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A Death In The Family



Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"A Death in the Family" is one of those books that falls into the "great works tarnished by high school English class" category. I read this book in the Tenth grade and garnered no sense of its raw literary power at that time since my teacher was more interested in using it to bash Catholicism than to explore its wonderful prose. Many years later I read the book again while living abroad. Since I was not in an English speaking environment the language and mood of the novel were even more evocative. I was astounded when I reread the essay called "Knoxville Summer of 1915" that precedes the rest of the novel. This is one of the most beautiful and most effective pieces of English I have ever come across. Agee describes a child's observation of his neighbors evening activities in their back yard in a subtle sequence of events. The essay mixes dreamy metaphor with detailed observation in a slow, rhythmic description. The child observes the rolled up shirt sleeves of fathers watering their lawn after dinner and then tells himself that now the night is a "blue dew". The genius behind this is how the child makes the transition for detailed observation to poetic descriptions of the entire experience. The rest of the novel is wonderful in parts but hardly equals the opening essay. Agee is very talented at conveying character, dialog, and mood. We sense the warmth of family life before the father's death and the absolute confusion and bewilderment that follow. It is very painful to read about how the narrator, as an awkward child, is momentarily accepted by his classmates because his father's death is a new and interesting topic for them. It is a terrible thing that in a roundabout way, the callousness of the boy's classmates converts his father's death into a moment of joy. But it is also one of life's realistic irony. The subject matter of this book is tragic and even in its most poetic parts its mood is very grim. You may want to keep this in mind before reading it.

James Agee's autobiographical novel A DEATH IN THE FAMILY, published posthumously in 1957

and winner of the Pulitzer Prize the following year, remains an American classic. In a nearly perfect treatise on how a family reacts to the death of a family member, Agee in beautiful, transparent prose as good as anything Christopher Isherwood or Truman Capote ever wrote, has given the world a novel that remains timeless. The story of course has universal appeal and touches everyone who reads it as all of us have lost or will lose a family member. It ultimately is about everything that matters. In 1915, Jay Follet at the age of 36 is killed in a freak automobile accident near Knoxville, Tennessee. Agee lets us see inside the minds of his wife, his children, his parents, his brother-in-law et al. as each character grapples with this new hole in his or her life, trying to grasp the loss and make sense of it. Jay's wife Mary and her Christian faith are contrasted with the indifference of the organized church in the character of Father Jackson who refuses to read the complete burial service over Jay because he had not been baptised. In a beautiful passage near the end of the novel Andrew, Mary's brother, describes the burial to the six-year-old Rufus (based on Agee) when a "perfectly magnificent butterfly" settled on the coffin. Andrew believes that "that butterfly has got more of God in him than Jackson [the priest] will ever see for the rest of eternity." Mary's father, perhaps as only a loving parent can, gives her hard but honest advice: "It's bad enough right now, but it's going to take a while to sink in. . . It'll be so much worse you'll think it's more than you can bear. Or any other human being. And worse than that, you'll have to go through it alone, because there isn't a thing on earth any of us can do to help, beyond blind animal sympathy." The novel opens with a prose poem "Knoxville: Summer 1915", later set to music by Samuel Barber. There are additional, similar lyrical prose pieces, usually seen through the eyes of Rufus, interspersed between the three divisions of the novel. Agee is a master at capturing the language and dialect of East Tennessee where children go snipe-hunting, they "waked up," and adults use expressions such as "bless his heart" and "poor old soul." With the recent publication by The Library of America of two volumes of practically all of the works of Agee, this great writer should reach a much wider reading audience he so richly deserves.

Agee, who gave us the words to Walker Evans' photoessay "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men" and the script for the African Queen, was a genius. Like many geniuses he was erratic. I cannot read Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. I find it Joycean in all the worst senses of that word. But *A Death in the Family* is a different story. If you read this and have the courage to really let it sink into you, you will feel the extraordinary pain of a family torn apart by a pedestrian but tragic event - an automobile crash. The shock hits you. The grief overcomes you. You feel the loss. In short, you understand. That is what all artists strive to do and what Agee stunningly succeeds at here. The beauty here is

the beauty of truth, mainlined slowly into your being. This is a book that can and probably will change the reader. Several reviews have mentioned the breathtaking prelude "Knoxville: Summer of 1915" and some mention the Samuel Barber soprano version of this. To me that Barber piece ranks as one of the great American musical moments. That two such enormous accomplishments should derive from one small book is a tribute to the power and brilliance of James Agee at his finest.

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