

Harry Sinclair Lewis was born in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, on Feb. 7, 1885, the youngest of three brothers. Harry was a strange-looking kid, with red hair and very bad skin. He didn't apply himself to his schoolwork and was indifferent about his grades, which were near the bottom of the class.

Very early on, he started to write and kept a journal. He was always able to concentrate and do two things at once and one of those things was always reading. Harry soon finished all his father's books and then sought out the public library. A town legend arose that he had read every book on its shelves by the time he went to college. He developed a precocious vocabulary. Boys at his schools taunted him, saying he must have swallowed the whole dictionary. He was something of a know-it-all. In his high school annual he wrote a tribute to Sauk Centre called "The Long Arm of the Small Town." It ends, "It was a good time, and a good place for a good preparation for life."

In 1902 he entered Oberlin Academy but soon dropped out and moved to Yale. His pet expression at the Academy was, "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise." His career at Yale was undistinguished, except for his contributions to the Yale Literary Magazine. He was an outsider from the beginning, and a bit of an aloof student. Once he turned to his editor and said, "Say, what is this Tap Day anyway?" Of course, Tap Day was the day juniors were chosen by the secret societies that dominated the social structure.

He dropped out of Yale in October of 1906 and went to Helicon Hall. The socialist commune had been built from proceeds from "The Jungle." Upton Sinclair would give Lewis a 3-hour lecture on socialism and then send him off to do battle with the mansion's massive furnace. There were rumors of free love and communism at Helicon Hall. Arson was suspected when it burnt to the ground in March of 1907.

Harry returned to school and received his M.A. in 1908. He was voted most eccentric of his class.

After college, Lewis worked as a journalist and a freelance writer in New York. He joined the Socialist Party in early 1911. In Greenwich Village, he associated with such radicals as John Reed, a close friend of Vladimir Lenin. At that time, Villagers still believed in social action as a means of making a better world. Lewis was a part of this crowd, and at the same time he was an outsider. Feminism, marriage reform and socialism were the causes that engaged him. In 1910-1911, when his socialist flame burned brightest, he wrote socially conscious fiction for radical publications like *The Coming Nation*.

By 1914, he worked all day as an editor for the George H. Doran Publishing Company, and all evening trying to write novels. That year, he married Grace Livingston Hegger, an editor at *Vogue*. Their son, Wells, was named after the famous British writer H.G. Wells. Lewis wasn't around a lot during his first marriage. He liked to travel and needed the stimulus of new people.

By 1921, he had already published 6 novels. The most interesting of these was “The Job,” which took on the pseudo-religions of the day, like the self-help craze, and helped sharpen the author’s budding satirical skills.

Lewis gained fame with “Main Street,” a study of idealism and reality in a narrow-minded small town. This was a radical new portrait of small town America, a far cry from the romantic pictures of open and democratic communities. The protagonist is Carol, an emancipated woman in conflict with the conformity of Gopher Prairie. She is part of what Lewis called the “social crusade,” which seeks the liberation of women and all oppressed peoples.

“Main Street” ultimately sold more than 2 million copies. It was incredibly popular with Middle America. And remember at that time America was still a small-town country. Half of its population lived in towns of 2,500 people or less. Lewis thought there was something suspect in “Main Street” appealing to so many people. He was now a bona fide celebrity. He and Gracie were invited to White House receptions and society dinners. Lewis once said, “We exist as public figures largely because we have given so much offense to so many people.”

F. Scott Fitzgerald called “Main Street” the “best American novel.” William Allen White sent Lewis an order for ten copies, saying he wished he could bribe the Kansas legislature to make the novel required reading in the schools. The Pulitzer Prize jury actually voted for it but the trustees overturned their decision and gave the Pulitzer instead to Edith Wharton for “The Age of Innocence.” Lewis felt this pressure to live up to the success of “Main Street” throughout his career.

Near the end of the book, Carol concludes: “I do not admit that Main Street is as beautiful as it should be! I do not admit that dish-washing is enough to satisfy all women!”

Lewis then wrote “Babbitt,” a merciless portrait of a Midwestern businessman. The hero, George F. Babbitt, yearns for freedom but in his world art and culture are in the service of business. All of Babbitt’s attempts to live a Bohemian life fail. “Babbittry” soon became synonymous with conformism and unthinking commercialism. Journalists quickly picked it up as a shorthand term.

The book was denounced from pulpits across the land. Nation’s Business, the official rag for Chambers of Commerce across the country, published a series of articles, cartoons and poetry with the theme “Dare to be a Babbitt.” In its kickoff editorial, the magazine demands: “Why should a man be condemned for running a real-estate business and taking “simple joy in the conveniences of his life and his home.”

Lewis was criticized for not offering a countering vision of what might redeem Babbitt and America. The book ultimately sold 240,000 copies but did not touch the hearts of Middle Americans the way “Main Street” did. Still, artistically it’s considered to be Lewis’s finest work.

His next novel, "Arrowsmith," is about a doctor caught between his idealism and commercialism. This time Lewis was awarded the Pulitzer but he turned it down. In his letter to the jury, he wrote, "Every compulsion is put upon writers to become safe, polite, obedient, and sterile." The famous director John Ford directed a film version of "Arrowsmith" in 1931.

"Elmer Gantry" was an attack on hypocritical ministers like Billy Sunday. Sunday, who thought radicals should be either deported or hanged, was the most famous evangelist of his day, regularly pulling in crowds of twenty thousand.

When Sunday brought his road show to New York, Lewis and Gracie went. They took the sawdust trail with other converts, declaring their allegiance to Christ, wailing and whooping along with the audience. Of course, Lewis wasn't really converted; he just wanted to see what it felt like. Lewis did this throughout his whole career. He didn't go out to make friends; the people he met were his material.

Lewis and Gracie divorced in 1925. In 1928 he married Dorothy Thompson and she gave birth to his second son, Michael. During their marriage, Lewis was drinking heavily and managed to offend most of his friends. Thompson, a columnist for the New York Herald Tribune, went on to become one of the most influential women in America.

Two years later, Lewis won the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first American to do so.

His last major novel, "It Can't Happen Here," portrayed a fascist coup in America. His writing habits always stayed the same: he wrote a book in a month and then did everything else until he was ready to start another one. But only occasionally did his novels capture large audiences.

In the 1930s he wrote and acted in political theater, successfully adapting "It Can't Happen Here" to the stage. He played the Stage Manager in one of the original runs of "Our Town."

J. Edgar Hoover kept an FBI file on him in those days. After his book "Kingsblood Royal" was published, Southern whites told Hoover the book was seditious – an incitement to revolution – but the FBI director took no action. He spoke out against the Soviet Union, citing its "tyranny and mechanical obedience."

Thompson tried to sober him up but he never took to it. Lewis was an alcoholic all his life. There's this great story where F. Scott Fitzgerald is trying to finish a collection of short stories called "Tales of the Jazz Age," and he's entertaining two visitors when the phone rings. He answers, comes back and says to his guests, "Aw, shucks. I've got to get some gin and lemons because Sinclair Lewis is coming over."

Lewis divorced Dorothy in 1942 for a much younger woman. In 1944, his son Wells was killed in combat in France. He was incredibly lonely in his later years. During the last period of his life he hired secretaries to play chess with him and keep him company.

Sinclair Lewis died alone in Rome on Jan. 10, 1951. He had written 22 novels. He was agnostic and didn't want a religious service. His ashes were buried in the family plot in Sauk Centre.

Frederick Manfred, a young Minnesota author Lewis had befriended, delivered the eulogy. He said, "Lewis was an honest man and a man who loved justice. Thus when he saw the vast, the awful, gulf that lay between the two knowledges, he was outraged, and a fire started in him that never went out, that harried him until he gave in to it and he had to take up pen and paper."

