

Discussion Questions for It Can't Happen Here by Sinclair Lewis

1. This novel was written at a time when people were terrified about the future and believed any number of drastic scenarios were possible. As you read the book in the 21st century, did it strike you as broad or cartoonish? Or did it seem to reflect real fears and concerns?
2. Did you identify with the protagonist? His attitude evolves throughout the story: at first scornful of Windrip and his followers, then disbelieving at this rise, then convincing himself to play along, then stymied by fear and finally inspired to fight back.. Did you find this evolution believable? Discuss.
3. The book reflects the passionate arguments that took place in the 1930's about socialism vs. communism and other utopian visions for bettering society. Doremus eventually resolves that no social system will solve all of mankind's problems and that "men of superior cunning" would always have influence over worthier people. Do you agree or disagree and why?
4. The author presents Windrip's positions as obviously unrealistic and openly pandering for votes; against the banks but for the bankers, for Labor but against strikes, unspecified plans to make all wages very high and all prices very low. What appeals to voters about politician like Windrip?
5. The new Jeffersonian party formed by the Republican candidate doesn't excite the electorate because "it represented integrity and reason in a year that the electorate hungered for frisky emotions, not monetary systems and taxation rates..." What are the implications for democracy if citizens don't have the will or the patience to focus on complex issues?
6. Doremus repeatedly struggles with feelings that are less than egalitarian, noting that "there must be SOME crooks and swine among the toilers" just as there are among well-off people, and mentioning several neighbors (such as the ungrateful squatter farmer) who turn on him although he has given them charity in the past. What did the author think about human nature? Did Lewis think people are basically selfish? Do you?
7. After reading this book, do you have a different feeling about the term "class warfare" which is being used so often in today's political discourse? Discuss.
8. Doremus muses throughout the book that well-intentioned ordinary people are the "most facile materials for any rabble-rousers," and that the people to blame for Windrip's success are the "conscientious, respectable lazy-minded Doremus Jessups who have let the demagogues wriggle in, without fierce enough protest." Do you agree? Do you think it is important to stand up for what you believe in?
9. The book explores how Windrip's scapegoating of the Jews and blacks proves useful to the regime. Lewis references Huey Long's famous slogan, "Every man a king," when he notes, "every man is a king as long as he has someone to look down on." Do you see any contemporary parallels?
10. When Doremus is considering whether to escape to Canada, he muses that "having a wife and family to support" makes us fearful of doing the right thing. Do you agree or disagree and why? What do you think motivates people to act despite these fears?
11. In Michael Myers' introduction to the book he states that Sinclair Lewis "...believed that dissent – even a cranky, erratic, eccentric, old-fashioned version of it—was not disloyalty but at the heart of an American democratic identity." What do you think about that sentiment? Have you seen instances where dissent has been taken as disloyalty in our democracy or democracies around the world?
12. In his 2004 novel *The Plot Against America*, Phillip Roth agrees with Lewis' premise that it "could happen here." Both the authors were writing fiction. Could the kind of fascist government they portray ever come to power in the United States, or, for that matter, in any other democratic country around the world?