

Support Your Local Utopia

Vachel Lindsay's Golden Book

Sunfrog (Andy "Sunfrog" Smith)

2000

a review of

The Golden Book of Springfield, Vachel Lindsay, 1920, Re-Introduction by Ron Sakolsky, 1999, Charles H. Kerr Publishers, Chicago

Nearly three decades after moving to central Illinois to share radical ideas with students at Sangamon State college, activist-writer-anarchist-musicologist-deejay-and-dreamer Ron Sakolsky is planting the seeds of his exodus from the job that brought him there, at the now sanitized, corporatized, and renamed University of Illinois at Springfield.

When he leaves his home at the humble rural abode known as Fool's Paradise, Sakolsky will bequeath the "Land of Lincoln" a radical literary legacy of its lesser-known native son, the visionary romantic Vachel Lindsay. Sakolsky helped revive the bizarre utopian trajectory of the *Golden Book*, Lindsay's previously out-of-print novel that takes place in Springfield in 2018, not for its impeccably cogent prose, he says, but rather for its intoxicatingly creative prophecy.

In the pithy and beautifully written introduction, Sakolsky searches, scavenges, and speculates to script an alternative history for his region, weaving Lindsay's lyrical hallucinations of heaven on earth into the context of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century utopian scene. For Sakolsky, Lindsay lived in an imaginative interstice between the passionate attraction of Fourier and the compassionate ecumenicism of midwest evangelicals, both seizing the mantle of the nineteenth-century utopian tradition, rejecting the greed and racism of many of his contemporaries, and foreshadowing the lush language games of the Surrealists and the dense discursive diatribes of the Beats.

In contrast to the nauseatingly patriotic pioneer mythos surrounding Abraham Lincoln, the lore that Sakolsky patches together about Lindsay makes a much more fascinating and radical story. This new edition of *The Golden Book* is Ron's gift to the region he's called home for almost thirty years.

Better known as an eccentric poet and virtually unknown outside small circles of literary scholars and Springfield history buffs, Lindsay, as Sakolsky helps his hometown and the world see him, is a sort of prairie Blake of bible communism, a shamanic sage of Sangamon County, a William Morris of the midwest. Compared to other utopian novels, Lindsay's *Golden Book* failed to inspire me with its social template for the twenty-first century. His magical Springfield is politically problematic—contaminated as it is with paeans to patriotism, puritanism, and a naive notion of a benign World Government; however, at the same time, Lindsay is poetically dynamic, announcing a village of voluptuous beauty, populated by unusual people and fanciful fairies, buddhas, butterflies, and angels.

Lindsay's spiritual stance avoids rigid religiosity since his enthusiasm hints at sloppy mysticism and inclusive pantheism. Indeed, Lindsay includes in his visions of the twenty-first century a psychedelic inversion of Adam and Eve's bad fruit experience in the Garden of Eden; in the new Springfield, the people eat the sweet fruit of the Amaranth Apple and taste lavish and enchanted visions from "the far jungles of Heaven." A little crazy for sure, Lindsay's linguistic elixir is brewed in a cacophonous cathedral of dreams—not in a political theory colloquium.

Sakolsky perhaps anticipates readers' mixed reactions to the wacky world views espoused in Lindsay's prophecies. Rather than ignore or dispel the more difficult aspects of Lindsay's work, Sakolsky urges each of us to "become a participant in the visionary process" because he sees Lindsay not as a "proselytizer for a particular utopian blueprint, but an advocate of utopian thinking per se." So, hopefully, many readers will leave Sakolsky's sharp scholarship and Lindsay's strange narrative with a hunger to search for the lost utopias lingering in their own backyards and the magic apples growing in their own orchards.

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