The Making of James Agee

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Abstract

When James Agee died in 1955, all of his major works were out of print or not yet published. The posthumous 1957 publication of Death in the Family, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1958, began a twelve-year period that saw editions of Agee's collected film reviews, screenplays, letters, short prose, and poetry, as well as re-issues of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and The Morning Watch. As these works came into or back into print, establishing a de facto Agee canon, an Agee myth also emerged. Agee came to be seen as the epitome of the tortured artist, a noble failure who had been crushed by a system to which he had refused to capitulate. Eventually, the myth came to predominate, and the work was judged not on its own merits but as a reflection of his various roles: rebel, poet, mystic, martyr.

While the people most responsible for creating Agee's legacy were long-time friends who wanted to ensure that his work would receive the attention it deserved, they did him a disservice by distorting or misrepresenting a large portion of his oeuvre. Built largely on manuscripts, journals, correspondence, and other archival material, "The Making of James Agee" offers a revised version of the Agee canon, revealing a writer much more complex than the caricature created by the Agee myth. Agee's engagement with the revolutionary avant-garde was more extensive than has previously been acknowledged, for instance, and is apparent not only in his long-suppressed proletarian poetry but also in his use of the ideas and techniques of surrealism in the late 1930s. Surrealist ideas are also important to Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, which explores the limits of primitivist discourse before turning to an investigation of the individual unconscious.

Having exhausted the possibilities of representation in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Agee turned to simpler forms, drawing on the lessons of popular filmmakers such as John Huston to introduce an economy of form and directness of expression to A Death in the Family in order to engage the reader more fully. Throughout his career, Agee was concerned with the surrealistic project of the reconciliation of art and life, and even though his works vary widely in style, they all constitute a complex commentary on the possibilities of the written word to affect the field of action.

Recommended Citation

About James Agee: An American author, journalist, poet, screenwriter and film critic. In the 1940s, he was one of the most influential film critics in the... Discover new books on Goodreads. See if your friends have read any of James Agee's books. Sign in with Facebook. Sign in options. Join Goodreads. James Agee's Followers (181). More followers... James Agee. James Agee was passionately involved with the movies throughout his life. A master of both fiction and nonfiction, he wrote about film in clean, smart prose as the reviewer for Time magazine and as a columnist for The Nation. Agee was particularly perceptive about the work of his friend John Huston and recognized the artistic merit of certain B films such as The Curse of the Cat People and other movies produced by Val Lewton. Read more. See all Editorial Reviews. Thus was my introduction to high-quality film criticism. James Agee made his reputation writing sterling movie reviews for Time and The Nation magazines in the 1940's.