born.
- 1919 *Free Air* published.
- 1920 *Main Street* published, first major commercial success.
- 1922 *Babbitt*.
- 1925 *Arrowsmith*.
- 1926 *Mantrap*. Awarded Pulitzer Prize for *Arrowsmith* but refuses it. Father dies.
- 1927 *Elmer Gantry*.
- 1928 *The Man Who Knew Coolidge*. Divorces Grace Hegger, marries journalist Dorothy Thompson.
- 1929 *Dodsworth*.
- 1930 Son Michael born. Awarded Nobel Prize in Literature on November 5 (first American to be so honored).

- 1933 *Ann Vickers*
- 1934 *Work of Art*. Assists Sidney Howard in adapting *Dodsworth* to the stage.
- 1935 *It Can't Happen Here* and *Selected Stories*.
- 1936-1942 Writes several plays and acts in a few of them.
- 1938 *The Prodigal Parents*.
- 1940 *Bethel Merriday*. Teaches briefly at University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- 1942 Divorces Dorothy Thompson.
- 1943 *Gideon Planish*.
- 1944 Lt. Wells Lewis killed by sniper in Piedmont Valley, France (near Alsace-Lorraine) during WW II.
- 1945 *Cass Timberlane*.
- 1947 *Kingsblood Royal*.
- 1948
- 1949 *The God Seeker*.
- 1951 Dies in Rome of heart disease. He is buried in Greenwood Cemetery, MN. *World So Wide* published posthumously.

## References

1. ^ Schorer, M.: *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, pages 3-22. McGraw-Hill, 1961.
2. ^ *Ibid.*, pages 47-136.
3. ^ *Ibid.*, pages 139-264.

4. ^ *Ibid.*, page 268.
5. ^ *Ibid.*, pages 235, 263-69.
6. ^ *Ibid.*, page 215.

- Lingeman, Richard ed. *Sinclair Lewis: Main Street & Babbitt* (Library of America, 1992) ISBN 978-0-94045061-5
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- D. J. Dooley, *The Art of Sinclair Lewis*, 1967.
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- Martin Bucco, *Main Street: The Revolt of Carol Kennicott*, 1993.
- James M. Hutchisson, *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis, 1920-1930*, 1996.
- Glen A. Love, *Babbitt: An American Life*.
- Stephen R. Pastore, *Sinclair Lewis: A Descriptive Bibliography*, 1997.

SOURCE: <http://lilt.ilstu.edu/separry/lewis.html>

## External links

- Online collection of works
- Works by Sinclair Lewis at Project Gutenberg
- his vigorous and graphic art of description and his ability to create, with wit and humour, new types of characters.
- Sinclair Lewis Society
- Autobiography
- wbgu.org WBGU-PBS documentary about Sinclair Lewis
- Hutchisson, *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis, 1920-1930*, Penn State Press, 2001 ISBN 0-271-02123-3

### Books by Sinclair Lewis

*Hike and the Aeroplane* | *Our Mr. Wrenn* | *The Job* | *The Innocents* | *Free Air* | *Main Street* | *Babbitt* | *Arrowsmith* | *Mantrap* | *Elmer Gantry* | *The Man Who Knew Coolidge* | *Dodsworth* | *Ann Vickers* | *Work of Art* | *It Can't Happen Here* | *Selected Stories* | *The Prodigal Parents* | *Bethel Merriday* | *Gideon*

*Planish | Cass Timberlane |  
Kingsblood Royal | The God Seeker |  
World So Wide*

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