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## Views & reviews

### *Medical classics*

## Arrowsmith

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*Arrowsmith* has a claim to be the greatest ever novel about medical research. Writing at the very beginning of a revolution in medicine that would yield a generation of powerful drugs, Sinclair Lewis evokes the past, present, and future of the profession, all through the career of Dr Martin Arrowsmith. Informed by Lewis's friend, the ex-Rockefeller Institute scientist Paul De Kruif, the book is based on real characters and actual institutions. It is a cutting satire, but beneath the wit is a powerful call to recognise science as the source of both truth and health. Numerous scientists maturing in the boom of biomedicine after the second world war testified to the book's allure.

Lewis was writing at a time when a drug that would fight the causes of most infection was as yet a vision without substance; penicillin still lay two decades in the future. His adviser, de Kruif, was however closely connected to the research on, and aware of the hopes for, the newly discovered phage viruses as means of destroying bacteria. The apparent success of phage treatment for plague therefore plays a key part in the novel. Indeed the book's invocation of the potential of phage straddles the line between fiction and reality.

If phage seemed to Lewis to be the alluring future, the promotion of sanitary behaviour is presented as the corrupt present. The most humorous part of the book is the description of Arrowsmith's time as assistant to the director of public health in the small town of Nautilus. His boss, Almus Pickerbaugh, is a wonderful rendition of the enthusiast in early 20th century United States. He began January with "Better Babies Week," followed hotly by "Banish the Booze Week," "Tougher Teeth Week," and "Stop the Spitter Week." This zealous promotion of sanitation is not just funny but also accurate. At the time, the real life Health and Happiness League was asking members to boycott public drinking fountains and to destroy all houseflies.

The novel's eponymous hero fails to cope with the absurdities of the public health department. Instead he escapes to the McGurk Institute, modelled on the Rockefeller Institute. Even here, he encounters managers—"men of measured merriment"—as well as his hero, the truth-seeking Max Gottlieb (modelled in part on Jacques Loeb). He is caught in the tensions between pure and applied science, yet there Arrowsmith can aspire to use fundamental knowledge to make great advances.

In the decades since the book's publication, McGurk and its real life analogues have served as the cradles of hopes for better health. Yet, at the beginning of the 21st century, the issues dealt with by that public health department in Nautilus have fresh importance. The relations between prevention, cure, and citizenship are again being renegotiated. So, although it is now more than 80 years old, *Arrowsmith* speaks to contemporary concerns—and fortunately this classic is still regularly reprinted.

Arrowsmith  
Sinclair Lewis

First published 1925

