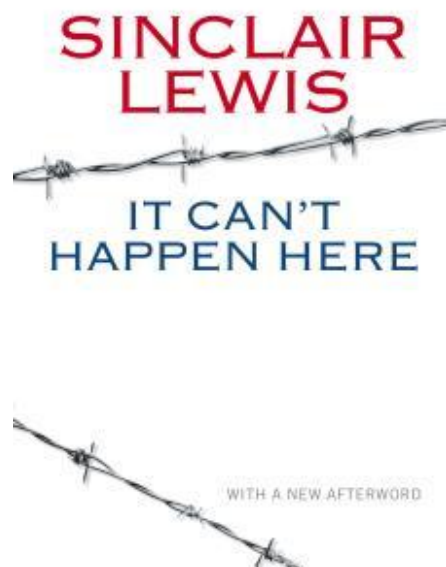


Signet Classics



## It Can't Happen Here

*Sinclair Lewis , Michael R. Meyer (Introduction) , Gary Scharnhorst (Afterword)*

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# It Can't Happen Here

Sinclair Lewis , Michael R. Meyer (Introduction) , Gary Scharnhorst (Afterword)

**It Can't Happen Here** Sinclair Lewis , Michael R. Meyer (Introduction) , Gary Scharnhorst (Afterword)  
*It Can't Happen Here* is the only one of Sinclair Lewis's later novels to match the power of *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and *Arrowsmith*. A cautionary tale about the fragility of democracy, it is an alarming, eerily timeless look at how fascism could take hold in America. Written during the Great Depression, when the country was largely oblivious to Hitler's aggression, it juxtaposes sharp political satire with the chillingly realistic rise of a president who becomes a dictator to save the nation from welfare cheats, sex, crime, and a liberal press. Called "a message to thinking Americans" by the *Springfield Republican* when it was published in 1935, *It Can't Happen Here* is a shockingly prescient novel that remains as fresh and contemporary as today's news.

With an Introduction by Michael Meyer  
and a New Afterword

## It Can't Happen Here Details

Date : Published January 7th 2014 by Signet Classics (first published 1935)

ISBN : 9780451465641

Author : Sinclair Lewis , Michael R. Meyer (Introduction) , Gary Scharnhorst (Afterword)

Format : Paperback 397 pages

Genre : Fiction, Classics, Politics, Science Fiction, Dystopia, Literature, Historical, Historical Fiction

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# From Reader Review It Can't Happen Here for online ebook

## ALLEN says

Sinclair Lewis's polemic novel, 1935's *IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE*, foresaw a dystopian 1936 when a demagogic New England politician, Berzelius ("Buzz") Windrip, seized control of the United States of America and ineluctably imposed a fascist-style dictatorship on the nation. To compose this 350-page playout on the theme of "Yes, it CAN happen here, and here's one way it could," Lewis put away the swift, raucous satirical style of his best-known and most commercially successful novels of the 1920s that had served him so well in *BABBITT*, *ELMER GANTRY*, *ARROWSMITH* and *DODSWORTH* -- in favor of a more traditional, yet as it turned out sometimes ponderous, character exposition and development.

Inside this suddenly-timely 350-page book is a 250-page novel struggling to get out. This probably accounts for the boredom-verging-on-disillusionment that some readers have felt in the novel's first third, and may wonder about its flashfire emergence from the grab-bag of Great Depression ephemera. It's almost unheard-of for an 82-year-old work of fiction to trigger an extra printing based on consumer demand beyond the modest needs of American Studies students and Lewis completionists and that alone, as they say, is news -- it was ordinary Americans suddenly confronted with "Could it happen here? Really, could it?"

So, how well does this book work as polemic? And to what extent can it be seen as an unwitting anticipation of 2016 campaign that brought Donald Trump to power? More than well enough to be notable, or so it seems to this observer at so many decades' remove. "Buzz" Windrip was no city slicker, though: in this novel he bursts into national attention after obscure political beginnings in a politically insignificant backwater, which even casual Thirties readers immediately recognized as the story of Huey Long, transplanted by Lewis from redneck Northern Louisiana to the decaying mill country of inland New England. The methods Windrip used to secure the Presidency, the people who helped him, and the irresistible agglomeration of interest groups that brought him to victory, were deliberately (but not exclusively) patterned after Twenties Italian Fascist and early-Thirties German NDSAP (Nazi-party). (Consider that such history is far from dust: the Nazis worked in such then-emergent, now "modern" techniques as targeting under-appreciated parts of the electorate to their eventual success.)

Windrip and his "Corpo" regime understand the distinction between persuasion and conviction in the solicitation of votes, know how to wheedle and threaten as occasion demanded, showing only when necessary the iron fist of thuggery inside the all-American velvet (cotton?) glove of populism, until he and his gang take power and the country slides irresistibly into totalitarianism. As Lewis's hero/mouthpiece, Jessup is astute at unpacking Windrip's pithy, yet ultimately meaningless slogans, though even Lewis can't really surpass the rhythmic vapidness of Huey Long's "Every man a king, but no man wears a crown." Yet Windrip's appeal was undeniable, not least from the fact that he promised, once in office, to guarantee each American household five thousand dollars per year (\$90,000 in 2017 money).

In poly-sci matters in this novel -- sheer well-informed background and logic and vote-counting -- Lewis was vivid and precise. Other, more "novelistic" concerns either didn't work as well as in the Twenties or were jettisoned under the weighty necessity of making well-reasoned attacks against the apparent charm of a fascist-style takeover. The Dickensian fizz of George Babbitt's neighbor T. Cholmondeley Frink in the eponymous 1922 novel, who becomes "Chum Frink," poet for pay to the masses, works well. In this book, Berzelius ("Buzz") Windrip is a passable moniker for an evil man, but how can we hold up "Doremus Jessup," small-town, liberal humanist, newspaper editor, to "Seth Buswell" in *PEYTON PLACE* or even "Gail Wynand" in *THE FOUNTAINHEAD*? We can't.

Clunky name or not, Jessup is a well-intentioned, well-educated and well-traveled member of the American middle class, New England (hence: fundamentally) small-town American, likeable to a fault -- Lewis's better version of himself. His character is well enough established, though it took Lewis a while: it took much more time than the one-dimensional object for satire of a George F. Babbitt, say or an Elmer Gantry. Not only does Lewis go on too long in this exposition, his mouthpiece Jessup goes on too long when he talks politics. Jessup's speechifying in the parlor and editorializing in print grind the action of this novel to a halt, a constant threat in even the most well-meant "novel of ideas." Contemporary reviewers noted the threat of fatigue possible under Jessup's (and to a limited extent, others') recurrent attacks of logorrhea. Yet I stress it isn't the ideas or language in this book that are difficult to comprehend, only that our patience is tried by their frequency and severity. What Jessup has to say makes perfect sense; his fellow New Englanders usually don't have the time to listen.

So, is *IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE* at times a tiresome book? Yes, but only for a while. An overstated book? Maybe. But the reader's perseverance will be rewarded as the first third ripens into the violent middle third and the tragically inevitable final third as America slips into totalitarianism. In actual history, Franklin Roosevelt smoothly steamrolled nice-guy GOP moderate Alf Landon in the 1936 election. Of course, we cannot really know for sure what is going to happen in our country's near future, but Lewis's novel for all its early awkwardness makes for a compelling "alt-history" and is well worth the time to read and discuss. Resistance may not be futile, but comparisons are inevitable.

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## **David Schaafsma says**

"The conspicuous fault of the Jeffersonian Party, like the personal fault of Senator Trowbridge, was that it represented integrity and reason, in a year when the electorate hungered for frisky emotions, for the peppery sensations associated, usually, not with monetary systems and taxation rates but with baptism by immersion in the creek, straight whisky, angelic orchestras heard soaring down from the full moon, fear of death when an automobile teeters above a canyon, thirst in a desert and quenching it with spring water—all the primitive sensations which they thought they found in the screaming of Buzz Windrip."--Lewis

I only just now finished listening to over 14 hours of this book, which I read for the first time, and found amazing--initially almost cartoonishly funny, and slowly, gradually scary, and then at times turning to horrific. It can happen here, Lewis said, in 1935, watching the rise of Hitler, as Brecht said also in *The Resistible Rise Arturo Ui*, and Orwell said in 1984, and so many others have written over the last several decades, including Roth's *The Plot Against America*. These stories exist because fascism is possible; some like Lewis in the thirties saw tendencies not only in Germany and Italy and Russia for the support of dictatorship, but in America, too, in movements they saw toward isolationism, xenophobia, anti-immigration, nationalism, and so on.

Lewis tells the story of a journalist and his family fighting Windrip and largely losing the fight, though what he says against the politician makes so much sense to us. We can't believe such a buffoon as Windrip would get elected and then turn his own military and media and government on not only his detractors but some of the very people who elected him on the basis of false promises against them. I think Lewis had in mind Huey Long as a partial model for Windrip.

I had read Lewis's *Main Street* and *Elmer Gantry*, which I loved for their social satire, his skewering of

hypocrisy, but in this book, published after his much deserved Nobel Prize, I think this just might be his greatest work. As I said, it started out as social satire, where you smile and laugh a lot at his wit, and then it actually turns out to be very moving in places. Bravo. Highly recommended. It looks like a lot of people are reading anti-fascist books now, which is good. This is a good one to consider in that bunch.

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## Jason Koivu says

It can. It is.

This book is the Nostradamus of our political past, present and potential future.

Check out GoodReads' stats for *It Can't Happen Here*: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/stats?...>

If you're viewing those stats in the future, when the graph no longer covers as far back as 11/8/2016, you will have missed the HUGE spike in activity on this site for this book. Prior to the ~~momentous~~ ~~astounding~~ absolutely fucking unbelievable election of 11/9/2016, interest in this book was hauling in pedestrian numbers, being shelved as to-be-read around 8 to 12 times a day on average. The day Trump was elected it shot up to 174 and has remained in the dozens, if not hundreds, ever since.

Why? Because *It Can't Happen Here*, a book written in 1935, parallels almost precisely what is happening right now. At times it's eerily similar. Political tactics, attitudes, slogans, etc etc, so much of it mirrors what is being said and done here and now, on both sides of the left/right coin.

You know all about it already, so why read the book, right? I mean, after all you're living it. Well, perhaps your eyes aren't as open as you think they are. In fact, that's a big part of the problem. So, open them up and read this book...before it gets burned.

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## Kyriakos Sorokkou says

Ο Σ?νκλερ Λιο?ις ?ταν ο πρ?τος Αμερικαν?ς συγγραφε?ας που κ?ρδισε το βραβε?ο Ν?μπελ Λογοτεχν?ας (1930) αλλ? λ?γο πριν την προεκλογικ? περ?οδο του κυρ?ου Τραμπ, ?ταν ?γνωστος στους περισσ?τερους απ? εμ?ς.

Με το εκλογ? του κυρ?ου Τραμπ ως προ?δρου των Ηνωμ?νων Πολιτει?ν οι πωλ?σεις αυτο? του βιβλ?ου εκτοξε?θηκαν στα ?ψη.

Πολλο? λ?νε ?τι αυτ? το βιβλ?ο προ?βλεψε την προεδρ?α του κυρ?ου Τραμπ.

Δεν γ?νονται αυτ? εδ? ?λεγαν πολλο?, αν?μεσα τους κι εγ?.

-Αποκλε?εται να βγει πρ?εδρος ?νας τ?πος που τον ε?δα να χτυπι?ται με ?λλους σε ρινγκ στο WWE. Και ?μω? βγ?κε.

Τα ?δια ?λεγε και ο πρωταγωνιστ?ς του βιβλ?ου Ντορ?μους Τζ?σαπ: ?τι αποκλε?εται να βγει πρ?εδρος ?νας λα?κιστ?ς, δημαγωγ?ς, ρατσιστ?ς, ?πως ο Μπερζ?λιους Γου?ντριπ.

Αλλ? ?μως βγ?κε:

Διαβ?στε τη συν?χεια στο μπλογκ μου ΒιβλιοΑλχημε?ες

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## **Jim says**

This extraordinary novel from 1935 predicts with uncanny accuracy the American political situation of 2016, and has authentic and frightening warnings. Sinclair Lewis satirizes with biting humor the potential for America to fall to populist demagogues with nothing to say but what people want to hear, and of the terrible consequences of the people's naïvete. A must read.

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## **Bam says**

This is a fitting fictional follow-up to the weighty nonfiction book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* which I've recently read. Written in 1935 in the midst of the Great Depression and the volatile political situation taking place around the world which facilitated the rise of demagogues like Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini, Sinclair Lewis asks the question: CAN IT HAPPEN HERE IN AMERICA? And the answer he provides in this book is YES, IT CAN!

Set in Vermont beginning in the year 1936, the main character is Doremus Jessup, born in 1876, who is the owner/publisher of the local newspaper, *The Informer*. He warily watches as that year's presidential election unfolds. The most popular candidate is the folksy senator and consummate actor Berzelius (Buzz) Windrip who travels around the country with a group of marching men wearing old-fashioned, patriotic uniforms--he calls these his 'Minute Men.'

At the beginning of his campaign, he issues a proclamation: The Fifteen Points of Victory for the Forgotten Men, which includes the takeover of the banks and workers unions, freedom for Christian religions only, declaring Communism and Socialism high treason, setting a cap on annual income, taking away the rights of Negroes to vote and women to work, and giving every family \$5000 a year. That last one is probably what gets him elected, as so many people had been out of work for several years. "The Senator was vulgar, almost illiterate, a public liar easily detected, and in his 'ideas' almost idiotic."

Immediately upon winning the election, he arms his Minute Men militia (his Gestapo) while enlisting more recruits, who help him swiftly take over the entire government--including Congress and the court system.

Jessup has two choices--to either lay low or speak his mind about what is happening. When he decides to publish a scathing editorial about the government, he is arrested and taken to jail, where he is given 'a trial' before a judge appointed by the government. His son-in-law comes in to protest his treatment and is summarily taken out and shot. Jessup is allowed to go free on the condition that he allows his newspaper to be taken over by the Corps, as they are known, and works with their representative to publish a government-friendly paper.

Jessup puts up with this humiliation for awhile but then quits and joins a new underground movement which

helps dissidents escape to Canada, and he secretly publishes a protest newspaper called Vermont Vigilance with like-minded friends--which could land him in a concentration camp or worse, if caught.

Some 80 years later, this is still very much a book of warning about the dangers that threaten our democratic institutions if we are not ever vigilant. Although not great literature, it is filled with satire and irony and does put our current political situation into perspective. Hopefully, it can also inspire us as citizens to get more politically active and work for what we believe is right. Read it and be warned!

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### **Susan says**

Written in 1935 this novel has had a sudden resurgence due to world events which somehow seem eerily similar. The story tells of the rise of the next President of the United States – Berzelius ‘Buzz’ Windrip, mostly through the eyes of small town journalist, Doremus Jessup (there are some very unusual names in this novel!), his family and local community.

Obviously, this novel was written during the time of rising fascism in Europe and the author has cleverly taken those events and the complacency of people to believe that dictators cannot happen ‘here,’ wherever ‘here’ is. So, we have the bullying, bluff, pretend humble, opinionated Buzz Windrip (sound familiar) whose every outrageous, offensive comment is instantly forgiven by his adoring followers (again....) as he pushes and shoves his way to the top, with the help of a shadowy puppet master and a horde of thugs, named the ‘Minute Men.’

Windrip is charismatic and power hungry; promising to restore the country to prosperity and greatness and assuring every ‘real’ citizen (real by his definition, obviously) a sum of money, from \$3-\$5000 a year. One of those hoping to benefit from these promises is Shad Ledre, who works for Doremus Jessup. Sly, lazy and vicious, he uses the new regime to rise to power and lord it over those who were nominally in charge before the changes. For soon there is a new balance of power and attacks on academics, the judiciary and the press.

This is a really thought provoking novel about listening to false promises and accepting those attacks on freedom which are taken for granted, until they are no longer there. It has a lot to discuss and is a perfect read for book groups, particularly in the current political climate.

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### **Lilo says**

October 8, 2015:

I am just on page 84 of this book but I cannot wait to write a review. So I will write a preliminary review.

Sinclair Lewis wrote this meanwhile classic satire in 1936. And I am afraid that fictitious history might become true, 80 years after this book has been written.

The satiric novel tells about an American presidential candidate who is very belligerent and bombastic. Irony of all irony: Even though he is clearly a fascist, he hitches a ride from the Democratic Party to come to

power.

Will keep you updated.

I URGE YOU TO READ THIS BOOK.

October 10, 2015

I rarely have time to read anywhere else than in bed or in the bathroom. At neither locations I keep any writing material. So in order to be able to treat you to a few excerpts from this book, I had to sit down at a table to reread part of what I had already read and take some notes.

I try to keep this review short, so I'll confine myself to only a few passages. They all portray the presidential candidate protagonist, whom, for simplicity, I will only call "The Candidate". I'll leave it up to you to find similarities to any of the present presidential candidates.

Here I go:

At the nomination event, The Candidate eventually retires to his hotel room, leaving a letter to be read to the electorate.

"Summarized, the letter explained that he was all against the banks but all for the bankers ... .. ; that he had thoroughly tested (but unspecified) plans to make all wages very high and the prices of everything produced by these same highly paid workers very low; that he was 100 per cent for Labor but 100 per cent against all strikes; and that he was in favor of the United States so arming itself, so preparing to produce its own coffee, sugar, perfumes, tweed, and nickel instead of importing them, that it would defy the World ..., and maybe, if that World was so impertinent as to defy America in turn [The Candidate] hinted, he might have to take it over and run it properly."

The other protagonist, owner of a small-town newspaper, whom I'll call The Newspaper Man, describes The Candidate as follows:

"Aside from his dramatic glory, The Candidate was a Professional Common Man.—Oh he was common enough. He had every prejudice and aspiration of every American Common Man. ... .. But he was the Common Man twenty-times-magnified by his oratory, so that while the other Commoners could understand his every purpose, which was exactly the same as their own, they saw him towering among them, and they raised hands to him in worship."

And the Newspaper Man continues a few pages later:

"The few who did fail [to adore and support The Candidate], most of them newspapermen, disliked the smell of him more than before they had met him. ... .. Even they, by the unusual spiritedness and color of their attack upon him, kept his name alive in every column ... .."

Will keep you updated.

PLEASE READ THIS BOOK.



October 12, 2015

I am now getting towards the middle of the book; more precisely, I have read to page 156.

As you might have guessed, The Candidate became The Nominee, and The Nominee became The President.

My, oh, my! What can I say? The book is getting eery. As a matter of fact, I think Sinclair Lewis has plagiarized “Pfaffenhofen unterm Hakenkreuz” (“Pfaffenhofen under the swastika”), a non-fiction book, written by a local historian, telling how my hometown was nazified during the 1920s and 1930s. This was accomplished with rallies (some of which Hitler, in person, attended), promises, marches, songs, propaganda, and finally with hard-core brainwash; and as you might have heard of because it happened all over Germany, with harassing and threatening those citizens who resisted the brainwash and sending dissidents of every couleur to Dachau. Actually, not all of the latter were sent to Dachau; some were properly arrested and brought in front of the “Volksgericht” (People’s Court), where a defense attorney was unnecessary. And a few were found dead, said to be murdered by some bolshevik swines. Mind you, all this happened before I was born (in 1939). So I cannot really testify to it and have to take the local historian’s word for it. (This book, btw, is out of print, and there is unlikely to be a new edition because there are rumors that the author has received death threats.)

Getting back to America: No, this can’t happen here. IT, definitely, CAN’T HAPPEN HERE. None of our present presidential candidates are evil. I have said this before, but I cannot say it often enough: NONE OF THEM ARE EVIL. Some are even very pious. Mind you, some are a bit power-craving (o.k., a few are a bit more than a bit power-craving). Some (and here I am definitely not naming names) are not the very brightest. One seems to be megalomaniac (might be treatable). This particular one is also very rude, vulgar, and scarily belligerent. I wouldn’t even rule out that one or another is a bit of a scoundrel, but none of them are evil. So IT CAN’T HAPPEN HERE.

Yet an old German proverb says: “Man soll den Tag nicht vor dem Abend loben.” (“One should not praise the day before the evening.”) I am not yet finished reading this book. So let’s see how it will go from here.

Oh, btw, I have trouble with all the names in this book. Being nuttin’ but an immigrant (listen, Mr. Trump, a LEGAL immigrant!), I am not very familiar with American politicians and other celebrities of days past. But I get by without identifying all of these characters.

One of the things I really like about this book is that it enables me to widen my meager ESL vocabulary. So for instance, I just recently came across the word “gas bag”. I had known “wind bag”, but “gas bag” can be so much more fitting. Sinclair Lewis even uses the expression “the gassiest of all gassy gas bags”. This is such a beautiful and flowery expression. I don’t know how I have been able to live without this expression for almost 76 years.

Talk to you again when I read further on.

In the meantime: GO AND START READING THIS BOOK.

October 17, 2015

I am now on page 258. America has been turned into a bomb-tight police state, terrorizing and murdering its non-conformist citizens. And I tell you, this COULD HAVE HAPPENED in the 1930s because, all

differences taken into account, Americans are NOT THAT MUCH DIFFERENT from Europeans and even Germans.

Yet I am rather sure that IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE now, in the early 21st century. But don't relax yet. Worse things CAN HAPPEN now.

So get off your couch and do something. Don't let worse things happen.

Will keep you posted.

HOPE YOU HAVE ALREADY STARTED READING THIS BOOK.

October 21, 2015

I have now read to page 355.

It's not funny anymore. And I don't mean the police state, as it goes without saying that this isn't funny. I mean the book. It is turning into a horror story, and I don't like horror stories. I never read horror fiction, and I get more than I ever want non-fiction horror from the news and from reading Holocaust memoirs, which I consider every decent person's duty to read.

So what is happening to this satire novel? I always thought that satire, while allowed to be acid, is supposed to be funny.

Could it be that Sinclair Lewis's wife, the journalist who visited Germany several times and even interviewed Hitler, got mad at her husband for writing too funny a book about such a serious matter as an abominable police state with concentration camps, torture, and state-approved murder? Could it be that she kicked him and coaxed him to describe in detail what oppressive, totalitarian regimes do to their non-conformist citizens (and occasionally even to their conformist citizens who fall out of grace for one reason or another)?

I am confused. Let's see where this book goes from here. I hope to be able to finish reading tonight.

However, regardless of how much criticism of this book I might come up with and whether or not I'll see myself compelled to snip off a star, GO AND READ THIS BOOK.

October 21, 2015 — evening.

I am now done with page 380; this means that I have finished reading this book.

So what can I say? First of all, I would like to express my relief that the last 25 pages contain no more horror details.

I don't wish to include spoilers. So just let me say that a lot of things happened already in the previous pages—changes in government and the like.

But now, guess what! The President of the United States has STARTED A WAR WITH MEXICO—no, not

because of illegal immigrants, and not even because he wants to build a wall on the Mexican border and the Mexican government refuses to pay for it. (There wasn't even any talk about Mexicans raping American women. Instead, there are songs about American soldiers having fun with Mexican girls.) No, it is something else.

Oh gosh! I forget what this war is for, but it doesn't really matter. The underlying cause is that the President of the United States and his Secretary of War (plus a few other government officials) consider the Mexicans inferior, and inferior people shouldn't be allowed to own a country. As I said, I don't quite remember the official reason.

And now what? Well, I won't give away the end. It is a bit inconclusive, and I am not too impressed with it. So don't expect a happy end. Who expects a happy end anyway with a book like this one?

Let me close with an uplifting thought: In the 1930s, there were no nuclear weapons. Thus, no one, not even Hitler, would be able to produce a total Armageddon. So don't worry about the ending of this book. It can't be all bad.

Today, however, there are nuclear weapons, and a WWII will, most likely, be the war to end all wars, except maybe for insect wars. (I hear that insects are more resistant to radiation than mammals.)

Now, where was I? Allow me. I am a senior, and seniors occasionally lose their train of thought. I wanted to close with an uplifting thought. That's right. O.k.!

So let's return to the title of the book. It says: "IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE".

(I decided to leave the rating at 5 stars. The general message of this book makes up for the flaws.)

P.S. February 9, 2016: After the primary results in New Hampshire, I am afraid, "IT CAN HAPPEN HERE." Time to start doomsday prepping.

P.P.S. November 9, 2016: "IT HAS HAPPENED HERE."

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## **Lyn says**

It Can't Happen Here is Sinclair Lewis' political satire and propagandized account of the rise of an American fascist.

Perhaps most compelling is the fact that Lewis wrote the book only a couple of years after Hitler's rise to power (and 13 years before Orwell's 1984). Lewis was an astute and keen observer of political power and was a canary in the coal mine for a world that would soon know much grief.

Considering that Lewis published this in 1935, it is eerily uncanny the way his fictitious predictions about American despotism would four years later parallel the Nazi blitzkrieg. Also noteworthy is Lewis' ability to create a uniquely American dictator, not a swastika brandishing Teuton or an Italian variety autocrat, but one who rises to power quoting folksy barbs and appealing to the New World everyman.

Also, this is an endearing call to arms for people to stand up to tyranny, even in the early stages and to be wary of the societal symptoms of fascist beginnings. Finally, this is simply a good story told by a brilliant writer, this being published 5 years after he had received his Nobel Prize in literature and generally considered the best of his later work.

Recommended.

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## Mike says

The first thing you might want to be clear about when you pick up this novel is that Sinclair Lewis is not Upton Sinclair. Not many people realize this. About a week after November 8 for example, when I dutifully brought *It Can't Happen Here* up to a clerk at Barnes & Noble, he remarked, "so you're reading this one and not *Oil!*, eh?" It wasn't until I got back to my car that I realized his mistake. Some may doubt my hypothesis, but I'm certain they are two different people. Well, almost certain. Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle* (which I read chapters of in high school US History class) and *Oil!* (which was turned into a great movie with Daniel Day-Lewis), and ran for governor of California in 1934, while Sinclair Lewis wrote this book, as well as, no doubt, many other novels that I'm probably not ever going to read. Surely no single person could accomplish all of these things. Adding to the confusion, it turns out that Lewis and Sinclair knew each other, and that Lewis gave Sinclair a (unflattering) guest appearance in this novel.

Having gotten that out of the way, it would be fair to say that Lewis's novel has a number of defects. Don't take it from me, though. Here's a quote from the introduction- you know, the part of the book that is at the very least probably not supposed to discourage you from reading:

Unfortunately, the writing displays the haste in which he wrote...many reviewers... complained about the novel's loose, melodramatic plot, flat and even corny characters, weak clichéd dialogue, padded political discourse, awkward sentimentality, and heavy-handed satire and irony...

I haven't been that motivated to start a book since the introduction to *A Critique of Pure Reason* hinted that readers of the text tended to experience frequent thoughts of suicide. As it turns out, I agree with all of the aforementioned criticisms. Even the last hundred pages or so of the novel, easily the best and darkest, are still marked by dizzying plot improvisation, scenes that seem more sketched than carefully worked on, dialogue filled with dashes, ellipses and exclamation points, mawkishness, and awkward sentimental humor. I don't doubt that people in forced labor camps are able to find humor in their situations, but the narrator's jaunty remarks about the family dog's not being able to understand English following a scene of torture, for example, contribute to a jarring, schizophrenic tone. The novel's Afterword clarifies that "the haste in which he wrote" was from May to September of 1935 (that is, he wrote the entire novel in 5 months), which may explain a few things, but the Afterword also suggests the reason you might want to read this book anyway. One reviewer, I learned, called it "a vigorous antifascist tract" if "...not much of a novel." Another wrote, in a

formulation I'm not convinced has an actual meaning (but I suppose I get it), presumably referencing two of Lewis's former novels, "...it is his worst book since *Elmer Gantry*; I think it is also, and more truly, his best book since *Arrowsmith*." A Marxist magazine called it a "...tremendously useful book." And so on. Point being that reviewers in general seem to have agreed that you read this book not for stylistic excellence but for its ideas; and people probably tend to read it more often at certain historical moments than others.

I can't say I was surprised, for example, to find that Buzz Windrip ranks pretty highly in the index of Fictional Dictators Whom Donald Trump Most Resembles. Windrip, whom Lewis based at least in part on Huey Long (as well as Mussolini and Hitler), rises to power on a platform of economic populism (one of his campaign promises, for example, is taken from Long's plan to seize all personal annual income in excess of \$500,000 for use by the federal government; it's made pretty clear, incidentally, that it's not so much that the working class who vote for Windrip- and eventually get screwed, of course- are passionate about fascism, but may be deluded about its true nature, and hey, the system hasn't been working, so they might as well give someone unconventional a try...it's the lasting economic effects of the Great Depression, however, that really seem to give Windrip his opening), xenophobia, and a non-specific mishmash of contradictory ideas and slogans; he has a hypnotic effect on crowds, holding mass rallies at which he whips them into orgiastic frenzies of nationalism (even if the people who go to the rallies never seem able to remember the details of what exactly he's said), and maintains a symbiotic relationship with a guarded, calculating, shadowy advisor who plans everything from the shadows- and who in turn needs Windrip's unconscious animal talent for demagoguery.

Moreover, I think Lewis has intelligent things to say about the nature of fascism, and the difficulties in responding to it. One reason supporters of different political parties in Lewis's novel argue over minutiae instead of banding together to fight Windrip is that they lack the experience of fascism and treat it with more fairness and less caution than it warrants. Since they believe in fairness and making arguments in good faith, they believe that at some level everyone else does as well. But fascism is only a political position in the sense that someone coming up behind you in a bar and smashing a glass over your head is a form of argument. A willingness to extend a fundamental decency and benefit of the doubt to opponents, while an admirable quality, may be a handicap when it comes to dealing with fascism, and hints at why people like Marat, Lenin or Mao were often more brutal and autocratic than the governments they helped overthrow. Fascism doesn't breed softness; it changes people, and Lewis makes a point of demonstrating this through his characters. He captures some of the identifying features of fascism- sadism, yes, but it is also so cartoonish, so self-evidently absurd and stupid, that it can be difficult to take seriously- and therein lies part of its danger.

The title of the book is not exactly subtle, and, just in case you didn't get it, Lewis scatters straw men throughout the early chapters to guffaw, in one case the exact words, "...it can't happen here." The natural instinct is to not let yourself be the same kind of sucker, whistling past the graveyard. But while it may be happening here in the US (as well as, in various stages, in the Philippines, Turkey, Hungary, Russia, China...), and while Lewis's book is prescient, it's hard to imagine it happening here in quite the way the book describes; things seem even stranger and more complex these days, and the novel that imposes some sense of order on it all has perhaps not yet been written.

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## Julie says

*It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis is a 2014 Signet publication.

I'll give you three guesses as to why this book showed up on my TBR list, and two don't count.

Originally published way back in 1935, Sinclair Lewis's novel seemed to transcend time and is a constant reminder what can happen if we are too complacent or too timid to make our voice heard.

There is no need to go over the context of this timeless classic, as it has been analyzed many times over by people far more prolific than myself. I don't think one must be hit over the head with a brick to see the parallels of this book and our current political atmosphere in the US, which is why there has been such a renewed interest in it recently.

If you haven't read the book, I hope you will consider doing so, and if you have read it, a second look at this stunning cautionary tale may be long overdue.

It should be noted that the story is dated, and is meant to be satirical, but the core lesson is one that remains as valuable today as it was when it was first written.

4 stars

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## Maru Kun says

UPDATE: Dorothy Thompson, Sinclair Lewis's wife at the time, wrote an article Who Goes Nazi?, where she guesses which of her fellow Americans at a party would become Nazis if given the opportunity. Well worth a read and a parlour game well worth reviving.

To give you the flavour, looks like Trump was at the party:

*I think young D over there is the only born Nazi in the room. Young D is the spoiled only son of a doting mother. He has never been crossed in his life. He spends his time at the game of seeing what he can get away with. He is constantly arrested for speeding and his mother pays the fines. He has been ruthless toward two wives and his mother pays the alimony. His life is spent in sensation-seeking and theatricality. He is utterly inconsiderate of everybody. He is very good-looking, in a vacuous, cavalier way, and inordinately vain. He would certainly fancy himself in a uniform that gave him a chance to swagger and lord it over others.*

There is no better time to read this book than right now, except maybe for this time next year.

The story in Sinclair Lewis' "It Couldn't Happen Here" is a familiar one: fascism comes to America through the ballot box and the path first trod by the Nazis is faithfully followed.

These days we have learnt the lessons of history and look with suspicion at grandstanding debates and at political rallies filled with bright lights, loud music and low-level violence. But in this age these are no more than a diversion from the natural home of a new American fascism.

Different from the fascism of the Nazis a modern American fascism would be born not in the democratic process but rather in the law. It would take its first steps far away from the noisy rallies and safe from the

glare of public attention in the grey offices of corporate lobbyists and in the proceedings of dull committees. A modern American fascism would be a tyranny of the legal opinion, an oppression of the outsourcing contract, a dictatorship of the draft regulations.

In dull back rooms mediocre lawyers would write legal opinions justifying torture and the majority of the public would support its use. Police would be given legal powers to seize property on spurious grounds and retain it for their own enjoyment (Canadian citizens would be warned by their state broadcaster not to travel with large amounts of money in the US). In drab state courtrooms judges would supplement their salaries by sending innocent children to jail. Prisons run for profit would be indistinguishable from concentration camps. Inmates would be sentenced to decades in jail for trivial crimes where they would be forced to work to supply goods for nominal wages.

“It Couldn’t Happen Here” was extremely popular when it was first published, so deserves recognition for the public debate it created in its time. It would need a thorough re-write before it could fulfil the same role in our more complex and subtle but no less dangerous age.

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### **Nandakishore Varma says**

Yesterday I was having a coffee with a friend. I told him how the recent lynchings in India, the violence against authors and books, and the ghettoisation of Muslims closely parallel 1930's Nazi Germany.

He dismissed my concerns with an airy statement: "It can't happen here."

Well, apparently...

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### **Michael Finocchiaro says**

A friend of mine that was recently in London told me that all the bookshops there had Roth's *The Plot Against America* and *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis. Alarmist? Perhaps, but as I already said in my review of *The Plot Against America*, maybe not.

In *It Can't Happen Here*, rather than Lindbergh tromping FDR as in *The Plot Against America*, we have a populist Windrip who takes the Democratic nomination in 1936 by storm on a platform promising \$5000 to each American citizen and naturally crushes the Republican opposition. Before becoming President (and subsequently dictator), Windrip wrote a populist book called *Zero Hour* which was your typical Drumpf-ian boisterous blather about the evils of everyone except himself and espousal of views about making America great again (but not in so many words.) Doremus Jessup is the protagonist, an ageing editor for the *Vermont Daily Informer* and as events unfold goes from "It Can't Happen Here" to "Oh shit, it has already happened."

Windrip issues a 15-point plan which has some parallels to Drumpf's platform and appoints equally unqualified people to his inner circle. Doremus' characterization of Windrip in Chapter 9 "The Senator was vulgar, almost illiterate, a public liar almost detected, and in his "ideas" almost idiotic, while his celebrated piety was that of a traveling salesman for church furniture, and yet his more celebrated humor the shy cynicism of a country store" certainly fits Drumpf to an extent.

Worse, Windrip "in between tricks would coldly and almost contemptuously jab his crowds with figures and facts - figures and facts that were inescapable even when, as often happened, they were entirely wrong" which is of course pure "Drumpf on Twitter."

Lewis' book is even more pessimistic than Roth's because America spins out into a mess of mass murders under the Gestapo-like Militia Men (M.M.) corps which are deployed nationwide and terrorise all sectors of the population preferably the educated, Jewish, and anyone even suspecting of whispering slander against the administration. It is a terrifying narrative and - again unlike Roth - does NOT have a happy ending.

We were warned at least twice by our own writers (and also by Orwell and others outside of the US) of letting ignorant populism run away with American politics. I hope that the dire sequence of events under the fictional Windrip will not be echoed by the reality of Drumpf, but then sometimes fact is even stranger and more terrifying than fiction.

I like how Doremus sums it up near the end: "More and more, as I think about history, I am convinced that everything that it is worth while in the world has been accomplished by the free, inquiring critical spirit, and that the preservation of this spirit is more important than any social system whatsoever. But the men of ritual and barbarism are capable of shutting up the men of science and silencing them forever."

A must read.

Unfortunately, gets more real every passing day :/

Incredible that ever passing day things continue to devolve into what Sinclair Lewis envisioned. Yesterday's hate filled publicity inciting gun owners to rise against liberals is not dissimilar from Windrip's use of the MM for fomenting racist attacks. Not to mention Drumpf's sexist tweets against Morning Joe. How many Doremuses will there be to #resist this current frontal assault on American democracy?

Time continues to slip by and the world it continues to happen here, unfortunately.

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## **Rick says**

I have always thought that if fascism ever came to America it would come clothed in red, white, and blue, with patriotic songs, and quotations from founding fathers. It would be nationalistic. It would extol military endeavors and elevate soldiers to the level of heroes. It would handle the race question in subtle yet effective ways. It would join forces with conservative Christian churches and begin to make life hard for anyone else. It would give free reign to the rich, the powerful, and the political supports they enjoy. It would ignore democratic ideals and replace them with a kind of Americanism that encourages love of country over love of people. Make no mistake, American fascism is possible with just the right rhetoric and influence.

Sinclair Lewis' book, *It Can't Happen Here*, portrays just such an America. His dystopia is set in the 1930s, depression years during which extreme solutions to economic problems were abundant. But if you think it can't happen here, and now, think again. They won't call it "fascism" of course, but we already have Americans who think this way.

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