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

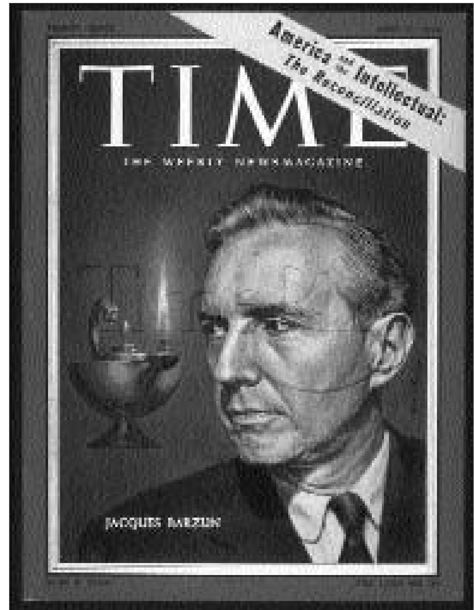
Why should a book as enthralling as this leave a reader dismayed? Because it prompts a sobering question: Where are today's Jacques Barzuns, heirs to the nonagenarian cultural critic's range, wit, style, and appeal? The original was born in France in 1907 and came to the United States in 1920. He graduated 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

provost, shape the field of cultural history, and become an ornament to the intellectual life of the nation. He edited the first of his 35 books as a college senior, and published in 2000 the most recent, the best-selling *From Dawn to Decadence*, an 800-page *summa* of his beliefs about the course (now downward) of Western cultural life since 1500.

The perfect epigraph to this selection of writings from Barzun's long career comes from the man himself: "The finest achievement of human society and its rarest pleasure is Conversation." The intent of a critic, "beyond that of saying what he thinks," is in effect to initiate a conversation, "to make two thoughts grow where only one grew before." Barzun's lifelong project has been to elucidate "the critical judgments that lead to truth." He writes with great authority, out of an ordered set of reflections, conclusions, and convictions, yet he always seems open to challenge. But the challenger had better be prepared: If we are to arrive at the truth, "it is always important to think straight, which means keeping words as strict as possible."

The genre of cultural history Barzun helped to create embraces just about everything that, in editor Murray's words, "might help to depict the substance, the feel, the import of the past." The limits "are fixed by the breadth of the practitioner's knowledge, eloquence, and tact." And practitioners don't come more knowledgeable, eloquent, tactful—well, maybe more tactful—than Barzun. He made a field equal to his boundless curiosity: "Variety and complexity are but different names for possibility; and without possibility—freedom for the unplanned and indefinite—life becomes a savorless round of predictable acts." No topic is too large, no detail too negligible, to engage his attention. He wants to explain great swatches of history, and he's willing to pick at the smallest threads to do so.

Barzun renders judgments about topics that furrow the brow, such as art, science, democracy, pedagogy, and sex and sexuality (the latter an abidingly powerful force in literature, the former as routine as a plumber's manual), and topics about which everyone can breathe a little easier, such as crime fiction and baseball ("a kind of collective chess with arms and legs in full play under sunlight"). He writes, *inter* a humbling number of *alia*, about French vowels, Lincoln's astonishing prose, the James brothers (William and Henry, though he probably could have done Jesse and Frank too), Oscar Wilde ("one of *the* critics thanks to whose exertions Western art is unique in being an object not only of enjoyment but also of self-aware contemplation"), the first railroads, life in Paris in 1830, the true mission of universities and the proper responsibilities of their administrators (he is proud of having revised, while in office at Columbia, a series of forms—not Platonic forms, just plain old paper forms of the sort that are the thin life's blood of university routine), and critics who don't understand their place ("criticism, however lofty, profound, subtle, and divinatory, remains exposition and analysis; it is referential and argumentative; it is not original, creative, independent of a text or a theory"). Time and again, he challenges the received view that rests on false or second-hand information. The message is plain: Return to the primary evidence, see it with fresh eyes, and report what you have seen, no matter the consequences.



Barzun made the cover of* Time *in 1956.

Barzun once wrote that George Bernard Shaw "remains the only model we have of what the citizen of a democracy should be: an informed participant in all the things we deem important to society and the individual." Ease your chair over a bit, Shaw. Barzun has earned a seat in your high row.

—James Morris