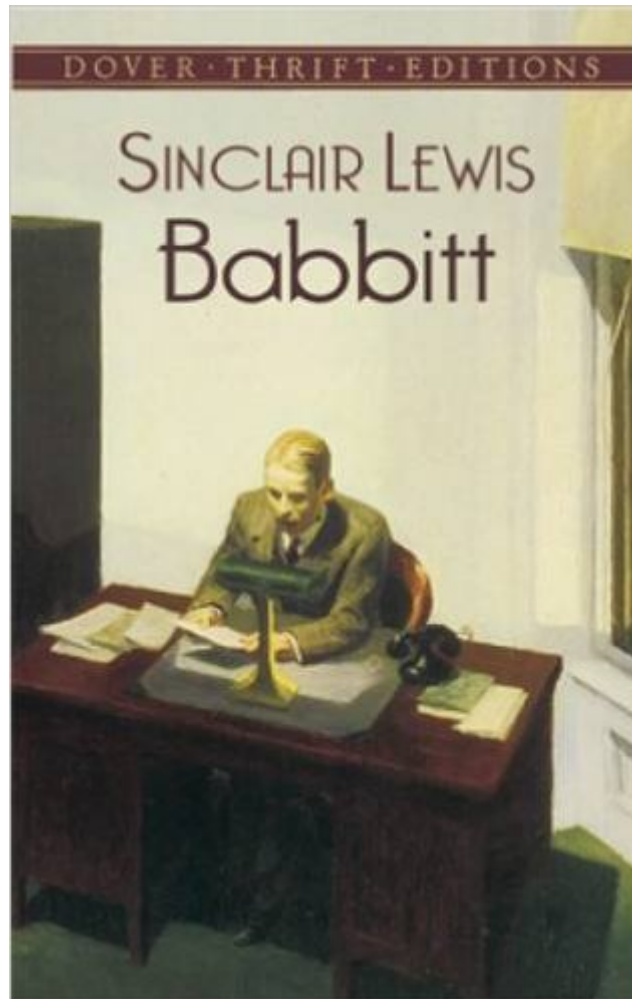


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Babbitt (Dover Thrift Editions)



Synopsis

Prosperous and socially prominent, George Babbitt appears to have everything a man could wish: good health, a fine family, and a profitable business in a booming Midwestern city. But the middle-aged real estate agent is shaken from his self-satisfaction by a growing restlessness with the limitations of his life. When a personal crisis forces a reexamination of his values, Babbitt mounts a rebellion against social expectations — jeopardizing his reputation and business standing as well as his marriage. Widely considered Sinclair Lewis's greatest novel, this satire of the American social landscape created a sensation upon its 1922 publication. Babbitt's name became an instant and enduring synonym for middle-class complacency, and the strictures of his existence revealed the emptiness of the mainstream vision of success. His story reflects the nature of a conformist society, in which the pressures of maintaining propriety can ultimately cause individuals to lose their place in the world. Babbitt ranks among the important 20th-century works addressing the struggles of people caught in the machinery of modern life, and it remains ever-relevant as a cautionary tale against clinging to conventional values.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Sinclair Lewis wrote a series of satires that exposed the hypocrisy of early 20th century America. "Babbitt" is a snapshot of the life of George F. Babbitt, a somewhat prosperous middle class businessman who lives in Zenith, Ohio. Zenith has a population of 300,000+, and has an active business community. This community has its own rituals and ironclad rules. These rules consist of

being one of the gang, being a member of all the right clubs and organizations, and never deviating from the ideals of business and money. These rules cause enormous difficulties for Babbitt when he goes through a midlife crisis at the end of the book and begins spouting liberal ideas and associating with the "wrong crowd." This is my first encounter with Sinclair Lewis. I really don't know why I chose to read "Babbitt" first, as I also have copies of "Main Street" and "Arrowsmith". I think it was the unusual cover of the Penguin edition, which is a picture of a painting called "Booster" by Grant Wood. To me, that picture IS Babbitt, and I'll always be able to see Babbitt in my head whenever I'm reminded of this book. There really isn't a lot of symbolism here (and the symbolism that is here is pretty easy to decipher) and the prose is much closer to our present day writing and speech. This is brilliant satire, and you'll laugh out loud at many of the situations Babbitt gets himself into. An especially hilarious incident occurs when one of the local millionaire businessmen finally accepts an invitation to dine with Babbitt. The evening goes badly because Babbitt is in a lower social class. Lewis then shows Babbitt going to a dinner at an old friend's house who is in a lower class than him.

Sinclair Lewis and Thomas Hart Benton, the artist, were about the same age, they both focussed on the American Heartland, and as I read Lewis, I see that they both had something else in common. They both had a tendency to draw cartoonish characters. George F. Babbitt is the main character of a satire by the same name; you might even laugh aloud in some places. Lewis is skillful, but at times, heavy-handed. He has portrayed an average Joe of 1920, the pep- and vim-obsessed go-getting businessman who was the bedrock of our industrial age, hypocritical, materialist, crooked, conformist, even proto-fascist. Babbitt is a real estate agent, a family man surrounded by the wealth of material goods provided by thriving industrial capitalism. He belongs enthusiastically and unquestioningly to any organization dedicated to preserving his and his family's ready access to those goods---professional group (realtors association), Boosters, church, and set social circle. He spouts meaningless platitudes on every subject, knows nothing except the price of real estate and methods of collusion, and ignores his feelings, his family, and the rest of the world, all the while believing that his city, state, and country are the best in the world. The first 90-odd pages of BABBITT are pure genius; one of the best character portraits you are likely to find in American literature---but it is a caricature after all. Lewis' choice of names underlines his cartoonish glee in writing this brilliant novel---Vergil Gunch, Professor Pumphrey, Chet Laylock, Matt Penniman, Muriel Frink, Opal Mudge, Carrie Nork, and Miss McGoun---names that could have been annexed years later by MAD magazine ! "Babbitt" has long been a word in American English, signifying a

conforming materialist citizen without a mind of his own.

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