

ARTS & LETTERS

**SINCLAIR LEWIS:
*Rebel from Main Street.***

By Richard Lingeman. Random House.
659 pp. \$35

In 1960, at a writers' luncheon at Trader Vic's in San Francisco, I said to Mark Schorer that, having spent so many years working on his monumental biography of Sinclair Lewis (1885–1951), he must have grown very fond of his subject. "On the contrary," he replied. "I like him less every day, every week, every month, and every year."

It's hardly the attitude of an objective biographer, as Schorer's damning *Sinclair Lewis* (1963) proves. Now Lingeman, a senior editor at the *Nation* who wrote a two-volume biography of Theodore Dreiser, helps to set the record straight. Every bit as detailed and as thoroughly researched as the Schorer tome, Lingeman's book provides a far more empathetic picture of the talented, tortured, and ultimately tragic creator of *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), *Elmer Gantry* (1927), and many other novels.

Since the publication of this eminently readable biography, I have found myself frequently consulted on the sage of Sauk Centre—for I am surely the only person still alive who lived with Sinclair Lewis. He was the principal figure in my life during five months of 1947, and his presence stays with me vividly to this day.

At age 25, while visiting my parents in Santa Barbara, California, I read that Lewis was in town for a few weeks. I sent a note asking to meet him. Probably the most famous and wealthiest novelist in the world, he was also America's first winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, so I was surprised and elated when he invited me to tea. He asked to read the first 75 pages of the novel I was working on, and the next day he advised me to throw away the first 72 of them. He asked for the next 75, called at 2 A.M. to say he liked them, and offered me a job as secretary-companion at his home in Massachusetts "as soon as you learn how to play chess."

At 62, he was tall and fiercely ugly, quite the ugliest person I had ever seen, with a scarlet

face ravaged and pocked and cratered from operations for skin cancer. Yet when he started to talk, one no longer was aware of a face, but only of a powerful personality and a towering imagination and great boyish enthusiasm. Lingeman quotes John Hersey's remark that when Lewis spoke, "his face suddenly turned on, like a delicate brilliant lamp."

I had a fantastic run as Lewis's secretary, but it ended abruptly when I brought my 26-year-old girlfriend on the scene. The aging novelist fell in love, fired me, and pursued this young lady—and his youth—even to Europe.

During those months, those exhilarating months, I did an oil painting of Lewis. He refused to look at it, but it turned out well by my lights, and it now hangs at the University of Texas at Austin. Over my desk I keep a large copy, which chides me daily—I hear him snarl, not unkindly, "You can write better than *that!*" Lingeman ends his wonderful biography in italics: "*He really cared.*"

Ernest Hemingway was once quoted as saying, in his usual vicious way, "Sinclair Lewis doesn't matter." But I suspect that in a hundred years, when people want to know what America in the first half of the 20th century was all about, they will turn not to Hemingway's jaded expatriates but to Carol Kennicott, George Babbitt, Samuel Dodsworth, Martin Arrowsmith, and Elmer Gantry.

—BARNABY CONRAD

**A JACQUES BARZUN READER:
*Selections from His Works.***

Edited by Michael Murray. HarperCollins.
615 pp. \$29.95

Why should a book as enthralling as this leave a reader dismayed? Because it prompts a sobering question: Where are today's Jacques Barzuns, heirs to the nonagenarian cultural critic's range, wit, style, and appeal? The original was born in France in 1907 and came to the United States in 1920. He graduated from Columbia College in 1927 and stayed on at the university for almost 50 years—to earn degrees, join the history faculty, be professor, dean, and