

SINCLAIR LEWIS



LEWIS, SINCLAIR (1886-1951), perhaps the greatest satirist of American business and the first U.S. author to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Born in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, the misfit son of a stern country doctor, young Lewis relished the gossip of traveling salesmen, the source of both the colorful oral style of his prose and his affection for and criticism of free enterprise.

After graduating from Yale in 1907, Lewis worked as a New York publicist, perfecting his craft in dozens of short stories for *The Saturday Evening Post* and a handful of apprentice novels parodying the fiction of **Horatio Alger**. But *Main Street* (1920) made



him a national sensation. This quixotic tale of an idealistic librarian defeated by the crass commercialism of a Midwestern village captured the postwar disillusionment of an entire generation.

A series of novels followed, in which Lewis mocked the rampant materialism of the twenties: *Babbitt* (1922), his masterpiece, deals with the midlife crisis of a complacent realtor,

whose name has become synonymous with mindless conformity; *Arrowsmith* (1925), for which Lewis was awarded but declined the Pulitzer Prize, depicts the conflict between science and hucksterism in medicine; *Elmer Gantry* (1927) attacks salesmanship and evangelism, while *Dodsworth* (1929), Lewis's most mature work, celebrates the regeneration of a retired automobile manufacturer.

These books earned Lewis the Nobel Prize in 1930. Although his subsequent career declined, he remained a prolific writer. Two of his later works, *It Can't Happen Here* (1935) and *Kingsblood Royal* (1947), were provocative bestsellers about Rotarian-style fascism and middle-class racism.

After his death, Lewis's reputation suffered a long eclipse, but the economic excesses of the eighties and nineties, prefigured so vividly in his best novels, caused many critics to rediscover the relevance of his satire. Other writers have noted the gap between the promise of American democracy and the reality of American consumerism, but few with more passion, wit, and insight than the Man from Main Street.

Anthony Di Renzo

FOR FURTHER READING



- ◆ Bucco, Martin, ed. *Critical Essays on Sinclair Lewis*. New York, 1986.
- ◆ Hutchisson, James M. *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis, 1920-1930*. University Park, 1996.
- ◆ Schorer, Mark. *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*. New York, 1961.