

Main Street

by Sinclair Lewis

StoryLines Midwest Discussion Guide No. 4

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About the author

Son and grandson of country doctors, Harry Sinclair Lewis was born in 1885 in Sauk Centre, Minnesota. After half a dozen lesser novels, Lewis published *Main Street*, the first of his major works, in 1920. In 1930, Lewis became the first American to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature “for his vigorous and graphic art of description and his ability to create, with wit and humour, new types of characters.” Lewis’s post-Nobel Prize novels are generally held to be lesser works artistically. *Cass Timberlane: A Novel of Husbands and Wives* (1945), set in a city modeled on Duluth, is considered the best among these. Twice-divorced, Lewis traveled restlessly in later life. He died in Rome in 1951; his ashes are buried beside his parents in Sauk Centre, Minnesota.

Discussion questions

Main Street can be read as the story of a young woman coming to grips with the complexities and discontents of adulthood. In what sense does Carol Kennicott strike us as a modern woman, and in what ways do her concerns seem out of date? In what ways is she a product of her place and time?

Throughout the novel, Lewis takes aim at the hypocrisy and suffocating small-town attitudes of Gopher Prairie, often including Carol’s husband, Dr. Will Kennicott, in this critique. How should we judge Kennicott? What virtues must we take into account along with his flaws? In what ways does he seem the product of his place and time?

Novels are about *change*—characters make choices and live with consequences. As *Main Street* ends, Carol and Kennicott are reunited, their life going forward. How has Carol been transformed over the course of the novel, and what are we to make of this ending—is it a victory, a truce, or something else?

Additional readings

Frederick Lewis Allen. *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s*, 1931.
Sinclair Lewis. *Babbitt*, 1922.
Elmer Gantry, 1927
Harry E. Maule and Melville H. Cane, eds.
The Man from Main Street: Selected Essays and Other Writings, 1953.
Edgar Lee Masters. *Spoon River Anthology*, 1916.
Mark Schorer. *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, 1961.
Thornton Wilder. *Our Town*, 1938.

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The northern tier of America's Midwest was settled, for the most part, by German and Scandinavian farmers. By the end of the 1800s it was dotted with trading centers, towns like Sauk Centre, Minnesota, birthplace of Sinclair Lewis and the model for *Main Street's* Gopher Prairie. Published in 1920, on the eve of a decade of rapid social change, *Main Street* found a wide audience, its fans hungry to read Lewis's attack on provincial values as satire.

But Lewis himself considered the novel "a genuinely realistic picture of American life." Encouraged by the examples of Balzac and Dickens, and especially Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), he had set out to debunk the accepted view that small towns were strictly bastions of good Christian values. "Main Street" quickly entered the national vocabulary—standing for the narrow-mindedness of small towns—as Lewis's later novel, *Babbitt* (1922) would label the conformity of the American businessman.

For all its value as social commentary, *Main Street* is also the story of a young woman's struggle with the ambiguities and let-downs of adult life. A professional librarian in her mid-twenties, Carol Milford meets Dr. Will Kennicott on one of his rare visits to the Twin Cities. Kennicott is nearly a dozen years her senior, an established "country doctor." They're soon married, and Carol sets off for Gopher Prairie with him. "I never saw a town that had such up-and-coming people," he boasts, eager for her to love the place as he does. But as early as this train ride, Carol has the first shiver of the discontent that will haunt her throughout the novel.

Gopher Prairie itself proves something of a shock: "It was not only the unsparing unapologetic ugliness and the rigid straightness which overwhelmed her. It was the planlessness, the flimsy temporariness of the buildings, their faded unpleasant colors." And the house Kennicott so proudly brings her home to strikes her as airless and dingy, the heavy furniture like "a circle of elderly judges, condemning her to death by smothering." Yet, buoyed by her love for Kennicott, she's determined to make her marriage and her life in Gopher Prairie a success.

The town—or its prosperous class of citizens—embraces Carol as Dr. Kennicott's wife. But soon she's as put off by this cohort of her husband's friends as by the look of the buildings. Their politics unbendingly conservative, their social attitudes unenlightened, they seem resistant to the most harmless changes to their routines. Soon, too, she learns that she's seen as "affected" or "too good" for the locals. Carol is stung by this criticism, for she wants to be liked, she wants Kennicott to be proud of her—what has she done but try to inject a little life, a little fresh air into this tight community?

A memorable character, writes critic William Gass, is a "bright, human image," and, indeed, Carol Kennicott is a lasting achievement in twentieth-century American fiction. An outsider to Gopher Prairie, city-bred, she's high-spirited and idealistic—a would-be reformer. But she's also quick to find fault, flighty, given to crippling self-doubt. Carol's most indelible quality is her ambivalence—she's attracted then repulsed, she blames others then herself, breaks the earnest vows she has just made, believes herself superior, then craves nothing more than to belong. In this, Carol seems the embodiment of Lewis's own mixed feelings about the Midwest of his boyhood.

Though his sympathies are clearly with Carol, Lewis doesn't shield her from the consequences of her foolishness, and the novel thus gains a depth it might otherwise have lacked. Just when the argument seems one-sided, we're caught off guard by an opposing view—when, for instance, we find Kennicott redeemed by his delicacy as a surgeon and his absolute composure under fire.

Carol settles uneasily into her life, never ceasing to feel that she is "a woman with a working brain and no work." The Kennicotts have a son, and though Carol is devoted to him, she remains unsatisfied. Her marriage gradually sours. When a gentle boy appears in town, a would-be designer of clothes, Carol finds herself drawn to him for companionship. This relationship—not quite an affair—is suddenly cut short by Kennicott.

The boy flees, and Carol finally reaches the point where she, too, must leave Minnesota, going east to Washington, D.C., where she finds work in the war effort. It's then that a new maturity overtakes Carol. She begins to feel that she's "no longer one-half of a marriage but the whole of a human being." Eventually, Kennicott comes to her, begins a "second wooing," and later, in due time, they are reunited in Gopher Prairie.

The era depicted in *Main Street*—just before and during the First World War—was rife with upheaval: the labor movement, women's suffrage, the splintering of class distinctions, the specter of socialism. America was quickly becoming a national culture; the time was past when a small town could insulate itself from outside influence. We find Lewis reserving his sharpest barbs for Christians who fail at Christian charity, for unthinking boosterism, and for the habitual fear of the outsider, as when the town fathers turn rabid at the news that a National Nonpartisan League organizer has been run out of a nearby community.

Frequently, Lewis becomes the essayist. We hear him step back to deliver a scathing editorial, as when Carol reflects on why the "more intelligent" young people of towns like Gopher Prairie run off to the city:

It is an unimaginatively standardized background, a sluggishness of speech and manners, a rigid ruling of the spirit by the desire to appear respectable. It is contentment. . .the contentment of the quiet dead, who are scornful of the living for their restless walking. It is negation canonized as the one positive virtue. It is the prohibition of happiness. It is slavery self-sought and self-defended. It is dullness made God.

Eighty years after its publication, *Main Street* remains a masterwork of American fiction, its social criticism still pertinent, its story still engaging.