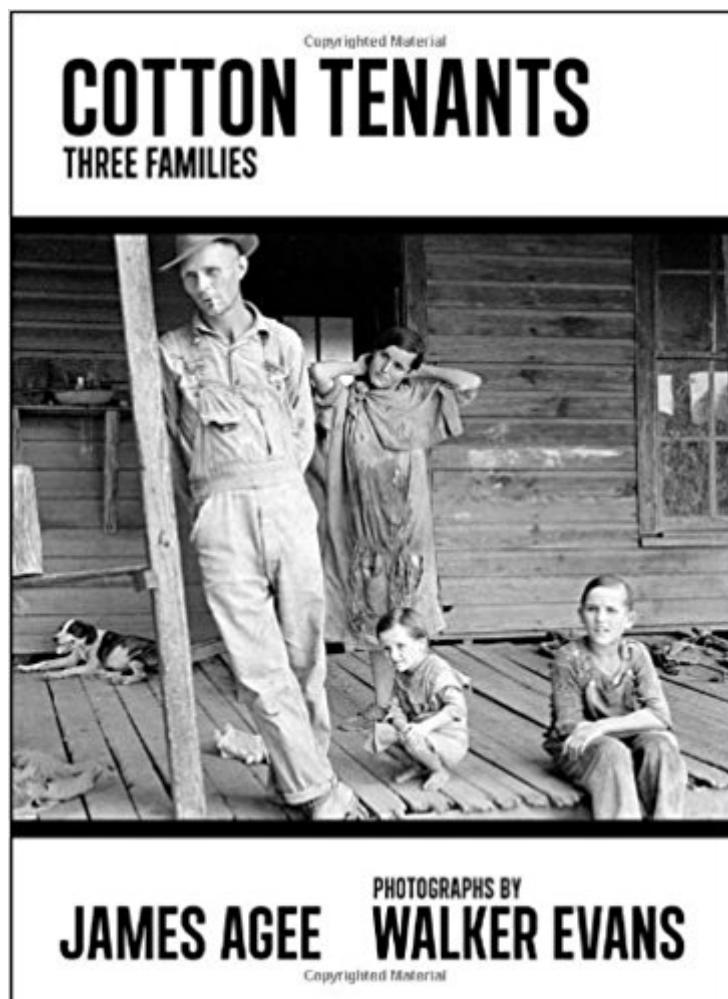


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Cotton Tenants: Three Families



Synopsis

A re-discovered masterpiece of reporting by a literary icon and a celebrated photographerIn 1941, James Agee and Walker Evans published *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a four-hundred-page prose symphony about three tenant farming families in Hale County, Alabama at the height of the Great Depression. The book shattered journalistic and literary conventions. Critic Lionel Trilling called it the “most realistic and most important moral effort of our American generation.” The origins of Agee and Evans’s famous collaboration date back to an assignment for *Fortune* magazine, which sent them to Alabama in the summer of 1936 to report a story that was never published. Some have assumed that *Fortune*’s editors shelved the story because of the unconventional style that marked *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and for years the original report was lost. But fifty years after Agee’s death, a trove of his manuscripts turned out to include a typescript labeled “Cotton Tenants.” Once examined, the pages made it clear that Agee had in fact written a masterly, 30,000-word report for *Fortune*. Published here for the first time, and accompanied by thirty of Walker Evans’s historic photos, *Cotton Tenants* is an eloquent report of three families struggling through desperate times. Indeed, Agee’s dispatch remains relevant as one of the most honest explorations of poverty in America ever attempted and as a foundational document of long-form reporting. As the novelist Adam Haslett writes in an introduction, it is “a poet’s brief for the prosecution of economic and social injustice.” Co-Published with *The Baffler* magazine

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Seven decades have passed since Agee (A Death in the Family) and Evans were commissioned by Fortune magazine to "report on working conditions of poor white farmers in the deep south." The report itself was never published, and the manuscript stayed forgotten until as late as 2003, when it was exhumed from Agee's Greenwich Village home by one of his daughters. It is a time capsule: open it and you are transported to "a brief account of what happens to human life," specifically the lives of three impoverished tenant farmers—Floyd Burroughs, Bud Fields, and Frank Tingle—and their families, captured in Agee's honest, unflinching, and brilliant prose. Readers familiar with Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* will relish what is more than "source material", and recognize, for example, many of Agee's description of the diet, shelter, and labor of an Alabama tenant family. To readers unfamiliar, this will be an unexpected pleasure. It is the minute detail of the work that brings Depression-era Alabama to life, including the colloquialisms, (Miss Mary's calling the babies "coons"), medicinal remedies (swampwillow bark for chills, cottonseed poultices for head pains, rattlesnake grease for rheumatism), and the leisure time "of people who work." Photos. (June)

This book is Agee's 1936 submission to Fortune magazine for an assignment on sharecroppers in the Deep South. Rejected and unpublished, the typescript was rediscovered in 2003 by Agee's daughter in her deceased father's Greenwich Village home. *Cotton Tenants* will enter the American literary canon for different reasons than Agee's far more developed classic on the same subject, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Here, Agee's discerning eye, crushing bluntness, and forward-falling prose poetry urge along before dunking readers' senses, again and again, into the families' way of life. Disdainful of sentiment and melodrama, Agee shows no bias, revealing his subjects and skewering both oppressors and supposed reformers. History, sociology, and economics instructors will like this compact book's quick, thorough engagement, and writing teachers can deservedly ask students, "What is it? Journalism, sermon, inadvertent economy of language, manifesto?" Yes, this nugget of . . . whatever—with an incisive preface by Adam Haslett—is meant for use. Like *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, it contains photos by the prestigious Evans. --Dane Carr

I have often heard the stories from my father, now 80, of growing up in a share cropping family in Texas. While I always found the stories interesting, they never portrayed the real full story. So when

I read about this book in Fortune magazine, I knew I had to read it. The hard scrabble life these people had is extraordinary. They are completely trapped in a system that never rewards them enough to escape, but provides just almost enough to live on - with always the promise of a better next year. Mr Agee gives such a strong visual sense in his writing and the photographs leave you wanting to help these folks. It makes me mad, nearly 100 years later to see how we treated each other back then. The families have their happy moments. However, the complete lack of health care and the hardships involved make them fleeting. While a very short book, it is powerful and takes you back to the time of the great depression with all the unflattering truths exposed. This book is a must for those who really want to understand living in the south during the depression. I am so glad my Grandparents were able to pull away and start a new life for my Dad. I wonder how the descendants of those in the book made out...

I was interested in this book because I visited an uncle in my youth that was a real share cropper in central Arkansas. He raised cotton and corn for The Man! When I first started visiting him, the farm was using mules for power to farm with. I remember hearing the mules eating ear corn at night when the work was done. There were so many mules in the lot eating the dried corn off of the cob that, it sounded like a large engine running. I went with my uncle to take the cotton to the gin in a mule drawn wagon and I can still hear the crunching sound the steel rimmed wheels made on the rock covered road. My uncle would buy my cousin and I an "RC AND A MOON PIE" and tell us to stay by the wagon while he shot Craps behind the gin. We almost always got home after dark. I remember going to visit and all of the mules had been replaced by "Poppin John Deere" tractors. Early in the cold mornings my uncle and others would open the pet cocks on the old tractors to drain the water out of the cylinders and reduce the compression in the tractor engines before starting them. They spun a large fly wheel on the tractors "sometimes a lot of times" to get the engines to start. When they finally started, they would belch and smoke and come to life. They would then close the pet cocks and the Popping would really begin in earnest. I found this book to be very factual and the hard times were very real. I was in the second grade when I first started visiting and didn't realize how bad it really was but am glad I got to live that part of our country's history, if only from a glancing exposure. The blacks had it much worse than my uncle and his ilk!!

Agee and Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was and is a classic work of American literature, the 20th century equivalent of Melville's *Moby Dick*-- in its sprawling reach, and overreach, in its readiness to shock by moving far outside the bounds of literary, social and political propriety, and in

its fundamental obsession with the humanist's struggle to find order, meaning and value in the face of cruelty and chaos. This book, *Cotton Tenants*, is the authors' earlier attempt to produce a more understated and condensed-- and necessarily more accessible-- report on their assignment for Fortune magazine to explore rural poverty in the Great Depression sharecropping South. It's an illuminating read for anyone who has struggled through the larger work-- it's like listening to Dylan's outtakes or Hendrix live-concert reissues: the final version is manifestly more ambitious in scope and polished in execution, but the original crackles with outrage and insight. Evans's pictures haven't changed a bit-- they're still as perfect a body of modernist documentary photography as anyone has done since the birth of the medium. And don't let the listing of Agee as author by various misguided publishers and their publicists fool you: Agee was adamant that Evans's photographs were coequal if not superior witnesses and testimonies.

Through interview and photographs of three cotton farmers working their acreage in Hale County, Alabama during the depression, the reader begins to feel the true hardship that these farmers had to go through to just exist. The land is not their own and portions of the yearly profit go to the owner who is the only winner in this sorry way to. We've to live in America. Walker Evans went on this assignment with James Agee and true to his style, provides very insightful pictures of the very simple and inadequate living conditions of each of these three families. I highly recommend this book as it just went to print this year even though the interviews and pictures were taken in the 1930s.

The language is poetic, and sometimes along with specific vocabulary of the day, I had difficulty understanding exactly what the author was saying. However, overall it was moving and interesting. It provides an incredible insight, from a very humane and thoughtful perspective, into a major socio-economic travesty that afflicted many Americans in the US for many generations, and surprisingly reminds me of situations that I've experienced working in the developing world today. Just wish there were more accompanying photos (thus 4 out of 5 stars), and maybe a glossary!

Splendid writer. Descriptions are crisp; his style among the finest. Easier to read than the longer "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men" on the same subject. Glad his descendants discovered it.

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