

The New York Times

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MAIN STREET. By Sinclair Lewis.
Harcourt, Bruce & Howe.

IT is the portrait of a town—typical, one of thousands of common, little American towns scattered all over the country, each with its own markings and idiosyncrasies, of course, but alike in essentials, alike as the average small town person, who is found quite as usually in the cities and the country as in the village or the towns, the common person, the common people, of whom there are so many. Nothing is so self-satisfied as this type, be it human or aggregate human. As one of them expresses it, "After all, Gopher Prairie standards are as reasonable to Gopher Prairie as Lake Shore Drive standards are to Chicago. And there's more Gopher Prairies than Chicagos, or Londons. * * *" There you have it. Gopher Prairie may be small in itself, but it can point with pride, and certainly will do so, to myriads like itself.

A remarkable book is this latest by Sinclair Lewis. A novel, yes, but so unusual as not to fall easily into a class. There is practically no plot, yet the book is absorbing. It is so much like life itself, so extraordinarily real. These people are actual folk, and there was never better dialogue written than their revealing talk. The book might have been cut without harm, possibly, for there is an infinite amount of detail, yet this very detail has its power, exerts its magic. The latter half is the more forcefully, clearly written, moves more soundly. In fact, one cannot shake off the impression that this book was begun long ago, when Mr. Lewis was but recently out of college, laid aside, and taken up lately, to be rewritten and reconstructed and finished. There is the sharp reaction of youth to so much of it, a personal note in the hatred Carol has for the people, the ways, the thoughts and the place of Gopher Prairie, a reaction and a note that savor of the agony, undimmed by intervening years, of a sensitive young creature coming from the free outlook and tolerant sympathies of a broader environment into such a prison atmosphere as that of this small Minnesota town. This impression that the book is partly by a college boy and partly by a man with many contacts with life and the world will not down; there are some poorly written pages, some jejune bits that add to it. Yet we would not wish to eliminate this youthful stand in the book. It belongs there.

As we have said, the book is a portrait of a town. It is also an amazing study of the girl Carol, the foil and critic of that town.

Carol is an alien. She comes of New England parentage, of a home that had its tone and color, and reached back to rich things that were lost. She had had a college training of a sort, some experience of Chicago, and she had been a librarian in St. Paul. She had known hopes and visions, a desire to transform the dull and the ugly into charm and beauty, but she had fallen into the routine of work, and the dream to go forth and to improve had faded. Then the man comes, a man she drifts into liking, into the belief of loving, the doctor of Gopher Prairie, "some live burg." as he and his townsmates never tire of saying.

Will Endicott is his name, and soon it becomes Carol's name. She marries and she goes with her husband to the burg he loves and admires. From that moment she and Gopher Prairie are at grips.

First it is the hopeless ugliness of Main Street that strikes at her, then the deadliness of the social life of the creators of this street, the leading citizens of the town. There is genius in Mr. Lewis's description of the party given in honor of the homecoming of the bride and groom. The awful stiffness of human beings to whom the joys of social intercourse are not alone unknown but distrusted, whose sole notion of entertainment consists in the performance of stunts.

And Carol, brave with youth's untriedness, foolish with that youth, not any too expert herself, starts to make Gopher Prairie beautiful and amusing, to give it some notion of the world outside its own limits, to bring in art and literature and landscape gardening.

And in the end she is allowed to plant a few geraniums in a vacant lot. But a great deal comes in between.

She begins by trying to make Will like poetry. He is very nice about it. Listens sheltered behind his cigar, says "yes, great stuff, shoot," and asserts that he likes poetry—"James Whitcomb Riley and some of Longfellow." But it won't do, and when he tells her, after she has read Kipling with a great deal of emphasis, that she can "elocute just about as good as Ella Stowbody," she bangs the book down and they go to the movies.

Of course, it won't do. No individual could conquer a town like Gopher Prairie. No alien can bring sweetness and light where it is not

Main Street

wanted or missed. Carol is a silly girl. She does not know as much as she thinks she does, she misses doing what good she might because she cannot see the good there is. But she is sensitive, proud and keen. She is alive, and she moves in a different strata from the townspeople of the prairie town. She has no business there, and yet she is caught there, by the fact of her marriage, by the later fact of her child. She gives up, she sinks almost to coma—and then, for a while she is awakened, yanked back to the feeling of her own individual existence and reality by falling rather feebly in love with the tailor, the one man who has some vision, some despair to match her own.

It doesn't last. But it leads to a wonderful interview between wife and husband, a few pages that are as good as anything can be. There are more such pages in this book than in any other book we have read this year, perhaps in several years, written by an American

In a way Carol is beaten. But she isn't lost. She runs away, goes to Washington and war work, and finally comes back. Gopher Prairie is the same. Insufferably conceited, insufferably ugly, mediocre, common, drab, though it has made money out of the war. And it has no more use for Carol than it ever had. But she retains her vision and her hope, and she has two children to fight for. And it is they who will win. She points out her small daughter to Will, saying:

Do you see that object on the pillow? Do you know what that is? It's a bomb to blow up smugness. If you Tories were wise you wouldn't arrest anarchists; you'd arrest all these children while they're asleep in their cribs. Think what that baby will see and meddle in before she dies in the year 2000!

But Gopher Prairie sits tight, ignoring its dangerous babies.

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