

THREE TENANT FAMILIES

LET US NOW
PRAISE
FAMOUS MEN

James Agee • Walker Evans



A MARINER BOOK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON • NEW YORK

To those of whom the record is made.
In gratefulness and in love.

J. A.
W. E.

First Mariner Books edition 2001

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Agee, James, 1909-1955.

Let us now praise famous men : three tenant families / James Agee, Walker Evans

p. cm.

Originally published: Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1941.

ISBN 0-395-95771-0

ISBN 0-618-12749-6 (pbk.)

1. Alabama - Rural conditions. 2. Agee, James, 1909-1955 - Journeys -
Alabama. 3. Alabama - Description. 4. Farm tenancy - Alabama -
History. I. Evans, Walker, 1903-1975. II. Title.

HN79.A4A535 1988 88-18110

976.1 - dc 19 CIP

Printed in the United States of America

QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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Passages from this book appeared in *Common Sense*, *New Directions*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*.

would not stand shelter to you: and these eyes, receiving this, held neither forgiveness nor unforgiveness, nor heat nor coldness, nor any sign whether she understood me or no, but only this same blank, watchful, effortless excitation; and it was I who looked away.

Every few minutes George would get up and open the door a foot or so, and it showed always the same picture: that end of the hallway mud and under water, where the planks lay flush to the ground: the opposite wall; the open kitchen; blown leaves beyond the kitchen window; a segment of the clay rear yard where rain beat on rain beat on rain beat on rain as would beat out the brains of the earth and stood in a bristling smoky grass of water a foot high; a corner of the hen-house; the palings of the garden; the growth of the garden buffeted; a tree by the palings with shearing of rain through it; open land beyond and beyond that trees in a line; the rain moving along the open land in tall swift columns of smoke, the trees lashing and laboring like rooted waves; and in all this time I have talked of, such steady rave of rain and such breakage of thunder as I shall not try to tell: the thunder, at length, has diminished first, and now after a long time further, the rain too, and now we sit with the door a little ajar and watch it follow itself in a frieze of tall forward-leaning figures on the field, and this smokiness faints slowly out of the air, and the yard dirt is needled, not battered; the thunder is growling well off to the west and the air, though completely clouded, is softly shiny; and there is everywhere such a running and rustling, gargling sound of water as might be heard if the recession of the late parts of a wave were magnified; and in all this I now see Louise's face in the strange blend of lamp with daylight; and Burt relaxes, and looks for a little while as if asleep; and Ricketts begins talking again more steadily; and now for the first time in all this hour we have sat here, Annie Mae takes her stiff hands from her ears and slowly lifts her beautiful face with a long stripe of tears drawn, vertical, beneath each eye, and looks at us gravely, saying nothing. After a minute she leans across toward her daughter (every line of her body sharp and straight as if drawn by a ruler), and asks, how's Squinchy?

She is really asking for him. Louise knows this, and gives him over to her, and she takes him against her body and gazes carefully into his face, smoothing on his bulged forehead her russet hand. He is asleep, and has been asleep in all this time, but now beneath her hand he comes awake, and cries a little, and begins to smile, and much more to comfort herself than her child, she turns away from us, and draws her dress away from her breast, and nurses him.

The shutters are opened. The lamp is drawn down, blown out. The room is clear with light and breathes coolness like a lung: it is filled with the odors of the rain on the earth and of wood, pork, bedding, and kerosene, and is cleaned of the exhaustion of our breathing. Our faces are no longer subsumed but are casual and they and I look at each other more casually yet shyly, much more sharply aware than before of the strangeness of my presence here. Our voices and our bodies take shape and loosen, and we get up off our chairs and the bed and the floor, and come out of the room to see what the rain has done. There still are no 'introductions'; there is no kind of social talk at all, but as if a definite avoidance of any of these issues as too complicated to try to cope with; but quietness, casualness, courtesy, friendliness, of a sort that make me feel at ease, only careful: and I see how they are very careful toward me, puzzled by me, yet glad rather than not to see me, and not troubled by me.

But from where I say, 'The shutters are opened,' I must give this up, and must speak in some other way, for I am no longer able to speak as I was doing, or rather no longer able to bear to. Things which were then at least immediate in my senses, I now know only as at some great and untouchable distance; distinctly, yet coldly as through reversed field-glasses, and with no warmth or traction or faith in words: so that at best I can hope only to 'describe' what I would like to 'describe,' as at a second remove, and even that poorly:

The room was all shut-in, full of shut odors. The door let in light, but only across one end of this room; so that as I have told the faces

were held in two lights at once, in two temperatures also, and in two kinds of air. With even this amount of the light and odor of day there was change; we were all widened apart, and more aware of each other, in the diminished storm: our ordinary egoism and watchfulness of a curious human situation was somewhat restored in each of us, and with this, something happy that came of the air itself, not very different from the venturing and resumed loudness of small birds on the barnyard air, whose pleated flight and song were brash as with dawn: The letting-open of the blinds in two of the four blind walls then let the room full of this cooled and happy light, wherein each piece of furniture stood completed in its casual personality within these blockaded boards, and where we found ourselves and saw each other hovered, no longer with any reason here to be huddled, and sat a few moments as if blinking, and as if embarrassed to be sitting; so that it was in part this embarrassment which, after those moments of shy glancing at one another, broke us and brought us standing and strolling, chairs drawn back, and broken apart along the porch: and I would wish most deeply to say, how strange the natural day in a room can be, and how curiously, how secretly, it can disturb those who find it broken upon them, and who find themselves resumed each into his ordinary being, before he is quite ready to reassume it, in a room whose walls have widened, have opened once more their square eyes, upon sectors of country, in steadily thinning satin rain:

But the music of what is happening is more richly scored than this; and much beyond what I can set down: I can only talk about it: the personality of a room, and of a group of creatures, has undergone change, as if of two different techniques or mediums; what began as 'rembrandt,' deeplighted in gold, in each integer colossally heavily planted, has become a photograph, a record in clean, staring, colorless light, almost without shadow, of two iron sheeted beds which stand a little away from the walls; of dislocated chairs; within cube of nailed house-wood; a family of tenant farmers, late in a Sunday afternoon, in a certain fold of country, in a certain part of the south, and of the lives of each of them, confronted by a person strange to them, whose presence

and its motives are so outlandish there is no reason why any of it should be ever understood; almost as if there were no use trying to explain; just say, I am from Mars, and let it go at that: and this, as well as the lifted storm, the resumption of work in lack of fear, is happening in these minutes; each mind disaligned, and busy, in a common human timidity or fear; the fear in which a new acquaintance begins to be made. I wish I might remember the talk, or even the method and direction, the shape of the talk, but I can remember this scarcely at all. I explained myself a little, this single visit, that is, as simply as I might: such as it was it was not difficult to believe, and was well enough accepted; neither I nor either of the other men said much directly to Mrs. Gudger, nor she much to us; though, so far as I felt it would be allowed as proper, I turned what I said or replied to include her, and a few times directly her way. She became able to say a little how frightened she was of storms, but without apology and in next to no humor, just statement, a sort of implied courtesy of explanation to me, if I had thought it strange at all: I gave her indirect reason to know I did not in the least think it strange: I spoke a little to the two older children, as if it were natural to speak to children; they were puzzled by this but appeared rather to like it. Mrs. Gudger was very quietly courteous toward me in a deeply withdrawn way: as a wife, as a woman, it was not her place to show or even to feel any question who I was, why I might be there; that was the business of the man and her greatest courtesy lay in this observance: the children, though, I felt their eyes on me all the while. Nothing that was said made any difference of itself, but in each thing that was said there was all the difference in the world in the way I should meet or say it: I relied on quietness and occasional volunteering, and improvised on whatever seemed best to hand, and began to have the pleasure of realizing that though I remained inevitably somewhat mysterious, I was in each few minutes a little more comfortably accepted as friendly, as respectful toward them, as candid of my ignorance, my motives, and my regard, and as a person who need not at all be feared nor dealt toward in any lack of ease.

The yard dirt had no shape left to it at all; or had the shape the