

## This Day in History... February 7, 1885

# Happy Birthday Sinclair Lewis

Harry Sinclair Lewis was born on February 7, 1885, in Sauk Centre, Minnesota.

The third and youngest son of a doctor, Lewis enjoyed reading and keeping a diary as a child. When he was 13, Lewis ran away from home to become a drummer boy in the Spanish-American War but his father found him and made him return.

Lewis attended Oberlin Academy and later Yale University. He took a break from his studies at Yale to work at Upton Sinclair's Helicon Home Colony in New Jersey and travel to Panama. Lewis eventually returned to Yale, where he first published his writing in the *Yale Courant* and *Yale Literary Magazine*, where he also worked as an editor before graduating in 1908.

Following his graduation, Lewis worked a variety of jobs but continued to write and publish his works. During this time he wrote a number of popular stories that appeared in magazines. He also sold some plot ideas to fellow writer Jack London.



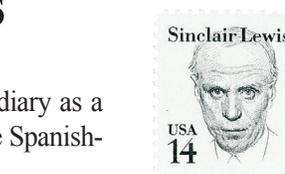
This stamp was issued a day before London's 112th birthday.

Lewis published his first book, *Hike and the Aeroplane*, in 1912 under the pseudonym Tom Graham. Two years later he published his first serious novel, *Our Mr. Wrenn: The Romantic Adventures of a Gentle Man*. In the coming years, he published *The Trail of the Hawk: A Comedy of the Seriousness of Life* and *The Job*. He also wrote serialized stories for magazines that were later expanded into book form – *The Innocents: A Story for Lovers* and *Free Air*.

During this period Lewis also moved to Washington, DC, to devote his full attention to writing. He spent several years working on a realistic novel about small-town life that eventually became *Main Street*. Published in 1920, *Main Street* was Lewis's first major commercial success. It sold 180,000 copies in the first six months and about two million in the first few years. According to Lewis's biographer, *Main Street* "was the most sensational event in twentieth-century American publishing history."

Lewis followed this success with *Babbitt* and *Arrowsmith*. *Arrowsmith* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize (which Lewis declined) and made into a movie in 1931 by John Ford. That movie was then nominated for four Academy Awards. In 1927 Lewis published the controversial novel *Elmer Gantry*, about an unethical minister. It was banned in some cities and denounced by many religions later. Though several years later it was also made into a movie that earned Burt Lancaster a Best Oscar award.

In 1929 Lewis published *Dodsworth*. Like many of his other popular works, this too was adopted for other media – first in 1934 for a Broadway play and then in 1936 for a movie. That movie was later selected for preservation on the National Film Registry.



Stamp issued for Lewis's 100th birthday.



Ford's 1931 film adaptation of *Arrowsmith* earned four Academy Award nominations and was a financial and critical success.



Sinclair's writings have been adapted for film and television more than 35 times over the years.

Also during this era, Lewis wrote a number of short stories for magazines. Among those stories was "Little Bear Bongo," which first appeared in *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Walt Disney Studios acquired the rights and made it into a cartoon short narrated by Dinah Shore as part of its 1947 *Fun and Fancy Free*.

Perhaps one of Lewis's greatest honors came in 1930 when he won the Nobel Prize in Literature. He was the first American writer to ever receive the award. After that he wrote eleven more novels, the most successful being *It Can't Happen Here*. Also during this period Lewis briefly taught a class at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, toured the country giving debate-lectures with Lewis Browne, wrote a screenplay, and purchased a farm.

Lewis died on January 10, 1951. Concerned with social issues including sexism, racism, and poverty, Lewis is remembered as the conscience of his generation. Lewis was a prominent member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

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