

# Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families

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Agee's colleague at *Time* in the 1940s, John Hersey, writes a major evaluation of Agee's work and the Agee legend in a new introduction to this literary classic. 64 pages of photos. Just what kind of book is *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*? It contains many things: poems; confessional reveries; disquisitions on the proper way to listen to Beethoven; snippets of dialogue, both real and imagined; a lengthy response to a survey from the *Partisan Review*; exhaustive catalogs of furniture, clothing, objects, and smells. And then there are Walker Evans's famously stark portraits of depression-era sharecroppers--photographs that both stand apart from and reinforce James Agee's words.

Assigned to do a story for *Fortune* magazine about sharecroppers in the Deep South, Agee and Evans spent four weeks living with a poor white tenant family, winning the Burroughs's trust and immersing themselves in a sharecropper's daily existence. Given a first draft of the resulting article, the editors at *Fortune* quite understandably threw up their hands--as did several other editors who subsequently worked with a later book-length manuscript. The writing was contrary. It refused to accommodate itself to the reader, and at times it positively bristled with hostility. (What other book could take Marx as the epigraph and then announce: "These words are quoted here to mislead those who will be misled by them"?) Response to the book was puzzled or unfriendly, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* sputtered out of print only a few short years after its publication. It took the 1960s, and a vogue for social justice, to bring Agee's masterwork the audience it deserved.

Yet the book is far more interesting--aesthetically and morally--than the sort of guilty-liberal tract for which it is often mistaken. On an existential level, Agee's text is a deeply felt examination of what it means to suffer, to struggle to live in spite of suffering. On a personal level, it is the painful, beautifully written portrait of one man's obsession. In its collaboration with Evans's photographs, the book is also a groundbreaking experiment in form. In the end, however, it is more than merely the sum of its parts. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is, quite simply, a book unlike any other, simmering with anger and beauty and mystery. --Mary Park

James Agee (1909-1955) was a poet, screenwriter, and journalist who won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *A DEATH IN THE FAMILY*.

#### Other Books

*From Goodwill to Grunge*. In this surprising new look at how clothing, style, and commerce came together to change American culture, Jennifer Le Zotte examines how secondhand goods sold at thrift stores, flea markets, and garage sales came to be both profitable and culturally influential. Initially, selling used goods in the United States was seen as a questionable enterprise focused largely on the poor. But as the twentieth century progressed, multimillion-dollar businesses like Goodwill Industries developed, catering not only to the needy but increasingly to well-off customers looking to make a statement. Le Zotte traces the origins and meanings of "secondhand style" and explores how buying pre-owned goods went from a signifier of poverty to a declaration of rebellion. Considering buyers and sellers from across the political and economic spectrum, Le Zotte shows how conservative and progressive social activists--from religious and business leaders to anti-Vietnam protesters and drag queens--shrewdly used the exchange of secondhand goods for economic and political ends. At the same time, artists and performers, from Marcel Duchamp and Fanny Brice to Janis Joplin and Kurt Cobain, all helped make secondhand

style a visual marker for youth in revolt.

?? ? ? ? . ... You Have Seen Their Faces (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995; first published in 1937). 14. James Agee and Walker Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men : Three Tenant Families (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960; ..."