

James Agee: Mentor

James Agee died suddenly of a heart attack on May 16, 1955, while riding in a taxicab in New York City. He was 45 years old. He wrote the screenplays for “The African Queen” and “The Quiet One,” and a superb film biography, “Mr. Lincoln,” that appeared three times on Omnibus over ABC TV. He was, and is, one of my all-time favorite authors, and has been a sort of mentor to me.

In 1936, in the midst of the Great Depression, James Agee and photographer Walker Evans set out to document the lives of sharecropper families in the south. For a month, they lived with three typical families and put together their observations in prose and photographs that were “eloquent, original and devastating.” Their efforts were published in what is now a classic: “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.” I’m not sure, but it wouldn’t surprise me if the book became an inspiration for John Steinbeck’s, “The Grapes of Wrath,” a few years later.

Agee’s final manuscript, a semi-biographical tale of his life, titled “A Death in the Family,” was mostly completed shortly before he died, but an additional section seemed not to fit the time frame of the novel. His editors were certain Agee wished to incorporate it but they didn’t know where. They decided to include the short section in italics as a prologue to the narrative. In the book it is titled, “Knoxville: Summer 1915,” and I believe it to be among Agee’s best prose. It has been an inspiration to me as an aspiring writer and I will share with you a portion of the beginning and of the end of the prologue...

“We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville Tennessee in the time I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child. It was a little bit mixed sort of block, fairly solidly lower middle class, with one or two juts a piece on either side of that. The houses corresponded: Middle sized gracefully fretted wood houses built in the late nineties, and early nineteen hundreds, with small front and side and larger back yards, and trees in the yards, and porches. These were softwooded trees, poplars, tulip trees, cottonwoods. There were fences around one or two of the houses, but mainly the yards ran into each other with only now and then a low hedge that wasn’t doing very well. There were few good friends among the grown people, and they were not poor enough for the other kind of intimate acquaintance, but everyone nodded and spoke, and even might talk short times, trivially, and at the two extremes of the general or the particular, and ordinarily next-door neighbors talked quite a bit when they happened to run into each other, and never paid calls. The men were mostly small businessmen, one or two very modestly executives, one or two worked with their hands, most of them clerical, and most of them between thirty and forty-five...”

And at the end of the section...

“On the rough wet grass of the back yard my father and mother have spread quilts. We all lie there, my mother, my father, my uncle, my aunt, and I too am lying there. First we were sitting up, then one of us lay down, and then we all lay down, on our

stomachs, or on our sides, or on our backs, and they have kept on talking. They are not talking much, and the talk is quiet, of nothing in particular, of nothing at all in particular, of nothing at all. The stars are wide and alive, they seem each a smile of great sweetness, and they seem very near. All my people are larger bodies than mine, quiet with voices gentle and meaningless like the voices of sleeping birds. One is an artist, he is living at home. One is a musician, she is living at home. One is my mother who is good to me. One is my father who is good to me. By some chance, here they are, all on this earth, lying on quilts, on the grass, in a summer evening, among the sounds of the night. May God bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father, oh, remember them kindly in their time of trouble; and in their hour of taking away.

After a little I am taken and put to bed. Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her: and those receive me, who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever, but will not ever tell me who I am.”

If you love words and their arrangement in creative prose that will stimulate your imagination, I recommend James Agee’s, “A Death in the Family” as a must read. It occurs to me, it might be a stepping-stone to “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,” and an interesting walk through history.

Tom Harvill, November 11, 2002