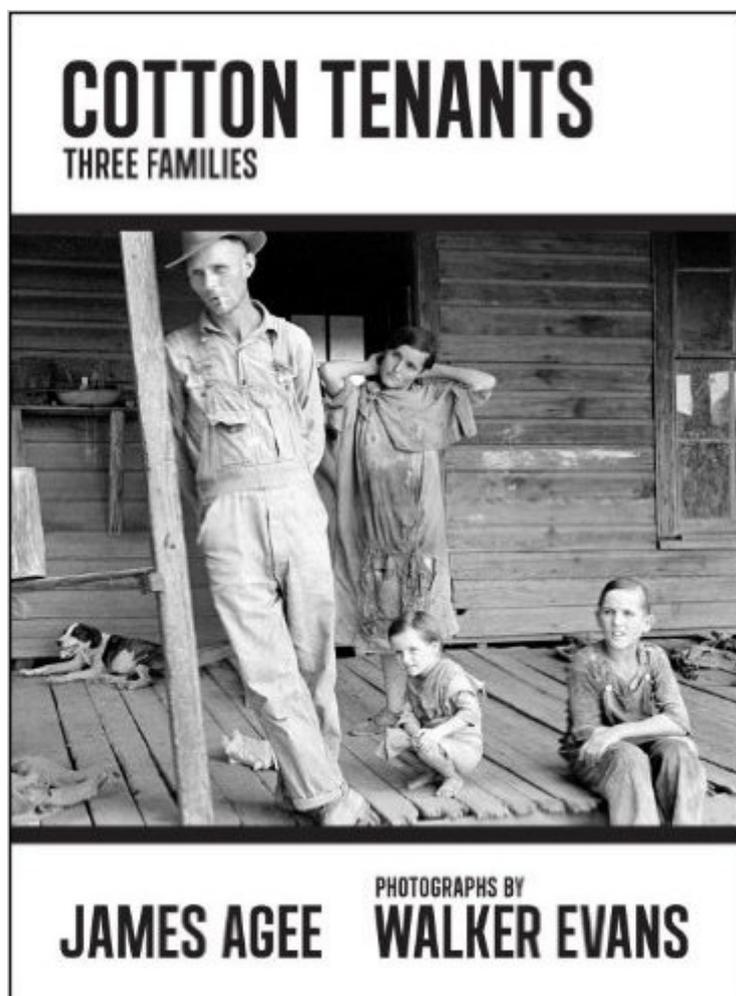


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# Cotton Tenants: Three Families



## Synopsis

A re-discovered masterpiece of reporting by a literary icon and a celebrated photographer. In 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' 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' 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

## Book Information

Paperback: 224 pages

Publisher: Melville House (September 19, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1612193986

ISBN-13: 978-1612193984

Product Dimensions: 5.6 x 0.5 x 7.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (68 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #267,770 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #342 in [Books > Arts &](#)

[Photography > Photography & Video > Photojournalism & Essays > Photo Essays](#) #1130

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## Customer Reviews

... so says Adam Haslett, of this work which has fortuitously come to light, and been published, after more than three-quarters of a century, from the proverbial attic. It represents a collaboration of the photographer, Walker Evans, and the writer, James Agee, which was commissioned, rather amazingly, by Fortune Magazine in 1936. Less amazingly, it was "deep-sixed," by Luce's pinions, and eventually inherited by Agee's daughter. Walker Evans was one of the small band of preeminent photographers commissioned by the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression to chronicle the economic and ecological (the Dust Bowl!) devastation being wrought on America's farming families. Evans died in 1975. James Agee, who died in 1955, is most famous for his brilliant and sensitive novel *A Death in the Family* (Penguin Classics), concerning the death of a young father in an automobile accident, in Knoxville, TN, in 1915. I've read the novel twice, separated by four decades, and have given it a "6-star" review at . Thus, when the latest work surfaced on my Vine list, considered it an essential read, and I was not disappointed. As the sub-title indicates, this is the story of three tenant families, all white, who live in Hale County, Alabama, with its county seat of Moundsville, a bit south of Tuscaloosa. They are barely scratching out a living during the Great Depression; a very poor diet and actual hunger are a daily part of their existence. The three families are the Tingles, the Fields and the Burroughs. Evans photographs are haunting, and in one case at least, iconic.

It seems I went about things a bit backwards; I read "Cotton Tenants" before picking up a copy of "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men"; I think perhaps that prejudiced me against the latter. "Cotton Tenants" is clear-eyed, arresting, and shocking in its matter-of-fact portrayal of three cotton tenant families in 1930s Alabama. In my opinion, Agee does a pretty good job of portraying these families as human and relatable, rather than side-show caricatures. They are not perfect: they are at times prideful and senselessly violent. They are not ogres. They strive to maintain a sense of order and dignity in the midst of chaos. One family in particular is as clean as they can be given the circumstances; all the families dress up carefully in their best clothes to go to town on Saturdays. They are people, people under duress. Looking at Walker Evans' (amazing) accompanying photographs, my husband said a lot of them reminded him of his time in Rwanda. Some of the people he saw there were ragged, but casually so. Like the tenants in these photographs, they were comfortable and unashamed. Agee's calm, clear style here does come at the expense of some warmth towards the families; if he has a flaw in his presentation here, it is coldness. Not, perhaps, a lack of empathy exactly, but (as I imagine it) the cold anger that results from helplessness, his and

theirs. After reading "Cotton Tenants," I borrowed and skimmed a copy of "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," which seemed a bit like the former through a fun-house mirror.

It was the summer of 1936 when Fortune magazine publisher Henry Luce sent journalist James Agee and photographer Walker Evans south to do a realistic and unembellished story about poor Alabama farmers. Agee had specifically requested Evans as the photographer; Evans received a temporary leave from his FSA job under the condition that the photographs become government property. The two spent eight weeks on assignment during that Great Depression summer, Agee writing and Evans taking black and white images with his battered view camera with its old and extremely slow lens. Cotton Tenants: Three Families is fascinating on a number of levels. The brief Editor's Note by John Summers of the literary magazine The Baffler, which co-published this book, offers the reader a glimpse at the background behind this 224-page work. But it's 'A Poet's Brief' by Adam Haslett that adds a three-dimensional aspect to the pages that follow, with quotes from James Agee, along with some thought-provoking questions, some of which will leave the reader wondering if history isn't today repeating itself. Right after a two-page spread of Walker Evans' photo "House, Hale County" we find a literary shifting of gears with James Agee's Introduction and his particular style of writing. Agee has a rather stark, even terse way of beginning with these words: "The cotton belt is sixteen hundred miles wide and three hundred miles deep.

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