

# James Agee:

## An Inventory of His Collection at the Harry Ransom Center

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### Descriptive Summary

<b>Creator:</b>	Agee, James, 1909-1955
<b>Title:</b>	James Agee Collection 1928-1988
<b>Dates:</b>	1928-1988
<b>Extent:</b>	14 document boxes (5.83 linear feet), 7 galley folders, 2 oversize flat files
<b>Abstract:</b>	James Agee began writing short stories and poems in high school and by the time he graduated from Harvard he was able to launch a fully-fledged writing career which included novels and screenplays. This collection contains a large and diverse sampling of his works including novels, articles and reviews, several posthumously published collections, and a small amount of correspondence.
<b>Language:</b>	English.
<b>Access</b>	Open for research.

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### Administrative Information

<b>Acquisition</b>	Purchases and gifts, 1964-1997 (R1975, R1976, R2163, R4149, R4289, R4498, R7152, R7504, R8356, R11583, R11703, R12737, R13925, G5081, G6043, G8086)
<b>Processed by</b>	Sally M. Nichols, 1998
<b>Repository:</b>	Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin

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## Biographical Sketch

James Rufus Agee was born on November 17, 1909, in Knoxville, Tennessee, the first of two children. His father, Hugh James Agee, was from rugged farming stock in the mountainous backwoods of Tennessee while Laura Tyler, his mother, had a more educated and artistic background. Her mother, Agee's grandmother, was among the first women to graduate from the University of Michigan. Throughout his life Agee was very aware of the contradictions of this twofold heritage. His mother was a devout Episcopalian and sheltered Agee whereas his father introduced adventure and pleasures such as going to the movies and taking his son to the pubs afterward. As a result, Agee was both timid and daring as a child. The death of Agee's father in an automobile accident in May 1916 was a major turning point in his life.

After vacationing near Sewanee, Tennessee, in the summer of 1918, Agee's mother decided to relocate there and enrolled her son at Saint Andrew's, an Episcopalian boarding school, which he attended from 1919 to 1924. Her reasoning was that it would allow him to be more in the company of men and would provide the religious training and education she felt was important. It had the effect, however, of causing Agee to feel not only cut off from the companionship of his father, but now from his mother as well. It was at Saint Andrew's that Agee formed the close ties with Father James Herold Flye that were to last a lifetime. Agee attended Knoxville High School for the 1924-1925 school year and after a trip to Europe with Father Flye in the summer of 1925, he enrolled at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire, where his interest in writing first began. Among his writings for the *Exeter Monthly* were twelve short stories, nine poems, several articles and reviews, and four plays.

Agee attended Harvard from 1928 to 1932 where he became increasingly committed to a literary career. He began to write poems, short stories, and articles for the Harvard *Lampoon*, the *Crimson*, and the *Harvard Advocate*. He first joined the editorial board in 1919 as an associate editor of the *Advocate*, and by 1921, became editor-in-chief. His parody of *Time* in the March 1921 issue of the *Advocate* was highly acclaimed. In fact, it was this article on *Time* which attracted Henry Luce, and resulted in an offer to write for *Fortune*. He accepted, thinking his journalistic career would be brief, but it lasted for more than fifteen years. Agee was constantly in despair that he may have sacrificed his own creative efforts for the demands a journalistic style imposed. However, his book of poetry, *Permit Me Voyage*, was published in 1934 as part of the Yale Series of Younger Poets.

In 1936, on assignment for *Fortune*, Agee and photographer Walker Evans went to Alabama to do a story on tenant farmers. By the time the project was finished three years later Agee had enough material for a book, which was published in 1941 as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Considered a failure at that time, it is now generally considered an original masterpiece. While working on *Famous Men*, Agee began reviewing books for *Time* in 1938, which soon expanded to films, and in 1941 he began a weekly column on film for *The Nation*, both projects ending in 1948. His most well known piece of criticism was "Comedy's Greatest Era," published in 1949 in *Life* magazine, in which Agee extolled the era of silent movies. After 1948, Agee wrote principally film scripts

and fiction. He wrote several screenplays and one full-length original script, *Noa-Noa*, based upon the journals of Paul Gauguin, which was never produced. Most well known is his work on *The African Queen*, which he wrote in collaboration with John Huston.

Agee's autobiographical novel, *The Morning Watch* (1951), is a tale about a young boy's experiences on a Good Friday morning while attending a boarding school, reminiscent of his own Good Friday activities. In *A Death in the Family* (1957), also autobiographical, Agee was finally able to write about the experience of a father's death and the reactions of various family members. Agee suffered a series of heart attacks beginning in 1951 and did not complete the novel for publication before his death. He began work on the screenplay, *A Tanglewood Story*, in 1954 but was unable to finish it, and several other projects he had begun, before his death from a heart attack on May 16, 1955. He was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1957 for *A Death in the Family*.

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## Sources

*Dictionary of Literary Biography*, v. 2 (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Co., 1978).

Doty, Mark A. *Tell Me Who I Am* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

Moreau, Genevieve. *The Restless Journey of James Agee* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1977).

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## Scope and Contents

The James Agee Collection contains 14 boxes of primarily manuscripts, with a slight amount of correspondence, ranging in date from 1928 to 1988, with the bulk covering the period before his death in 1955. The later dates reflect posthumous collections of his works. The material is arranged in three series: I. Works, 1928-1968 (10 boxes), II. Correspondence, 1930-1955 (1 box), and III. Miscellaneous, 1936-1988 (3 boxes). Within each series the material is arranged alphabetically by title or author. This collection was previously accessible only through a card catalog, but has been re-cataloged as part of a retrospective conversion project.

The Works series consists of holographs, typescripts and carbon copy typescripts of books, articles, plays, poems, reviews, stories, and screenplays. Included are holographs and typescripts of Agee's novels, *A Death in the Family* (published posthumously in 1957), *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), written with Walker Evans, and his shorter novel, *The Morning Watch* (1950). Also present are typescripts of a collection of his short prose entitled *Collected Short Prose of James Agee* (1969), edited by Robert Fitzgerald.

His poetry is represented as well with typescripts of *Collected Poems of James Agee* (1968), edited by Robert Fitzgerald, a proof copy of *Permit Me Voyage and Other Poems* (1934), and typescripts of several poems. Holographs, typescripts, and carbon copy typescripts of several of Agee's screenplays are also in this collection, such as *The African Queen*, "The Blue Hotel," *Magia Verde*, *Night of the Hunter*, *Noa-Noa*, *Scientists and Tramps*, *A Tanglewood Story*, *The Touch of Nutmeg*, and "Undirectable Director." In addition, there are typescripts of a television play, *Mr. Lincoln*, and a holograph draft of *The Quiet One*, a commentary for a documentary film. Numerous reviews of books and films written for *Time* and *The Nation* are grouped together under the heading "Reviews."

The Correspondence series consists mainly of letters relating to Agee's work. Outgoing letters include correspondence to director David Bradley regarding his screenplay for *Noa-Noa*; 47 letters to Walker Evans, photographer and co-author of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; and letters to Archibald MacLeish (*Fortune*) and T.S. Matthews (*Time*). Also present are 57 handwritten personal letters, along with 22 fragments of letters, from Agee to Patricia Scallon, dating from 1951. Incoming correspondence includes a contract from Gregory Associates, Inc. for writing the screenplay, *Night of the Hunter*, and letters from Margaret Marshall of *The Nation*. Correspondents are indexed at the end of this inventory.

The Miscellaneous series contains correspondence from Agee; a book review by Harvey Breit; articles by George Barbarow on the cinema and Roberto Rossellini, and by John MacDonald on "The State of the Movies"; typescripts of John Collier's *The Touch of Nutmeg*; two versions of a play by Tad Mosel based on the Agee novel, *A Death in the Family*; two copies of a screenplay, *All the Way Home*, also based on *A Death in the Family*, by Philip Reisman, Jr.; typed comments on *A Death in the Family* by Rebeccas O'Conner Moulder along with photographs, clippings, and theater program for a theatrical production of *All the Way Home*; a thesis on Agee by Joan Shelley Rubin, and an address by Robert Fitzgerald given at the dedication banquet of the James Agee Memorial Library at Saint Andrew's School, as well as letters to Robert Fitzgerald regarding publication of his book on Agee from Houghton Mifflin Company. Included also is a bound galley proof of *My Brother's Keeper: James Joyce's Early Years* by Stanislaus Joyce; and correspondence from and concerning Laura Tyler Wright, Agee's mother.

Elsewhere in the Center are two Vertical File folders which contain reviews of Agee's books and articles about his life. In the Walker Evans collection in the Photography Collection are 70 published and 100 unpublished documentary portraits, landscapes, and other images made in Alabama in 1936 for Agee's collaboration with Evans on the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The Art Collection houses thirteen sketches by Agee.

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## Index Terms

### Correspondents

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Kracauer, Siegfried, 1889-1966

MacGowan, Kenneth, 1888-1963

MacLeish, Archibald, 1892-

Matthews, T.S. (Thomas Stanley), 1901-

Newhall, Beaumont, 1908-

Phelps, Robert, 1922-

Rodman, Selden, 1909-

### **Subjects**

Authors, American--20th century

Moving pictures

Novelists, American--20th century

### **Document Types**

Christmas cards

Contracts

Galley proofs

Post cards

Screenplays

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Unidentified story: outlines and notes, nd, 13pp	
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"Comedy's greatest era," article in *Life Magazine*, 1949

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Miscellaneous notes and empty envelopes	<b>folder</b> 4

## James Agee Collection--Index of Correspondents

Index entries followed by the notation (from Agee) indicate people to whom Agee wrote. Box and folder numbers followed by a number in parenthesis indicate the number of items by (or to) that person. No parenthetical notation indicates there is just one item. So in the example

Matthews, T. S. (Thomas Stanley), 1901- --11.13 (2) (1 from Agee), 12.3 (2) there are two items in box 11, folder 13, one from Agee and one from Matthews; and two items from Matthews in box 12, folder 3.

- Arnold, Jack H.--12.1
- Audience Research, Inc.--12.12
- Bradley, David, 1919-1997--11.11 (6 from Agee)
- Brown, Chamberlain--12.1
- Darrell, Miss--11.11 (from Agee)
- De Moraes, Vinicius--12.1
- East 92nd St. Parking--12.1
- Erskine, Albert--11.11 (from Agee)
- Evans, Walker, 1903-1975-- 11.12 (47 from Agee), 12.17 (4)
- Fitzgerald, Robert, 1910- --12.5-6, 12.17 (7)
- Ford Foundation--7.5
- Gregory Associates, Inc.--12.1
- Hecht, Ben, 1893-1964--11.13 (from Agee)
- Hobson, Wilder, 1906-1964--11.14 (6 from Agee)
- *Horizon* (New York, N.Y.)--11.20 (from Agee) (with Mrs. Steloff)
- Houghton Mifflin and Company--12.10 (11)
- Huston, John, 1906- --11.15 (from Agee)
- Kaufman, George S. (George Simon), 1889-1961--12.12
- *Kenyon Review*--12.12
- Kracauer, Siegfried, 1889-1966--12.1
- Lahn, Ilse--12.14 (with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)
- LeMonnier,? --12.2 (2)
- Lewton, Val--11.15 (from Agee)
- Linscott, Robert Newton, 1886- --12.5 (3) (2 from Agee)
- Luce, Henry Robinson, 1898-1967--9.17 (from Agee)
- Macdonald, Dwight--11.15 (from Agee)
- Macgowan, Kenneth, 1888-1963--12.1
- MacLeish, Archibald, 1892- --11.15-17 (3 from Agee)
- Marshall, Margaret( *The Nation*)--9.18, 11.18 (from Agee), 12.1 (2)
- Martling, G. E.--12.1
- Matthews, Mr.--11.18 (from Agee)
- Matthews, T. S. (Thomas Stanley), 1901- 11.19 (2) (1 from Agee), 12.3 (2)
- Maxwell, Bill( *New Yorker*)--12.1
- McDowell, David--12.14 (3)
- Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer--12.14
- Mt. Washington House (Proprietor)--11.20 (from Agee)
- Newhall, Beaumont, 1908- --12.1
- Oceanic Productions, Inc.--12.1
- Phelps, Robert, 1922- --13.3
- Ransom, John Crowe, 1888-1974--11.20 (from Agee)
- Rodman, Selden, 1909- --13.6

Agee, James, 1909-1955

- Rubin, Joan Shelley, 1947- --14.1
- Saudek, Robert, 1911- --7.5 (from Agee)
- Scallon, Patricia--14.5-7 (from Agee)
- Schoenfeld, Bernard--11.20 (11 from Agee)
- Spivak, Lawrence E. (Lawrence Edmund), 1900- --11.20 (from Agee)
- Steloff, Mrs.( *Horizon*)--11.20 (from Agee)
- Stevens, George Cooper, 1904- --11.20 (from Agee)
- Stillman, C. L.--11.20 (from Agee), 12.1
- Strauss, Mr.--11.20 (from Agee)
- Time, inc.--12.1
- Tyler, Hugh C.--14.3 (3) (with Wright, Laura)
- Unidentified author Teresa--12.4
- Unidentified recipient--11.11 (2 from Agee)
- Unidentified recipient Bob--7.5 (from Agee)
- Unidentified recipient Dorothy--11.11 (from Agee)
- Unidentified recipient Lloyd--12.1
- Unidentified recipient Robert--11.10 (from Agee)
- Unidentified recipients "Sirs"--11.11 (2 from Agee)
- Westrate, Edwin J.--11.20 (from Agee)
- Wright, Laura [Tyler]--14.3
- Zinnemann, Fred, 1907- --10.7 (from Agee), 11.20 (from Agee)