



# 2020-21 STUDY GUIDE

## 3 Essential Questions:

- What happens when our definition of democracy is challenged?
- How do we identify the difference between propaganda and journalism? At what point does misinformation become harmful?
- What makes a nation "great" in the eyes of its citizens? Can any nation truly be "great" today?

BERKELEY REP PRESENTS

# IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE

BY TONY TACCONE AND BENNETT S. COHEN  
ADAPTED FROM THE NOVEL BY SINCLAIR LEWIS  
SOUND DESIGN AND MUSIC BY PAUL JAMES PRENDERGAST  
DIRECTED BY LISA PETERSON



**Berkeley Rep**

**Be a Rep**

## ABOUT THE PLAY

Written in 1935 during the rise of fascism in Europe, Sinclair Lewis' darkly satirical *It Can't Happen Here* follows the ascent of a demagogue who becomes president of the United States by promising to return the country to greatness. Witnessing the new president's authoritarian tyranny from the sidelines is a liberal, middle-class newspaper editor from Vermont who is caught in the chaos of social upheaval. Sound familiar? Called "a message to thinking Americans" upon its publication, this eerily prescient book receives a new adaptation just in time for election season.

### TO THINK ABOUT:

The story of *It Can't Happen Here* has been adapted from a book to the stage, and now to a radio play for the sake of social distancing. How does adapting a story for a different medium change the way that story is told and how an audience experiences it?

## LET'S TALK POLITICS: A GLOSSARY OF USEFUL TERMS

• **Minutemen** - In *It Can't Happen Here*, the Minute Men become Buzz Windrip's personal army, but the title "Minutemen" actually comes from a group of civilian colonists who formed militia companies self-trained in weaponry, tactics, and military strategies during the American Revolutionary War.

• **Communist Manifesto** - political pamphlet by German philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, originally published just as the European revolutions of 1848 began to erupt. It lays out problems with capitalism and proposes a natural shift to socialism by means of a proletariat (working class) revolution. This text was later recognized as one of the world's most influential political manuscripts. Listen for Pascal and Pollikop's discussions on socialism and communism in *It Can't Happen Here*.

• **Printing Press** - a device for applying pressure to an inked surface resting upon a print medium (such as paper or cloth), thereby transferring the ink; typically used for texts, i.e. books press was invented circa 1440 by Johannes Gutenberg. The actors in *It Can't Happen Here* (2016) received tutorials in rehearsal for operate the two printing presses that appear in the play. The printing press in the image to the right is from the 1930s and matches the style of Sissy's printing press from the end of the play.



• **Demagogue** - a leader in a democracy who gains popularity by exploiting prejudice and ignorance among the common people, whipping up the passions of the crowd and shutting

## GLOSSARY continued...

down reasoned deliberation. Demagogues have usually advocated immediate, violent action to address a national crisis while accusing moderate and thoughtful opponents of weakness or disloyalty. Most demagogues who were elected to high office changed their democracy into some form of dictatorship.

• **Martial law** - an extreme and rare measure used to control society during war or periods of civil unrest or chaos. Generally, this includes some use of military force whereby government military personnel have the authority to make and enforce civil and criminal laws. Civil liberties, such as the right to be free from unreasonable searches and seizures, freedom of association, and freedom of movement, may be suspended under martial law. The writ of Habeas Corpus, which allows persons unlawfully prisoned to gain freedom through a court proceeding, and due process, the requirement that the state must respect legal rights of its citizens, may also be suspended. In the United States, martial law has been instituted on the national level only once, during the Civil War.

• **Concentration camp** - a place where large numbers of people, especially political prisoners or members of persecuted minorities, are deliberately imprisoned with inadequate facilities, sometimes to provide forced labor or to await mass execution. Doremus Jessup and others opposed to the Windrip administration are held in a concentration camp in *It Can't Happen Here*.

### PARTNER SHARE:

*It Can't Happen Here* allows us to analyze the power of our words. How does the written word shape our politics and political discourse today?

## FROM THE 2016 PRODUCTION



Tony Taccone and Lisa Peterson in workshop for *It Can't Happen Here* in 2016

### CONTINUE THE LEARNING:

Take a look at the two articles we've included from the original 2016 program before listening to the radio play and learn more about the history of Sinclair Lewis and the political climate of *It Can't Happen Here*!

*"Intellectually I know America is no better than any other country; emotionally I know she is better than every other country."*

SINCLAIR LEWIS

# *The relentless American: Author Sinclair Lewis*

BY KATIE CRADDOCK

Sinclair Lewis' first wife observed of him, "Romance is never where you are, but where you are going." Lewis was relentless—in speech, work, the pursuit of relationships and ideas, and in drinking, which eventually killed him. His formidable and often frenetic work ethic produced over two dozen novels, scores of short stories, four plays, a screenplay, nonfiction works, and a handful of poems. This refusal (or inability) to slow down came at great personal expense, but it gave us one of the most celebrated and gifted writers in our nation's history.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

Harry Sinclair Lewis was born in 1885 in the small town of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, which inspired his hit novel, *Main Street*. His mother died when he was 6, and he struggled to connect with his father. His growing-up years were painfully awkward; he was clumsy with bright red hair and bad acne made worse by X-ray treatments. To cope with the cruel rebuffs of his peers, Lewis read voraciously, wrote romantic poetry, and got out of Sauk Centre as fast as he could, heading east to study at Yale. Unhappy there, he left without graduating, determined to make his mark as a writer. His short stories quickly landed in magazines, and he began writing novels. He met and fell in love with Grace Hegger, an editor at *Vogue*. They married in 1914.

The 1920s were Lewis' creative golden years. Lewis employed his encyclopedic knowledge, lively prose, and cutting humor to critique various aspects of American life in the 1920s—from small-town life (*Main Street*) to boosterism (*Babbitt*) to organized religion (*Elmer Gantry*) to science (*Arrowsmith*). Americans couldn't get enough of these biting assessments of themselves; the novels sold like hotcakes

across the country. In 1925, he was offered the Pulitzer Prize for *Arrowsmith*, but refused it because "all prizes, like all titles, are dangerous." He and Grace divorced in 1928, after he had begun an affair with Dorothy Thompson, whom he married that same year. Thompson was an accomplished political journalist with a rich understanding of Europe's complex, shifting politics; her work inspired Lewis as he wrote *It Can't Happen Here*.

Lewis was the first writer from the United States to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, which he did accept in 1930. Overwhelmed by the honor, Lewis privately predicted, "This is the end of me. This is fatal. I cannot live up to it." Indeed, his life after the Nobel was darkened by alcoholism and restlessness, and drinking tore his marriage apart.

This did not slow him down, however. Always searching for his next challenge, he dabbled in teaching, Hollywood, and even rehab, but none of them stuck. He continued to write, but never matched the critical or commercial success he enjoyed in the 1920s. He died in Rome at age 66 of the effects of advanced alcoholism. Dorothy wrote, "What was once Sinclair Lewis is buried in no ground. Even in life he was only fully alive in his writing."

Clockwise from left Sinclair Lewis in Florence, 1950; Lewis (right) as Doremus Jessup in *It Can't Happen Here*, 1938; Dorothy Thomas; Grace Hegger, 1912 (images from Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street by Richard Lingeman / Yale Collection of American Literature)



“THE ONLY  
THING WE HAVE  
TO FEAR IS  
FEAR ITSELF:”

# THE POLITICAL CLIMATE OF *IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE*

BY SARAH ROSE LEONARD

Sinclair Lewis wrote the novel *It Can't Happen Here* in 1935, amidst worldwide economic and political upheaval. The Nazis were increasingly isolating the Jews from their German peers. Benito Mussolini had invaded Ethiopia to expand his empire. Conflicts between the left and right political factions were growing in Spain. The U.S. fervently sought to stimulate the economy and put its unemployed population back to work. In the midst of it all was the novelist Sinclair Lewis — a sharp chronicler of the American milieu and the first American to win a Nobel Prize in Literature. He wrote *It Can't Happen Here* in response to the turmoil of the moment: the novel imagines what would happen if fascism sprung up in America. At the time, the thought was scarily credible.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

On October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed. People felt the crash's impact not only on the home front, but also around the globe as international trade fell by roughly 30 percent. Some economies started to recover by the mid-1930s, but for most countries the Great Depression, the longest-lasting economic downturn in the history of the Western world, lingered until World War II. Many nations experienced severe unemployment; in the U.S. it exceeded 20 percent at the worst point of the crisis. The deep, prolonged depression shook people's faith in existing economic and political systems. Hardship created a culture of anxiety and fear that fueled the rise of military dictatorships in Latin America and extremist political movements in Europe. By the time 1935 came around, fascism had emerged as a legitimate political ideology.

**Fascism**, a far right-wing authoritarian and nationalist system of government controlled by a dictator, took root most strongly in Italy, Spain, and Germany. The term itself originated with Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, who founded the first Fascist Party. While these governments looked different in each country, they shared three central tenets: intolerance of political disagreement, belief in violence as a necessary element in society, and intense zeal for the motherland. Fascism's growth was aided by a wounded national pride in the wake of World War I that contributed to populations eager to believe in their countries again.

Fear of **communism**, generally defined as a political theory invented by Karl Marx that advocates for collective ownership of the means of production and the obliteration of social class, also fueled fascism's rise. In the 1930s, the communist Soviet Union (the USSR) sought a global revolution. Communism's rejection of private ownership threatened elites who enjoyed great power in their countries and were terrified by the prospect of a Russian takeover. Their paranoia was fueled by the fact that communism extended beyond Russia — it was an international movement, grown out of progressive labor movements in various countries.

These dynamics gained steam relatively quickly. By 1935 the Nazis firmly held power and implemented the Nuremberg Laws, stripping Jews of their civil rights as German citizens. These new laws affected Jews at every turn: they couldn't date Germans, weren't allowed to vote, were expelled from the army, weren't admitted to municipal hospitals, and much more. They were increasingly isolated, enabling Germans to practice further bigotry and violence.

That same year in Italy, Mussolini exhibited his military prowess by leading a notably brutal and ruthless invasion of

Ethiopia, one of the few independent states in a European-colonized Africa. The war substantiated Italy's imperialist ambitions and aggravated tensions between fascist states and Western democracies. The displaced Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, criticized the world community for not taking action. He famously said, "It is us today. It will be you tomorrow."

In Spain, conflicts between the left-wing Republicans and right-wing Fascists were growing. Government restrictions on workers' rights sparked protests among agriculture and industrial workers, some of which erupted into violence. In 1936, General Francisco Franco led a coup and plunged the Spanish people into a civil war, one of the bloodiest wars in their country's history. Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany aided Franco, in a precursor to World War II allegiances. Franco won — and ruled Spain with an iron fist for 36 years.

The United States viewed Europe's mounting violence with fear, but remained ambivalent on the subject of fascism. The U.S. shared Europe's fear of Russian-style communism taking hold: influential members of society worried that "radical reds" would take advantage of the general population's miserable living conditions and stage a revolution.

Enter President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a Democrat, who epitomized optimism and strength in the face of adversity. In his inaugural address in 1933 he famously stated, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," and took charge of the administration with a reassuring manner. He established fire-side chats: regular radio addresses to the nation that quelled the emotional effects of the Great Depression by restoring a sense of confidence amongst the population.

Roosevelt's most ambitious program was the **New Deal** — a series of initiatives intended to boost the economy. A New Deal centerpiece, the Work Projects Administration (WPA), gave employment to around 8.5 million people and spent over \$11 billion on public works projects like roads, buildings, bridges, and airports between 1935 and 1943. Smaller but equally distinctive projects were dedicated to employing artists, writers, musicians, and theatre makers to bring culture to the masses. Writers recorded former slaves' life stories; music was brought to an estimated 92 million people each



week; travel guides were written for each state; murals were commissioned for public buildings; and plays were performed in multiple languages. These projects shaped the American physical and cultural landscape as we know it.

Of course, no bold enterprise can exist without disapproval. By 1935, critics of the New Deal had cropped up across the country, many of them identifying as Republicans. Historically, Republicans favored bigger government and Democrats preferred a less hands-on federal presence. But many Republicans began to feel that the New Deal overstepped appropriate bounds and impinged on the private sector, posing a threat to big business. The parties flipped in response and became what we recognize today: Democrats advocated for expanded government, and Republicans wanted to limit federal reach.

Another critic of the New Deal was the populist Louisiana governor **Huey Long**, known as “the Kingfish,” who led with a tight fist and a smile. Long became immensely popular when he expanded social services and developed badly needed infrastructure. He was notorious for overcoming opposition through intimidation and bribery, yet remained widely beloved. When he was elected to the Senate he began Share Our Wealth, a national movement that aimed to radically redistribute wealth: taxes would cap large fortunes and everyone would receive a guaranteed income equal to at least one third of the average family income. In an interview with *The Nation* Long was asked how he could carry out Share Our Wealth without instituting socialism. He said, “What sense is there running on a Socialist ticket in America today? What’s the use of being right only to be defeated? First you must come to power — POWER — then you do things.” Long proved himself an extremely controversial figure: many fervently attached themselves to Long’s message of “Every man a king,” and others, including Sinclair Lewis, denounced him as a dangerous demagogue. In 1935, Long announced his plan to run for President against Roosevelt, running for his second term.

The climate of this election year was a frequent topic of conversation between Lewis and his wife, Dorothy Thompson, an international political reporter and anti-fascist writer. In a letter she wrote Lewis while out of town on assignment, she noted that the Roosevelt Administration is “on the rocks” and that FDR “will probably be reelected in 1936,” but “if things move in the present tempo I think we may very easily have a Republican-fascist dictatorship in 1940.” Thompson also fed Lewis information about the shifting ground in Germany: she was the Berlin bureau chief of the Central European News Service until Hitler eventually expelled her from the country.

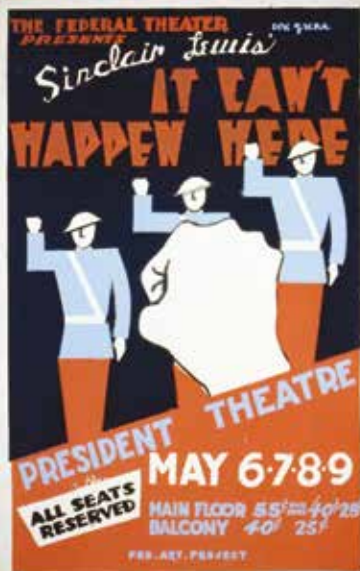
These conversations prompted Lewis to imagine what fascism would look like on the home front. Particularly influential was an interview Thompson conducted with Huey Long, in which Long indicated that he thought he could beat FDR on a third-party ticket. The couple believed Long was flirting with fascism. Lewis began writing *It Can’t Happen Here* when he created a fictional happy-go-lucky, paranoid president-turned-dictator named Buzz Windrip — modeled after Long — who beats Roosevelt in the 1936 election. Lewis solidified the Long-Windrip parallel by creating the character of Bishop Prang, who resembled Long’s ally, the demagogic, bigoted radio personality **Father Charles Coughlin**, whose fiery speeches attracted an audience of around 30 million listeners.

Lewis wrote *It Can’t Happen Here* in two months. It was almost too timely: Long was assassinated before election candidates were even announced, and Lewis had to do rushed rewrites to refer to Long in the past tense. The novel came out on October 21, 1935; it made the bestseller list and was praised by reviewers of all political stripes. *The New Yorker* called it “one of the most important books ever produced in this country” and *The Nation* called it “a weapon of the intellect.”

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



Left to right Father Charles Coughlin, Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Huey Long



#### CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

The novel was so prescient that the Federal Theatre Project, a WPA program that employed out-of-work theatre artists, proposed adapting *It Can't Happen Here* to the stage. At the time, Federal Theatre Project director Hallie Flanagan needed a hit—the FTP had accumulated accusations of being pro-communist, and its previous production got it in trouble with the White House because the show criticized Italy's invasion of Ethiopia (the U.S. was officially neutral on the subject). Lewis told the press that he gave the FTP the rights for two reasons: "first because of my tremendous enthusiasm for its work, and second, because I know that I can depend upon the Federal Theatre for a non-partisan point of view." Flanagan said the play was a good fit because it was "based on a burning belief in American democracy."

Lewis and co-writer John C. Moffitt worked furiously to adapt the novel into a play in about a month. Lewis reportedly said to his director, "You began by saying how honored you were to be working with me and how happy you were to be doing my play, but you've just been telling me that you want to change every damn scene in it!" He reportedly finished his tirade by saying, "It's all right with me. I think it stinks too." Lewis, often in a fighting mood, eventually refused to speak to Moffitt; Flanagan ended up being the go-between communicator during the production process. The play turned out to be the most ambitious project the FTP produced: it opened in 1936 with 21 simultaneous productions occurring in 17 states in Yiddish, Spanish, Italian, German, and English. Flanagan didn't think that the play was a particularly strong piece of art, but she proudly observed that audiences across the country listened with a rapt concentration that is rare in live performance. Despite the pains FTP took to remain unbiased, some critics labeled the play (and the novel) pro-communist. Nevertheless, the play went on to become a hit: it played for 260 weeks, or the equivalent of five years. Once the play proved successful, Lewis softened considerably and became its biggest advocate. He even played protagonist Doremus Jessup in a 1938 summer-stock production in Maine.

The novel and play have gone down in history as upholding Lewis' belief in the "free, inquiring, critical spirit"—which many argue is central to a democratic process. Today's press has caught on to the story's relevance: if you google "It Can't Happen Here" you will be greeted with more articles about Donald Trump than about Sinclair Lewis. It is indeed striking that a novel written so long ago can feel like a piece of nonfiction written yesterday—passages can trigger a wave of goosebumps at the uncanny resemblances—but there is also something reassuring in the repetition. The world has looked tumultuous and divided before and we've stumbled onward, fears and all.



**EXTRA EXTRA:** Check out this poster from Lyndon B Johnson's senate run (left) and the Buzz Windrip (right) poster created for the 2016 production



**#BEAREP**

**GET INVOLVED IN YOUR COMMUNITY!**

Want to make an impact on the political makeup in 2020? The best way to get involved in your community--or classroom--is to learn more about voting!

## **VOTER REGISTRATION ACTION PLAN**

Your Guide to Starting a Voter Registration Program in Your School  
**FOR HIGH SCHOOLS**

**When We All Vote** is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization on a mission to increase participation in every election and close the race and age gaps in voter registration and turnout.

WWAV's My School Votes program supports this effort by working to change the culture around voting and guiding schools in becoming hubs for voter activity

For support, questions, and to share highlights along the way, please email:  
education@whenweallvote.org

**#BEAREP continued...**

## **CLASSROOM RESOURCES**

**FOR HIGH SCHOOLS**

**See the full classroom resource here!**

use a smartphone camera to hover the QR code below and access the site



### **TO THINK ABOUT:**

Where have you seen examples of a demagogue in your life? How can you take steps to combat it?

Study Guide Provided by: Berkeley Rep School of Theatre  
Written by: Ankita Raturi  
Articles Written by: Sarah Rose Leonard & Katie Craddock  
Edited by: Berkeley Repertory Theatre Staff

 **Berkeley Rep  
School of Theatre**

**Be a Rep**