



Free Air

Sinclair Lewis , Robert E. Fleming (Introduction)

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Fame was just around the corner when Sinclair Lewis published *Free Air* in 1919, a year before *Main Street*. The latter novel zeroed in on the town of Gopher Prairie; the former stopped there briefly and then took the reader by automobile in search of America. *Free Air* heads toward a West that was brimming with possibilities for suddenly mobile Americans at the end of a world war. The vehicle in Lewis's novel, not a Model T but a Gomez-Dep roadster, takes Claire Boltwood and her father from Minnesota to Seattle, exposing them all to the perils of early motoring. On the road, the upper-crust Boltwoods are at once more insignificant and more noble. The greatest distance to be overcome is the social one between Claire and a young mechanic named Milt, who, with a cat as his traveling companion, follows close behind. If *Free Air* anticipates many of the themes of Lewis's later novels, it also looks forward to a genre that includes John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley and Josh Greenfeld* and Paul Mazursky's *Harry and Tonto*. And the character of Claire, blazing her own trail across the West, looks back to the nineteenth-century pioneer woman and ahead to the independent-minded movie heroines played by Katherine Hepburn.

In his introduction Robert E. Fleming discusses the place of this early novel in Lewis's canon.

Free Air Details

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Illiterate says

A mildly amusing drive West, escaping the stuck up East Coast, discovering freedom & equality.

Tony says

FREE AIR. (1919). Sinclair Lewis. ***.

This was a novel by Lewis that I had not known of before I fell across it at a used book store. After reading it, I wondered how the author would manage to write books that came later that would be classics of American literature and win for him a Nobel Prize for literature. Lewis used this book as a way of putting down the class distinctions that existed in this country. He used the simplest of characters to represent the upper classes and the correspondingly lower ones. The story line revolved around a young woman's trip across country in one of the new-fangled cars from Brooklyn to Seattle. Along the way, she gets into a variety of troubles and is invariably rescued by a representative from the lower class – a garage owner from Minnesota named Milton Daggett. When two classes clash, one has to ultimately give in – and it is this giving in that plays out in the story. You can read this book as if you had encountered some literary piffle, or as a trial book for Lewis to get his feet wet about the separation of classes. It is not a literary feast: the dialog is silly in most cases. The characters are not very subtle drawings of usual types, but blatant icons of their types. When all is said and done, the novel is likely how Lewis put his thoughts together to come up with the organization of his later works. When you think about it, this book is more of an amateur approach to “Main Street” and “Arrowsmith.” When Lewis was finally ready and got all his thoughts together he was able to come up with the best ways to approach the American landscape. Look at this novel as an outline for a future experiment in writing, one which became wildly successful for the times.

Mike says

If, as the saying goes, cynics are just disappointed idealists, then here we have Sinclair Lewis' ideal vision of America on the cusp of his success as the razor-sharp satirist of middle America. Like Huck and Jim on their raft, Claire and Milt represent the great American ideal--freedom, equality, and a sense of adventure. They embrace a pioneer spirit born of blue collar pragmatism that at once desires and rejects wealth and class stature. Lewis' description of the great Western road trip is passionate and fun, but always tinged with an underlying uneasiness about class. In the decades leading up to the publication of this novel in 1919, traveling and leisure were becoming hallmarks of the American middle class--those who weren't rich enough to be chauffeured, but who felt above the working and lower classes who often served (and envied) them in the small town cafes and hotels they visited. What begins as a screwball comedy adventure story (this would have made a glorious 1930s comedy) turns into a portrait of class fears: falling in class, not living up one's class, being reminded of a lower class upbringing, etc.

While we begin to see the scathing Lewis of the 20s emerge in the jokes and wry comments scattered throughout the text ("Isn't it delightful that this is such a democratic country, with no castes," said Claire.), the novel has a happy, hopeful, perhaps even sappy ending. It's the ending we all WISH might happen--in an

ideal world.

James says

If you are usually a fan of Sinclair Lewis, I need to be up front. This is not one of his best. If you are new to the author, you may want to start with *Elmer Gantry*, *Babbitt*, or *Main Street*. However, if you want to give one of his earlier, more minor works a try, this one isn't awful. I know that isn't exactly a glowing recommendation, but compared to a lot of trash the world has to offer (I'm looking at you, Stephenie Meyer), this really is worth a go. And here's why.

I've gotten into arguments with other readers that Lewis tends to be a bit heavy-handed. He wrote in the same period as other American greats like Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner, though. If you've read any of those, you know that early 20th Century American literature is often plagued with heavy-handedness and "hit you over the head" morality. Let's face it--it was all the rage back then. And it got much worse a couple of decades later (see everything written by John Steinbeck). So take that aspect of it with a grain of salt, okay?

Also keep in mind that this novel was originally written as a serial, so if it seems periodically that you are being steered over a cliff to hang there, there is a reason for that. The original format was to keep the readers coming back for the next installment. So the seams show a little. It is really not all that distracting, and makes for a fairly brisk pace and an interesting read.

Now with the negatives out of the way, I can inflate your hopes with a bit of faint praise. Though the characterizations of the main protagonist Claire Boltwood and her love interest Milt Dagget just barely rise from the two-dimensional, the two do have their moments. They seem to grow and mature as the novel progresses, which endears them to the reader.

Claire is a bit of a feminist before such portrayals of women were commonplace. She decides to break free of her privileged, high-society life and travel cross-country by car. Doing so in 1919 when the novel was written was an endeavor not much less daring than heading over the prairie in a covered wagon, but she does it anyway. She would have come off as more of a brave heroine had she not taken her father with her, but the reader grows used to that and even somewhat fond of the father-daughter relationship.

Dagget seems a bit more hackneyed in the beginning of the novel. He even veers into creepy territory as he stalks Claire cross-country, but I'm willing to admit that also may be my modern day cynicism affecting my interpretation. Many love stories involve borderline stalking behavior, so I tried to overlook that. He also redeems himself as the story progresses, proving to the reader he really does care about the heroine. And given that many of the characters are stuffy rich people, Milt as the relatable Everyman works somehow. It may be a bit obvious, but it still works.

Overall, this is a charming read. It is a female "On the Road" thirty years before Jack Kerouac. It may not have the most developed characters, but the story is engaging and fast-paced. The story may change speeds once the journey cross-country ends in Seattle, but there is new drama to be explored there.

Though I wouldn't recommend it for those new to Sinclair Lewis, it is definitely worth checking out for anyone who is more familiar with his other, later works. Lewis is a little green here, but still shows the reader a good time.

Kathy says

I think it was Raymond Chandler who said that when he was writing a story and the plot began to drag, he would have a man come through the door with a gun. Sinclair Lewis did something very similar at the end of each segment of his 1917 serial *Free Air* by inserting an abrupt meeting between one of his two protagonists and the person he or she least wants to see. The first 150 pages or so of the novel version, published two years later, are so clever and charming that it's a real letdown when these seams begin to show.

Lewis was a master of place-setting, and his descriptions of the back roads between Chicago and Seattle are often first-rate. It's interesting to read a portrait of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota written three years before he used that fictionalized Sauk City as the setting for his best-seller *Main Street*. In the early sections, *Free Air*'s Claire Boltwood, whose opinions about provincial towns and townspeople have been shaped by a privileged Brooklyn girlhood, seems like a first draft of the later book's Carol Kennicott. Of the two, Claire is the physically and mentally stronger: she's capable of wrestling a heavy touring car along mountain roads for days at a time, and she's far quicker on the uptake than the dense Carol about the humanity and decency of most people, whether or not they've been formally educated. Hero Milt Daggett resembles other later Lewis creations, most strongly the self-made success Sam Dodsworth. He's an appealing fellow, alternately self-conscious and assertive and always yearning to improve himself.

The novel is far from perfect. Whether deliberately or not, Lewis gives both his main characters the same irritating on-and-off tendency to speak in telegraphese. ("Had nice trip; that's all I wanted. Never did intend to go clear to Seattle, anyway. Go on to Butte, then back home.") Secondary characters drop in and out of the narrative with no explanation, and the fate of a non-human who had added real color to the early chapters seems contrived, as if inserted in haste to meet a deadline. *Free Air* should have been edited down by a third between its magazine and book appearances. If the second half had lived up to the promise of the first, I would award it four stars. However, it's neither truly good enough for that rating nor ordinary enough to deserve a straight three, so my final judgment is three and a quarter.

Marie French says

Such a great book. Love to hear all the familiar place names along the way. Nice juxtaposition of the upper and lower class. Fun ending.

Mary Ronan Drew says

It's 1919 and Miss Claire Boltwood of Brooklyn and her father are on a road trip. They are driving west from Minneapolis to Seattle.

Think about it. Most of the roads are not paved. You have to buy gas in cans from a hardware store. The only mechanic in a small Montana town might be the blacksmith. Claire had to know her engine and how to fix it, how to repair and replace tires, how to drive up steep inclines and, more important, down them (in 2nd gear using both the foot and hand brakes.) The book mentions that the road down the western side of Snoqualmie Pass is paved with loose gravel. The road on the eastern side is just ruts down the mountain.

During their somewhat eventful trip, Claire and her father are rescued when their Gomez-Dep auto gets stuck in the mud by Milt Daggett, a lad from a very small town not far from Gopher Prairie, a location familiar to readers of Sinclair Lewis' next book, Main Street. Milt takes a liking to Claire and decides to make a road trip himself and follow her. He is a mechanic and owns a shop so he can hand it over to be run by his assistant and take off for Seattle.

After a couple of additional saves the Boltwoods come to appreciate the rough, countrified Milt. He has decided to put his mechanical ability to better use and enrolls in the University of Washington to earn a degree in mechanical engineering. But Claire's wealthy suitor from New York and her wealthy friends on Queen Ann Hill don't see what endears Milt to her.

The question is, can a wealthy society girl and a boy from a small town in the midwest with no appreciable education make a go of it?

The book held particular interest for me and it will for the rest of the 22nd Avenue Book Club here in Spokane because so much of the action takes place in Washington. Claire falls in love with the names of the towns and cities of the state and makes a free verse poem of them, from Cle Elum and Humptulips to Walla Walla and Mukilteo. The travelers move quickly through Spokane but they visit and linger in other places like Yakima and eventually Seattle.

Reuben Alejandro says

Good short read. Story about breaking barriers and social norms

Ward Hammond says

Oh, what a great story. A love story. I am in love with Sinclair Lewis.

T.P. Williams says

If you can get over the condescending, cynical tone of the narrator, book stands out for a couple of reasons - it describes a cross-country car trip at the dawn of the motor age, and again has a female character as the main character. I thought the romance with the man from the middle west was contrived, and the way he kept popping up in the narrative was fairly absurd. Dated, but interesting for being dated, giving a picture of America during and after WWI. Other characters were poorly developed.

Shelly♥ says

Written in 1919, this is the story of Claire Boltwood - NY socialite on a road trip with her wealthy businessman father from Minnesota to Seattle. They get a true taste of the wide open spaces as they motor their car through the small towns of the plains and mountains of the west. Perhaps their biggest realization is the beauty of Americans that wouldn't fit neatly in their social circles. Along the way, Claire picks up an

admirer in small-town mechanic Milt Dagwood. While he adores her, can she overcome her own prejudices to see him for who he really is?

I found this a charming story. I have not read any of Lewis's more famous works. I would say that his style is typical of his era, reminiscent of Fitzgerald, but with more small town charm in it. It reminds me of *Pride and Prejudice* meets *The Great Gatsby*.... Claire is a woman with an identity crisis. She has known nothing but social circles, but real life effects her in an unexpected way. I enjoy the time period, the adventure of learning about America in the grand adventure of the road trip. There is lots of vasilating in this story for both Claire and Milt.

Recommend for people who love the classics, or American History. Take a peek into the troubles of the early 20th century.

Kirk says

I can't remember the last book I read that made me smile and laugh so often. Lewis' prose is so fluid and so full of life and character. *Free Air* has instantly become one of my favorite love stories, and hopefully the start of a great literary romance with Lewis' works.

A special thank you to Steven Michels' essay on Public Domain Review, "American Freedom: Sinclair Lewis and the Open Road," for introducing me to the book and linking me to a PDF of the original printing.

Steve says

An absolute delight. I won't give it away, but it is just a light-hearted romp taking place in the early 1900s.

Joel says

It's a book about appearances and real wisdom and courage, classes and spaces, travel and discovery. Full of invaluable emotional observations and notes.

Jeff J. says

New York socialite Claire takes a road trip from Minnesota to Seattle. While considered a lesser novel by the Nobel Prize winner it introduces many themes that will be further developed in his later work.
