

Depression before the Depression

BY MIKE WOLD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

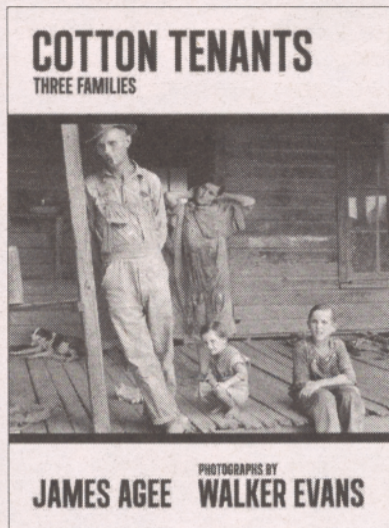
Book Review - *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*, by James Agee

One of the iconic books of the Depression, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," by James Agee, is not really about the Depression at all. Based on a magazine assignment to report on the lives of white sharecroppers in Alabama, the poverty Agee documented existed long before the Depression ever started. But in 1936, even the editors of *Fortune* were interested in how the poorest segments – at least the poorest white segments – of America lived.

Fortune never published the article; five years later, Agee and photographer Walker Evans published the book. A few years ago, the original draft of the *Fortune* article was found in Agee's papers. The result, with the addition of some of Evans' famous photographs, is "Cotton Tenants," which is not at all a rough draft of "Famous Men." It's a finished, if not polished, piece in its own right, more straightforward and less poetic. "Famous Men," though it contains fragments from "Cotton Tenants," is a stream-of-consciousness love letter about three desperately poor families. "Cotton Tenants" is an exposé and indictment of a society that pushes its poorest members to the margins.

Agee makes no secret of his views: "A civilization ... which can exist only by putting human life at a disadvantage; is worthy neither of the name nor of continuance. And a human being ... who prefers that this should remain as it is, is a human being by definition only." Those are strong words for a magazine aimed at the rich.

"Cotton Tenants" gives detailed, raw and unvarnished descriptions of how Agee's three families really lived: "The Tingles no longer think of what life they have in terms



of something in the least controllable from season to season ... they welter on their living as on water, from one hour to the next, flashing into brief impulse, disorganized and numbed." It continues, "Poverty caused their carelessness; their carelessness brings them deeper poverty; disease runs in among them, free as hogs in a garden."

Agee documents the three families' isolation, even though they're within a couple of hours' journey of Moundville, Ala., the nearest town. Their children go to school there – when they make it to school. Only some of the isolation is due to distance, since the families generally go into town every Saturday when it's not picking season. Some is class exclusion: They are at the low end of the social scale among whites. The Fields and Tingle girls, in particular, mostly wear clothing made of sheeting, fertilizer or flour sacks. Much of their isolation is due to poverty, since there are few forms of entertainment or community involvement they can afford. A lot of it is because of race, since, even though black families surround them, they cannot conceive of socializing or worshipping with them, and probably would get in

trouble if they did.

"Cotton Tenants" goes softer on the race question than the more famous book, only casually mentioning race as a factor in the families' isolation. Agee notes in an appendix that black sharecroppers are far worse off than white ones – indirectly giving some sense of how destitute black sharecroppers must have lived. He says he focused on whites to portray the "typical," paralleling how the New Deal also largely ignored the lives of Southern blacks.

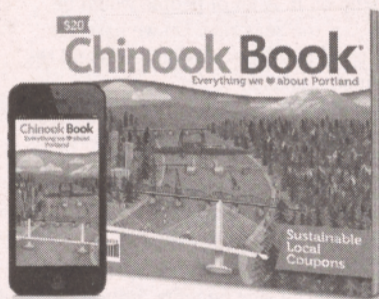
Agee avoids proposing easy answers; in his section on education, he notes that public education of the sort available in Moundville is not much use to these farmers; the most educated farmer, Frank Tingle, who finished fifth grade and still likes to read magazines and pulps, is also the poorest. Agee also makes clear that he is describing a system that constrains landlords as well as tenants.

One thing that's missing is the families speaking for themselves about their lives. Agee, a self-described Communist, is careful not to blame his subjects for the conditions of their lives. He finds beauty in the way that they live. But, except for brief quotes that are rendered in thick dialect – which itself creates a distance between the speaker and the reader – he doesn't give them voice. He also gives short shrift to their spiritual lives, an area where they might have reflected on the meaning of their existence and their poverty, even though their weekly lay-led worship services are clearly significant to them.

"Cotton Tenants" includes 32 Evans photographs from his collection in the Library of Congress, including people, places and objects, such as a pair of old boots. Although some are also found in the other book, many will be new to readers.

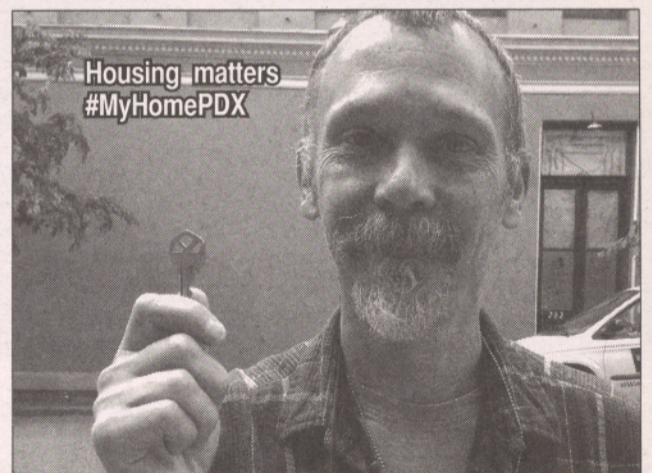
Agee's prose has flashes of brilliance and Evans' photos are consistently works of art in their composition. Together, they form a powerful indictment of a system of farm production that is still remembered with nostalgia by some people in our country.

The new Chinook Book is here!



Get yours today and help the sustainable economy grow

Featuring poetry from our Art Partner, Street Roots



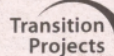
KEEP PORTLAND WARM!



JOIN OUR
2013
COAT
DRIVE!

Transition Projects needs warm coats for winter.

You can help by hosting a donation barrel.



Call or email for information
volunteer@tprojects.org 503.280.4741

NEW SEASONS MARKET

Home Grown

shop local
eat fresh

The friendliest store in town.

EASY & FUN TO SHOP • LOCALLY OWNED & OPERATED
www.newseasonsmarket.com