
REVIEWS

James M. Hutchisson, ed. *Sinclair Lewis: New Essays in Criticism*. Troy, NY: Whitston Publishing Company, 1997. 257p.

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A casual reader of this volume might well conclude that the most important book in the Lewis canon is not *Babbitt* or *Main Street*, but Mark Schorer's *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, published ten years after its subject's death.

Mark Schorer did not admire Lewis the writer nor like Lewis the man. One of the earliest (1961) of the new school of oversized literary biographies, Schorer's book seems to recall every hateful word Lewis ever spoke or wrote and to describe every disagreeable act. According to James M. Hutchisson and his fellow essayists, Schorer's training as a New Critic disqualified him to read Lewis' work competently, seeking in his novels a felicity of style and ingenuity of structure and missing altogether the cultural insights, particularly in matters of gender, that constitute his real claim to greatness. In other words, Schorer was guilty of two flaws that one would think unlikely to occur in the same critic: on the one hand a kind of rigid formalism that makes him blind to merits other than those that characterize modernists like Hemingway or Stein, and an illegitimate interest in the artist's personal life on the other.

Only in the last decade or so, the argument goes, has a new generation of scholars appeared, equipped by their study of feminism, New Historicism, or the theoretical constructs of Mikhail Bakhtin to appreciate Lewis' significance in the development of American literature and culture. Without necessarily accepting this version of literary history (Schorer's book is slightly more judicious than it sounds, and Lewis' best work has continued to be read and well regarded since it first appeared), readers will find much in Hutchisson's collection to support the contention that post-modern approaches do indeed shed new light on the novels.

Most of the thirteen essays that make up most of the book are written from such perspectives. Together, they make a strong case for Lewis' enduring value as an interpreter and critic of American culture. Clare Virginia Eby's piece on marriage in three of Lewis' novels, for example, suggests the seriousness with which he analyzes this most critical of institutions in its distinctively American forms. Similarly, in an essay entitled "Gopher Prairie or Prairie Style? Wright and

Wharton Help Dodsworth Find His Way Home,” James Williams shows that Lewis was as serious a student of the American landscape and the ways in which men and women might live and work in it as Edith Wharton or Frank Lloyd Wright. All three of them, Williams points out, grappled early on with the opportunities and difficulties the automobile and the suburb presented to Americans, especially members of the new urban middle class.

In “Mark Schorer, Dialogic Discourse, and *It Can't Happen Here*,” Robert L. McLaughlin uses Bakhtin to account for a phenomenon he thinks Schorer missed: Lewis’ ability to mimic a variety of forms of discourse to show just how close to fascism some American leaders in the 1930s seemed prepared to get and at the same time “provide the vocabulary, narratives, and languages” with which more democratic ideas of America might be expressed (36). Far from the incoherence Schorer found in the multiple voices of a Lewis novel, McLaughlin detects a keen understanding of the moral and political implications of the way people express themselves. Given this aspect of his work, it is quite appropriate that certain of Lewis’ coinages have become indispensable to American intellectual discourse: *Babbitt*, *Main Street*, *Elmer Gantry* — not unlike such phrases of George Orwell as *big brother*, *1984*, or *newspeak*.

Huchisson and his colleagues win their argument hands down: Sinclair Lewis was a much better writer than Schorer thought. That probably goes a long way to explain why his best work was so much admired when it appeared, why he attracted the attention of sharp critics like H.L. Mencken, won the Nobel Prize, and never really lost both a serious and popular audience.

The last two essays get into the biography itself, though necessarily less thoroughly than Schorer did. Martin Bucco in “Sinclair Lewis on Authorship,” seems to share some of Schorer’s distaste for Lewis the man. In summarizing the kind of advice, mostly rather banal, that Lewis offered to aspiring authors, Bucco provides a droll, but probably not unfair, assessment of Lewis’ place in American literature: at his best “a fabulist of the first order” (183), but probably less than great.

In “Can You Go Home Again? Sinclair Lewis: Main Street and Paris,” Roger Forseth discusses where some of Lewis’ troubled relations with his literary contemporaries began: in his inability or unwillingness to get along with the expatriate community around Gertrude Stein. Not surprisingly, the Americans in Paris did not always like each other very well, though many of them were able to share a dislike for “Red” Lewis. Given that Lewis and Hemingway, for example, had quite different, but perhaps equally valid, ideas about the novel, it does seem unfair that the admirers of the one wrote more eloquently than the defenders of the other.

The volume concludes with an extensive annotated bibliography by Sally E. Parry and Robert L. McLaughlin. The list covers the period from 1977 to 1996 and runs for nearly fifty pages — not exactly evidence of critical neglect. This volume, however, demonstrates that there are still vital things to be said about Sinclair Lewis' work and that he clearly belongs in that ever-growing pantheon of authors who deserve to be much better known. ✱