

review and comment



THE BROADAXE OF SINCLAIR LEWIS

America's veteran novelist cuts down some big timber in the backwoods of Jim Crow.

By HOWARD FAST

KINGSBLOOD ROYAL, by Sinclair Lewis. Random House. \$3.

AS LONG ago as the long, long past, when the war you spoke about meant the war to save democracy, or to make the world safe for it, as some said, and the Model T was a fact, not a legend, and you knew people whom Attorney General Palmer had put in jail and were still there, I heard it said, in a monotonous singsong that has not improved with the years, "Sinclair Lewis can't write." Blessed be those who tell the doers what they can or cannot do! That time in the long, long ago was a time when reading was an adventure, each book a new door into a new world—and after these twenty years or so, how sweet and bitter and merciless and fine the taste of *Babbitt* and *Mainstreet* and *Elmer Gantry* still is!

But Sinclair Lewis can't write, as I've discovered after reading three or four reviews of his new piece of literary dynamite, *Kingsblood Royal*. This poor, benighted man, who won a Nobel Prize for literature more than a decade ago, who has twenty novels to his credit, who numbers his readers by the millions, who is read by more millions in twenty other languages, had just gone along merrily these past thirty years under the illusion that he was a writer. Well, so have I—and I consider him a damned good writer, a hell of a writer, and I think that his new book, in terms of choice of content, in terms of the problem he set for himself, in terms of broad understanding of the forces at work in our society, is the most vigorous and positive thing he has ever turned out.

Show me your writer of sixty and better, with four decades of continuous

work behind him, who can match it! Where the young hopefuls of the Thirties—Steinbeck and Dos Passos and Saroyan and Farrell and so many others—have rotted into a spongy and frightful literary hopelessness, this old man—I speak of years, not of heart and mind—meets the challenge of our times, tears off the sick mask of race hatred, and writes as savage an indictment of monopoly-fostered Jim Crow as our literary scene has witnessed.

Young Neil Kingsblood, as you have surely heard by now, is that paragon of all any American could want to be—a war veteran with a Purple Heart and a game leg, tall, handsome, red-headed, white—put that in quotes—

To combat the reactionary offensive against culture and explore the problems of a people's culture a conference on Marxism and American Culture will be held at the Jefferson School, New York, June 6-7-8, under the auspices of NEW MASSES and Mainstream. Participating in the conference, in addition to the editorial boards of the two publications, will be invited guests from among workers in the various cultural fields. We urge our readers to watch in future issues of NEW MASSES for the publication of some of the conference material.

Protestant, job in a bank, nice house in the suburbs, beautiful wife, blond and beautiful little daughter, accepted, respected, not only of the new master race but of the master race within the master race. His game leg rules out sports, so he turns to genealogy as a hobby. The family likes to think that it stems from a bastard child of the Eighth Henry, and with a golden vision of what royal blood—even filtered through bastardry—would mean in a Minnesota town like Grand Republic, they send young Neil out researching into his past.

There he finds royal blood, right enough, in the person of a great-great-grandfather, Xavier Pic, a man as royal and noble and enduring as any who has walked on this earth, a pioneer, an opener of roads—and also a full-blooded Negro. That makes young Neil one-sixteenth Negro; that also makes for a situation pregnant with possibility, and it makes for a book you will not want to put down until the last page.

BUT after all, what makes for the difference? I've described a situation—in modern terminology, a gimmick—not so different from those invented by other writers. Laura Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement* also exercised a gimmick, and her book was an important magazine piece, hardly much more. Lewis' book is a great deal more. If he had been content with the situation and all the situational possibilities obvious to it, the reviewers of the kept press would have had no bone to pick with him. It would have been: "Good old Red is at it again"; and hardly anyone would have reminded us that Lewis never could write.

But Lewis was not content with the surface situational possibilities. Once he had inserted the scalpel and opened Jim Crow to his inquisitive, incisive and unsentimental gaze, he discovered the putrid decay underneath—and then, like Neil Kingsblood, he made his choice and waded in. Step by step, Sinclair Lewis moved along this strange new road he had chosen. Knowing him and his method of work, I can appreciate how he must have studied, worked, inquired, fought with his material, and pursued the truth through the maze of falsehood, legend and slander that American society has created around the Negro people.

But he followed where the road led him, and he came to certain conclusions, and it is these conclusions



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that add the good red meat to the bone of his situation. He discovered that biological racism is an evil lie; he discovered that Negroes are precisely as intelligent or foolish as white folk; he discovered that Jim Crow is not spontaneous but deliberately created; he discovered that Jim Crow has economic roots and that those economic roots grow best in the soil of monopoly capitalism; he discovered that it is not the *lumpen* who create race hatred and race riot, but those who are known as the "best families"; and he discovered that Jim Crow is not a *problem*, not a small matter that *nice*ness will cure, as so many reviewers have it, but a filthy cancer that permeates American life—and must be eliminated lest it eliminate us. Nor does he deceive either himself or the reader regarding that process of elimination. No reformist speaks in this book, but an angry militant who states, as positively as a novelist can state it: "It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees."

That is why *Kingsblood Royal* is not merely a good or interesting book, but as important a document on the subject as anyone has written this past decade. Be damned with those who say it is poorly written! When a man cuts down a tree, he doesn't use a penknife, but a two-edged ax, and he swings from the shoulder, not from the wrist. I have little patience with those small-voiced connoisseurs of the *Kenyon Review* and the *Partisan Review* who criticize the laces when they are not fit to polish the boots. Show me another American writer who can talk the broad language of the middle states as Lewis does; show me another who can use satire so devastatingly, who can turn love and understanding into such monumental hatred! Show me another who can tell a story like this, in the wonderful old tradition of storytelling! Admittedly, this is neither a Proust nor a Faulkner—but only a fool eliminates whiskey because there is wine. Lewis is out of Clemens and Whitman and London, and I, for one, would not want him different.

The more shame, I say, that Orville Prescott in the *New York Times* should write, "As a novel, as a work of art, it is unworthy of the man who wrote so many fine ones." As a novel, as a work of art, as a part of the human experience, it is very worthy of the man who created *George Babbitt*.

My hat is off to this man for his courage, his honesty and his integrity.

Facts and Myths

STALIN MUST HAVE PEACE, by Edgar Snow.
Random House. \$2.50.

WHY THEY BEHAVE LIKE RUSSIANS, by John Fischer. Harper. \$2.75.

DESPITE a thin thread of agreement in content and conclusion, these two books are poles apart in terms of the spirit in which they are written and the experience of their respective authors. Where Snow draws on more than a decade of intimate contact with the Soviet Union and its neighbor nations, Fischer has composed his volume in the library surrounded and submerged by a typical cross-section of American commentary on Russia, supplemented by the brief impressions of two months in the Ukraine and a quick visit to Moscow. Where Snow asserts the need for understanding between the US and USSR and keeps this objective constantly in front of him, Fischer pays lip-service to the same necessity but produces the kind of book which helps to make understanding all but impossible. Snow has not written a pretty book to please, but within certain limitations it is honest and is a serious attempt to explore the common ground between two great countries and systems that must live together. Fischer, on the other hand, has drawn a crushing indictment from Marshall MacDuffie, chief the UNRRA mission to the Ukraine on which Fischer served, who charges him with writing a book which seriously compromises the good work done by the UNRRA mission and which is, at best, "based upon deductions from an extremely limited experience in the country."

Fischer is a graphic penman and his picture of poverty and hardship in the Ukraine is worth reading for its revelation of the tragedy of war; but unfortunately that is not the purpose to which he puts it. He proceeds to deduce by implication a similar state of poverty and squalor throughout the entire Soviet Union. Even William L. White, whose *Report on the Russians* contained glaring inaccuracies and brash generalizations, never descended to quite this level. Fischer generalizes to his heart's content. Material prepared and in some cases published before his trip is indiscriminately lumped in with first-hand impressions to give authentication to the whole. An indication of the extent of this misrepresentation is to be found in the minimum of fifty changes in the text