

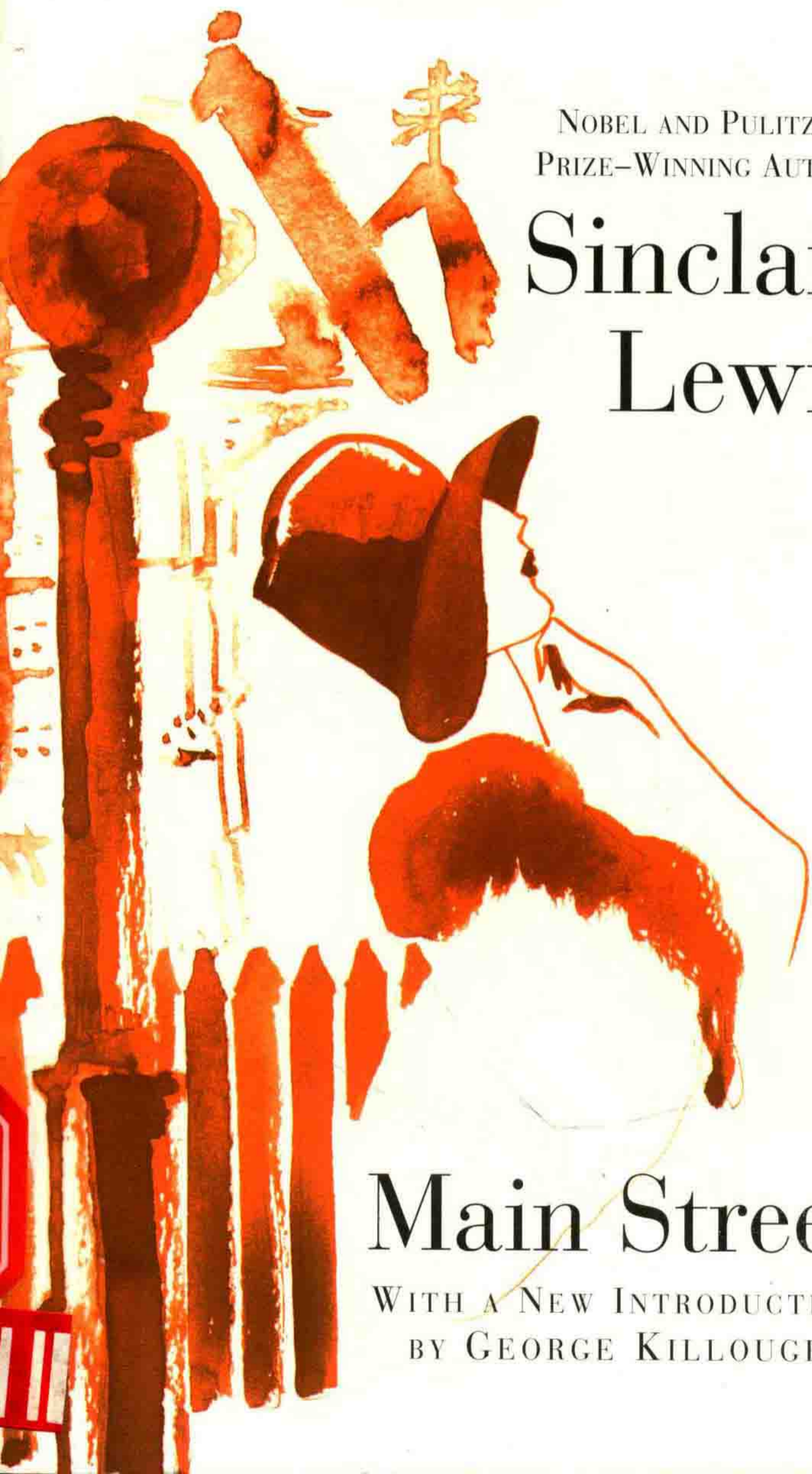
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PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR

Sinclair Lewis

Main Street

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION
BY GEORGE KILLOUGH



Sinclair Lewis



MAIN STREET

With a New Introduction by
George Killough



SIGNET CLASSICS

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Harry Sinclair Lewis, the son of a country doctor, was born in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, in 1885. After graduating from Yale in 1907, he went to New York, tried freelance work for a time, and then worked in a variety of editorial positions from the East Coast to California. *Main Street* (1920) was his first successful novel. In the decade that followed, Lewis published four other acclaimed novels of social criticism: *Babbitt* (1922); *Arrowsmith* (1925), for which he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize; *Elmer Gantry* (1927); and *Dodsworth* (1929). In 1930, he became the first American to win the Nobel Prize for literature. He continued to write novels and plays for another two decades. His last work, *World So Wide* (1951), appeared in serial form shortly before his death in Rome.

George Killough is a professor of English at the College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, Minnesota. A former president of the Sinclair Lewis Society, he has written several articles on Lewis as well as editing Lewis's *Minnesota Diary, 1942–46*, which was published in 2000 by the University of Idaho Press.

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INTRODUCTION

Main Street is a landmark book. First published in October 1920, it was an immediate success and became the bestselling American novel of the first quarter of the twentieth century. Nearly every novel-reading American read it. It reached even beyond the normal book market, appearing on household shelves that bore only a handful of volumes besides the Bible. It eventually became a defining vision of small-town culture that influenced the way observers understood America.

Having published six other books and many stories in magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, author Sinclair Lewis was already known to a few readers, but *Main Street* propelled him into the national spotlight and brought him international recognition. He went on to write four other blockbuster novels in the 1920s and then to garner the Nobel Prize for literature in 1930—the first American ever to receive this award.

Main Street tells the story of small-town America in a way that seized the imagination of the time. Readers were hungry for a realistic view, and *Main Street* gave it to them. The previous forty years had witnessed a migration from the country to the city, and so large numbers of people in cities as well as even larger numbers still living in rural communities knew small-town life well. Already familiar with idealizations of the village, they were ready for an exposé. Other artful writers had headed in this direction, for example Edgar Lee Masters in *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) and Sherwood Anderson in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), but without mass appeal. Working independently, Lewis leavened pathos with satire. He made his attack unmistakable, sometimes funny, and he kept his audience in mind, especially middle-class readers and women.

The book filters small-town life largely through the eyes of a woman, Carol Kennicott, with whom readers identify. As a young, educated librarian in St. Paul, her adult experience is urban until she marries a doctor who takes her home to Gopher Prairie, Minnesota. Her first glimpse, as she arrives on the train, reveals a planless community, with "no dignity in it nor any hope of greatness" (page 42). Hoping to make improvements, she finds herself as the story unfolds confronting a bulwark of intolerance, stale thinking, self-congratulation, and dullness. The shops are dirty and the shopkeepers inconsiderate. The arbiters of culture and society are mediocrities, sometimes mean-spirited—the matrons at the Jolly Seventeen bridge luncheons who complain about their Scandinavian servants, the men at Del Snafflin's barber-shop who gossip about Carol, the clingy relatives who believe every pious cliché ever invented.

Carol struggles to make reforms. She attempts to improve the work of the women's study club. She approaches the wealthiest man with a scheme to upgrade the town's architecture. She starts a drama club and puts on a play. She tries to persuade the merchant class to show more generosity to their servants. At every turn, her efforts meet frustration, and she loses confidence, the town ever more forcefully looming over her. We eventually see this young, hopeful spirit of altruism hiding in her big house, fearful and weeping.

Such a poignant picture gains resonance from the fact that Carol's struggle is portrayed as a feminist one. Lewis had already shown an interest in the feminist cause in his 1917 novel *The Job*, which is about Una Golden, a clerical worker in New York, who is exploited first by low-paying employers, then by marriage, until she gains her own footing in the business world and achieves success. Later, in 1933, Lewis published *Ann Vickers*, whose main character participates in the suffrage movement and becomes, after painful experience working in a prison, a major authority on prison reform. *Main Street* presents its woman protagonist, Carol Kennicott, who gave up her career for marriage, as a "woman with a working brain and no work" (page 101). Social taboos prevent a physician's wife from taking a job outside the home. She is painfully aware of the "darkness of the women," who, either because of drudgery or not enough

work to do, crave “a more conscious life” (pages 219–20). As in the case of Una Golden and Ann Vickers, Carol’s suffering is more touching because it derives in part from the fact that she is a woman.

Lewis had personal knowledge of his subject. He had grown up as a doctor’s son in Sauk Centre, a small town in central Minnesota near the fictional site of Gopher Prairie. He had a sense of how an urban woman might feel in such a place, for his stepmother came from a suburb of Chicago, and his wife, Grace, grew up in New York City. Grace was with him on visits home just enough to observe the dull conversation and the invasive scrutiny accorded outsiders. His stepmother had been completely transplanted to Sauk Centre. She arrived there from Chicago in her early forties, brought in as a replacement mother for the Lewis boys, who had lost theirs to tuberculosis, and lived there until she died about three decades later. As with Carol Kennicott, marriage to a doctor plucked her from a city and planted her permanently in a village. Beyond Lewis’s sense of the trials faced by his wife and stepmother, experience of his own factored in heavily. In fact, as he acknowledged later to his friend Charles Breasted, he was himself as much a prototype for Carol Kennicott as anyone else, for he struggled with romantic yearning and restlessness, just as she did, all his life.

Lewis was quite deliberate about portraying a small town in all its limitations. He advised his publisher to inform reviewers in advance that *Main Street* “is almost the first book which really pictures American small-town life.” As Richard Lingeman has shown in his biography *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street* (2002), there had been considerable risk in taking on such a goal. For several years, Lewis had made a handsome income from writing stories for the *Saturday Evening Post*, where sharp realism was not the purpose. George Horace Lorimer, the magazine’s editor, liked folksy humor and patriotic wholesomeness and opposed everything radical. Lewis was a quick writer and could turn out cute, Lorimer-approved stories, but the constraints, complicated by the high pay, hemmed him in. With *Main Street*, he broke free from a proven source of financial security to tell the real story.

So the book was destined from the start to be a critique

of small towns. So clear was the criticism that some readers objected to it. In the first five months after publication, the *Sauk Centre Herald* refused to mention the novel, as if it had offended the community. Lewis confessed to Charles Breasted later that his own father was not happy about it. In the *New York Times*, critic Catherine Beach Ely went so far in her defense of small towns as to call *Main Street* a "mud puddle of sordid tattle" (8 May 1921). Thinking perhaps too literally about the book, newspaper reporters in recent decades, visiting Sauk Centre in search of a Lewis feature story, have had a tendency to write about the town as that place that still needs to be reformed. People have a hard time thinking about the book in any other way. It was written as an exposé, and readers remember it as an exposé.

And yet it is much more. As a realistic story, it refuses to stay at the simple level with good guys on one side and bad guys on the other, or with grinding social and economic forces on one side and helpless victims on the other. It is not set up like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), which revealed the plight of workers in the meatpacking industry, or even like John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which traced the sufferings of Oklahoma farmers during the Great Depression. Granted, protagonist Carol Kennicott faces overwhelming forces, but she has considerable force of her own. She is an attractive, educated woman and the wife of a highly respected doctor. In small-town society, she is distinctly upper-class. She also has flaws. Though we tend to see Gopher Prairie mainly as she does, we are made to see as well that she is a dreamy outsider who wants to tell people what to do. Lewis makes sure we discover the limitations in her point of view as soon as she arrives in town. We feel her despair as she surveys the flimsiness and filth on her first walk along the main street, and then we look through the eyes of newcomer Bea Sorenson, a Scandinavian farm laborer, who likewise walks the main street for the first time but sees a shining metropolis.

We also observe the best qualities of rural practicality coalescing in Carol's physician husband, Will. A well-grounded man, he serves as a revealing foil to Carol, who seems impractical in comparison. Despite his typical Gopher Prairie flaws, such as literary shallowness and prejudice

against radicals and Germans, he loves Carol devotedly and takes heroic measures to care for patients in distress. One scene shows him amputating a crushed arm on a farm kitchen table, with inflammable ether as the only anesthetic available, and then returning home in a blizzard. Some readers admire Will more than they sympathize with Carol. According to Charles Breasted, Lewis acknowledged later that Will was created in tribute to his father, Dr. Lewis.

An additional complexity is that Carol has moments of joy. Will takes her hunting, and she finds in the glorious outdoors "dignity and greatness" (page 74). When the merchant-class townspeople adjourn to their lake cottages in the summer, Carol, still among them, feels happy and free. At times she even appreciates "the homely ease of village life" (page 79). Main Street is not without attractions.

The book complicates its theme of the-individual-versus-the-small-town further with an overlay of the-romantic-versus-the-practical. Husband Will represents the practical—dealing with things as they are. Carol represents the romantic. She yearns for a more attractive village, one that will fit the beautiful landscape. She wants mystery. She dreams of "the world of gaiety and adventure, of music and the integrity of bronze, of remembered mists from tropic isles and Paris nights and the walls of Baghdad, of industrial justice and a God who spake not in doggerel hymns" (page 128).

In allowing Carol to yearn for so much, Lewis took a risk that the dream of the book might be nullified by readers' perception of the dreamer. If Carol goes so far as to want tropic isles and Paris nights in Gopher Prairie, can she have credibility as a discerning observer? Or would all plausible human communities, no matter how humane, artful, and civilized, strike her the same way?

This question is part of the critical quandary that the complexities in the novel present. Not only do they enrich the text, but they also may seem to undercut it. If Will, who represents the best of Gopher Prairie, seems more heroic and practical than Carol, is her critique of small-town life no more than the whining of an ineffectual dreamer? Some readers have thought as much. Some have considered the book ambivalent or unresolved, sending mixed signals—partly criticism, partly resigned acceptance,

and partly admiration for the rustic virtues of Doc Kennicott and the place that nurtures him.

One need not go this far to make sense of the novel. Its critical edge is sharp, whether or not Carol Kennicott is a reliable critic-observer. Abundant evidence, exterior to Carol's mind, demonstrates the reductive and constrictive quality of small-town life: the shallow discussion at the Thanatopsis Club, the ferocious gossip, the mean-spirited treatment of Miles and Bea Bjornstam. In such an atmosphere, a person who does not dream of improvement lacks an essential element of soul. That Carol, who may want too much, is the book's main dreamer does not remove the need to dream. And since this is the biggest need, readers' sympathies stay for the most part with her. We hope with her that the world will open richer possibilities than her surroundings seem to allow.

There are abundant reasons to like her. She starts the story with such youthful expectancy, wanting to be a helper to the world. In Gopher Prairie she makes friends with outcasts such as Miles and Bea Bjornstam. She even tries to be kind to the wicked gossip Mrs. Bogart. Lewis worked diligently to make Carol attractive to readers and to keep the story realistic at the same time. He rejected novelist friend James Branch Cabell's advice to involve Carol in an adulterous affair, thinking this would not fit her character. Adultery would not have endeared her to the mass of readers in 1920.

James M. Hutchisson in *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis 1920-1930* (1996) has shown how revisions in early drafts of the novel helped to make Carol more sympathetic. Lewis excised passages in which she seemed abrasive toward villagers, and he made changes to allow her to gain some fulfillment from motherhood and to seem capable of growth. The record of revisions shows he deleted passages satirizing the village as well, especially elements not mediated through Carol's point of view. Lewis tried hard to avoid oversimplification, and in so doing, he achieved a credible balance between a flawed but sympathetic observer-critic and a realistically flawed small town.

The complexities of the book reflect the complexity in Lewis's relationship with Sauk Centre. He understood the town's limitations and looked forward to improvements.

Far from hating the place, he was glad to have grown up there. In 1931 he published in the Sauk Centre High School yearbook a tribute for its fiftieth anniversary, titled "The Long Arm of the Small Town." He wrote, "It was a good time, a good place, and a good preparation for life."

The diary he kept as a teenager, which resides in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale and has never been published, gives no hints that this young man will grow up to write a major indictment of small towns. Granted, it shows aspirations for adventure in the big world beyond, especially the desire to go to Harvard or Yale, and there are adolescent ups and downs. Also, during the summer of 1905, when Lewis was home from Yale, there are complaints about boredom, and he dreams up the idea of the Village Virus, which is the seed from which *Main Street* will later sprout. But the tone throughout is regularly hopeful, not critical or contemptuous. Thousands of American teenagers have made a much bigger fuss about living in nowheresville than Lewis did in this diary, which contains little direct criticism of Sauk Centre.

Throughout his life, he made visits to Sauk Centre to keep in touch with family and friends. In his late fifties, he returned to Minnesota to try to establish a home there so as to make a more permanent connection with his roots. He saw himself, not as an outsider, but as someone who was glad to have rural Minnesota flowing in his veins.

Like Carol Kennicott, Lewis was a romantic who grappled with the hard facts of life. In introducing her at the beginning of the novel, he notes that the heroic pioneer days are over, and so is the time of Camelot, and therefore "a rebellious girl is the spirit of that bewildered empire called the American Middlewest" (page 1). As a native of the place, he was fully as much the spirit of that bewildered empire, and in rebellion like her. His criticism has the quality of one who belongs. His satirical humor is not too far removed from the humor of homegrown gossip, only with a different target. Just as teenage boys and Carol's in-laws find her unusual ways amusing, so Lewis finds *them* amusing. Lewis himself was the spirit of small-town America as much as he was its critic.

That he first discovered in Sauk Centre the negative side of small-town life is easy to picture. Harder to picture is

that Sauk Centre stimulated his romantic aspirations as well. This is because commentators have viewed his home through the critical lens of the novel. The town actually has attractive qualities. It lies, for example, at the lower end of a long, beautiful lake, and had in Lewis's youth vivid evidence of an exotic old-world culture, rich in learning and committed to extraordinary architecture. Stearns County, Minnesota, had a high density of German Catholic settlers in the late nineteenth century, all radiating around two German Benedictine foundations, St. John's Abbey and St. Benedict's Convent, which were both on the Great Northern rail line between Sauk Centre and the county seat St. Cloud. St. John's had the second-oldest private college in the state and a brick church with twin 150-foot spires. Many faculty members had received their education in Europe.

The Protestant Lewis took a special interest in German Catholic culture. As his teenage diary shows, he attended mass and considered becoming Catholic. With a friend he made arrangements for tutoring in German from the German priest in Sauk Centre, whose knowledge of several languages and familiarity with Vatican disputation impressed him. He visited the magnificent churches that German Catholics had recently built in neighboring towns, the brick one in Melrose large enough to seat a thousand and with twin 130-foot onion-dome towers, the one in Meire Grove having a 156-foot spire visible in Sauk Centre, eight miles away. Lewis's diary shows him climbing into the steeple in Meire Grove, observing the stained glass, and idealizing this hamlet with its brick houses and neat gardens, where everyone spoke German, and where the heart of the church breathed mystery and romance.

So the Sauk Centre environs provided Lewis not only with evidence of Middlewestern drabness and mediocrity but also with suggestions of old-world magnificence. Of course, elegant churches and fine education could not appear in the book, which was about "Main Streets everywhere," as the headnote says, not just about Lewis's place of birth. And the book was deliberately exposing how hard it was for people with cultural and altruistic aspirations to live in American small towns. If Gopher Prairie had been a quaint European village transplanted to Minnesota, Carol Kennicott would not have seemed so bereft of culture.

Moreover, Lewis had seen enough immigrant farm life to know it was not all stained-glass windows. His portrayal of the Swedish father from whom the artistic young Erik Valborg wants to escape suggests that farming could roughen the mind as well as the body.

Still, Lewis's experience had given him reason to hope. If transplanted German Catholics could come so close to expressing the soul of medieval Europe in a beautiful material way, why could not Midwestern villages express the soul of America equally well? Why must the great North American continent and the great new American democratic experiment produce a daily life no more fulfilling than Jolly Seventeen bridge luncheons and the chatter in Del Snafflin's barbershop? The stunning spires of Stearns County had shown the young Lewis that human communities have greater potential, and that is why his and Carol Kennicott's protest spoke so directly and why they both kept hope alive.

—George Killough

