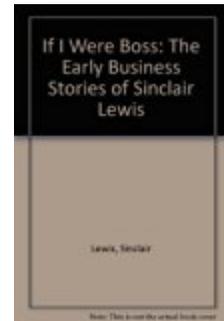


H-Net Reviews

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Sinclair Lewis. *If I Were Boss: The Early Business Stories of Sinclair Lewis*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997. xxxvii + 363 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8093-2139-1; \$39.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-2138-4.

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Sinclair Lewis Before <cite>Babbitt</cite>

In the twentieth century, as in the nineteenth, the voices that celebrate business values in the United States have been challenged by voices of doubt and dissent. No one denies that business has shaped American life in vital ways. The questions that interest the critics are questions of value. How does the United States measure up as a culture? What kind of people does it produce? What quality of life does it offer? Has business exercised not merely a shaping but a warping influence?

These questions were addressed with special fervor in the work of a tall, skinny redhead who became, in 1930, the first American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Sinclair Lewis was born in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, in 1885, the son of a country doctor. In the twelve years after he graduated from Yale in 1907, Lewis traveled restlessly around the United States; worked briefly in a number of editorial, advertising, and public relations positions; and published four novels, none of them now remembered. Then, in 1920, he published *Main Street*, followed in 1922 by *Babbitt*. These books remain essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the cultural history of the United States in the twentieth century.

To mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the publication of *Babbitt*, the Southern Illinois University Press has rescued fifteen of the over sixty short stories that Lewis published in American popular magazines between October 1915 and May 1921. No one would claim that these stories add to the world's supply of great literature, yet Lewis's early work contains much that will interest the

literary or cultural historian. In these stories, as Lewis's biographer Mark Schorer observes, Lewis "investigates the world of George F. Babbitt and Elmer Gantry, the world of high pressure salesmanship, and he exploits his knowledge of New Thought, Chautauqua, quack religion, the dressmaking business, the automobile industry, patent medicine, trade publications, poetry for businessmen, the whole world of boosting and commercial razzmatazz and the fast buck, all presented in a raucous tone of satiric exposure."^[1]

The stories collected in *If I Were Boss* throw light not only on Lewis's development as an artist but also on the cultural scene that welcomed his work. Lewis's business stories appeared not in obscure literary quarterlies but in hugely popular periodicals such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *American Magazine*, and *Metropolitan Magazine*. The *Post*, especially, under its legendary editor George H. Lorimer, encouraged the work of the young man who eventually produced some of the most scathing satire ever to take aim at American business.

As Anthony Di Renzo, a teacher of professional writing and American business history at Ithaca College, notes in his useful introduction, Lorimer had revitalized the *Post* partly through successful serializations of business novels such as Harold Frederic's *The Market-Place* (1899), Frank Norris's *The Octopus* (1900) and *The Pit* (1901), and Lorimer's own *Letters of a Self-Made Merchant to His Son* (1902). Business, Lorimer felt, dominated the lives of most Americans, yet the nation's novelists rarely

dealt with it. Most writers preferred romance, whereas Lorimer felt that in fiction “the struggle for existence is the loaf, love or sex is the frosting on the cake.”[2]

Lorimer liked Lewis’s early business stories, encouraged him to submit frequently to the *Post*, and paid him well. Lewis responded with stories that smoothly blended satire, sentiment, and business instruction. The satire is pointed, but not savage. A reader who knows the novels that made Lewis famous will wonder to what extent Lewis pulled his punches in deference to the requirements of writing for a magazine that sought to celebrate Main Street, not to bury it. Mr. Di Renzo reports that after Lewis published *Main Street*, “rumors circulated that Lorimer had refused to serialize the novel, had privately advised Harcourt to shelve the manuscript, and had recommended that the Pulitzer Committee deny Lewis the prize. These charges proved insubstantial, but they point to an actual rift—a rift that became a chasm with the publication of *Babbitt*” (p. xxxi).

Of special interest in this collection are four stories that involve a dazzling con man named Lancelot Todd, whom Lewis introduces, in a story titled “Snappy Display,” with words that show the writer hitting his stride as a satirist: “Lancelot is an artist of advertising; a compound of punch, power, pep, and purest rot serene. You have doubtless heard his addresses, ‘Upward and Upward,’ and ‘The Smash and Lash that put the Zing! in Advertising,’... You have noticed in editorials in syndicated house-organs, and his signed advertisements of everything from cocaine to arts-and-grafts coffins. You may even own one of his books; perhaps ‘Fishin’ for Effishincy’ or ‘Are You Toting Old Man Sloth on Your Shoulders?’... (Lancelot) joined every possible organization, from the Jolly Bowlers to The Young Men’s Wesleyan Circle, and made a business of being familiar and agreeable with every member who had an income of more than four

thousand dollars a year. He was so successful that he was no longer dishonest in money matters.... Scarcely at all” (pp. 168-70).

Lewis wrote eight stories in which Todd figures as the central character. These stories appeared not in the *Saturday Evening Post* but in *Metropolitan Magazine* (seven of the eight) and in *Popular Magazine*. Mr. Di Renzo feels that the move from the *Post* allowed Lewis to sharpen his satire. “Sophisticated and irrelevant, *Metropolitan* targeted the urban smart set and displayed a Menckonian contempt for the entrepreneurial middle-class values of the *Post*. Lewis had gone over to the enemy, who relished his jugular humor and wicked caricature” (pp. xxvi-vii). Even so, the stories involving Todd that appear in this collection show signs of commercial pressure. In no story is the trickster allowed to triumph; every story ends with a comeuppance.

None of the fifteen stories collected in *If I Were Boss* have appeared in print since their original publication. This volume makes possible a better understanding of Lewis’s development as an artist and demonstrates the ambivalent feelings aroused by American business in the early years of the twentieth century. Mr. Di Renzo’s Introduction shows a firm grasp of the commercial culture that inspired the stories and the literary culture in which the stories appeared.

[1]. Schorer, Mark, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (New York: McGraw, 1961), p. 239.

[2]. Quoted in Baida, Peter, *Poor Richard’s Legacy: American Business Values from Benjamin Franklin to Donald Trump* (New York: William Morrow, 1990), p. 242.

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