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## *Thirty Years of Minnesota Fiction*

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MINNESOTA is not usually thought of as a writing state. In comparison with Indiana, where scribbling is almost congenital, or New York, for generations the mecca of artists of all kinds, its literary output seems negligible. And yet Minnesota writers have produced a surprising amount of fiction of sound merit. From 1920, the date of *Main Street*, to 1949, the date of *The God-Seeker*, probably a hundred novels with Minnesota locales have appeared in the form of detective stories, satires, realistic portrayals of manners, and historical fiction. The successful authors of the period between wars—figures like Grace Flandrau, Darragh Aldrich, Margaret Culkin Banning, Martha Ostenso, James Gray, Maud Hart Lovelace, and William J. McNally—have been reinforced by such recent aspirants to literary fame as Ann Chidester, Mabel Seeley, Norman Katkov, Herbert Krause, and Neil Boardman. In the past decade novels about Minnesota and novelists hailing from Minnesota have equally captured national attention. Feike Feikema, whose stories spill over the state line into Iowa and South Dakota, has long been a resident of Minneapolis. Thomas Heggen, whose *Mister Roberts* won acclaim both as a novel and as a Broadway play, was a graduate of the University of Minnesota, as is Max Shulman, whose exaggerated and somewhat sophomoric brand of humor won him a national reputation. Nor should it be forgotten that Sinclair Lewis, whose novels make a convenient demarcation for the period under discussion, was the first American writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature.

Although the year 1920 is an appropriate date at which to begin a survey of modern Minnesota fiction, it should not be supposed that novels with a Minnesota locale failed to appear before that time. As a matter of fact, a bibliography of fiction written about Minnesota in the nineteenth century would be surprisingly long. One must go back as far as 1830 to

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find the first collection of short stories dealing with the state—William Joseph Snelling's *Tales of the Northwest*. Edward Eggleston, for nine years a resident of Minnesota, produced in his *Mystery of Metropolisville* an interesting picture of frontier manners and land speculation in the 1850's. Toward the end of the century such writers as H. H. Boyesen, Thomas Sharon, Franklyn Lee, and James Allan Ormar published books with Minnesota settings; and H. A. Foss and Tellef Grundysen wrote stories about the state in Norwegian which circulated widely among the recently arrived immigrants but which were slow to appear in translation. Yet the early books dealing with Minnesota were not conspicuous artistic successes. It remained for Sinclair Lewis to draw attention to the state in an original way and at the same time to influence much subsequent writing about the small town and its inhabitants.

Relatively few writers have chosen to recreate the Minnesota past in fiction. Even Lewis, the state's most famous author, waited until his sixty-fourth year to publish a historical novel about Minnesota—*The God-Seeker*. It is not difficult to compile a list of historic scenes and events in which the dramatic values of art seem inherent—for example, the Grand Portage fur-traders' rendezvous, the Sioux Massacre, the Hinckley fire, logging on the Rum and St. Croix rivers, the winter carnivals in St. Paul, the blizzard of 1873. But so far only Maud Hart Lovelace has extensively vivified Minnesota territorial or settlement days in fiction.

Probably Mrs. Lovelace's most satisfactory historical novel is *Early Candlelight*, originally published in 1929 and reprinted twenty years later by the University of Minnesota Press as a contribution to the Minnesota Territorial Centennial. The tone of the novel is romantic and the author's emphasis on details of dress, cookery, and domestic life, as well as her glamorization of soldier and fur trader, suggests a deliberate appeal to a feminine audience. But much of the background is authentic, the Fort Snelling locale is sharply defined, and one leaves the book with a nostalgic feeling for the early civilization along the upper Mississippi. In *The Black Angels* Mrs. Lovelace traced the adventures of a theatrical family named Angel who wandered throughout Minnesota in the post-Civil War period staging productions of *Pinafore*, and finally achieved a Chicago performance. As in *Early Candlelight*, the novel has superficial verisimilitude and some narrative interest, but a certain naive sentimentalism limits its value.

Mrs. Lovelace collaborated with her husband, Delos Lovelace, to write two other novels of nineteenth-century Minnesota, *One Stayed at Welcome* and *Gentlemen from England*. The first is concerned with the pre-emption of land in Hennepin County, the second with the settlement of

an English colony at Fairmont. The stories are sharply contrasted, since in one the protagonist is an Eastern farmer who is seeking a permanent home in the West and is perfectly willing to toil toward his goal, while in the other the theme is the transplantation of a group of English aristocrats to the Western prairies and the inevitable social and personal readjustments that follow. Richard Chalmers, one of the "gentlemen from England," chooses to emigrate to Minnesota because of the persuasive talk of a land promoter and the British system of primogeniture. He and his associates have enough capital so that they can avoid actual farming themselves; instead they hire their labor done and devote their leisure to shooting prairie chickens and ducks, to horseback riding and cricket playing and fox hunting (despite the lack of an adequate supply of foxes!). But their gentlemanly aversion to manual labor eventually proves disastrous, and even the organization of an expert riding team to perform at fairs and exhibitions cannot avert financial catastrophe. When Chalmers finally decides to wed Cathy Halliday and stick to the land, he also commits himself to personal participation in farming, which is contrary to the ideal of the English colony. In *Gentlemen from England* as well as in her other historical novels, Mrs. Lovelace is accurate and sympathetic to her material, but she is too obviously contented with costume romance to achieve anything of permanent significance.

Neil Swanson chose earlier Minnesota history as the themes of two novels, each of which stresses action and melodrama at the risk of sacrificing probability. *The Forbidden Ground* includes scenes and events along the fur route from Grand Portage to Rainy Lake, but the author is less interested in establishing the background and its characters than in the ramifications of a lurid plot. Some slight reality inheres in his overcolored picture of the animosity between rival fur companies. In *The Phantom Emperor*, Swanson seized upon the story of the fabulous James Dickson, who proclaimed himself Montezuma II. Dickson sallied west from Buffalo in 1836 with the fantastic notion of leading his Indian Liberating Army to Santa Fé. With a handful of followers he passed the future site of Duluth and crossed northern Minnesota via Sandy Lake to the vicinity of Pembina. There his army and his purpose both crumbled away. Like other novels by Neil Swanson, these stories have narrative zest, but they seldom improve upon second-rate cinema.

Few writers have chosen to base their novels on the episodes of Minnesota's Indian wars and outbreaks, despite the plenitude of such material. An exception is Edward Havill's *Big Ember*, which deals with a tiny Norwegian hamlet which happened to be in the path of Little Crow's marauding Sioux in 1862. Guri Erikson, a typically sturdy pio-

neer, suffers the loss of both her husband and her son but refuses to be driven off by the hostile uprising. After the excitement has quieted down, she resumes the farming life that her husband had chosen. *Big Ember* is a pedestrian novel despite its subject; it fails to dramatize in any memorable fashion the events of the famous Sioux revolt.

One of the most widely read Minnesota novels, Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese*, is historical in that it sketches a primitive community in that northwestern corner of the state which abuts on Manitoba, yet Miss Ostenso's main interest is the chronicle of the Finnish and Icelandic farmers in their agricultural and domestic turmoil. The book is a strong, theatrical narrative dominated by a tyrannical father, Caleb Gare, whose death in the burning of his treasured flax field is almost too contrived to be convincing. The characters, however, are strongly individualized and are profiled sharply against a bleak setting. Less can be said for some later novels by Miss Ostenso. *The Mad Carews* pictures rural life on the Western prairies in the second decade of the twentieth century, and a family with dramatic eccentricities but little reality. The characterization is impressionistic and inadequate. In *O River, Remember!* the scene is the Red River Valley and its farms and infant communities. The excitement produced by the coming of the railroad and its consequent economic dislocations is well depicted, but the characters are maneuvered rather than created, and the abrupt time segments of the novel do not increase its readability.

The railroad and its political repercussions form the subject matter of two novels in which the life of James J. Hill is employed as a theme. Ramsey Benson's *Hill Country* sketches the extension of the railroad to the West, and Oscar M. Sullivan's *Empire-Builder* is romantic biography to such an extent that the author favorably compares James J. Hill to Leonardo da Vinci. Still another novel with a railroad theme is Cornelia Meigs' *Railroad West*, which focuses upon the construction of the Northern Pacific from Brainerd to the Missouri River.

In general, these fictional attempts to use definite historical events as the backbones of novels have not been overly successful. Much more impressive are several family chronicles which cover a long sequence of years and present rather vividly the development of a community through individual lives. Frances Sterrett's *Years of Achievement* deals with a Norwegian emigrant girl who goes to Minneapolis with her husband in the 1870's and begets a large family. By the time the girl, now a grandmother, has reached the age of eighty her descendants are numerous and proud of their family solidity. The story takes on impact by accretion, although it reveals a spirit of inane cheerfulness. On the contrary, Wil-

liam J. McNally's *House of Vanished Splendor*, which chronicles the decay of a pioneer family at Beauharnois (Frontenac), is written in the naturalistic tradition with force and skill. McNally describes first the importance of the Knott family in the days when Donnelly, Ramsey, Sibley, and other notables were visitors to the river mansion, and then shows how in the second generation the family disintegrates through parasitism, debauchery, and prodigality. Artistically the novel is weakened by the constant shift of protagonists, but the book has interest and vigor. Descriptions of such communities as Aile Rouge (Red Wing) and Rivertown (Lake City) give the reader a pleasant sense of recognition.

McNally told a somewhat similar story with a different setting in *The Roofs of Elm Street*. Here three friends, respectively of Irish, German, and Yankee background, become prosperous through their lumber business and found a middle-class suburban development—Elm Street. But again the second generation proves inferior and feeble, and North Star, Minnesota, is hardly what the original sponsors desired it to be. An essential weakness of the novel, moreover, is the author's failure to emphasize the racial differences which he explained so carefully in the original delineation of the protagonists. The children of the town builders retain neither their vitality nor their racial idiosyncrasies, so that the author's insistence on the original distinctions seems pointless.

The most recent historical novel of Minnesota, Lewis' *The God-Seeker*, is a disappointing survey of frontier evangelism which is vastly inferior to the author's major novels. Aaron Gadd is that singular phenomenon, a Sinclair Lewis protagonist who is not a scamp and a rascal, but he is thrown in with the author's usual assortment of hypocrites and renegades, and Lewis is much more interested in satire and burlesque than in seriously recreating the pioneer background. After Gadd leaves Massachusetts, the setting is largely a mission in the Minnesota Valley and the infant city of St. Paul. Gadd is ultimately converted from proselytism to general contracting, and in the 1850's he finds his time well occupied. The historical atmosphere of *The God-Seeker* is superficial and the introduction of actual figures like Edward D. Neill and Joseph R. Brown seems gratuitous. Yet a Sinclair Lewis novel is never dull, and the reader may find in this tale of Minnesota territorial days a salutary corrective for some of the saccharinity of the more romantic storytellers.

The novels of twentieth-century Minnesota illustrate a wide diversity in both scene and technique. One thinks of Mabel Seeley's detective stories set in small towns, of Herbert Krause's rural novels of the western farm lands, of the depiction of urban sophistication by such writers as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Grace Flandrau, and James Gray, of the occasional

exploration of racial minorities as reflected by Lewis' *Kingsblood Royal* and Norman Katkov's *Eagle at My Eyes*. As a whole, Minnesota novelists have chosen to concentrate on certain themes to the virtual neglect of others, just as the geographical framework of their stories has remained curiously limited. Only incidentally, for example, have novels been set on the iron ranges, on the lakes or rivers, in the north woods.

Thus, Phil Stong's *Iron Mountain* is a good-natured, heavily humorous tale of the various peoples who labor on the Mesabi Range, but being confined to externalities it reveals little insight. The methods which served the novelist quite well in *State Fair* (the account of an Iowa exposition) are no more effective and certainly as limited in this story of northern Minnesota. George Ryland Bailey's *The Red Mesabi*, localized chiefly around Taconite, has trite characterization but is an exciting story with a wealth of detailed description of the mining background. Bailey makes full use of the melodramatic elements inherent in his theme and introduces a lurid and turbulent fight in a mine shaft. The conventional disposal of the villain and the rewarding of the hero do not weaken the physical impact of place which the novel gives. In *Iron Land* Mrs. Dorothy C. Ogley and Mrs. M. Goodwin Cleland tell a tale of Duluth in the early 1860's when the mining fever first appeared and when gold rather than iron ore seemed to be the magnet. But eventually the real riches of the Lake Superior region become apparent and affect the citizens at the Head of the Lakes correspondingly. There is too little detail about either mining or lumbering to give the novel authenticity, and the romance is stereotyped. One does gain from the story, however, some notion of the febrile activity which made Duluth an exciting place in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Novels set in the Minnesota north woods have been almost as infrequent and generally as unsuccessful as those localized in the mining area. Darragh Aldrich has employed the Arrowhead region for several rather trivial romances, notably *Red Headed School-Ma'am*, which deals with the arrival of an auburn-haired young woman schoolteacher in the forest area north of Duluth and with her impact upon the community. A forest fire gives a spectacular conclusion to Evelyn Voss Wise's novel entitled *Wheels in the Timber*. In an interesting first novel called *The Trees Went Forth*, Walter O'Meara chose a lumber camp just after the turn of the twentieth century as his setting and proceeded to document his story so lavishly that at times the book is almost too statistical. Probably the best novel so far produced with the Minnesota north woods as a background is Kenneth S. Davis' *In the Forests of the Night*, the Blakean title of which offers the appropriate key to the meaning. For this story

focuses not on the physical background, except in its contributory isolation, but on the personal tragedy of the protagonist, a forest ranger whose disintegration stems from the fact that he is both a neurotic and a dipsomaniac. The author's interest in psychological analysis obviously transcends the sense of locale. Yet the gloom and blackness of the woods have their effect on the catastrophe. Despite some crudity in exposition, the personal collapse of the main figure is convincingly told.

Much more numerous and artistically superior as a group are the Minnesota novels which deal first with farmers and farming, second with the small town, and third with the city, its economic and social rivalries as well as its racial minorities. Here the plentitude of volumes makes a complete survey impossible, but representative and conspicuous titles are not hard to select.

James Gray once observed that the Minnesota Muse "sings exclusively of ruined wheat harvests and she sings of them with a strong Swedish accent."<sup>1</sup> Both remarks are relevant to Cornelia Cannon's *Red Rust*, a story of the attempt of a young Swedish farmer to develop a rustproof wheat which would endure a northern climate. The hero, Matts Swenson, after long toil and many defeats, finally produces the desired kind of wheat. But his marriage to a neighboring farm widow who is considerably his senior is obviously a matter of convenience rather than of romance, and the match is not too harmonious. Matts is finally killed by the widow's youngest son, who is motivated by both jealousy and rage. *Red Rust* is most effective in its exposition of farming and wheat-growing, both of which are well documented; as a human story it is undramatic and not always plausible.

The opposite is true of *Pure Gold*, O. E. Rølvaag's story of avarice on the farm.<sup>2</sup> Lizzie and Louis Houghlum are determined to become wealthy, if industry, perseverance, and ruthless thrift can make them so. They refuse to subscribe to *Skandinaven*, to support the local pastor, or to buy Liberty Loan bonds; they skimp in cooking and deny themselves little indulgences. At first they put their savings into gold pieces, but as so much metal proves bulky they secure large denomination paper bills. Distrusting banks and finally each other, husband and wife carry some thirty-five thousand dollars on their persons. Eventually they sell their farm and retire to cold and miserable rooms in a neighboring town, where the two old misers are finally found dead of cold and privation. In this novel

<sup>1</sup>In the *Saturday Review of Literature*, June 12, 1937.

<sup>2</sup>Rølvaag's trilogy of western settlement — *Giants in the Earth*, *Peder Victorious*, and *Their Father's God* — is essentially a farm chronicle, but for all except the opening chapters of the first novel the setting is South Dakota. Similarly, Feike Feikema's *This Is the Year* is a vigorous, sometimes overly earthy panorama of Frisian farmers in northwestern Iowa.

Rölvaag used the farm background clearly and effectively, although his essential interest, as in his great trilogy, remained in the exposition of character. Certainly *Pure Gold* fuses the people and the setting more satisfactorily than do most of the farm novels under discussion.

In recent years no one has written about the farms of the Middle West with more authority and vigor than Herbert Krause. Both his *Wind Without Rain* and *The Thresher* are impressive stories, rich in detail and almost panoramic in their amplitude. Although the themes of the two novels differ, their setting is similar, Otter Tail County with its largely German rural population forming the background of both. *Wind Without Rain* tells the story of an isolated but homogeneous German Lutheran farming community and, in particular, the life of the Vildvogel family. Like Miss Ostenso's Caleb Gare, Vildvogel is stubborn, domineering, brutal, a domestic despot who is curbed only when the children grow old and strong enough to rebel. The wife dies, two sons flee their rural prison, and the farm toil devolves on the father and the remaining children. The characters are unpleasant but real, and the atmosphere is rich and tangible. Rural activities like pig-sticking, cow dehorning, harvesting, and threshing fill the pages of the novel, and the primitive social life is likewise amply depicted. Indeed the author's flair for description and his obvious delight in a vigorous and fresh vocabulary sometimes muddies the stream of the novel; the spate of analogies and metaphors diverts the reader's attention from the tale itself.

*The Thresher* is a stronger story because the author is a little more restrained in his use of language and because the protagonist, Johnny Schwartz, so completely dominates the novel. An orphan who is brought up somewhat reluctantly by his aunt and uncle, the Herman Barewolfs, Johnny first helps his uncle with the old horsepowered threshing unit. But where the older man has been content to get along with antiquated equipment, Johnny insists not only on mechanical improvements, but on better organization as well. He quickly gets his own threshing rig, but soon discards the horses for steam power, and eventually secures a gasoline engine. Not content with one rig, he goes into threshing on a wholesale scale and soon drives out all rival crews. Crowned with early success, Johnny becomes arrogant and belligerent; he sacrifices his best friend, his wife, and his family to his passion for dominance, and his eventual death in a reckless attempt to save his machinery from fire is, like Captain Ahab's, a kind of *hubris*. Johnny Schwartz is a vigorous, if unlikeable, character whose defiance of social and economic conventions is dramatically depicted. Almost as interesting as Johnny's character is the history of threshing operations and machinery changes which is



incorporated into the large time scheme of the novel. *The Thresher* is an effective fictional picture of one aspect of rural life.

The rural scene also figures largely in two novels by Lorna Doone Beers, *A Humble Lear* and *The Mad Stone*, although in both the tone is quieter and the passions less violent. The author writes sensitively, but her sense of character is not firm enough to produce significant fiction.

The publication of *Main Street* in 1920 was an epochal literary event, not only because it introduced Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, with all its narrowness, provincialism, and complacency to the American reading public, but also because it set a kind of pattern for subsequent fictional portrayal of the American small town. Lewis of course was not unique. In the 1880's E. W. Howe had published his bleak *Story of a Country Town*, but had had few imitators. Zona Gale's saccharine *Friendship Village* was more suited to the tastes of the time, and even her astringent *Birth* fell almost stillborn from the press in 1918.<sup>3</sup> But two years after the end of the First World War the time was ripe for *Main Street*, and it established a literary convention which is still being followed.<sup>4</sup>

In his first great success, as well as in his subsequent novels, Lewis attacked the materialism, the aridity, the stodginess of the small Middle Western community. Using the town in which he grew up, Sauk Centre, as the prototype, Lewis ridiculed its complacency, its apathy to intellectual or artistic movements, the resentment of its citizens toward any attempt to change the routine of their actions or thoughts. Carol Kennicott, coming to Gopher Prairie as the wife of a doctor, is naively optimistic about reforming the town and pathetic in her futile insistence. In the long run, she has small impact upon the daily routine, the inane social gatherings, the excursions to summer resorts, the artistic insensitivity of the inhabitants. And when she returns, after an escapist interlude in Washington during the First World War, it is with resignation and—since Carol is no martyr—perhaps a little relief. She has fought her fight, she has jarred the fortress slightly, but the walls still stand formidably and Carol will live out her life as Mrs. Will Kennicott, a respectable and not very exciting matron of Gopher Prairie society.<sup>5</sup>

Sinclair Lewis as a satirist was not averse to distortion and over-emphasis. As William Allen White, likewise an authority on small towns,

<sup>3</sup> For an extensive survey of the subject, see Ima Honaker Herron, *The Small Town in American Literature* (Durham, 1939).

<sup>4</sup> Lewis' earlier novels, as well as his awareness of the *zeitgeist*, are discussed by the present writer in an article entitled "A Long Way to Gopher Prairie: Sinclair Lewis's Apprenticeship," published in the *Southwest Review*, 32:403-413 (Autumn, 1947). Before 1920 Lewis used Minnesota scenes in *Free Air* and *The Trail of the Hawk*.

<sup>5</sup> The transformation wrought by twenty-five years in the mores and standards of Sauk Centre is described in an interesting article on "Main Street 1947," appearing in *Life* for June 23, 1947.

once remarked, Lewis concerned himself with the shady side of Main Street. Certainly Lewis neglected the casualness, the friendliness, the quietness, even the material cleanness of the community without heavy industry. Physical virtues always interested him less than moral and intellectual stagnation. The virulent gossip and the passive acceptance of mental and social fashions more than offset the charm of neighborliness and simplicity. *Main Street* unquestionably established the tone for subsequent portrayals of the small town, and the language and spirit of Lewis' indictment were repeated many times in the next two decades.

Thus in his novel *Druida*, John T. Frederick chose a Red River Valley setting and the town of Riverton (Moorhead). The heroine, Druida Horsfall, is brought up on a farm, attends the local normal school, and finally goes off with her rural swain to a new home in Montana, having survived both family neuroticism and school friction. Although lacking artistic merit, the novel does emphasize, as Lewis did, the power of gossip in a small community, and it adds to Lewis' indictment a bitter picture of the ignorance and personal animosity current in the rural teacher's college. This same emphasis on rumor and scandal is found in Mabel Seeley's *The Whispering Cup*, which belongs to what Poe called stories of ratiocination. Mrs. Seeley is especially adroit in combining the modern detective thriller with the small town setting. With convincing skill she shows how the local telephone exchange is the main artery of life in towns whose population is numbered in the hundreds.

James Gray in *Wake and Remember* chose to depict wealthy and seasonal visitors to the village of Genesis and centered his novel around a young widower named Alec Rankin. In *Shoulder the Sky* he set his story in the small river town of Nokomis (possibly Hastings) and used as his protagonist a physician, Eugene Kane. Somewhat like Lewis' Dr. Will Kennicott, Kane is essentially part of the life of the community, although he retains an attitude of superiority; his wife Marietta is frankly bored and contemptuous. Unsatisfied by a round of cocktail parties and amateur theatricals, the Kanes indulge in extramarital affairs, after which experience, mutually chastened, they return to each other. In both novels Gray uses the small town as a framework, but fixes his interest in the psychological dissection of the characters. Unfortunately, despite a firm sense of fictional structure and a graceful style, Gray is too interested in the writing of brittle and sophisticated dialogue to achieve any very satisfying picture of life. Glibness and facility substitute for sincere understanding of character and result in unsubstantial and pseudo-clever people. The tone of the comedy of manners is inappropriate to the Minnesota rural community.

The same general background figures in the work of one of the younger Minnesota writers, Ann Chidester, the author of several novels which despite their alternate imitation of Sinclair Lewis and Thomas Wolfe have attracted considerable attention. In *Young Pandora* Miss Chidester depicts under the name of Hamilton her own community of Stillwater and emphasizes the usual vices of drabness, apathy, and scandal-mongering. Moreover, in the struggles of Jody Barker to produce her first novel and in the curious reaction of the town to the knowledge that it has suddenly spawned a writer, there must be a considerable touch of autobiography. Jody, daughter of the town's physician, has been brought up with a good deal of freedom and has been able to give her father some of the sympathy and interest which he failed to find in his wife. When Dr. Barker dies, Jody is left at loose ends, but at the state university she transfers her admiration first to Professor Edom Harris and second to a tall, lean journalist from the iron range country, Pod Palcich, whose martyr-like devotion to the cause of labor she tolerates because of her love for him. Harris has fired her with the conviction that she can and must write. As a consequence, though she lives with Pod and nurses him through a long illness, she refuses to marry him; as the book ends, Jody is hard at work revising her first novel, which has just been rejected, while Pod has departed for battle fronts abroad. *Young Pandora* breathes sincerity, but it is written in a lush, amateurish style which often proves annoying. The town of Hamilton somehow succeeds in emerging from the blanket of words with which Miss Chidester drapes it; the Minneapolis and university scenes are less clearly realized.

*The Long Year* tells the story of Kay Hasswell, a woman of the world, who in the depression year of 1933 returns to High Falls to salvage what she can from the family industry. She is selfish and completely mercenary, unconcerned by the damage she may do the town by carrying out her economic policies. As a result, her decisions affect a good many of the citizens of High Falls, mostly adversely. Miss Chidester in this novel has employed the familiar theme of the sophisticate returning to the home community; the only fresh touches spring from the depression background of the story. In both books the author evinces her eagerness, her visualization of character, and her fascination with words; but the writing is too often fuzzy and rhapsodic where it ought to be sharp and hard.

Neil S. Boardman's *The Long Home* is more ambitious than most of these novels of small towns and in many ways is impressively done. His protagonist, Theodore Bruere, is the illegitimate son of Millicent Evans, who, at the time of the story's beginning, has just lost her husband. The

Evans family lives in Riverport (Stillwater) and young Peter and Naomi are considered Theodore's cousins. Bruere, partly through temperament and partly through inheritance, is a drifter, both irresponsible and malcontent. He starts to attend medical school on Millicent's money, but soon drops out, bums around the country, and becomes interested in life only when he is sucked into the socialist movement. In the Twin Cities he helps organize and edit a radical paper and sees something of the truck drivers' strike in Minneapolis, but his courage falters when he tries to hand a copy of the new paper to Governor Floyd Olson, and his usual indolence and cowardice subsequently reassert themselves. Bruere is never very adequately conceived, neither in his experience as a radical nor in his earthy love affair with Anna Stoyka, and the final episode in which he is arrested for committing a fatal abortion on Naomi Evans is largely a convenient denouement. *The Long Home* obviously shows some of the flamboyance of a first novel; it is also a serious and interesting piece of work with suggestive insights into the mores of Riverport and with vivid, if brief, sketches of the Minneapolis labor wars.

The merging of the small town with the city as a background for fiction is excellently illustrated by a later novel by Mabel Seeley, *Woman of Property*. This is a serious character study of Frieda Schlempe, daughter of a German barber, who spends her girlhood in West Haven (Northfield) and her maturity in Meridian (St. Paul). Frieda is vulgar and selfish, qualities which her family life does nothing to reclaim, and as a young woman she becomes inordinately desirous of success in terms of money and possessions. Her jobs, her marriages, her establishment of a dressmaking shop are all calculated to be profitable; when she finally becomes a woman of property she is also cold, ruthless, dishonest, and cordially disliked. Avarice has been almost as destructive to her as to the miserly pair in Rölvaag's *Pure Gold*. Yet the novel is impressive. Frieda is consistently and powerfully drawn, and the opening chapters etch sharply the small-town scene. When Mrs. Seeley carries her protagonist to the state capital, however, she subordinates the surroundings to the character and the city becomes only a hazy backdrop.

The imaginary city of Grand Republic in the equally imaginary Radisson County serves Sinclair Lewis as the background for two novels, *Cass Timberlane* and *Kingsblood Royal*. The author conveniently locates this city halfway between Minneapolis and Duluth and asserts that with eighty-five thousand people it is "large enough to have a Renoir, a school-system scandal, several millionaires, and a slum."<sup>6</sup> In both novels Grand Republic is less important for itself than as the setting of the

<sup>6</sup> *Cass Timberlane*, 10 (New York, 1945).

story, in one case an elaborate and sarcastic dissection of marriage, in the other an earnest and rather sensational examination of race relations. But somehow Grand Republic becomes almost as tangible as the earlier conceived Gopher Prairie and Zenith.

Grand Republic has an aristocracy, a small group of established wealth and prestige, a country club set, and a clique which controls the financial and economic reins of the city. Like so many Minnesota towns, the ancestry of the people is Yankee, German, or Scandinavian, with a sprinkling of Irish and French. Social cleavage is sharp between the acceptable and the unacceptable, between the families on the one hand whose wealth and position go back all of two generations and on the other the foreigners and *nouveaux riches*. The two groups meet and fuse no more successfully than Kipling's East and West.

*Cass Timberlane* deals ostensibly with the marriage of the Honorable Judge Timberlane to a girl twenty years his junior. But it is also an analysis of marriage and at times almost a diatribe against it. Cass Timberlane wants quiet, chess-playing evenings in a study filled with books and tobacco smoke; Jinny wants excitement and social life. She has not Carol Kennicott's urge to reform her husband or the town, but she is unwilling to accept the social doldrums into which her marriage has plunged her. Finally, after an interlude in New York with Bradd Criley, Jinny returns penitent to her husband and the Timberlanes settle down to their established future in Grand Republic society. Their brief but tempestuous married life Lewis uses as a mirror to reflect the currents and mores of city society. Certainly the milieu of the Timberlanes is clear.

Despite Lewis' satirical thrusts at the conglomerate architecture of Grand Republic, in *Kingsblood Royal* the reader quickly forgets the physical setting because of the unusual plight in which the protagonist soon finds himself. Neil Kingsblood, a wounded war veteran and a rising young banker, finds through a strange quirk of genealogical investigation that he is a thirty-second part Negro. Rather implausibly he resolves not to forget his racial impurity, which no one else suspects, but rather to publicize it and cross the line which separates white from black. Throughout the rest of the novel two trends are apparent: Lewis' caricatures of the stuffy figures in Grand Republic, and his accumulation of obstacles which warp Neil Kingsblood's life but do not alter his resolution. The final melodramatic scene in which Neil, his wife, and a few ardent supporters await the onslaught of the mob which is determined to expel him from the neighborhood is effective but inconclusive. Even should the police intervene and escort Neil to jail, his sacrifice would

settle nothing either for the Negroes or for himself. Indeed Lewis' book is essentially a tract in favor of a more decent and equitable treatment of the Negro rather than a completely imagined and integrated novel. *Kingsblood Royal* is one more proof that Sinclair Lewis habitually uses fiction for expository purposes.

Racial prejudice of another kind appears in Norman Katkov's tale of Jewish life in St. Paul, which he calls *Eagle at My Eyes*. The plot is thin and confusingly fragmented by flash backs, but the essential story of Joe Goodman, son of an emigrant Russian Jew, is clear enough. Despite family opposition, Joe has married a Gentile girl. He is reluctant to enter her world and feels that he cannot introduce her to his own (has not his old father warned, "Jew and goy, can't live, that's all"?).<sup>7</sup> The author implies that complete social intercourse of Jew and Gentile is as impossible as that of Negro and white. Ultimately Joe capitulates and joins his wife at the country club which she cannot relinquish, but the solution is neither successful nor permanent. The setting of this promising first novel is the hill section of St. Paul and the outskirts of White Bear. Katkov's sincerity and honesty more than balance some crudities in presentation, and his vignettes of newspaper life savor of personal experience.

The 1920's produced a number of American novelists who strove to reflect the jazz age, to depict the *blasé* sophistication and cynicism of the postwar generation. Among these almost the most conspicuous was St. Paul-born F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose novels of the "flaming youth" period brought him instant fame. *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned* are faithful representations of adolescents who were striving to emancipate themselves from Victorian repressions and to challenge most of the social traditions which the previous generation had valued. Thus Amory Blaine, who in his origins, Princeton experiences, and erratic brilliance is not unlike Fitzgerald himself, is a kind of composite hero of this jazz-age fiction, youthfully disillusioned, egoistic, unstable, and frothy. Fitzgerald frequently used the Twin Cities as a locale for his stories and introduced country club and lake resort scenes, but generally avoided actual names. His best novel, *The Great Gatsby*, is set in New York, although one of the major characters is a Minnesotan.<sup>8</sup> Serious effort has recently been made to rehabilitate Fitzgerald's fame; still there seems to be small reason for disturbing his position as a clever

<sup>7</sup> *Eagle at My Eyes*, 138 (Garden City, 1948).

<sup>8</sup> A few scenes of Floyd Dell's *Janet March* also are localized in Minnesota and they resemble Fitzgerald's work in tone, but Dell's major novels are associated with Davenport and Chicago. His picture of adolescent youth is considerably more sympathetic and understanding than Fitzgerald's.

and bright chronicler of an age which most people are quite willing to let die.

Another St. Paul-born writer, Grace Flandrau, employs similar methods without Fitzgerald's pyrotechnics in such novels as *Being Respectable* and *Indeed This Flesh*, both localized in St. Paul and both fundamentally social dissections. Disregarding the rebellious younger generation, Mrs. Flandrau occupies herself with older protagonists; in the first book with aging and lonely Darius Carpenter, whose children offer him small satisfaction; in the second with Will Quoyne, a neurotic dullard, who is portrayed in great detail with notebook realism. Mrs. Flandrau evinces some of the satiric skill of Lewis, but she is not always maliciously unkind, so that her work if consequently more truthful is also less entertaining.

Without question, however, the one book which is both the best picture of a Middle Western small city and also the best novel so far written by a native Minnesotan is *Babbitt*. One may doubt the proximity of Zenith, state of Winnemac, to any community remotely similar in the actual state of Minnesota; one can hardly deny the position of *Babbitt* as Lewis' masterpiece and one of the best American novels of the twentieth century.

Like most of Lewis' fiction, it is a biography in structure, told episodically, conceived externally largely because the protagonist has no mental life. Babbitt is a character, a type, and a term. His name has become a linguistic coin recognizable everywhere. His doddering attempts to be a good father, his placid acceptance of economic and political platitudes, his pathetic effort to climb socially while at the same time he rebuffs others who strive to reach his rung on the ladder, these are common knowledge. Babbitt is neither stupid nor moronic. Actually he is an economic success, clever and astute in business. But because Babbitt never thinks for himself on any topic, because his opinions are all derivative, because he overvalues appearances and is afraid of the unconventional, because he judges everything by material standards, and most of all because he is ignorant of culture and distrustful of intellectualism, Sinclair Lewis derides and ridicules him.

Most of the book is less satire than reporting, a mirroring of routine daily existence which in one form or another is timeless. But when Babbitt lunches with his fellow boosters, addresses a service club, or echoes newspaper platitudes, he leaves the world of simple reality for the world of pretense in which by easy projection he becomes a major figure and a civic leader. Here Lewis' satire reduces Babbitt to scale and at the same time etches the background indelibly. In the long run, Gopher Prairie

and Grand Republic and Zenith all fuse into one—a composite Minnesota community which values conformity over individualism and material success over the more durable satisfactions of life. Lewis was not of course quarreling primarily with Minnesota, but Minnesota was his symbol for the Middle West, for America, possibly for the world. He was writing simply about what he knew best, and what he knew best he didn't like.

Thirty years then have seen the publication of many novels with a Minnesota setting—novels varying in type and theme. Much unevenness is apparent in them. Despite a wide chronological range in the events they portray, many subjects remain untouched. Geographically this body of fiction has tended to concentrate on the Twin Cities, on the small towns of the St. Croix Valley, on the farming regions of the south and west. In particular, the Lake Superior region, the Mississippi River, the Minnesota and Red River valleys, the wheat farms of the northwest, the hunting and fishing areas of the north, the mining sections, the intellectual life of the cities, even the University of Minnesota have been neglected. Novels about Minnesota racial groups or particular industries are still uncommon; here the painter has preceded the novelist.

Artistically, too, these books show considerable variation. Many have been the work of younger writers, writers like Ann Chidester, Norman Katkov, Neil Boardman, Herbert Krause, Mabel Seeley, some of whom lack artistic maturity. Crudities in style, flamboyance, imperfect motivation, unconvincing portraiture are faults which can be cured by experience. Two faults in general seem obvious: a tendency to allow cleverness or prolixity to substitute for honest writing, and an inability to draw or perhaps even to conceive character. Storytelling is important to the serious reader of fiction, impressionistic word juggling is interesting, but neither is enough. A novelist who merely manipulates his characters on strings deserves only the audience of the puppet master.

One would like to claim for Minnesota Rølvaag's magnificent novel of the immigrant pioneers, *Giants in the Earth*; although its Norwegian-born author was a resident of Northfield most of his life, his story is inescapably localized in the prairie sections of South Dakota.

Actually the most impressive novels about Minnesota which have so far appeared are the *Main Street* and *Babbitt* of Sinclair Lewis. Many a reader might wish that the best Minnesota novels were somewhat less astringent, somewhat less of an indictment of the state and its mores. But there is at least one compensation. Few commonwealths indeed can point to a native son and say, "There is a winner of the Nobel Prize for literature!"





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