

The man who knew why women sinned

REVIEW BY ARUN MUKHERJEE

WITH the publication of the second volume of the biography of Theodore Dreiser, Richard Lingeman has concluded his own 10-year journey through a "thicket of Dreiseriana." The first volume, in 1986, left his readers dangling on the precipice of curiosity, in typical Dreiser fashion, with a lot of tantalizing questions of the "And what of the flower-faced young girl of 18 named Thelma Cudlipp?" variety. This volume takes the story right up to its conclusion with Dreiser's death on Dec. 28, 1945.

It is truly a labor of love. Dreiser's life is a specially daunting one to record. A compulsive inscriber of the minutest details of his life, he left behind a mountain of papers, a potpourri of manuscripts, typescripts, page proofs, clippings, letters and diaries. Dreiser scholars have been wading through these materials and, thanks to their work, we have now the most intimate knowledge of Dreiser's life, including his most intricate and overactive sex life, which earned him the sobriquet of the "first cock of Greenwich Village" from H. L. Mencken.

The irony is that despite the concerted labor of a devoted band of Dreiser scholars, his stock has always remained undervalued in North America, perhaps because of his leftist sympathies. In an introduction to a recently published anthology of critical essays on Dreiser's best known novel, *An American Tragedy*, Harold Bloom, a reigning guru of literary theorists, declared Dreiser to be "drabber than ever."

Lingeman's biography may not change the conventional wisdom about Dreiser's place in American literature, but it is an important contribution to American cultural history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It captures the agony and the excitement of the rapid urbanization of America, the impact of the massive waves of immigrants that settled in the ghettos of the major metropolises, the charms of bohemian life, the rise of the emancipated woman, the heady mood of the Jazz Age, the onsets of the two world wars and the rise and fall of the leftist movements of the thirties and the forties. The drama of Dreiser's life was played out against these major currents of social upheaval. Lingeman records it all in a most engaging manner.

When Dreiser published *Sister*

THEODORE DREISER
An American Journey: Volume II, 1906-1945
BY RICHARD LINGEMAN
G.P. Putnam's Sons, 544 pages, \$51.95

Carrie in 1900, he shattered the complacency of a society in which only literature about "the smiling aspects of life," to use William Dean Howells' famous phrase, was permissible. Lingeman told the story of the suppression of the "immoral" *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser's subsequent nervous breakdown and attempted suicide, his recovery and the republication of the book in 1907 in the first volume of his biography. The second volume narrates Dreiser's next major battles against the controllers of public opinion.

It was a period when guardians of virtue demanded that books reward the virtuous and punish the sinners. And Dreiser paid a heavy price because he refused to meet this demand. The Harper's, for instance, cancelled the publication of *The Titan*, the second volume of Dreiser's trilogy about the American financier Charles T. Yerkes, after sheets for 10,000 copies had already been printed. *The Genius*, Dreiser's fourth novel, was left to rot in the warehouse because the publisher was unwilling to challenge the gag order obtained by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. Its violation might have landed him in jail. According to the society's head, John Sumner, the book had to be banned because it contained "vivid descriptions of the activities of certain female delinquents who do not, apparently, suffer any ill consequences from their misconduct but, in the language of the day, 'get away with it.' It is wholly conceivable that the reading of the book by a young woman could be very harmful."

What attracts today's feminist to Dreiser's portrayal of the "fallen woman," the woman who had to "sin" in order to support herself or her family, is exactly what the conservatives of the day disliked so much. Even Edwin Markham, the poet who described the sorrows of the American peasantry in his famous poem *The Man with a Hoe*, showed a total lack of understanding when, on the one hand, he praised Dreiser for his depiction of the stark poverty of working people in *Jennie Gerhardt*, and, on the other, criticized his heroine's decision to alleviate her family's poverty by becoming the mistress of a businessman: "Is a

woman ever justified in smirching her womanhood, in staining her virtue, in order to help her relatives — even to save them from starvation? This must be answered with an iron 'No' by all who take a deep look into life."

Dreiser's lasting contribution is in introducing these working-class women who lost their virtue so they could survive in the patriarchal and capitalist economy. While his immediate predecessors, such as Henry James, had drawn portraits of bourgeois ladies trapped in unhappy marriages, Dreiser went to the bottom of society for his portraits of "shopgirls" and unskilled assembly-line workers who often switched to the life of "sin" because they found "honest labor" "unremunerative."

Lingeman's biography helps us understand what gave Dreiser this unique insight. The two volumes uncover a good deal of new information about Dreiser and his times. Unlike W. A. Swanberg, Freiser's previous biographer, Lingeman's attitude toward Dreiser is more res-

pectful, and he does not make light of Dreiser's deep involvement in the politics of the left during the second quarter of our century.

However, while Lingeman's biography is interesting as a compendium of social and cultural history, his literary analysis is too heavily old-fashioned Freudian. Every detail in the novels is reduced to Dreiser's private anxieties or complexes. In today's theory-dominated critical climate, this kind of analysis is disappointing.

But then, one should not judge a biography on the basis of its literary interpretation. What is remarkable about Lingeman's biography is its ability to communicate the wider picture of the social and cultural mores of Dreiser's America. It is a picture that bears many resemblances to our own times. Contemporary readers will learn many truths here.

Arun Mukherjee is the author of *The Gospel of Wealth in the American Novel: The Rhetoric of Dreiser and Some of His Contemporaries*.



Dreiser: a stock undervalued in American literature

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