

THREE TENANT FAMILIES

LET US NOW
PRAISE
FAMOUS MEN

James Agee • Walker Evans



A MARINER BOOK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON • NEW YORK

Preface

(Serious readers are advised to proceed to the book-proper after finishing the first section of the Preface. A later return will do no harm.)

During July and August 1936 Walker Evans and I were traveling in the middle south of this nation, and were engaged in what, even from the first, has seemed to me rather a curious piece of work. It was our business to prepare, for a New York magazine, * an article on cotton tenantry in the United States, in the form of a photographic and verbal record of the daily living and environment of an average white family of tenant farmers. We had first to find and to live with such a family; and that was the object of our traveling.

We found no one family through which the whole of tenantry in that country could be justly represented, but decided that through three we had come to know, our job might with qualified adequacy be done. With the most nearly representative of the three we lived a little less than four weeks, seeing them and the others intimately and constantly. At the end of August, long before we were willing to, we returned into the north and got our work ready.

* Evans was on loan from the Federal Government.

For reasons which will not be a part of this volume the article was not published. At the end of a year it was, however, released to us; and in the spring of 1938 an agreement was reached with a New York publisher for an expansion of the same material in book form. At the end of another year and a half, for reasons which, again, will receive later attention, the completed manuscript was rejected, or withdrawn. In the spring of 1940 it was accepted by those who now publish it, on condition that certain words be deleted which are illegal in Massachusetts.

The authors found it possible to make this concession and, since it rather enhanced a deception, to permit prominence to the immediate, instead of the generic, title.

This volume is designed in two intentions: as the beginning of a larger piece of work; and to stand of itself, independent of any such further work as may be done.

The title of this volume is *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

The title of the work as a whole, this volume included, is *Three Tenant Families*.

The nominal subject is North American cotton tenantry as examined in the daily living of three representative white tenant families.

Actually, the effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense. More essentially, this is an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity.

The immediate instruments are two: the motionless camera, and the printed word. The governing instrument — which is also one of the centers of the subject — is individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness.

Ultimately, it is intended that this record and analysis be exhaustive, with no detail, however trivial it may seem, left untouched, no relevancy avoided, which lies within the power of remembrance to maintain, of the intelligence to perceive, and of the spirit to persist in.

Of this ultimate intention the present volume is merely portent and fragment, experiment, dissonant prologue. Since it is intended, among other things, as a swindle, an insult, and a corrective, the reader will be wise to bear the nominal subject, and his expectation of its proper treatment, steadily in mind. For that is the subject with which the authors are dealing, throughout. If complications arise, that is because they are trying to deal with it not as journalists, sociologists, politicians, entertainers, humanitarians, priests, or artists, but seriously.

The photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative. By their rewness and by the impotence of the reader's eye, this will be misunderstood by most of that minority which does not wholly ignore it. In the interests, however, of the history and future of photography, that risk seems irrelevant, and this flat statement necessary.

The text was written with reading aloud in mind. That cannot be recommended; but it is suggested that the reader attend with his ear to what he takes off the page: for variations of tone, pace, shape, and dynamics are here particularly unavailable to the eye alone, and with their loss, a good deal of meaning escapes.

It was intended also that the text be read continuously, as music is listened to or a film watched, with brief pauses only where they are self-evident.

Of any attempt on the part of the publishers, or others, to disguise or in any other way to ingratiate this volume, the authors must express their regret, their intense disapproval, and, as observers awaiting new contributions to their subject, their complaisance.

This is a *book* only by necessity. More seriously, it is an effort in human actuality, in which the reader is no less centrally involved than the authors and those of whom they tell. Those who wish actively to participate in the subject, in whatever degree of understanding, friendship, or hostility, are invited to address the authors in care of the publishers. In material that is used, privately or publicly, names will be withheld on request.

I spoke of this piece of work we were doing as "curious." I had better amplify this.

It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together through need and chance and for profit into a company, an organ of journalism, to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of "honest journalism" (whatever that paradox may mean), of humanity, of social fearlessness, for money, and for a reputation for crusading and for unbiased which, when skillfully enough qualified, is exchangeable at any bank for money (and in politics, for votes, job patronage, abelincolnism, etc. *; and that these people could be capable of meditating this prospect without the slightest doubt of their qualification to do an "honest" piece of work, and with a conscience better than clear, and in the virtual certitude of almost unanimous public approval. It seems curious, further, that the assignment of this work should have fallen to persons having so extremely

* Money

beauty, of indignation, of guilt, of betrayal, of innocence, of forgiveness, of vengeance, of guardianship, of an indominable fate, predicament, destination, and God.

Therefore it is in some fear that I approach those matters at all, and in much confusion. And if there are questions in my mind how to undertake this communication, and there are many, I must let the least of them be, whether I am boring you, or whether I am taking too long getting started, and too clumsily. If I bore you, that is that. If I am clumsy, that may indicate partly the difficulty of my subject, and the seriousness with which I am trying to take what hold I can of it; more certainly, it will indicate my youth, my lack of mastery of my so-called art or craft, my lack perhaps of talent. Those matters, too, must reveal themselves as they may. However they turn out, they cannot be other-wise than true to their conditions, and I would not wish to conceal these conditions even if I could, for I am interested to speak as care-fully and as near truly as I am able. No doubt I shall worry myself that I am taking too long getting started, and shall seriously distress myself over my inability to create an organic, mutually sustaining and depend-ent, and as it were musical, form: but I must remind myself that I start-ed with the first word I wrote, and that the centers of my subject are shift-y; and, again, that I am no better an "artist" than I am capable of being, under these circumstances, perhaps under any other; and that this again will find its measurement in the facts as they are, and will contribute its own measure, whatever it may be, to the pattern of the effort and truth as a whole.

I might say, in short, but emphatically not in self-excuse, of which I wish entirely to disarm and disencumber myself, but for the sake of clear definition, and indication of limits, that I am only human. Those works which I most deeply respect have about them a firm quality of the superhuman, in part because they refuse to define and limit and crutch, or admit themselves as human. But to a person of my uncer-tainty, undertaking a task of this sort, that plane and manner are not

within reach, and could only falsify what by this manner of effort n
at least less hopelessly approach clarity, and truth.

'For in the immediate world, everything is to be discerned, for I
who can discern it, and centrally and simply, without either dissect
into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of conscious
seeking to perceive it as it stands: so that the aspect of a street in s
light can roar in the heart of itself as a symphony, perhaps as no s
phony can: and all of consciousness is shifted from the imagined,
revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what

This is why the camera seems to me, next to unassisted
• weaponless consciousness, the central instrument of our time; an
why in turn I feel such rage at its misuse: which has spread so ne
universal a corruption of sight that I know of less than a dozen a
whose eyes I can trust even so much as my own.

different a form of respect for the subject, and responsibility toward it, that from the first and inevitably they counted their employers, and that Government likewise to which one of them was bonded, among their most dangerous enemies, acted as spies, guardians, and cheats,* and trusted no judgment, however authoritative it claimed to be, save their own: which in many aspects of the task before them was untrained and uninformed. It seems further curious that realizing the extreme corruption and difficulty of the circumstances, and the unlikelihood of achieving in any untainted form what they wished to achieve, they accepted the work in the first place. And it seems curious still further that, with all their suspicion of and contempt for every person and thing to do with the situation, save only for the tenants and for themselves, and their own intentions, and with all their realization of the seriousness and mystery of the subject, and of the human responsibility they undertook, they so little questioned or doubted their own qualifications for this work.

All of this, I repeat, seems to me curious, obscene, terrifying, and unfathomably mysterious.

So does the whole course, in all its detail, of the effort of these persons to find, and to defend, what they sought: and the nature of their relationship with those with whom during the searching stages they came into contact; and the subtlety, importance, and almost intangibility of the insights or revelations or oblique suggestions which under different circumstances could never have materialized; so does the method of research which was partly evolved by them, partly forced upon them; so does the strange quality of their relationship with those whose lives they so tenderly and sternly respected, and so rashly undertook to investigate and to record.

So does the whole subsequent course and fate of the work: the causes for its non-publication, the details of its later acceptance else-

where, and of its design; the problems which confronted the maker of the photographs; and those which confront me as I try to write of the question, Who are you who will read these words and study the photographs, and through what cause, by what chance, and for what purpose, and by what right do you qualify to, and what will you do about it; and the question, Why we make this book, and set it at large and by what right, and for what purpose, and to what good end, none: the whole memory of the South in its six-thousand-mile parade and flowering outlay of the façades of cities, and of the eyes in the streets of towns, and of hotels, and of the trembling heat, and of the wide wild opening of the tragic land, wearing the trapped frail flow of its garden of faces; the fleet flush and flower and fainting of the human crop it raises; the virulent, insolent, deceitful, pitying, infinitesimal and frenzied running and searching, on this colossal peasant market of two angry, futile and bottomless, botched and overcomplicated youthful intelligences in the service of an anger and of a love and of an undiscernible truth, and in the frightening vanity of their would-purity; the sustaining, even now, and forward moving, lifted on the lighting of this day as ships on a wave, above whom, in a few hours, once more will stand up in his stars, and they decline through lantern light and be dreaming statues, of those, each, whose lives we knew whom we love and intend well toward, and of whose living we know little in some while now, save that quite steadily, in not much possible change for better or much worse, mute, innocent, helpless and incorporate among that small-moted and inestimable swarm and poll stream and fleet of single, irreparable, unrepeatable existences, they led, gently, quite steadily, quite without mercy, each a little fart toward the washing and the wailing, the Sunday suit and the prettiest dress, the pine box, and the closed clay room whose frailty decorates the roof, until rain has taken it flat into oblivion, wears the shape of a real scar and of an inverted boat: curious, obscene, terrifying, beyond search of dream unanswerable, those problems which stand thick and forth like light from all matter, triviality, chance, intention, and recess in the body, of being, of truth, of conscience, of hope, of hatred,

* Une chose permise ne peut pas être pure. Lillégal me va.