

ANALYSIS

It Can't Happen Here (1935)

Sinclair Lewis

(1885-1951)

“Doremus Jessup, liberal editor of a Vermont paper, is one of the few in his small town to oppose the nomination and election (1936) of his fellow townsman Berzelius (Buzz) Windrip to the presidency. Upon assuming office, Buzz, who is fascistic and dictatorial, obtains control of the legislature and judiciary, divides the U.S. into eight provinces governed by his henchmen, stifles labor unions, quells riots with machine guns, suppresses all racial and political minorities, and jails all his opponents. Doremus is temporarily arrested, his press is taken from him, and his son-in-law is shot for defending him. Walt Trowbridge, an honest ex-senator who had been Buzz’s rival for the presidency, flees to Canada, where he sets up a New Underground movement, which Doremus aids by secretly printing a paper in its favor.

His socialist friend Lorinda Pike assists him, as do his daughter Sissy, her fiancé Julian Falck, and his elder daughter Mary, though his son is a supporter of Windrip’s Minute Men. Julian joins the Minute Men to obtain information for Doremus, and Sissy for the same reason encourages the attentions of Shad Ledue, formerly Doremus’s assistant and now a local leader for Buzz. The Minute Men nevertheless suspect Doremus, discover incriminating documents, and send him and Julian and to a concentration camp. Sissy reports Shad’s revelation of secrets to her to the local commissioner, and Shad is sent to prison, where he is killed by the men he has had arrested. Two years later, Buzz is deposed by his former friend Lee Saranson, who in turn is soon ousted by Secretary of War Haik. Through Lorinda’s aid, Doremus escapes to Canada, where he joins Trowbridge and his many followers. During the war that Haik declares on Mexico (1939), Doremus takes part in the widespread revolt, converted by necessity from his former liberalism to revolutionary activity.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“There was a [good] reception in store for *It Can't Happen Here* (1935)—‘the hell it can’t’—which dramatized the contemporary fear of fascism by describing how a Huey Long-like dictator gained control of the United States in the election of 1936. In mood and manner, the book is a kind of [H.G.] Wellsian fantastic romance—but with sociology replacing science—and it should surprise nobody that it has considerably more propaganda value than literary value. Nowhere is the fable more incredible than in the role it assigns to Franklin D. Roosevelt following his failure to win renomination at the end of his first term.”

Edward Wagenknecht

*Cavalcade of American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*
(Holt 1952) 361

“*It Can't Happen Here* is a satirical study of the triumph of a hypothetical dictator, suggested by the success of fascism in Italy and Germany as well as by such American demagogues as Huey Long, who was assassinated the year the book was published. Its central character, Berzelius (Buzz) Windrip, begins in a small New England town and ends in the Presidency. The novel is concerned only secondarily with his rise to power, and concentrates chiefly on the fascist methods by which he rules the country after his election. He ruthlessly suppresses liberalism, wipes out labor unions, and extends his influence until he controls not only the executive wing of the government but also the judiciary and legislative.

His antagonist in the novel is Doremus Jessup, a liberal newspaperman who has known him from the time of his beginnings in a small Vermont town. Jessup, persecuted by Windrip because he has worked against his election, joins a liberal underground movement led by Walt Trowbridge, a former senator and

Windrip's opponent in the Presidential election. In addition to Jessup the liberal group includes Lorinda Pike, an intelligent woman of socialistic tendencies who becomes Jessup's companion; Jessup's daughter Sissy; and her fiancé Julian Falck. Windrip's American 'Gestapo,' the Minute Men, discover the plot, and Jessup and Julian are sent to a concentration camp. After several years Lorinda helps Jessup to escape to Canada, and when the Windrip government declares war against Mexico he takes an active part in the revolutionary uprising which results.

This 'novel of the future' is an interesting exercise in extrapolation; its action begins in 1936 (i.e., one year after its publication) and continues through 1939, the year in which the fascist governments of the world actually succeeded in plunging Europe into war. It demonstrates a thesis which Americans often tend to forget: that if dictatorship should come to America it would come disguised in the nation's highest principles (e.g., 'Minute Men'). The change of attitude which Jessup undergoes is significant; at the beginning of the novel he is vaguely liberal and dislikes violence. He and other liberals permit, or tolerate, the accession to power of a totalitarian government. Then gradually Jessup realizes that passive liberalism is inadequate to cope with the situation; dictatorship must be fought through an active revolutionary struggle. The novel thus reflects the militant anti-fascism which developed in Lewis in the period immediately before the Second World War."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 120-21

"The novel deals with the rise and establishment of a fascist dictatorship in the United States. Doremus Jessup, a liberal Vermont newspaper editor, sees with sorrow and horror the partisanship—not only of many of his friends and neighbors, but even of members of his own family—to the cause of Berzelius Windrip. Upon election to the Presidency in (presumably) 1936, Windrip resections the United States into eight 'provinces,' gains control of both Congress and the Supreme Court by sheer force, and effectively overcomes all resistance by means of the 'Minute Men,' his personal storm troopers. With members of an underground organization established by Walt Trowbridge, Windrip's opponent in the election, Jessup sets out to overcome the dictator's power. He is discovered and sent to a concentration camp, but eventually escapes to join Trowbridge in Canada. By the end of the novel, however, his own family has completely disintegrated."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)