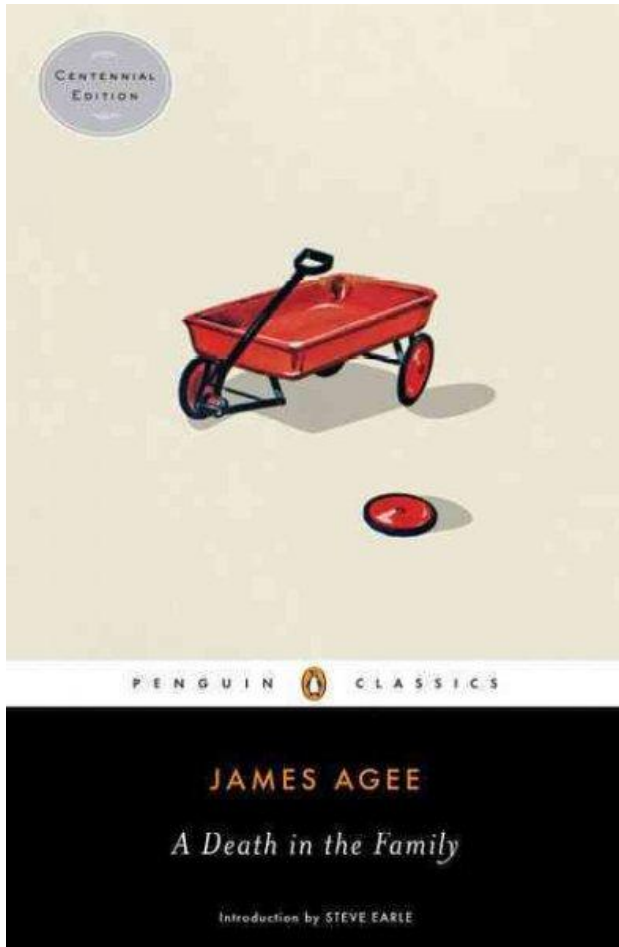


About the book...



On a spring night in 1915 in Knoxville, Tennessee, Jay Follet, a gentle, well-intentioned but financially unsteady father of two, is awakened by a telephone call from his drunken brother Ralph. Their own father, he learns, is having serious heart trouble and may or may not pull through. Follet bids a lingering good-bye to his deeply pious wife, Mary, and drives off into the darkness, little imagining that the death that is soon to occur will be his own.

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Death in the Family*, James Agee reconstructs through the lens of fiction the real-life car accident that claimed his father when James was not yet six years old. Leading us from the evening of the phone call that sets the tragedy in motion to the funeral that strives to bring the calamity to closure, Agee offers a plot that is simplicity itself, and the occurrences he describes are perhaps no different from those that would transpire within any family that has had a member suddenly stolen from its midst.

Despite its seeming straightforwardness, however, *A Death in the Family* is a novel of surprising profundity and aching lyricism. With deft strokes of characterization, Agee brings vivid life to Mary, whose loss brings her both to rely upon and to question God as she has never done before. We also come to know Mary's brother Andrew, whose contempt for religion both adds a sharp philosophical edge to the novel and stirs elemental conflicts among its characters. Deep pathos surrounds both Ralph Follet, the self-pitying alcoholic who struggles to come to terms with the dishonored place he fills in his family, and Mary's aunt Hannah, whose capacities for indulgent kindness and stinging severity hover in a fitful, unsteady balance. In these characters, the lines between love and hate are finely drawn, and Agee develops their sometimes speechless passions with refinement and understanding.

At the emotional center of Agee's novel, however, stands his own remembered self, in the form of young Rufus Follet. Awkwardly self-conscious, comically trusting, Rufus has only recently begun to understand the depth of the attachment that can exist between father and son—only to have that connection violently destroyed overnight. His efforts to comprehend his loss exude an unforgettable poignancy, and his recollected moments of closeness to his father rise to a poetic grace seldom encountered in the American novel.

A triumph of literary style and psychological acumen, *A Death in the Family* excels in its brilliant attention to the too-often overlooked nuances of thought, speech, and action that comprise the true fabric of being. One of the most intensely personal novels ever written, it also transcends its author's subjectivity to shed clear light on the mysteries of life and death, of faith and unbelief, in which all of us inescapably share.

About the author...



James Rufus Agee, known to his family as Rufus, was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1909. His father, Hugh James Agee, or Jay, worked at a variety of jobs, including construction work for his wife's family business. When James was nearing six, his father struck an embankment while driving home from visiting his own ailing father. The car flipped over, and Jay was killed instantly. The accident and its aftermath were etched into Agee's memory. As his teenage years approached, Agee formed a close attachment to an Episcopal priest, Father James Flye, who became his mentor and surrogate father.

Agee graduated from Phillips Exeter Academy in 1928 and moved on to Harvard, where he studied literature under the eminent critic I. A. Richards. After graduating, Agee began a productive but difficult tenure with *Fortune* magazine. In 1936, on assignment with *Fortune*, Agee traveled to Alabama with photographer Walker Evans to report on the struggles of poor tenant farmers. Although *Fortune* rejected Agee's piece on the subject, his collaboration with Evans led to a groundbreaking, though initially unpopular work, [Let Us Now Praise Famous Men](#), published in 1941. While working on a variety of fiction manuscripts, Agee wrote film criticism for the *Nation* and a number of screenplays, including [The African Queen](#) and [The Night of the Hunter](#). Battling alcoholism and heart disease, Agee worked for years to complete his magnum opus, a novel about his father's death called *A Death in the Family*. On May 16, 1955, two days before the thirty-ninth anniversary of his father's fatal accident, James Agee died of a massive heart attack in a New York taxicab.

Awards

Published posthumously in 1957, [A Death in the Family](#) was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1958.

Reviews

Booklist

Published posthumously this simply but poetically told novel unflinchingly describes the impact of tragedy upon a close-knit family living in Knoxville, Tennessee in the early years of the present century. Beginning a few hours before Jay Follet's death in a car accident and ending on the day of his funeral the story, inhabited by wonderfully human people, offers a moving, warm, and unsentimental portrayal of love, death and grief.

Library Journal

(The following is a combined review for *Film Writing and Selected Journalism* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, A Death in the Family, & Shorter Fiction*) In his all-too-brief life, Agee (1909–55) produced acclaimed writings in fiction, journalism, and criticism; these two volumes, edited by Baltimore Sun film critic Sragow, offer a thorough representation of his literary output. Volume 1 opens with *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a portrayal of Alabama sharecroppers through Agee's poignant words and Walker Evans's haunting photographs. Next is a selection of Agee's fiction, most notably *A Death in the Family*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel based on the author's Tennessee childhood, here newly corrected from original manuscripts. Volume 2 is a sumptuous gathering of film reviews originally published in *The Nation* and *Time* as well as some that have not appeared in previous collections. The range of these pieces is impressive, covering movies as varied as *Lifeboat*, *The Song of Bernadette*, and *The Enchanted Cottage* and focusing on every film personality imaginable; all of them bear the imprint of Agee's distinctive analytical and literary style. Additional works include the renowned essay on silent film comedy that appeared in *Life*, as well as literary reviews, reportage on subjects from orchids to cockfighting, and a screenplay for Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter*. The accompanying notes and chronology are quite helpful, and more such enhancements would have been welcome. Academic libraries and large circulating collections would be wise to invest in these quality volumes

Kirkus Reviews

A posthumous publication, on which James Agee had worked for some ten years before his death, is an often distinguished piece of work and is concentrated on a few days (save for some free associational insets which return to the past) when death unexpectedly affects a family in a small southern town. It is both the fact and the finality of this experience which pervades and prevails here; from the grief of the widow to the disbelief of the two young children; from the solidarity it occasions among the relatives who assemble, to the constraint it imposes. Death is a commanding presence- more vital than any of the characters- with the exception of the boy, Rufus- and a challenge to those who are left behind.... James Agee -- a writer of sensibility and insight (*The Morning Watch* 1951) has found a universality in the commonplaces of life as it goes on within the hushed household, as the last rites of respect take precedence over sorrow- but there is a greater sense of recognition than participation. Publisher enthusiasm- and critical appreciation- may help to widen a perhaps reluctant audience.

Discussion questions (<http://us.penguin.com>)

1. James Agee was an enthusiastic reader of Sigmund Freud. How, if at all, is this interest reflected in *A Death in the Family*?
2. Although *A Death in the Family* is a work of fiction, it is highly faithful to the actual events surrounding the death of James Agee's father. Why do you think Agee chose to present his memories in a fictional account instead of as a nonfiction memoir?
3. James Agee died before the text of *A Death in the Family* could be finalized and it was his editors who decided on the placement of the italicized nonchronological passages that appear at the ends of Parts One and Two. How does the insertion of these passages change the way one reads and understands the novel? Do you think Agee would have approved?
4. The first section of the novel's published text, "Knoxville: Summer, 1915," was published separately in *Partisan Review* in 1938. It formed no part of Agee's manuscript for *A Death in the Family*. Why do you think Agee's editors chose to commence the novel with this section? How does its inclusion affect the reading of Agee's novel as a whole?
5. Although Rufus and his father exchange relatively few words in Chapter 1, one senses that they are communicating deeply on a nonverbal level. What are the nature and substance of this communication, and what techniques does Agee use to establish the father-son bond in the space of only a few pages?
6. What is Jay's opinion of Rufus? How well does he appear to know his son? How do his views of Rufus differ from how the reader perceives the boy?
7. Why did Mary's family object to her marrying Jay? What effects does their opposition seem to have had on their marriage? Were her family's misgivings justifiable?

8. Assess Jay's strong and weak points as a husband and father. Is he someone you would like to have had in your family? Why or why not?
9. Agee chooses to narrate Jay's relatively uneventful trip to his ailing father's house, but he opts not to directly narrate the fatal return trip, choosing instead to describe the crash only through the secondhand accounts of characters who did not witness it. What do you think of this choice, and why do you suppose Agee made it?
10. *A Death in the Family* is a novel about the pre-Civil Rights-era South, written and published just as the civil rights movement was gathering force. How do issues of race influence the novel, especially as they relate to Rufus?
11. When the stranger calls to report Jay's accident, he specifies that his family should "send a man out here" (p. 103). This is just one of the instances in the novel where roles and behavior are strongly dictated by gender. What commentaries are implied in *A Death in the Family*, and to what extent do you think Agee was aware of making them?
12. Much of the philosophical tension in the novel arises because of Mary's deep religiosity and her conflicts with characters like Jay, her brother Andrew, and her father Joel, whom "God in a wheelbarrow" would not convince to abandon his atheism (p. 172). In general, which side gets the better of the argument in this novel, faith or unbelief?
13. What are your thoughts about the scene in which Jay's ghost is thought to appear (Chapter 12)? How do the characters' reactions to the supposed apparition reveal aspects of their personalities?
14. Agee takes great pains to give balanced portraits of his characters, enabling us both to sympathize with and criticize them and their views. With which of Agee's characters did you find it most difficult to sympathize, and why?

15. One of Mary's hardest moments comes in Chapter 14, when she must explain Jay's death to their children. Do you agree with the way in which she does this? How should a parent of children of differing ages and levels of comprehension go about explaining an event like this?
16. Rufus struggles to understand whether his father died, as his mother would have it, "because God wanted him" or, as Aunt Hannah explains it, because of a mechanical malfunction with the car (pp. 227, 234–235). Which explanation seems more plausible to him, and does it seem more likely that Rufus will grow up believing or disbelieving in God?
17. How does the scene where Rufus discusses Jay's death with the other schoolchildren (Chapter 16) influence the way in which he comes to terms with the event?
18. Analyze the character of Father Jackson. Is he as contemptible as Rufus, young Catherine, and Andrew consider him? If not, why not? What accounts for his inability to relate more positively to the Follet children?
19. In Chapter 20, Andrew describes how a butterfly settled on Jay's coffin just before it was lowered into the ground, a moment that he contrasts violently with Father Jackson's prim refusal to perform the complete burial service over the unbaptized Jay. What argument does Agee appear to be making about natural versus institutionalized religion?
20. At the end of the novel, Andrew's anti-Catholic screed convinces Rufus that Andrew hates Rufus's mother. Is Rufus correct about this? If not, what is a better way to describe the unstable cocktail of emotions that Andrew feels toward Mary?

Readalikes

[*Animal Dreams: A Novel*](#) by Barbara Kingsolver

"Animals dream about the things they do in the day time just like people do. If you want sweet dreams, you've got to live a sweet life." So says Loyd Peregrina, a handsome Apache trainman and latter-day philosopher. But when Codi Noline returns to her

hometown, Loyd's advice is painfully out of her reach. Dreamless and at the end of her rope, Codi comes back to Grace, Arizona to confront her past and face her ailing, distant father. What she finds is a town threatened by a silent environmental catastrophe, some startling clues to her own identity, and a man whose view of the world could change the course of her life. Blending flashbacks, dreams, and Native American legends, *Animal Dreams* is a suspenseful love story and a moving exploration of life's largest commitments.

[Lost in the Forest](#) by Sue Miller

For Eva, the divorced and happily remarried mother of three children, and her adolescent middle child, Daisy, the death of Eva's second husband John in a car accident turns their lives upside down, a tragedy that draws Daisy into a confusing, chaotic, and unstable world as she embarks on a harrowing sexual odyssey with a much older man.

Saul by Rosemary Kay

Saul is the powerful and thought-provoking story of the author's own son, who was born after 23 weeks in the womb. (There are a handful of 23 weekers who have survived intact. There are no surviving 22 weekers.) Told from the tiny baby's point of view, the resulting fictional memoir is an unforgettable voice from another world. With surprising insight and humor -- and a distinct and intriguing personality -- the narrator shows himself to be both a vulnerable baby and a wise, sometimes mischievous, little boy with a purpose. His story is one of hope and courage, of supreme trust and tragic betrayal, and above all, of the triumph of the human spirit.

[Shadow Baby](#) by Alison McGhee

Eleven-year-old Clara is struggling to find the truth about her missing father and grandfather and her dead twin sister, but her mother refuses to talk. When Clara begins interviewing Georg Kominsky--her elderly neighbor--she finds that he is equally reticent about his own concealed history. Precocious and imaginative, Clara invents versions of Mr. Kominsky's past, just as she invents lives for the people missing from her own shadowy history. Her journey of discovery is at the heart of this beautiful story about unlikely friendship and communion, about discovering what matters most in life, and about the search to find the missing pieces of ourselves.



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