

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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James Agee (1909-1955)

Let us Now Praise Famous Men

James Agee was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, the son of middle-class parents. When his father died in an automobile accident when Agee was six, his mother, who had artistic interests, took over his education, sending him at age ten to St. Andrew's, a boarding school near Sewanee, Tennessee, but moving to Sewanee to be near him. He later went to Phillips Exeter and Harvard College.

On graduating in 1932, during the depression, Agee got a job writing for *Fortune* magazine, the prosperous new business magazine which pioneered in documentary journalism. Two articles Agee did on the Tennessee Valley Authority, the government's experiment in land reclamation, hydroelectric power, and flood control, won praise from Henry Luce, *Fortune's* owner. In 1936, Agee and a documentary photographer, Walker Evans, were assigned to do a piece on southern tenant farmers, focusing on the daily life of a supposedly typical farmer and his family.

But Agee found it "curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying" that a magazine should "pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings." With profit its ultimate motive and neither its editors nor its readers equally exposed or at risk.¹ The article Agee wrote was ten times longer than assigned and was also "too persona;" and "too violent."² Agee then got a contract with Harper and Brothers to develop the article into a book to be titled *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*. But when this manuscript was submitted in 1939, it too was rejected. Agee said he would not make "certain required changes through which it might be less unpalatable to the general reader."³ Finally, in September, 1941, it was published by Houghton Mifflin, with only the removal of "anglo-saxon monosyllables" that were "illegal in Massachusetts."⁴

What Agee had done was to break the rules of documentary journalism, which held that the author must be a rigorously objective spectator. He had introduced his own feelings—his anger, tenderness, and, as he called it, the full "individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness."⁵ In so doing, he exposed himself and his life just as daringly as he exposed the lives of the three families he wrote about. At one point, thinking of himself alone in the Gudger house, he even recalled how as a boy left alone in his grandfather's house he had pryed into forbidden drawers and closets and masturbated on other people's beds. Such self-exposure some critics called distracting, egotistical, and motivated from guilt. But Agee's defense was that uncovering the vulnerable reality of other lives necessitated recognizing his own. He wrote to shock, but also with great respect for human dignity. Significantly, the title of the book is from the forty-fourth chapter of *Ecclesiastics*, in a song praising the heroes of Israel's past.

The short selection here, entitled "A Country Letter," does not go deeply into Agee's own past, but it describes the setting of the Gudger house with Agee himself as an on-site, introspective observer. He also towards the end imagines himself losing his own "shape and weight and self" and becoming each person in the house, a kind of universal, Whitmanian auto/biographer of every one.

For additional biographical information on Agee, see Victor A. Kramer, *James Agee* (Boston: Twayne, 1975). The selection here is from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).

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1. Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, p. 7.
2. William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 262
3. Stott, *Documentary Expression*, p. 263.
4. Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, pp. 456, xiv.
5. Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, p. xiv.

Reading

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

<http://memory.loc.gov/master/gdc/scdser01/200401/telework/Let%20Us%20now%20Praise%20FamMen.pdf>