

## Matula Thoughts 7 February 2020

### Leaps, literacy, & opinions

2142 words



### One.

**Leap Year.** A celestial accounting anomaly this month on Saturday February 29 will have only minor impact on people's lives and world economies. The extra business day, when it happens, is always good for the bottom line although unlikely to make or break a fiscal year, however dealing with leap year birthdays is tricky. Birth on a leap day is rare, only one chance in 1,461 producing only 5 million leaping/leapsters in the world (0.068%) or less than 200,000 in the United States. Accounting for leaping birthdays in ordinary years is a matter of jurisdiction - states and nations usually stipulate either February 28 or March 1 as the legal birthday for leapsters. Rumor has it that extraterrestrial Superman has a February 29 birthday, although how that came about given his planet of origin is unclear. The first Salem witchcraft arrests took place in 1632 on February 29, *Gone with the Wind* won 8 Oscars at the Academy Awards on leap day 1940, and Gordie Howe made his 800<sup>th</sup> NHL career goal on that peculiar day in 1980 while playing for the Hartford Whalers. (Howe was 51 years old at the time, scored one more goal that year, and retired.) Coincidentally, Hugh Cabot's first full year at the University of Michigan at the start of the first century of Michigan Urology in 1920 was also a leap year. It has been a great hundred years for Michigan Urology, although for Cabot's career in retrospect, it would have been better if he could have looked before he leaped into the job.

## Two.



**Harry Sinclair Lewis**, an author of some relevance to us, was born on this more likely day of the month, 7 February 1885 - a common year, in Sauk Centre, Minnesota. His path in life would intersect tangentially, but famously with the University of Michigan Medical School. His father, country physician Edwin J. Lewis, had graduated from Rush Medical College in 1877 under the instruction of Professor of Surgery Moses Gunn, who had left Ann Arbor a decade earlier. Gunn, a powerful figure at Rush and treasurer of its board since 1871, retained fond friendships and memories on Ann Arbor, returning on a regular basis.

Sinclair's mother died of tuberculosis when he was three and Dr. Lewis remarried the following year. Sinclair, the third of three sons, was bookish, un-athletic, and socially awkward. He had a difficult relationship with his father and at age 13 tried to run away from home to join the Spanish-American War effort as a drummer boy. The unsuccessful attempt led to the deprecating nickname "Doodle" after Yankee Doodle. Four years later, in 1902, he made his escape from Sauk Centre to Oberlin Academy and then to Yale University in 1903, taking leave to work as a janitor for a few months from late 1906 to early 1907 at Helicon Home Colony, a living cooperative established by Upton Sinclair (1878-1968) in Englewood, New Jersey. The Sinclair name coincidence set a high literary bar. Upton Sinclair, an established writer, funded the Helicon experiment with money from his successful novel *The Jungle* (1906), announcing it in a letter to the *New York Times* on July 16, 1906. The short-lived colony opened in October in an old school building called Helicon Hall. A chickenpox outbreak among ten children in the utopian home was reported in the *New York Times* on February 14, 1907. Janitorial hygiene was not implicated, although the custom of letting children spend their days unencumbered by clothes may have helped the microbe spread. During its short time-span the colony had 46 adults and 15 children in residence until March 16, 1907 when it burned down.

Back at Yale Sinclair Lewis honed his literary skills, graduated in 1908, and became a writer with *Main Street* in 1920 as his first success. His fictional account in 1926 of an American

physician with a crisis of conscience, Martin Arrowsmith, centered around medical education modelled on the University of Michigan Medical School and explored the tensions between medical practice and research, as well as public service and personal gain. *Arrowsmith* was a remarkable book for its time, a commercial success, and a window into the world of medical education and research. I admired it as a medical student and reread it more recently. Notably, the modern edition I read included an introduction by Howard Markel, colleague here at Michigan, whose name is also back in the news for his work on historic quarantines, related to the current coronavirus spread and efforts to restrict it. [*Prescribing Arrowsmith*, *New York Times Book Review*, September 24, 2000 p. 35.; *Quarantine!*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999; PBS News Hour, January 24, 2020.] In the context of today's sensibilities, the dialogue and plot in *Arrowsmith* fall a bit short of authenticity, no surprise given that neither Lewis nor his collaborator, Paul de Kruif, actually practiced medicine. Furthermore, as a University of Michigan (UM) student de Kruif, with a Ph.D. in 1916, held a grudge against contemporary medical practice, as demonstrated in his anonymous essay that skewered the profession.

### Three.



**Paul de Kruif**, mentioned on these pages last year (June 7, 2019), studied and worked at UM under Frederick Novy (later dean) who helped him get a job at the prestigious Rockefeller Institute in 1920. After only a short time at Rockefeller, de Kruif was invited to write a 14-page essay on medicine for the compendium *Civilization in the United States, An Inquiry by Thirty Americans* by Harold Stearns in 1922. de Kruif, a Ph.D. but not an M.D., was a strange choice for this collection of essays by otherwise prominent authorities and that may be one reason he was the only anonymous author in the book. de Kruif bemoaned “the almost universal confusion of the *art* of the practice of medicine with the *science* of the study of disease,” a complaint similar to that of George Bernard Shaw in *The Doctor's Dilemma*, whom de Kruif mentions at the start of his essay. Directly skewering the director of the Rockefeller Institute Hospital and

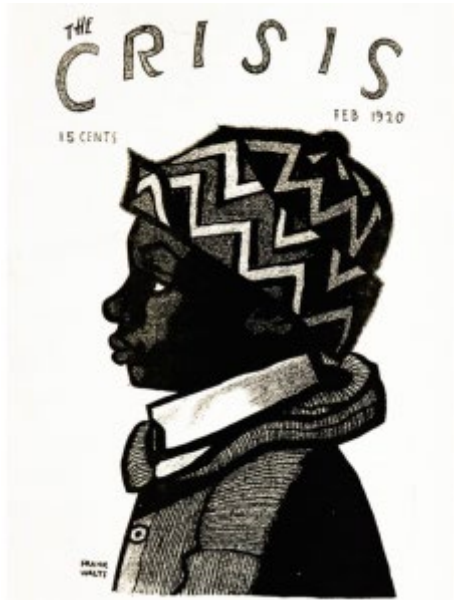
Victor Vaughan, recent dean of UM Medical School, de Kruif was quickly identified as the author of the untoward piece and fired from his scientific job at Rockefeller. In the long run this turned out to be a good thing, for de Kruif found his calling as an authoritative scientific journalist, one of the earliest to explain science effectively to public audiences. *Microbe Hunters*, published by de Kruif in 1926 inspired and introduced me as a teenager to virology and the bacteriophage concept when I read it 35 years later.



An introduction to a modern edition of the book by the pathologist Francisco Gonzalez-Crussi of Northwestern University begins with an appreciation of the enduring impact of *Microbe Hunters*.

“It does not happen very often that a book read in our youth should quicken, when reread after many years, the lively impressions that first moved us. Indeed, the opposite most commonly occurs – namely, that the volume fills us with a sort of puzzled disappointment, a melancholy feeling of defeated expectations. We are prompted to ask, ‘How could I have liked this stuff?’ ... It is thus no small praise to say of Paul de Kruif’s *Microbe Hunters* that, well over half a century after it first saw the light (1926) it manages to delight, and frequently entrance old and new readers...”

**Four.**



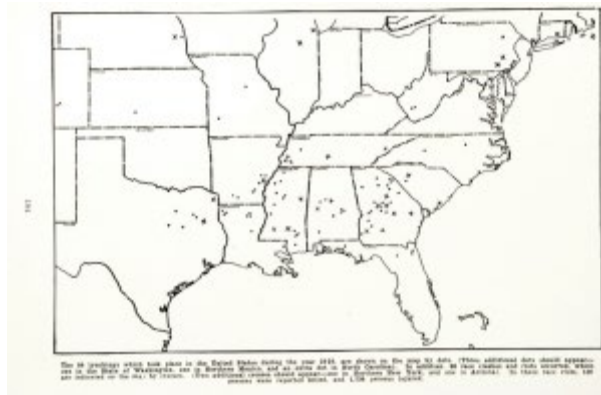
*The Crisis*. In February of leap year 1920 Hugh Cabot and the University of Michigan optimistically settled into each other, the crises of WWI and the influenza epidemic comfortably in the past. Other Americans and institutions, however, were focused on crises still immediate for them and one notable example is a magazine aptly named *The Crisis*. [Above: *The Crisis* cover February, 1920. Below: W.E.B. Du Bois, 1868 – 1963, co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1918.]



Founded in 1910 under W.E.B. Du Bois as editor plus six other influential thinkers, the monthly periodical held the original title *The CRISIS: A Record of the Darker Races*. The title came from an abolitionist poem in 1844 by James Russell Lowell, *The Present Crisis*. Lowell, member of the New England intellectual community that included the Cabot family and Oliver Wendell Holmes, later became the first editor of the *Atlantic Magazine* (1857). *The Crisis* was an NAACP publication, but Du Bois had a more personal intention: “I determine to make the opinion of the *Crisis* a personal opinion; because, as I argued, no organization can express definite and clear cut opinions...”.



The initial monthly circulation of 1,000 grew to well over 100,000 by 1920 with 70-page issues of news, politics, education, and culture. Du Bois focused particular attention to matters of social injustice. Among the seven articles in the February, 1920 issue was “The lynching industry, 1919” that included the annual lynching map, also summarized in an adjacent advertisement for the NAACP (below). Other ads featured products, properties, jobs, and schools.





When I was a teenager reading *Microbe Hunters*, other Americans were reading *The Crisis*. Both publications remain in print, although *The Crisis* has become a quarterly, in both digital and print formats.

**Five.**

**The 1619 Project** is an important initiative of Nikole Hannah-Jones and other *New York Times* journalists to examine the legacy of American slavery at the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved people from the Kingdom of Ndongo (in modern Angola) to Port Comfort in the British Colony of Virginia on August 20, 1619 – fourth centennial of an event far more consequential than that at Plymouth Colony, one year later. Last week the UM Wallace House hosted a public forum at Rackham Auditorium with Hannah-Jones, demonstrating a remarkable leap in journalism, scholarship, and public awareness since the early years of *The Crisis* and Du Bois. (Below: 1619 Project Symposium at UM, January 28, 2020.)





People attend to what they see in front of them better than what may not be so immediate. Today's rich media web offers great opportunity to discover a larger world of ideas and events, with unprecedented choice in what to read, listen to, watch, or otherwise examine. Paradoxically, as the world has become more cosmopolitan, complex, and interwoven, the opportunities for self-immersion in echo-chambers of parochial world-views and like-minded opinions have increased to customize and curate information tailored to individual and sectarian preferences. This should not be surprising, it is a tribal human trait – we like to see and hear things that are agreeable. The paradox, however, is that the success of human civilization and our species will depend on a broader world view of global citizenry and its myriad leaders. The greater human potential and the ultimate planetary sustainability require synergism of different peoples, points of view, and ideas, admixed with the sense of kindness and humanism so well-expressed in the first sentence of Adam Smith's first book:

“How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it.”

The works of Sinclair Lewis and Paul de Kruif understandably reflect little sense of the crisis in America then experienced by Du Bois and his readers for they inhabited very separate Americas. My guess is that the conversations of University of Michigan medical students today would be kinder, more inclusive, and humanistic than that depicted in *Arrowsmith*. Of course, medical students retain some latitude for fun, pranks, and lingering immaturity, but today's lot is more responsive to issues of diversity, inclusion, social justice, and planetary stewardship.

### Postscript.



**Consider where you get your information.** (Above: Ann Arbor newsboys circa 1890. Bentley Library.) It is comfortable and reliable to fall back to customary routines of aggregated news and opinion – and, of course, no one can read everything. Yet responsible citizenship and excellent medical professionalism demand thoughtful attention to alternate points of view that best derives from the multiple perspectives of freedom of speech and a free press.



Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were declared aspirationally and unambiguously, in the *Declaration of Independence of the United States of America* and then codified, to some extent, in the *Constitution*. Many voices behind the *Constitution* believed that the document was not explicit enough in defining the vague idea of liberty, for that reason a delayed *Bill of Rights* was produced, with the explicit five freedoms of the *First Amendment*. This clearly delineates the freedoms of speech, religion, the press, assembly, and the right to petition the government (lobby) for redress of grievances. To the small extent that this monthly essay (*What's New* or its web-based alternative *Matulathoughts.org*) was intended in part as an electronic book club, a recurring book recommendation remains Danielle Allen's *Our Declaration*. Even if you've read it once, it's worth revisiting in advance of the national birthday on July 4. Through that book and today's modern lens, Du Bois and *The Crisis* are all the more extraordinary for their good service a century ago as well as now.

Thanks for reading this monthly essay, either in the email format *What's New* or the web format *matulathoughts.org*.

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