
VINTAGE ANDERSON
Winesburg, Ohio

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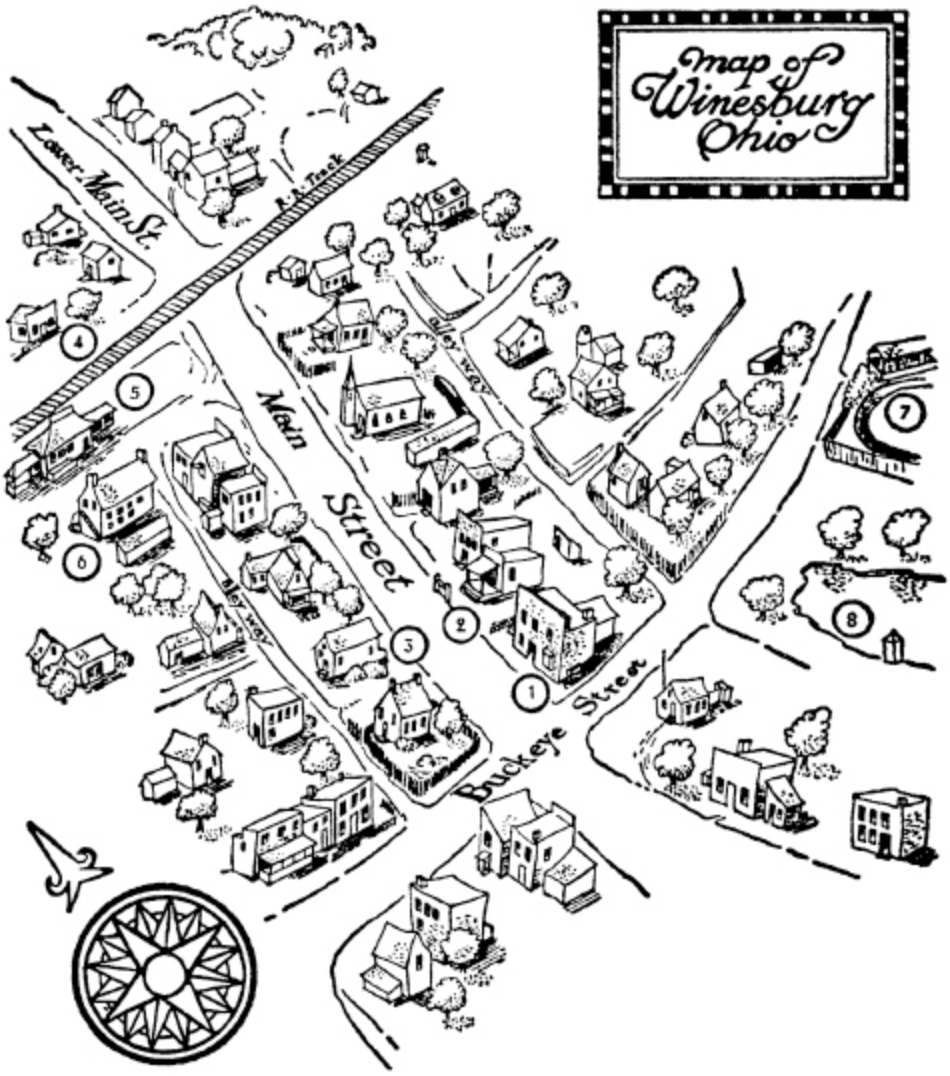
WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY SARA WHEELER

This timeless cycle of short stories lays bare the life of a small town in the American Midwest. The central character is George Willard, a young reporter on the *Winesburg Eagle* to whom, one by one, the town's inhabitants confide their hopes, their dreams, and their fears. The town of friendly but solitary people comes to life as Anderson's special talent exposes the emotional undercurrents that bind its people together.

About the Author

Sherwood Anderson was born in 1876 and grew up in a small town in Ohio. He served in the Spanish–American War, worked in advertising and managed an Ohio paint factory before abandoning both job and family to embark on a literary career in Chicago. His first novel *Windy McPherson's Son*, was published in 1916; his second, *Marching Men*, a characteristic study of the individual in conflict with industrial society, appeared in 1917. But it is *Winesburg, Ohio*, published in 1919, that is generally considered his masterpiece. Thomas Wolfe proclaimed that Anderson was 'the only man in America who ever taught me anything'. Anderson died in Panama in 1941.


Map of Winesburg Ohio
Lower Main St.
R.R. Track
Main Street
Buckeye Street
1
2
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TO THE MEMORY OF MY MOTHER,
EMMA SMITH ANDERSON,

whose keen observations on the life about her first awoke in me the hunger to see beneath the surface of lives, this book is dedicated.

SHERWOOD ANDERSON

Winesburg, Ohio

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Sara Wheeler

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Introduction

Winesburg, Ohio is a portrait of regional life based on the author's experience growing up in the 1880s. Anderson captures the fleeting small-town of those years and pins it to the page like a lepidopterist. When I read the book again to prepare for this introduction, I found it as resonant and poetic as I did in my twenties, when I devoured it in one sitting riding the rails from Chicago to New York, a journey the author made countless times. Almost three decades on, I wonder afresh why Anderson is not better known. At his best, he is one of the best. Hemingway admired him, and so did Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe, though all his disciples deserted him in the end. He would have appreciated the irony, as his masterpiece (alright: a minor one) is an elegy to thwarted expectation.

Anderson's characters include the lamplighter, the night watchman at the Paris Dry Goods Company, the tired-out hotelier's wife: all from Winesburg. News from the state capital Columbus never intrudes on the action, let alone from Washington, DC or the wider world. By including a map at the start of his book, Anderson encourages readers to familiarise themselves with the hugger-mugger layout of his Midwest settlement, and he begins many of the twenty-two tales by precisely locating the protagonist's house. As the seasons unfurl, the author conjures tin roofs baking in summer sun, a team of horses stamping in the snow, and fragrant wagons at berry-picking time under a June moon when a storm threatens in the west and silhouetted day labourers pitch boxes into express cars. Each tale is self-contained, but characters recur, and the background

remains the same: Winesburg, and the black earth of the Midwest.

Anderson turned his back on the sanitised decorum that characterised nineteenth-century American letters. *Winesburg, Ohio* is about mostly decent people who, if they haven't failed, haven't succeeded either. Love affairs and marriages almost always turn bitter. 'Defeated' is a word that recurs, and the past broods over the present, either in one terrible incident that shaped a man's life, or in eventless decades of frustration. Isolation and alienation sound like a fugue all the way through this short book. Of the unloved schoolgirl Louise Bentley, farmed out to people who shun her, Anderson writes, 'It seemed to her that between herself and all the other people in the world, a wall had been built up'. Everything in the town is 'soiled': the sheets in New Willard House, Dr Parcival's surgery in its squalid entirety, even the whites of Wash Williams's eyes. Women, regrettably, come off poorly. The young are often predators who tempt then brutally reject, like the teacher Kate Swift, provoking, 'resentment, natural to the baffled male'. Older specimens are 'grey' and 'silent', like Mrs Welling, the mother of the town's Standard Oil agent. John Updike, a fan of Anderson's, wrote in *Harper's Magazine* in 1984 that *Winesburg, Ohio* is 'a democratic plea for the failed, the neglected, and the stuck'.

Democratic or not, one can see why critics used to complain that *Winesburg* was pessimistic. I don't agree. Against a background of quiet despair, Anderson inserts sudden moments of transcendent human contact that redeem the gloom. In a single flash of light in the tale 'Death', Elizabeth Willard and Dr Reefy fall into one another's arms, holding tight in silent communion until a clerk noisily lobs an empty box on the rubbish already piled in the hallway. Even between moments, Anderson notes 'many strange, beautiful qualities in obscure men'. Throughout these pages I hear Wordsworth's 'still, sad

music of humanity'. Is there some universal truth in Anderson's provincial stories? Only in that the universality of truth lies in its nugatory quality.

Is *Winesburg, Ohio* a novel? Or a collection of short stories? Or thinly disguised autobiography? 'I tried to write about my own boyhood', Anderson said years later when recalling the genesis of the volume, 'but couldn't do it so I invented a figure I called George Willard and about his figure I built a series of stories and sketches called *Winesburg, Ohio*.' Men and women from Anderson's own life loom recognisably behind many of the characters. Enoch Robinson bears more than a passing resemblance to the author's youngest brother Earl, a man who walked to the beat of a different drum and who vanished for more than a decade, reappearing having collapsed on the streets of New York with a letter to Sherwood in his pocket asking why nobody in the family had ever loved him. But to make it true, Anderson had to cast his material as fiction. As V. S. Naipaul once wrote to explain his own reluctance to pen an autobiography, 'Non-fiction can distort; facts can be realigned. But fiction never lies.'

Anderson has a perfect ear for the rhythm of his prose. Towards the end of 'Hands' he writes of Wing Biddlebaum, 'When the rumble of the evening train that took away the express cars loaded with the day's harvest of berries had passed and restored the silence of the summer night, he went again to walk upon the veranda.' Another time, a guest at New Willard House 'was striving to wear away a dull evening by dozing in a chair by the office door'. There is something fine in that 'striving'. Similarly, Anderson has the true writer's eye for the telling detail – Abner Groff, the baker, sports a beard 'filled with flour dust', while Elmer Cowley has to take his shoes off in order to thread his recalcitrant shoelaces into their holes. Throughout the book the author deploys the first person plural to establish a complicity with the reader, drawing him close to the beating

heart of the little town. ‘Long before the time during which we will know him …’ he introduces the monster-knuckled, pipe-smoking Dr Reefy in ‘Paper Pills’.

Some readers have noted the lack of a beginning, middle and end, both in the individual tales, and in the book overall. Anderson defended the charge: ‘Life is a loose flowing thing,’ he wrote. ‘There are no plot stories in life.’ There is certainly no coherence in human lives – mine, yours, anyone’s – and like the best biographers, Anderson resisted the temptation to impose coherence on his characters.

Born in 1876 in Camden in south-eastern Ohio, Sherwood Anderson passed most of his childhood in the south-west of the state, in Clyde, a trading centre and railhead surrounded by farmland planted out with wheat, corn and cabbages. It was still practically a frontier town, with seventeen saloons servicing a population of 2,500. The gleam of kerosene lamps in the back of chilly stores shines down the years from the author’s childhood there. The second son, and third child, of an unreliable Civil War veteran, the boy Sherwood enjoyed at best a rudimentary education. His father’s harness-making business failed as industrialised manufacturing supplanted the little man, and the family was among the poorest, especially as Anderson senior talked more than he worked. There is more than a touch of him in the hotelier Tom Willard. The oldest three brothers shared a bed (four more children had appeared, one of whom died in infancy). Sherwood loved his mother, a stalwart soul who took in washing to keep the family going. *Winesburg*, *Ohio* is dedicated to her. She died when Anderson was eighteen, and later he said he was in love with her all his life.

‘In the last fifty years’, Anderson writes in *Winesburg, Ohio* ‘a vast change has taken place in the lives of our people … Much of the old brutal ignorance that has in it also a kind of beautiful childlike innocence is gone forever.’ He returns

constantly to this theme, observing elsewhere, ‘the time of factories had not yet come’. Trains steaming into the rail yard squeal rhythmically through the stories, adumbrating further mechanisation. The author catches middle America on the cusp of rebarbative change.

Anderson was five feet seven, with dark hair and fair skin, and in the adult photos one glimpses the dark eyes of a frightened rabbit. In 1896 he took off for Chicago, briefly enlisted in the Sixteenth Infantry Regiment of the Ohio National Guard during the Spanish–American War, and subsequently flourished as a copywriter. All this was the loam from which his work germinated. He changed careers; rose to become president of his own manufacturing company in Elyria on the fork of the Black River; took up golf and became a noted figure in the community, raising three children with his first wife. But Anderson was not a domestic animal, and on 27 November 1912 he experienced a catastrophic breakdown, or at least a psychotic episode: he walked out of his office one morning and vanished for four days, reappearing wearing a muddy suit in a pharmacy miles away saying he didn’t know who he was. Increasingly distracted after this trauma, he began to write himself out of his hole. That, after all, is what writers do. He was a dreamer, and one senses that he never really felt at home in the world beyond his own mind.

Anderson began to mix in bohemian circles, and in a room in a cheap boarding house on Chicago’s North Side started writing the tales that became *Winesburg, Ohio*. In the act of writing, he said, ‘all staleness in life floats away’, and elsewhere he remembered, ‘It was as though I had nothing to do with the writing.’ He had entered that trancelike state V. S. Pritchett (another master) termed ‘the determined stupor’ out of which great books are born.

Most of the tales were published in magazines in 1915 and 1916, and all appeared between hardcovers as *Winesburg, Ohio* in 1919. Anderson was forty-three. Critical

response was initially largely negative, not least because readers were not accustomed to depictions of blighted lives, especially not blighted sexual lives. After reading the book, an associate's wife who had recently sat next to Anderson at dinner wrote him a letter announcing, 'I do not believe that, having been that close to you, I shall ever again feel clean.'

All wheels turn. Within a decade the book became an American classic, studied in classrooms and lecture halls throughout the land. By the early thirties Anderson was one of the most celebrated authors in America, recognised in the street. So why is he not more famous now? Partly, I think, he was overshadowed by those two voluble colossi of early twentieth-century American letters, Hemingway and Fitzgerald; both had accepted his patronage as young writers. (The thirty-year-old Faulkner came to call in 1927 and Anderson helped get him published too; Faulkner later called him 'the father of my generation of American writers'.)

In 1922 – a significant year in English-language literature – Anderson abandoned the world of business for good. Increasingly, he sought isolation; he called it 'hunting solitude'. Flight is a leitmotif of *Winesburg, Ohio*. In 'Loneliness' a man 'began to feel choked and walled in by the life in the apartment', and in 'Mother' George Willard reflects, 'I just want to go away and look at people and think.' A restless adulterer, like his father, Anderson married twice more, moved around the country, ran a couple of local newspapers in Louisiana; when the Depression came along it politicised him and fostered a late-flowering passion for the labour market. He grew tired of his third wife, and when she went on a trip wrote advising her not to come home. She didn't. Anderson had by this time published a substantial body of work including seven novels, two poetry collections, plays and assorted works of non-fiction. But *Winesburg*, to my mind, outranks them all. He married once

more and died in Colón in Panama in 1941, having inadvertently swallowed a cocktail stick.

Willa Cather, that other superlative chronicler of the Midwest and almost Anderson's exact contemporary, once wrote, 'It does not matter much whom we live with in this world, but it matters a great deal whom we dream of.' Near the beginning of *Winesburg, Ohio*, the fat grotesque Wing Biddlebaum, 'with a kind of wriggle, like a fish returned to the brook by the fisherman,' tells George Willard, 'You must try to forget all you have learned. You must begin to dream.'

Sara Wheeler, 2013

The Book of the Grotesque

The writer, an old man with a white mustache, had some difficulty in getting into bed. The windows of the house in which he lived were high and he wanted to look at the trees when he awoke in the morning. A carpenter came to fix the bed so that it would be on a level with the window.

Quite a fuss was made about the matter. The carpenter, who had been a soldier in the Civil War, came into the writer's room and sat down to talk of building a platform for the purpose of raising the bed. The writer had cigars lying about and the carpenter smoked.

For a time the two men talked of the raising of the bed and then they talked of other things. The soldier got on the subject of the war. The writer, in fact, led him to that subject. The carpenter had once been a prisoner in Andersonville prison and had lost a brother. The brother had died of starvation, and whenever the carpenter got upon that subject he cried. He, like the old writer, had a white mustache, and when he cried he puckered up his lips and the mustache bobbed up and down. The weeping old man with the cigar in his mouth was ludicrous. The plan the writer had for the raising of his bed was forgotten and later the carpenter did it in his own way and the writer, who was past sixty, had to help himself with a chair when he went to bed at night.

In his bed the writer rolled over on his side and lay quite still. For years he had been beset with notions concerning his heart. He was a hard smoker and his heart fluttered. The idea had got into his mind that he would some time die unexpectedly and always when he got into bed he thought

of that. It did not alarm him. The effect in fact was quite a special thing and not easily explained. It made him more alive, there in bed, than at any other time. Perfectly still he lay and his body was old and not of much use any more, but something inside him was altogether young. He was like a pregnant woman, only that the thing inside him was not a baby but a youth. No, it wasn't a youth, it was a woman, young, and wearing a coat of mail like a knight. It is absurd, you see, to try to tell what was inside the old writer as he lay on his high bed and listened to the fluttering of his heart. The thing to get at is what the writer, or the young thing within the writer, was thinking about.

The old writer, like all of the people in the world, had got, during his long life, a great many notions in his head. He had once been quite handsome and a number of women had been in love with him. And then, of course, he had known people, many people, known them in a peculiarly intimate way that was different from the way in which you and I know people. At least that is what the writer thought and the thought pleased him. Why quarrel with an old man concerning his thoughts?

In the bed the writer had a dream that was not a dream. As he grew somewhat sleepy but was still conscious, figures began to appear before his eyes. He imagined the young indescribable thing within himself was driving a long procession of figures before his eyes.

You see the interest in all this lies in the figures that went before the eyes of the writer. They were all grotesques. All of the men and women the writer had ever known had become grotesques.

The grotesques were not all horrible. Some were amusing, some almost beautiful, and one, a woman all drawn out of shape, hurt the old man by her grotesqueness. When she passed he made a noise like a small dog whimpering. Had you come into the room you might have supposed the old man had unpleasant dreams or perhaps indigestion.

For an hour the procession of grotesques passed before the eyes of the old man, and then, although it was a painful thing to do, he crept out of bed and began to write. Some one of the grotesques had made a deep impression on his mind and he wanted to describe it.

At his desk the writer worked for an hour. In the end he wrote a book which he called ‘The Book of the Grotesque.’ It was never published, but I saw it once and it made an indelible impression on my mind. The book had one central thought that is very strange and has always remained with me. By remembering it I have been able to understand many people and things that I was never able to understand before. The thought was involved but a simple statement of it would be something like this:

That in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful.

The old man had listed hundreds of the truths in his book. I will not try to tell you of all of them. There was the truth of virginity and the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and of poverty, of thrift and of profligacy, of carelessness and abandon. Hundreds and hundreds were the truths and they were all beautiful.

And then the people came along. Each as he appeared snatched up one of the truths and some who were quite strong snatched up a dozen of them.

It was the truths that made the people grotesques. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.

You can see for yourself how the old man, who had spent all of his life writing and was filled with words, would write

hundreds of pages concerning this matter. The subject would become so big in his mind that he himself would be in danger of becoming a grotesque. He didn’t, I suppose, for the same reason that he never published the book. It was the young thing inside him that saved the old man.

Concerning the old carpenter who fixed the bed for the writer, I only mentioned him because he, like many of what are called very common people, became the nearest thing to what is understandable and lovable of all the grotesques in the writer’s book.

Hands

Upon the half decayed veranda of a small frame house that stood near the edge of a ravine near the town of Winesburg, Ohio, a fat little old man walked nervously up and down. Across a long field that had been seeded for clover but that had produced only a dense crop of yellow mustard weeds, he could see the public highway along which went a wagon filled with berry pickers returning from the fields. The berry pickers, youths and maidens, laughed and shouted boisterously. A boy clad in a blue shirt leaped from the wagon and attempted to drag after him one of the maidens, who screamed and protested shrilly. The feet of the boy in the road kicked up a cloud of dust that floated across the face of the departing sun. Over the long field came a thin girlish voice. ‘Oh, you Wing Biddlebaum, comb your hair, it’s falling into your eyes,’ commanded the voice to the man, who was bald and whose nervous little hands fiddled about the bare white forehead as though arranging a mass of tangled locks.

Wing Biddlebaum, forever frightened and beset by a ghostly band of doubts, did not think of himself as in any way a part of the life of the town where he had lived for twenty years. Among all the people of Winesburg but one had come close to him. With George Willard, son of Tom Willard, the proprietor of the New Willard House, he had formed something like a friendship. George Willard was the reporter on the *Winesburg Eagle* and sometimes in the evenings he walked out along the highway to Wing Biddlebaum’s house. Now as the old man walked up and down on the veranda, his hands moving nervously about, he

was hoping that George Willard would come and spend the evening with him. After the wagon containing the berry pickers had passed, he went across the field through the tall mustard weeds and climbing a rail fence peered anxiously along the road to the town. For a moment he stood thus, rubbing his hands together and looking up and down the road, and then, fear overcoming him, ran back to walk again upon the porch on his own house.

In the presence of George Willard, Wing Biddlebaum, who for twenty years had been the town mystery, lost something of his timidity, and his shadowy personality, submerged in a sea of doubts, came forth to look at the world. With the young reporter at his side, he ventured in the light of day into Main Street or strode up and down on the rickety front porch of his own house, talking excitedly. The voice that had been low and trembling became shrill and loud. The bent figure straightened. With a kind of wriggle, like a fish returned to the brook by the fisherman, Biddlebaum the silent began to talk, striving to put into words the ideas that had been accumulated by his mind during long years of silence.

Wing Biddlebaum talked much with his hands. The slender expressive fingers, forever active, forever striving to conceal themselves in his pockets or behind his back, came forth and became the piston rods of his machinery of expression.

The story of Wing Biddlebaum is a story of hands. Their restless activity, like unto the beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird, had given him his name. Some obscure poet of the town had thought of it. The hands alarmed their owner. He wanted to keep them hidden away and looked with amazement at the quiet inexpressive hands of other men who worked beside him in the fields, or passed, driving sleepy teams on country roads.

When he talked to George Willard, Wing Biddlebaum closed his fists and beat with them upon a table or on the walls of his house. The action made him more comfortable.

If the desire to talk came to him when the two were walking in the fields, he sought out a stump or the top board of a fence and with his hands pounding busily talked with renewed ease.

The story of Wing Biddlebaum's hands is worth a book in itself. Sympathetically set forth it would tap many strange, beautiful qualities in obscure men. It is a job for a poet. In Winesburg the hands had attracted attention merely because of their activity. With them Wing Biddlebaum had picked as high as a hundred and forty quarts of strawberries in a day. They became his distinguishing feature, the source of his fame. Also they made more grotesque an already grotesque and elusive individuality. Winesburg was proud of the hands of Wing Biddlebaum in the same spirit in which it was proud of Banker White's new stone house and Wesley Moyer's bay stallion, Tony Tip, that had won the two-fifteen trot at the fall races in Cleveland.

As for George Willard, he had many times wanted to ask about the hands. At times an almost overwhelming curiosity had taken hold of him. He felt that there must be a reason for their strange activity and their inclination to keep hidden away and only a growing respect for Wing Biddlebaum kept him from blurting out the questions that were often in his mind.

Once he had been on the point of asking. The two were walking in the fields on a summer afternoon and had stopped to sit upon a grassy bank. All afternoon Wing Biddlebaum had talked as one inspired. By a fence he had stopped and beating like a giant woodpecker upon the top board had shouted at George Willard, condemning his tendency to be too much influenced by the people about him. 'You are destroying yourself,' he cried. 'You have the inclination to be alone and to dream and you are afraid of dreams. You want to be like others in town here. You hear them talk and you try to imitate them.'