

# “A Death in the Family”

(a portrait of James Agee)

a documentary film by  
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# Synopsis

The film will be a biographical portrait of James Agee, a major American writer who was born in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1909, and who died in New York in 1955.

Agee's existence was shattered at the age of six by the death of his father, who died in a car accident. In his autobiographical novel, *A Death in the Family*, Agee tells the story of this death, which affected his existence forever, a tragedy he suffered from his entire life.

In the film, an actress-filmmaker will investigate the life of Agee while she prepares a fiction film based on his novel. She will visit the places of the writer's childhood, which are identical to those referred to in his book. To learn about who James Agee was, what his destiny was, what the "innermost truth" of the man and writer was, is to return, through the reading of his novel, to the past, to retrace the childhood magnificently recounted in his great book, focusing on the tragic death of a father.

The actress-filmmaker will look for and engage actors and actresses to rehearse passages of the book with them; this will constitute the core of the film. The actors will play, before her eyes, directed by her, the novel's key scenes recounting the accident and death of the father and how his wife, the writer's mother, learns about and reacts to this death and how she makes her children understand the terrible tragedy that has beset them.

The scenes of the book rehearsed by the actors and actresses will be interspersed with the inquiries the actress-filmmaker makes into the writer's life: his difficult relationship with his mother, the Episcopalian middle school, Harvard University, and how in New York, Agee became a journalist, then film critic, then filmscript writer in Hollywood where he became friends with John Huston and Charlie Chaplin, and how he wrote his autobiographical novel, published two years after his death.



# Biography of James Agee

The Agees were of French origin, coming from Nantes, France. The first Agee, or rather Agé, arrived in New York around 1690 and settled in Virginia. Initially they were farmers, with later generations becoming doctors, lawyers and teachers.

James was born in 1909, his sister Emma in 1911.

In May 1915, his father died in an automobile accident. At age ten his mother sent him to a Episcopal middle school in Sewanee, TN where he was educated for four years.

The death of his father left him with a terrible and incomprehensible feeling of guilt, which he bore for the rest of his life.

At a young age he became interested in literature and started writing poetry; one poem is a tribute to his dead father, who he worshiped and idealized, all the more so because his mother increasingly rejected him and often even refused to see him. His becoming a man and his nascent sexuality would appear to have repulsed her.

In 1923 when he was 14, he experienced a spiritual crisis and decided to abandon religion. The following year he attended high school in Knoxville, then spent the next three years at a prestigious private school in New Hampshire.

In the spring of 1924 his mother married a minister and he nearly definitively lost sight of her. In the summer he traveled through France, in the country of his father's ancestors.

Upon his return, he began studying at Harvard and started writing articles in the student newspaper. He discovered the cinema at the same time.

He started reading more and more: Dostoyevsky, Joyce, and later, Thomas Wolfe, Faulkner and finally Marcel Proust, who fascinated him and who he thought he could learn to write from.

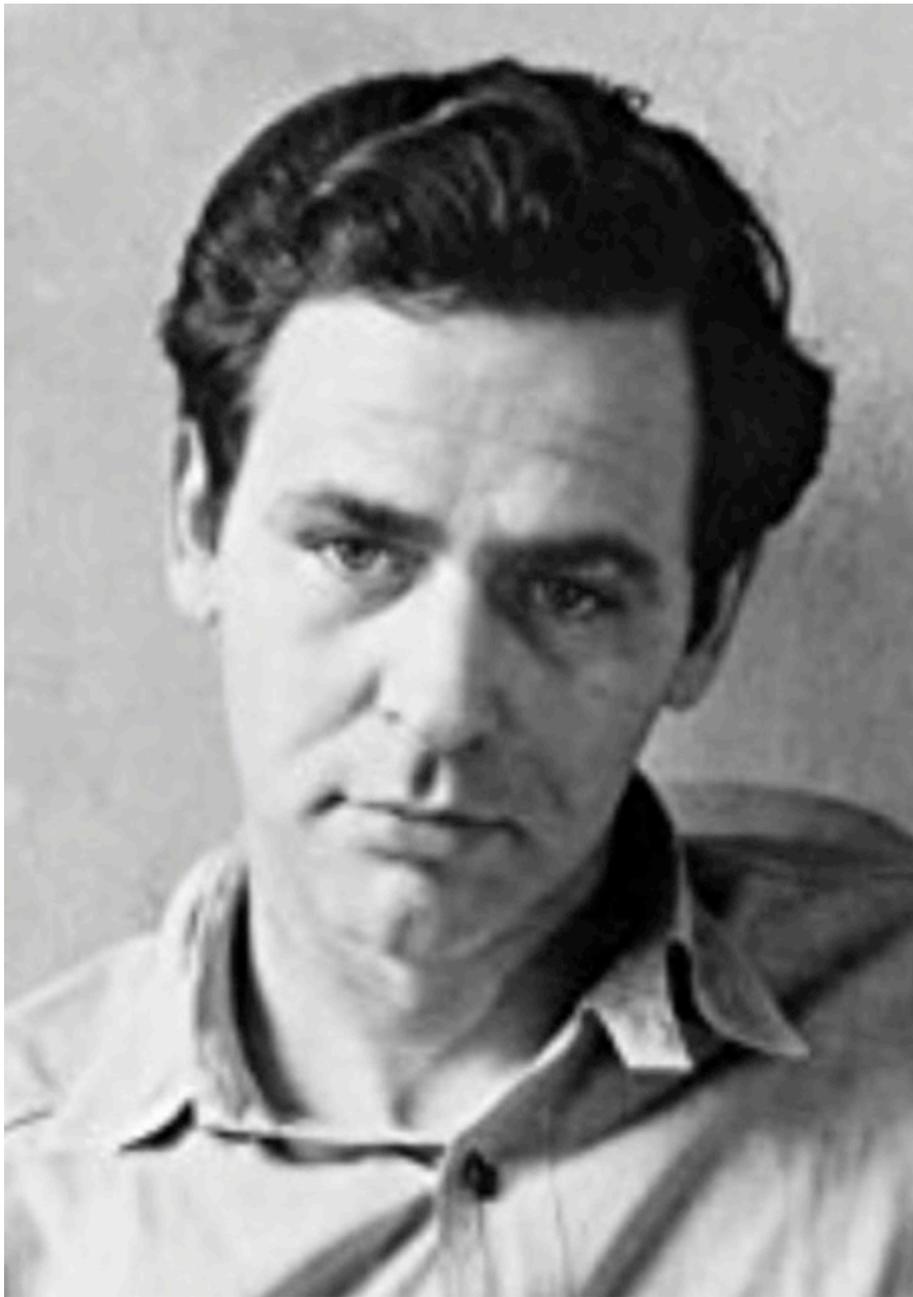
Often experiencing bouts of anguish and despair, James started to drink, like his father, and believed he would die young, like his father. He also thought about suicide and tried several times to kill himself, once in a car, "to see," he said, "what it was like to die in a car accident."

He undertook a long journey hitchhiking across the United States and ended up in Hollywood. He had felt for a long time like a "lonely wanderer", without a home, an exile in his own land.

Back at the University, he felt he had matured, that he was becoming an adult, partially cured, he thought, of the "irrational side of his unhappiness".

In 1932 he settled in New York where he started to work as a reporter for *Fortune*, a magazine followed by 100,000 readers.

He became more and more interested in film and started to write movie reviews. He was referred to at the time in the US as someone who had "revolutionized" film criticism.



He watched five or six films each week, some several times over. For him, as later on for the filmmakers of the French *Nouvelle Vague*, speaking about films was almost like making them. He saw and loved what he wanted to do himself. He could see himself becoming a screenwriter in Hollywood.

In the spring of 1947 he defended Chaplin's magnificent film, *Monsieur Verdoux*, which was not understood in the US and was bashed in the press. He and Chaplin became friends and often talked about film projects together, none of which ever came about.

The following year, Agee was thinking more and more about writing an autobiographical novel on the death of his father, with the intention of very precisely recounting what he called those tragic days lived through by his family before and after the death of his father, how a boy of six had endured those terrible days that had darkened his life forever.

He saw John Huston's film, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, and praised it in an enthusiastic review, expressing his admiration for the filmmaker. Huston sent him a word of thanks. The two men ended up meeting and became friends. Huston proposed that Agee write the film script for his new project, *The African Queen*. This is exactly what Agee had hoped for; he left immediately for Hollywood and feverishly set to work on the script.

Agee continued to work on film scripts, such as that for *The Night of the Hunter*, which Charles Laughton made into a wonderful film.

He also thought about writing the script for a film on *Gauguin in Tahiti* and another on Kafka's *The Trial*. Awaiting to concretize these projects, he wrote a television series about Abraham Lincoln, another of the paternal figures he so admired.

But he essentially worked on his novel, *A Death in the Family*. The night before his death, he talked about it with a friend, telling him that he thought he needed around another two months to finish it.

Suffering a heart attack followed by another, he finally died of a third in a taxi in New York on May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1955 at the age of 46.

Agee was married three times and left his wife Mia Agee Fritsch and their three children behind him, Deedee, Andrea and John.

His novel, *A Death in the Family*, was published two years after his death; it received the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1958.

In 1963, a play written on the basis of the novel was filmed by Alex Segal and was shown in movie theatres.

In 1979, the American filmmaker Ross Spears shot a wonderful documentary on Agee that was nominated for an Oscar.



The „filmmaker“ (Nancy Duckles)

# The shooting script

The film will open with a few images of the streets of New York, to finally arrive before the house on Kingstreet in Greenwich Village where Agee lived the latter part of his life with Mia Fritsch, his third wife, and their three children. We see the hands of a man on a typewriter typing the last words of a novel. We read the typing and hear the voice of an actor, the voice of Agee so to speak, reading these few phrases outloud:

*“I hear my father and my mother and they are my giants, my king and my queen, beside whom there are no others so wise or worthy or honorable or brave or beautiful in this world. I need never fear: nor ever shall I lack for loving-kindness. You hear the man you call your father: how can you ever fear?”*

We then see a man whose face we never clearly see climb into a yellow cab. We see images of the city go by through the window of the cab. The man then slouches down, falls over on one side and we hear heavy breathing, then death rattles, then the man’s last breath. While dying, images of his childhood flash through his mind; these will be the final images we see, they will be like an overview in fastplay of the images that will be shot during the rehearsals of the key scenes of Agee’s book.

We arrive by car to Knoxville, Tennessee, the filmmaker is driving. She talks about when she’d read Agee’s novel long ago and how she had immediately started thinking about making it into a film, and about how now this dream was finally coming true and that she is traveling to Knoxville to look for shooting locations, and that she’s very excited and enormously happy to concretize this project at last.

She starts looking for locations. This is a voyage into the past, looking for traces of what still exists from 1915 and what has disappeared. And first of all the house in which the Agee family lived when his father was still alive.

The house no longer exists, our filmmaker has to find another one that is similar to the Agee house where little James at age six lived through the tragedy of his father’s death and in which we will film, in the form of rehearsals, key scenes from the novel.

It is evening. The filmmaker is walking in the south part of Knoxville looking for traces of the walks little James took with his father, if they still exist in this city of James’ childhood. Walking down Gay Street, she looks for the *Majestic* movie theater where a piano played tunes during westerns or Charlie Chaplin’s short films and where the father sometimes took his son.

She tells us that James’ mother detested “that horrible little man, who she found disgusting and vulgar and who lifted women’s skirts, and how the way he walked was repulsive.” And how his father merely laughed at his wife’s comments.

The local historian Jack Neely will show her the place where the *Majestic* was at the time and he accompaings her to the Market Square, looking for a bar where the father was accustomed to going. She tells us how the father would proudly present his son to his friends, sitting him on the counter. “This is my boy,” he would tell them. “At six he can already read better than I could when I was twice his age.”



Then she passes with Jack Neely by the train station and sees the viaduct above it. What does it look like today? In the dark, she searches for the letters “NORTH KNOXVILLE” that Agee talks about in his book. Are they still there?

Later they look for a big rock in a meadow where the father and son sometimes sat to contemplate the sky and the stars. These were the most intimate moments that little James spent with his father, moments where they felt the closest to each other and are therefore the most memorable, those that the child will always remember.

Finally, the filmmaker will start looking for actors and actresses in playhouses and at the theater department of the University. We will see her watch the rehearsal of a play, where she ends up being invited by the director to go on the stage to present herself to the actors and actresses, speaking briefly about her film project. She goes from one to the other, shaking hands; she looks at each one of them and exchanges a few words with each.

After having made an initial selection, she will film auditions of a number of men and women to finally select the father, the mother, the mother’s brother and her aunt. She will do the same for the two children.

Once she has found the persons she feels are right for the film, she will start rehearsing key scenes from the novel with them in the parents’ home.

We will see these rehearsals like a film in the process of being shot. We will sometimes see the cameraman behind his camera, the sound mixer with his boom and microphone, the gaffer moving a film light. And opposite, the actors/tresses and the filmmaker who looks at them, listens to them, speaks to them.

Everything the filmmaker does and experiences during this shoot will be effected in a spontaneous and improvised manner. There will be no written dialogue. Her actions will be viewed by me behind my camera. We will speak together, I will ask her questions, she will tell me what she is in the process of doing and how she imagines her film. In the places of Agee’s childhood or during rehearsals with the players, she will sometimes read aloud a few phrases from the novel to help the players understand more clearly what she wants from them and how she imagines that the scene should be played.

During her investigations, the filmmaker will tell us about the difficult relationship Agee had with his mother. Paul Brown who wrote a childhood biography about James Agee will show her the St. Andrews School in Sewanee, three hours from Knoxville, where James attended his religious education and where he met Father Fly.

The local poet Laura Still who works as a tourist guide invites us at a tour for a high school class on Agee. She goes with them to Highland Avenue where the Agee’s lived and reads them some excerpts of his novel and explains them his childhood in Knoxville and who he became later on.

The filmmaker asks also people in the streets if they have heard about James Agee and if they have read him.

She leaves for New York, goes to the Chrysler Building, visits the office that Agee occupied as a reporter and film critic and where a colleague saw him lean over the window ledge one day looking down on the street far below, where he probably hesitated to throw himself.

She will watch on her computer a few excerpts from Ross Spears documentary film about Agee, including the interview of Father Flye, who is the person who knew Agee best, starting when Agee was an adolescent at the St. Andrews Highschool and continuing throughout his entire life, who was like a second father to him. She will also watch the interviews with Mia Agee Fritsch and John Huston.



KNOXVILLE „1915“



MARINER BOOKS



LET US NOW PRAISE  
FAMOUS MEN

JAMES AGEE • WALKER EVANS

THE AMERICAN CLASSIC, IN  
WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS, OF THREE  
TENANT FAMILIES IN THE DEEP SOUTH

FEATURING STRIKING PHOTOGRAPHS NEWLY REPRODUCED FROM ARCHIVAL NEGATIVES

# The interviews

The filmmaker will interview authors who have written books about Agee. The *Citizen Kane* type investigation that she will carry out in the film will cover four major chapters in the life of Agee: his childhood, his years as a film critic in New York, his work in Hollywood as a screenplay writer and his friendship with Charlie Chaplin.

Her first encounter with Belinda Rathbone, who wrote a biography of Walker Evans, one of the greatest American photographers, in which she recounts at length the friendship between Agee and Evans and their work together on their wonderful book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. This interview will be interspersed with many photos taken by Evans for the book.

The book was first published in 1948 without the success; it was republished in 1960 and became a “cult” book that has been translated into many languages.

## „Let Us Now Praise Famous Men“

### Interview with Belinda Rathbone:

Agee had been with the magazine for four years and was groweling bored with his assignments on such lifeless topics as glass, jewelry, and Colonial Williamsburg.

For the next story the managing editor, Eric Hodgins, wanted to find a typical white tenant farmer and his family somewhere in the South. The perfect writer for this assignment was James Agee. As the boy from Knoxville, Agee understood the mentality of southern country folk better than most of his colleagues.

When Agee heard about the assignment, he decided to postpone his resignation. Here was just the kind of story he had been wanting to write, a story about people, not about commerce and merchandise. He had already give a good deal of thought to the subject of tenant farmers, an exceptionnally damaged group of people hidden from society.

Travelling „in disguise“ as a journalist would give him the excuse he needed to probe into the lives of people wary of intruders. His ambition was to make the people he would write about not just real, but „full of vitality and the ardor of their own truth.“ He would treat them with a respect and dignity never before known to american journalism, forcing his readers to face them as equals and thereby exposing the superficiality and condescenios of so much Depression reportage. He would reveal the injustice of society.

Agee’s one request was for Walker Evans to be sent with him to make the photographs. No other photographer, he believed, would be as sensitive to the delicacy of his new assignment. He wanted to move gently, almost invisibly, into the culture of southern poverty.

Agee already knew that his interest in the subject was too great to be contained in the limits of a magazine article. His idea was to research his story in three sections, using three families, perhaps in different parts of the South.

After more than three weeks on the road, with their allotted time nearly up, the two men were still traveling in search of their story.



By the middle of July, Evans and Agee had narrowed their search to south-central Alabama, a large part of which was known as the Black Belt for its exceptionally dark, rich soil. This was the heart of cotton Country.

The original economy of the region was based on subsistence homesteading, small independent farms buttressed by a wealth of forests. Now the timber was heavily cut, the soil was overworked, and many of the farmers were at the mercy of large landowners.

In Hale County, Alabama, a particularly poor and desolate part of the state, the travelers stopped to revise their plans in the county seat. In front of the courthouse, Evans struck up a conversation with a farmer who was here seeking government relief. The man was Frank Tingle.

Tingle's house was a dilapidated single-story frame construction that had once belonged to a small farmer. Tingle invited the two journalists to sit on the wide front porch, which was caving in here and there under the pressure of a rocking chair, and offered them, as Agee vividly remembered that day, „a glass of water from the cistern and small sweet peaches that had been heating on a piece of tin in the sun.“ Children emerged from behind bushes and „hid behind one another and flirted at us.“ Tingle called out to them and to his wife to say they had visit.

Evans brought out his eight-by-ten view camera, and the Tingle family prepared itself for a group portrait. Frank laughed about how his face would break the camera while his wife combed her hair and nervously smoothed her sackcloth dress, full of holes and stains. With mounting excitement, Agee observed the family and Walker setting up his camera on the tripod.

„Mrs. Tingle then posed for her portrait and then posed with her seven children as before a firing squad,“ remembered Agee, „the children standing like columns of an exquisite temple.“

Agee wrote in his book: „I receive a strong shock at my heart, and I move silently, and quickly. I'm seated on the front porch with a pencil and an open Noteboock, and I get up and go toward them. In some bewilderment, they yet love me, and I, how dearly, them, and trust me, despite hurt and mystery, deep beyond making of such a word as trust. It is not going to be easy to look into their eyes.“

Agee and Evans were not sure whether this was the first or the last of their visits to Mills' Hill. But of one thing they were certain: having spent the afternoon there, they were closer to capturing their subject than they had ever been.

Although it was Evans who had made the initial contact with the Burroughses, the Tingles, and the Fieldes, in later years, Evans insisted that Agee deserved all the credit for winning their hearts. Agee treated them with the utmost cordiality and took a sincere interest in the daily problems of their lives. He spoke to the children as if their thoughts and feelings mattered to him. They quickly realized that they didn't have to act any different from what it comes natural to act, Mary Fields told Agee, whose accent, Evans noticed, had begun to veer toward country southern.







Agee and Evans worked in silence, out of a faith in each other and a respect for the privacy of their separate creations. They resisted the idea that one medium might serve to illustrate the other, or that either might dominate. What would result, they were sure, would be morally and aesthetically equal and compatible, reflecting their shared belief that what lay before them was not a socialological set of statistics but the bare bones of „a great work of art.“

Mrs Rathbone or our filmmaker will read these wonderful and enigmatic phrases from the book: „This world is not my home, I'm, only passing through my treasures and my hopes, are, all, beyond the sky. I'v many, friends, and kindreds, that's gone, along before, And I cant' feel, at home, in this world, any more.“

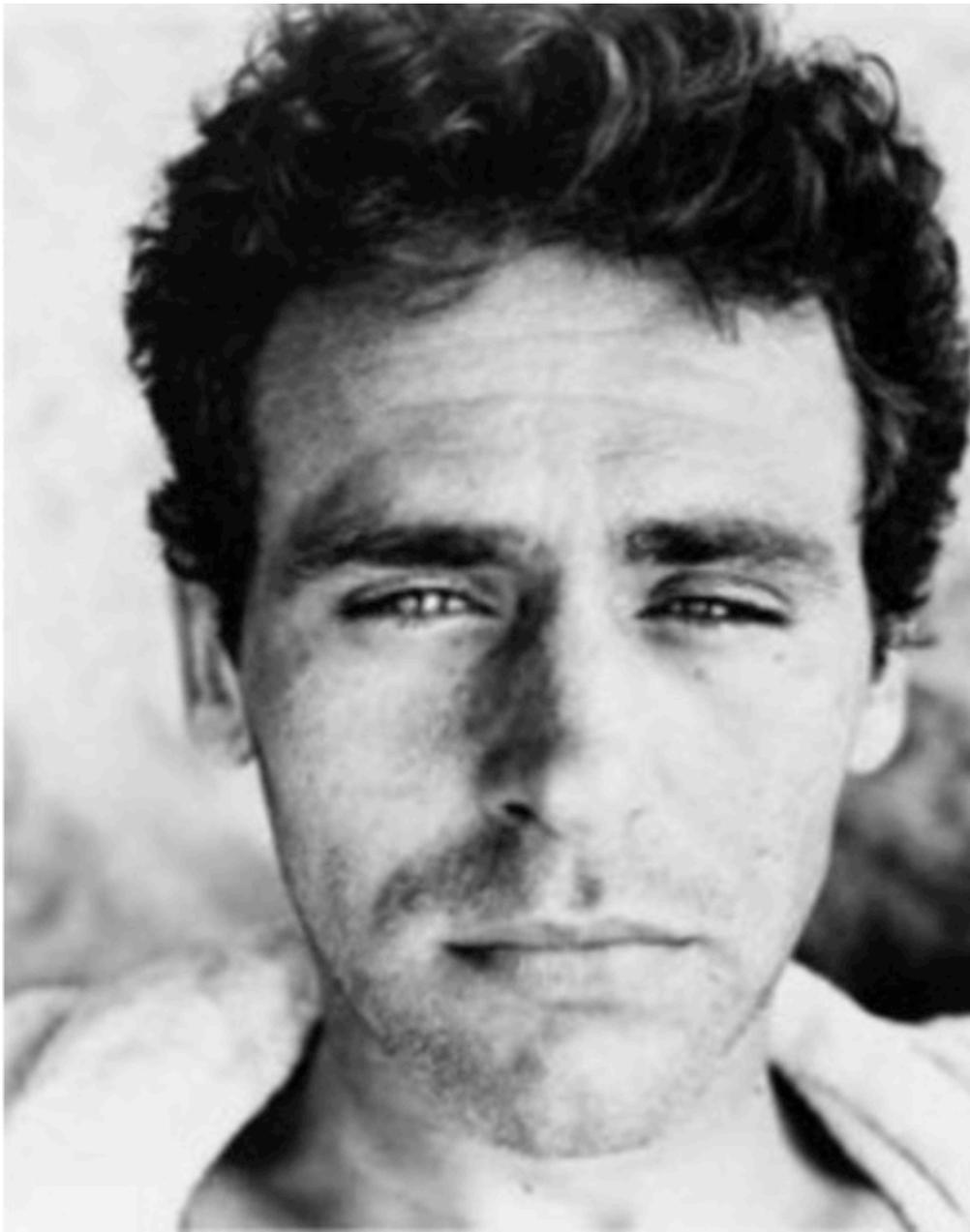
He stayed on, writing late into the night by the light of an oil lamp, covering page upon page, with his tiny, illegible script. Agee would be working on his prose long after Evans had developed and printed his negatives, and he would rely on the pictures to renew his inspiration and assist his memory in his exhaustive cataloguing of the house's every object and it's arrangement.

Agee and Evans devoted more of their attention to the Burroughses than to the other two families, partly because they lived with them, but also because they were closer to them in age. To the writer and photographer, the Burroughses had the greatest dignity, and thus the greatest potential for dignified portrayal. The Burroughses wished to be photographed outdoors, away from the inescapable poverty of their home, but the Fieldses did not mind posing amid the filth and shabbiness of their wooden shack.

When they finally made their departure at the end of August, Agee and Evans felt as much guilt as they had setting out. They knew that what they had done would not really change the familie's lives for the better, and they knew that the families were under the innocent impression that it would. They promised to send money, clothes, toys for the children, and they promised that they would return.

What they carried away was much more than the material for a magazine article, and the love they had invested and the love they had inspired was to great, to dispense with in a timely piece of journalisme.

Agee (quote): „The young Emma Wood appeared, all dressed to go, looking me steadily and sweetly in the eyes, and said: „I want you and Mr. Walker to know how much we all like you, because you make us feel easy with you; we don't have to act any different from what it comes natural to act, and we don't have to worry what you're thinking about us, it's just like you was our own people and had always lived here.“ I had such tenderness and such gratitude toward her that while she spoke I very strongly, as something steadier than an impulse, wanted in answer to take her large body in my arms and smooth the damp hair back from her forehead and to kiss and comfort and shelter her like a child. To smile to her and say to her that there was nothing in my whole life that I had cared so much to be told, and had been so grateful for and that I wanted her to know how much I loved them, too, and her herself, and that I certainly felt that they were my own people, and wanted them to be, more than any other kind of people in the world, and that if they felt that of me, and that I belonged with them, and we all felt right and easy with each other and fond of each other. I went on to say that whatever might happen to her or that she might do in all her life I wished her the best luck anyone could think of, and not ever to forget it, that nobody has a right to be unhappy, or what people will think of them.“



The book was published in 1948 with few success; it was republished in 1960 and became a “cult book” that has been translated into many languages. Walker Evans wrote a beautiful preface to the new edition that will be read outloud by our filmmaker, accompanied by a series of photo portraits of Agee, mixed in with some of Evan’s photographs:

„At the time, Agee was a youth fullooking twenty-seven, a hint of family gentility and a trace of romantic idealisme. He didn’t look much like a poet, an intellectual, an artist or a Christian, each of which he was. Nor whas there outward signe of his paralyzing, self-lacerating anger. His voice was pronouncedly quiet and low-pitched, though not of „cultivated“ one.

His clothes were deliberately cheap, not only because he was poor but because he wanted to be able to forget them. I exaggerate, but it did seem sometimes that wind, rain, work, and mockery were his tailors.

Physically Agee was quite powerful. In movement he was rather graceless. His hands were large, long, bony, light, and uncared for. His gestures were one of the memorable things about him. He seemed to model, fight, and strock his phrases as he talked. The talk, in the end, was his great distinguishing feature. He talked his prose, Agee prose. It was hardly a twentieth-century style, it had Elizabethan colors.

He wrote, devotedly and incessantly. Night was his time. In Alabama he worked I don’t know how late. His work was largely night-written. Agee worked in what looked like a rush and a rage. In Alabama he was possessed with the business, jamming it all into the days and the nights. He must not have slept.

He was driven to see all he could of the families, day, starting, of course at dawn. In one way, conditions there were ideal. He could live inside the subject, with no distractions. Back-Country poor life wasn’t really far from him, actually.

He had some of it in his blood, through relatives in Tennessee. The families understood what he was down there to do. He’d explained it in such a way that they were interested in *his* work.

His Christianity was punctured and residual remnant, but it was still a naked, root emotion. It was an ex-Church, or non-Church matter, and it was hardly in evidence. All you saw of it was an ingrained courtesy, an uncourtly courtesy that amanated from him towards everyone, perhaps excepting the smugly rich, the pretentiously genteel, and the police.

After a while, in a rund-about way, you discoverd that, to him, human beings were at least possibly immortal and literally sacred souls.

The days with the familes came abruptly to an end. Their real content and meaning has all been shown. The writing they induced is, among other things, the reflection of one resolute, private rebellion.

Agee’s rebellion was unquenchable, self-damaging, deeply principled, inifnetly costly, and ultimately priceless.“



# About Agee as a filmcritic:

Interview of Charles Maland, film professor at the University of Tennessee, who has published all the film reviews written by Agee:

Agee, quote: „To me, the great thing about the movies is that it’s brand new field. I don’t see how much more can be done with writing or with the stage. As for the movies, however, their possibilities are infinite – at least insofar as the possibilities of any art can be so.“

Agee’s love for movies began very early. His father, Hugh James Agee, often took him on the short walk from their Highland Avenue home to see silent films in one of the downtown movie theaters.

As he wrote in a letter in early 1947, during his early childhood he and his father often went to movies: westerns, and above all, Charlie Chaplin. „I remember my mother saying of Chaplin that, “he is so vulgar“ and deploring our going, and my father’s laughing that off. We both had a very good time watching him.“

Chaplin who was enjoying his first great popularity in 1915, the year of Agee’s novel’s setting, the year of his father’s death.

From 1942 on he started to write filmcritics for the *TIME* magazine. Between September 1943 and the end of the Summer 1948, Agee reviewed one or more movies almost every week, sometimes he watched the same film several times.

For the next five years, Agee sought to provide his readers at *Time* and *Nation* with just such a stimulating and illuminating take on what he believed to be the central artform of the twentieth century.

The English poet W.H. Auden wrote a letter to *TIME*, saying that Agee’s column about films was, „the most remarkable regular event in American journalism today. They transcend their subjects and belong in that very select class of newspaper work which has permanent literary value.“

He had more and more movie-making aspirations. His favorite filmmakers were D.W. Griffith, Chaplin, Keaton, Erich von Stroheim, the Russians Eisenstein and Dovjenco, the Germans Murnau and Papst, the Dane Dreyer. In USA Hitchcock, Billy Wilder. And the French filmmakers René Clair and Jean Vigo.

Agee celebrated ambitious directors who sought to create great works of art but often felt crushed by industries and audiences.

He proceeds to blend biographical details with close attention to key moments in the films. One observer famously called Agee a „crown prince of the English language“ and the reader of Agee’s reviews often feels in the presence of a master prose stylist.“

Another critic celebrated Agee for his humor, encyclopedic memory, use of fresh detail, and inventive use of language.

Agee's impassioned commitment to writing seriously about the movies provided a great model. Many considered him as the „best movie critic this country has ever had.“ His reputation as a critic has remained alive in the ensuing years. Many people thought that American movie criticism started with him as „the first great American movie critic.“

Interview with David Denby, writer and filmcritic at “The New York Times” and at “The New Yorker”:

David Denby will specifically talk about the influence Agee has had as film critic on subsequent generations of film reviewers and how he personally considers Agee to be the “master of American film criticism”. He will speak of Agee's almost “tactile” sense of the cinema, about the fact that he thought that a general culture was needed to talk about films and how Agee understood film as the “reflection of the soul of a country”.



# Agee's friendship with Charlie Chaplin:

Interview of John Wranovics who wrote the book entitled *Chaplin and Agee*. This interview will be punctuated by many photos of Chaplin and of excerpts from the films John Wranovics talks about:

It is no exaggeration to say that Agee idolized Chaplin. He wrote continually about him, in his critics and in his letters. Chaplin's „Little Tramp“ character stood for him as a modern, secular Jesus figure.

During the 1940's and fifties, Chaplin, the private man, increasingly under siege for his politics and personal life, represented for Agee the artist at odds with society. He wrote, „Charlie Chaplin is, I believe, the greatest artist of our time, in any medium.“

Agee's love of film and his love for Chaplin were inseparable. He came to see Chaplin's Little Tramp as a new spiritual hero for the capitalist era, speaking to the masses through film, it's most promising and popular new art form.

For Agee, the Tramp represented the fully human individual, uncorrupted by technology and politics, and as such, the model mankind must aspire to emulate if it is to survive.

He believed sincerely that film had the potential to replace and supersede literature as the dominant art form of our time.

„The Tramp“, Agee wrote, „is as centrally representative of humanity, as manysided and as mysterious, as Hamlet.“

Chaplin's Tramp distilled from the strife and trouble of everyday life were an inspiration in Agee's art and life from his earliest remembered childhood until the last days of his life.

The famous photo taken from Chaplin's film "The Kid" of Chaplin, Agee's idol, and his adopted son, is the film image Agee loves best. One might say that this photo of a father "lost in the world" and of a fragile boy who is looking behind him as if desperately looking for help or as if he is fleeing someone who wants to do him harm, perhaps fleeing destiny itself, mirrors his own life. Undoubtedly Agee identifies with this boy, with Chaplin himself becoming his „ideal" father, a kind of "dream" father.

Agee (quote): „Before Chaplin came to pictures people were content with a couple of gags per comedy; he got some kind of laugh every second. The finest pantomime, the deepest emotion, the richest and most poignant poetry were in Chaplin's work.“

For Agee, Chaplin was the ideal hero. Robert Coles concludes that Agee found in Chaplin's work, „a triumphant, searching social and political criticism, all worked into a brilliant artist's performance. Agee, the passionate moraliste, angry at injustice and anxious to change the world, saw in Chaplin a fellow artist with similar interests and loyalties. And both, Chaplin and Agee, were raised without fathers.“



Chaplin's „Monsieur Verdoux“





At the end of the forties Chaplin was more and more attacked by right wing journalists for his support for the Soviet Union during World War II, an ally of America at the time, and his continued highprofile interest in progressive causes. He came to New York to present his new movie *Monsieur Verdoux*, a black comedy, a critique of the human toll of capitalism's periodic. It was a risky film. Twenty years later in his memoir he wrote, „the cleverest and most brilliant film I have yet made.“

At the press conference he is heavily attacked by right wing journalists who accused him to be a „communist“. It's true, in Hollywood during and after the war his best friends were German Jewish writers and musicians, refugees from Nazi Germany. Chaplin's answer was: „I'm not touting for any ideology. I'm for the progress of the human race. I'm for the little man.“

At the press conference, Chaplin heard one friendly voice attempt to end the cycle of attacks. It was Agee who said with a trembling voice: „How does it feel to be an artist who has enriched the world with so much happiness and understanding of the little people, and to be derided and held up to hate and scorn by the so-called representatives of the American press?“

This was the first time Agee was in presence of Chaplin and he was terribly nervous and excited.

For Agee, the opportunity provided by the press conference was both a dream come true and the hand of God at work. Chaplin was a touchstone for Agee throughout his life, serving him as an artistic idol and as an emotional connection to his father. Agee would later write a moving account of his childhood memories of accompanying his father to the local movie theater in Knoxville to watch Chaplin's *Little Tramp*.

About *Monsieur Verdoux* Agee wrote in his paper *The Nation*: „The skeletal story: Henri Verdoux, a French bank teller of thirties who has lost his job in a depression, works out a business of his own whereby he can support his crippled wife and their little boy. He becomes a professional murderer of women of means. He courts them, marries them, finesses their little fortunes into his possession; murders them and eliminates their corpses, plays the market with the wole of his profits.“

„Verdoux is Landru, the French bluebird. Before he is executed he says to a Journalist: „As a mass killer I'm an amateur by comparison. That's the history of many a big business. One murder makes you a villain, millions a hero.“

„The world of Verdoux is the world of gain, gotten ill, by chance, by heritage, by crime.“

„But why does Verdoux become a murderer? One good answer is: why not? Verdoux is a business realist; in terms of that realisme the only difference between free enterprise in murder and free enterprise in the sale of elastic stockings is the difference in legal liability and in net income.“

„The film ends with the famous scenes in which Verdoux hears his sentence and explains himself, more or less, to the court and the world; pays his equally cold respects to journalism and to God, and walks to the guillotine.“



Chaplin's „Limelight“

It's still Agee writing: „I think it is one of the best movies ever made, easily the most exciting and most beautiful of Chaplin since *Modern Times*. *Monsieur Verdoux* is one of the most notable films in years. It is not the finest picture Chaplin ever made, but it is certainly the most fascinating. Artisticly the film is extraordinary.“

„*Monsieur Verdoux* is one of the purest and most courageous works I know. One of the few indispensable works of our time.“

„A majority of Manhattan critics found the film baffling, disappointing, offensive, and, in stretches, plain boring. But a few enjoyed the subtle, tragicomic ironies germinated by Chaplin's powers of intuition, of pure feeling, and of observation.“

„Working with a new character, and adapting his old, mute artfulness to a medium new and basically hostile to him, Chaplin still has his sure virtuosity; his is one of the most beautiful single performances ever put on film.“

Agee speaks about the difference of this film compared to his comedies and „it's irony with an intensity never before attempted in films“

„It is one of the most talented screen plays ever written.“

„I could write many pages, about the richness and quality of this film as a work of art, in fact, of genius.“

In the last months of 1951, Agee found his relationship with Chaplin growing even stronger. He wrote Father Flye: „I've spent probably 30 or 50 evenings talking alone most of the night with Chaplin, and he has talked very openly and intimately. I wish I had kept a record of this. But all I've done of it is in a couple or three letters to Mia (his wife).“

Chaplin was then in the process of filming *Limelight*. He invited Agee on the stage, both as an interested viewer and as an informed consultant. Chaplin also invited Agee to view roughcuts and advance screening to ask his reactions.

Mia Agee Fritsch says in Ross Spears film: „Chaplin used him as a critic, though he never paid any attention to any criticism. But he was always very interested and he made Jim write out what he thought. Jim was at all the shootings. So he have Jim tell him what he thought about various scenes. And Jim would, of course, tell him very honestly. Of course, Chaplin never paid attention to what Jim said.“

September 16, 1952, Last photo Chaplin, Agee and their wives, in New York, the night before sailing into unwitting exile, Chaplin was barred from reentering the US by State Department.

The next day, Agee went to the dock to say his farewell to the Chaplins. The poignant scene of Agee desperately searching for one last view of Chaplin made a lasting impression on Chaplin, who described it in his memoir: „And Jim never did see me; and that was the last I ever saw of Jim, standing alone as though apart from the world, peering and searching. Two years later he died of a heart attack.“



Agee kept contact with Chaplin writing him often. The week before Christmas in 1953, Chaplin wrote to Agee from Switzerland, a long letter: „Dear Jim, received your bountiful letter, you certainly went from soup to nuts and I must say it was heartening to hear from you. We are very comfortable and happy living in Switzerland. You really must come over, you and Mia. I'm glad to hear that you have had a nice year. You deserve it. As for your new script being almost poetry I don't think you could write anything without it having that flavour. So let us have more of it.“



Humphrey Bogart, Katharine Hepburn and John Huston

# Agee's encounter with John Huston

Told by Charles Maland and David Denby, with photos and excerpts from the film *The African Queen*, along with some shots from the original screenplay written by Agee:

Of the directors whose work Agee most admired, John Huston was perhaps the one he was most personally drawn to. In the course of working on an article (published in *Life*, September 18, 1950), the two men met for the first time, although they had exchanged correspondence when Agee was still reviewing. Agee's article on Huston is a good early example of what would later be called auteur criticism, an approach celebrating directing especially writer-directors, that was just beginning to percolate in France when this essay appeared.

To Agee, Huston was the shining example of successful, intelligent independent working within the confines of the movie studio system. In Huston's eyes, „Agee was a poet, novelist and the best motion-picture critic this country has ever had.“

Agee (quote): „John Huston, next only to Chaplin, is the most talented man working in American pictures. Most of the really good popular art produced anywhere comes from Hollywood, and much of it bears Huston's name. To put it conservatively, there is nobody under fifty at work in movies, here or abroad, who can excel Huston in talent, inventiveness, intransigence, achievement or promise.“

„Huston is a born popular artist. In his life, his dealings and his work as an artist he operates largely by instinct, unencumbered by much reflectiveness or abstract thinking.“

Huston's wrote him back in February 1948. His letter reflects the unease he felt at breaking the unofficial barrier between critic and the artist. Still they got together and became quickly good friends.

Huston: „When it was time to start on *The African Queen*, I phoned Agee in New York and said: „How about it?“ Agee left New York and his family and went to Hollywood. They started to write the script after C.S. Forester's novel.

Huston: „I would write a section and give it to Jim. Jim would write and give it to me. Most of what Jim wrote stayed as he had written it, and most of what I wrote, Jim rewrote. So the collaboration was a one-sided one, and much to my benefit.“

Huston was surprised by the quantity of Agee's output. „Jim was forever bringing more pages. He was doing an enormous amount of work, and I didn't see how he managed to turn so much work out.“

Agee, a lifelong insomniac was in fact working through the night, writing as much as he could on little or no sleep.

KATHARINE  
**HEPBURN**

HUMPHREY  
**BOGART**

# *The* **AFRICAN QUEEN**

UN FILM DE  
**JOHN HUSTON**



Filmed in AFRICA  
in colour by  
TECHNICOLOR

OSCAR® DU MEILLEUR ACTEUR  
**HUMPHREY BOGART**

He suffered then a near-fatal heart attack. He had to go to hospital. While Agee convalesced, Huston left for Africa with the unfinished screenplay. Huston hired Peter Viertel to work with him to complete the script. Peter spoke about Agee's „brilliant descriptions, but there were practically no dialogue scenes, which Huston explained was the reason I had been hired. My contribution had mainly been sitting for hours with John while we laboriously invented the sparse lines of dialogue he required.“

Agee wrote to a friend in 1953 describing his contribution to the 160 page first draft of the screenplay: „The first hundred pages were mine and brought it through almost exactly half the story. The last 60 were Huston's.“

The film got 3 Oscar nominations, for the best screenplay, best film and best actor, Humphrey Bogart, who finally got an Oscar.



Robert Mitchum in „The Night of the Hunter“

## Agee's Screenplay *The Night of the Hunter*

Charles Maland and David Denby will talk about this wonderful and exceptional film, with excerpts and photos from the film:

In March 1954, Charles Laughton, the great British actor, asked Agee to write a screenplay based on the novel of the same name written by Davis Grubb. It's the story of a psychopathic, demonic minister, magnificently played by Robert Mitchum, who pursues two children, a boy and his sister, because he wants to steal the money they have been given by their dying father. In the film as written by Agee, there are a few autobiographical traces of his childhood and countless beautiful ideas and inventions of scenes, situations and characters.

His manuscript was over 300 pages long and mostly consisted of descriptions, analyses and thoughts rather than of a screenplay organized in scenes and plans.

There was some confusion as to Agee's real contribution as the film's screenplay writer. By comparing his manuscript with the film, it is obvious that Laughton used practically everything of Agee's original manuscript, faithfully following his narrative.

The film came out in July of 1955, two months after Agee's death. It was a flop, only to be recognized a few years later as a veritable *chef d'oeuvre*; it has since become a legendary film in the history of cinema.



The mother, the grandmother, the brother, and the children James and Emma



## Agee's novel "A Death in the Family"

Throughout all these years Agee also worked on his autobiographical novel, *A Death in the Family*, in which he recounts the death of his father. He had started to write it in 1948, but was often interrupted by financial worries and his work in Hollywood. As soon as he could, he started working on it full time. He told a friend: "this book is killing me". What he probably meant by this was that it made him suffer, it traumatized him, caused him great anxiety to dig into those fateful days in summer 1915 when his father did not return in the night and when his mother told her children the next morning that he would never be coming back.

The filmmaker will tell us that Agee thought and dreamed about his autobiographical novel nearly his whole life and that he had said to a friend the evening before his death that he still had two or three months of work to finish it.

The viewer will see excerpts of the original manuscript of this magnificent novel before our filmmaker starts filming the rehearsals with her actors and actresses.

Finally she will visit the house on 17 Kingstreet in Greenwich Village where Agee lived the last years of his life with his third wife, Mia, and their children Deedee, Andrea and John, and where he tried to finish his novel, working at the same time on a film script about the French painter Gauguin, *Gauguin in Tahiti*.

The last visit she will make will be to the neighborhood church, Saint Luke's Chapel, where the funeral was held and attended by around 100 persons. Father Flye spoke about James at the funeral, about the adolescent boy he knew and about the adult he continued to know. Later, the family had Agee buried at the base of a hill near his house in Hillsdale, New York, around 200 kilometers north of New York City, where he had lived a few years of his life.

# The scenes from the “A Death in the Family” “rehearsed” by the actresses and actors

## 1st scene

In the beginning of his novel, Agee recounts his happy childhood when his father was still alive. We find our filmmaker in the backyard of the Agee home. Sitting or lying on the grass around her are the actors and actresses: the father, the mother, the mother’s brother, her aunt and their son James, whose name is “Rufus” in the novel. We see, all around, the house, the trees, the sky, the leaves moving in the breeze as evening approaches. An off voice, reads the following phrases:

*We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child.*

*On the rough, wet grass of the backyard 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.*

*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; and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being 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 the hour of their taking away.*

*After a little I am taken in and put to bed. Sleep, softly 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.*

## 2nd scene

We find the filmmaker with two of the actors, the father and the son, in a meadow surrounded by a few trees and next to a rock, on which they sit. She directs their gestures following those described in the novel. We see how Rufus looks at his father's face, and we see his father put his hand on Rufus' head, brush back his hair, then gently squeeze his neck while Rufus throws his head back, pressing it against his father's strong hand. The father then puts his hand on his son's shoulder.

Rufus looks at his father's blue eyes and the deep wrinkles around his mouth. He looks at what his father is looking at the leaves of the tree behind them and the stars above their heads, "*the trembling lanterns of the universe, the whispering of the stars.*" The filmmaker talks with the two actors and together they organize this ballet of gestures and looks. We see the father and son who then play the entire scene after having rehearsed it with the filmmaker while we hear the phrases from the novel describing these gestures, the reading helping us "see" what the images cannot show, i.e., what's going on inside their heads, their thoughts and feelings, the reason why we have literature, the poetry of words:

*Whenever they walked downtown and walked back home, in the evenings, they always began to walk more slowly, from about the middle of the viaduct, then, without speaking, stepped into the dark lot and sat down on the rock, looking out over the steep face of the hill and at the lights of North Knoxville. Deep in the valley an engine coughed and browsed; couplings settled their long chains, and the empty cars sounded like broken drums.*

*As always Rufus' father took off his hat and put it over the front of his bent knee. Rufus realized that his father stopped as much because he wanted to, as on Rufus' account. He was just not in a hurry to get home, and, far more important, it was clear that he liked to spend these few minutes with Rufus. During the ten to twenty minutes they sat on the rock, he felt a particular kind of contentment, unlike any other that he knew, and that their kinds of contentment were much alike, and depended on each other.*

*He knew that each of them knew of the other's well-being, and of the reasons for it, and how each meant more to the other, in this most important of all ways.*

*Rufus seldom had at all sharply the feeling that he and his father were estranged, yet they must have been, and he must have felt it, for always during these quiet moments on the rock a part of his sense of complete contentment lay in the feeling that they were reconciled, that there was really no division, no estrangement, by comparison with the unity that was so firm and assured here.*



The „father“ (Joe Jayne)

### 3rd scene

We're in the kitchen of Agee's home. The filmmaker is speaking with the actor who plays the father, whose name is "Jay" in the novel. She tells him that the night the phone rang, he got out of bed to answer it, and that it was his brother-in-law "Ralph" who was calling. She discusses with him how he should pick up the receiver and how he should position himself in relation to the camera; then we hear the voices of the two men:

"Hello, Ralph?"

"Hello, Jay?"

"Ralph? Yea. Hello. What's the trouble?"

"Jay? Can you hear me all right?"

"Sure, I can hear you. What's the matter?"

"Hit's Paw, Jay. I know I got no business aringing y'up this hour night, but know too you'd never a forgive me if..."

"Quit it, Ralph, cut that out and tell me about it."

"Hit's only my duty, Jay, God Almighty I..."

"All right, Ralph, I preciate your callin. Now tell me about Paw."

"I just got back fer this, Jay, this minute, hurried home specially to ring you up."

"Listen, Ralph, can you hear me? Is he dead or alive?"

"Why, naw, he ain't dead."

"I should come up, huh?"

"Course that's entirely up to you, Jay. I know Paw n'all of us would feel it was mighty strange if his oldest boy, the one he always thought the most of..."

"Hold on Ralph, you hold on there. If Paw's that bad you know damn well I'm coming so don't give me none of that... Do you hear me?"

"I can hear you, Jay."

"Ralph, get it straight. I'm not trying to jump on you, but sounds to me like you've had a few. Now... I know you wouldn't a phoned if you didn't think it was serious. Listen here, I'm starting right on up. I ought to be there by – what time is it, do you know?"

"Hit's two-thirty-seven, Jay. I knowed you'd..."

"I ought to be there by daylight, Ralph, you tell Mother I'm coming right on up just quicks I can get there. Ralph. Is he conscious?"

"Awf an'on, Jay. He's been speking yore name, Jay, hit like to break muh heart. He'll sure thank his stars that his oldest boy, the one he always thought the most of, that you thought it was worth yer wile to..."

"Cut it out, Ralph. What the hell you think I am? If he gets conscious just let him know I'm coming."

His wife, whose name is "Mary" in the novel, has got out of bed too and comes into the room wearing her dressing gown; she follows the end of the conversation between her husband and his brother-in-law. The filmmaker talks to her, guiding her arrival, telling her where to position herself, behind or beside her husband:

"It's your father, Jay?"

"Yup."

"Then it's very grave, Jay."

“Lord knows.”

She put her hand on him: “Has the doctor seen him?”

“He says he has a chance.”

“That could mean so many things. It might be all right if you waited till morning. You might hear he was better, then. Not that I mean to...”

“Sweetheart, I’d rather wait and see what we hear in the morning, just as much as you would. It may all be a false alarm. I know Ralph goes off his trolley easy. But we just can’t afford to take that chance.”

“Of course not, Jay.”

“What would you like to do for your birthday?” he asks her.

“Why Jay.” She is taken very much by surprise.

“Why you nice thing! Why – why...”

“You think it over,” he says. “Whatever you’d like best, within reason, of course,” he jokes.

“That is, of course, if everything goes the way we hope it will, up home.”

“Of course, Jay. Let’s hope it will.”

“Well, Mary,” he says in his gentlest voice. He takes her hand. They smile.

She: “Then I’ll hear from you – see you very soon.”

“That’s right.”

“All right, Jay.” She squeezes his arm. He kisses her, just beneath the eye and realizes her disappointment. They smile again and he kisses her now heartily on the mouth.

“All right, dear. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, my dear.”

We see Rufus in his bed. The phone call has woken him. He listens to the voice of his father, then that of his mother. We see the reflection of light in his room, coming from beneath the door. His little sister sleeps in another bed close by. The boy hears his father leaving, the door to the house opening. The tires of his father’s car that squeak on the gravel. The sounds of the car motor receding. The door to the house that closes. The mother goes to the children’s bedroom, opens the door and looks at them a very long time. Rufus pretends to be sleeping. She comes in, carefully readjusts their covers and looks at them tenderly.

## 4th scene

The following evening. A few minutes before ten p.m., the telephone rings again. Mary rushes to answer it for fear that it will wake the children. Again, the filmmaker directs the scene; they rehearse two or three times the way in which Mary reaches the phone, the speed with which she moves, and the manner in which she picks up the receiver:

“Hello?”

The voice is a man’s, wiry and faint, a country voice. It is asking a question, but she cannot hear it clearly.

“Hello!” she says again. “Will you please talk a little louder? I can’t hear.

I said I can’t hear you, please. Thank you.”

Now, a voice coming from a great distance.

“Is this Miz Jay Follet?”

“Yes, what is it? Yes, this is she.”

“There’s been a slight – your husband has been in a accident.”

“Yes”, she says, in a cavedin voice.

“A serious accident.”

“Yes,” she says again, shocked.

“What I wanted to ask, is there a man in his family, some kin, could come out? We’d appreciate if you could send a man out here, right away.”

“Yes, yes, there’s my brother. Where should he come to?”

“I’m out at Powell Station, at Brannick’s Blacksmith Shop, bout twelve miles out the all Camp Pike. Brannick’s B-r-a-n-n-i-c-k. It’s right on the left of the Pike comin out just a little way this side, Knoxville side of Bell’s Bridge.”

“Do you have a doctor?”

“How’s that again, ma’am?”

“A doctor, do you have one? Should I send a doctor?”

“That’s all right, ma’am. Just some man that’s kin.”

“He’ll come right out just as fast as he can. Thank you very much for calling.”

“That’s all right, ma’am. I sure do hate to give you bad news.”

“Good night.”

“Good-bye, ma’am.”

Mary can barely stand. She hangs up the phone like a lost soul. She stiffens her knees and leans on the wall. Then she starts preparing a bed for her wounded husband. She puts on clean sheets and changes the pillowcases. She lowers the blinds in the bedroom. She turns off the light and falls to her knees before the bed. She makes the sign of the cross and starts praying.

*“Oh God, let him be well enough to come home where I can take care of him, where I can take good care of him. How good to rest. O God, if it be Thy will”, she whispers. She makes the sign of the Cross, slowly, deeply. “Thy will be done.”*



The „mother“ (Carrie Booher)



The „aunt“ (Jenny Lamm)

## 5th scene

Mary and her aunt, Hannah, are sitting at the kitchen table in the Agee home. The filmmaker is standing and speaking to the aunt, but we can't hear much of what's being said. The film crew is busy working around them. We see the scene being set up, the positions for the lighting and sound recording are found. Small adjustments are made as necessary. Then the filmmaker sits down and the actresses start playing the scene. The aunt's hands are stretched out to Mary, who takes them in hers; Mary kisses her aunt on the cheek; "sorry", she says, almost in tears. We then listen to their long conversation:

Hannah comes in with her hands stretched out and Mary extends her own hands and takes them and kisses her cheek while, at the same instant they say, "Mary", and "my dear."

"Mary, I'm so sorry," says her aunt.

"Everything is ready that I can think of," Mary says. "That we can know about yet. I've made up the downstairs bedroom, where he stayed when his poor back was sprained, you remember."

"Of course I do."

"But I guess it's just as well to wait till we hear from Andrew, not create any needless disturbance, I guess. After all, it's very possible he'll have to be taken straight to a hospital. The man did say it was serious, after all."

"I think you are wise to wait."

"You know," Mary says slowly, "the queerest thing. When the man phoned and said Jay had been in a serious accident I felt it just as certainly as I'm sitting here now, it's his head. What do you think of that?" she asks, almost proudly.

Hannah looks away and then: "We never know," she murmurs.

"Of course we just have to wait," Mary says, after a long silence.

"Hyess." Hannah could think of nothing to say.

"We ought to be hearing pretty soon. Ten minutes."

"Yes, I should think.

"Maybe twenty."

"Why didn't he tell me!" Mary burst out.

"What is it?"

"Why didn't I ask?" She looks at her aunt in furious bewilderment. "I didn't ask! How serious! Where is he hurt? Is he living or dead?"

Hannah looks back steadily into Mary's eyes. "Then we simply have to wait to find out," she says.

"Of course we have," Mary cries angrily. "That's what's so unbearable!"

"I'm sorry," Mary says, "You're perfectly right. I've just got to hold myself together, that's all."

"Never mind," Hannah says, and then fell silent. Then she adds: "It was so sudden, it was such a shock."

Mary: "I think I must have been too afraid of what he would have to say.

I just can't help wondering, why he didn't say more. A serious accident he said."

After a moment of silence, Mary looks up at her aunt. "If he dies," she says, "if he's dead, Aunt Hannah, I don't know what I'll do."

"God help you," Hanna says. She reaches across and takes Mary's hand. "God keep you. You'll do well. Whatever it is, you'll do well. Don't doubt of it. Don't you fear."

Mary subdues her crying.

“It’s well to be ready for the worst,” Hannah continues. “But we mustn’t forget, we don’t know yet.”

At the same instant, both look at the clock.

“Certainly be very soon now, Andrew should phone,” Mary says. “Unless he’s had an accident!” She laughs sharply.

“Oh, soon, I’m sure,” Hannah says.

“We’ve simply got to wait.”

“Yes.

After a long silence Mary says: “At least we’re given the mercy of a little time, awful as it is to have to wait. To try to prepare ourselves whatever it may be.”

Hannah feels unable to say anything.”

“Whatever it is,” Mary goes on, speaking slowly, “it’s already over and done with. He was gone already when the man called and he couldn’t bear to be the one to tell me. And no matter what, there’s not one thing in this world or the next that we can do or hope or guess at or wish or pray that can change it or help it one iota. And all there is now is to be ready for it, strong enough for it, whatever it may be. That’s all. That’s all that matters.”

Hannah: “Whatever we hear, learn, Mary, it’s almost certain to be hard. Tragically hard. You’re beginning to know that and to face it very bravely. What I mean is that this is only the beginning. You’ll learn much more. Beginning very soon now.”

Mary: “Whatever it is, I want so much to be worthy of it.”

After a silence she so goes on: “I feel so utterly unprepared. So little time to prepare in.”

Her aunt: “I don’t think it’s a kind of thing that can be prepared for; it just has to be lived through.”

Mary: “He’s dead. There’s no longer the slightest doubt of it. I only wish we’d hear now, because I am ready.” After a new silence, she says: “It’s just barely conceivable that the news is so much less bad than we’d expected, that Andrew is simply too overjoyed with relief to bother to phone, and is bringing him straight home instead, for a wonderful surprise.”

Again silence between the two women.

“I’m not going to say he’s dead, aunt Hannah, till I know he is,” she says as if defiantly.

“Certainly not,” adds Hannah.



The „brother“ (Charlie Thomas)

## 6th scene

In this scene, which is being rehearsed, Mary's brother, Andrew, arrives; we hear the filmmaker and the actor discussing his arrival and precisely how he should close the door and embrace his aunt. Then the shooting starts. We are in the scene. Without bothering to knock, Andrew opens the kitchen door and closes it softly behind him. He arrives not speaking a word. The two women stand up. He embraces his aunt and lifts her up in his arms. His sister is standing next to them, her eyes and face that of a bewildered child, looking at them imploringly. Before he can say a word, we hear her soft, sweet voice:

"He's dead, Andrew, isn't he?" He cannot speak, but nods.

"He was dead when you got there."

Again he nods; and then he sets Hannah down carefully on her feet, now turning to his sister, takes her by her shoulders and says, more loudly than he had expected: "He was instantly killed," and he kisses her upon the mouth and they embrace, and without tears but with great violence he sobs twice, his cheek against hers, and says: "Here, Mary," catching her across the shoulders and helping her to a chair, just as she, losing strength in her knees, gasps, "I've got to sit down," looking timidly towards her aunt, who at the same moment is saying, in a broken voice, "Sit down, Mary," putting her arms around each of them and feeling gratitude and pleasure in the firmness and warmth of their moving bodies. And then Mary could see her aunt's face, leaning deep above her, very large and very close, the eyes at once intense and tearful behind their heavy lenses, the whole face terrible in love and grief. She sits down and takes both Mary's hands in her own, on Mary's knees and realizes that Mary is squeezing her hands with all her strength, and as strongly as she is able.

"Sit with us, Andrew," Mary says. He takes a chair and now seated, he puts his hands upon theirs, and feels the convulsing of her hands. "Now, Andrew, I want to hear all about it," Mary says. "Anyway, you say he didn't have to suffer."

"Mary, I saw him – at Roberts'. There was just one mark on his body."

She looks at him: "His head. Right at the exact point of the chin, a small bruise. A cut so small –they can close it with one stitch. And a little blue bruise on his lower lip. It wasn't even swollen."

Mary: "That's all?"

Andrew: "That's all. The doctor said it was concussion of the brain. It was instantaneous."

She stays silent.

"He can't have suffered, Mary, not even for a fraction of a second. Mary.

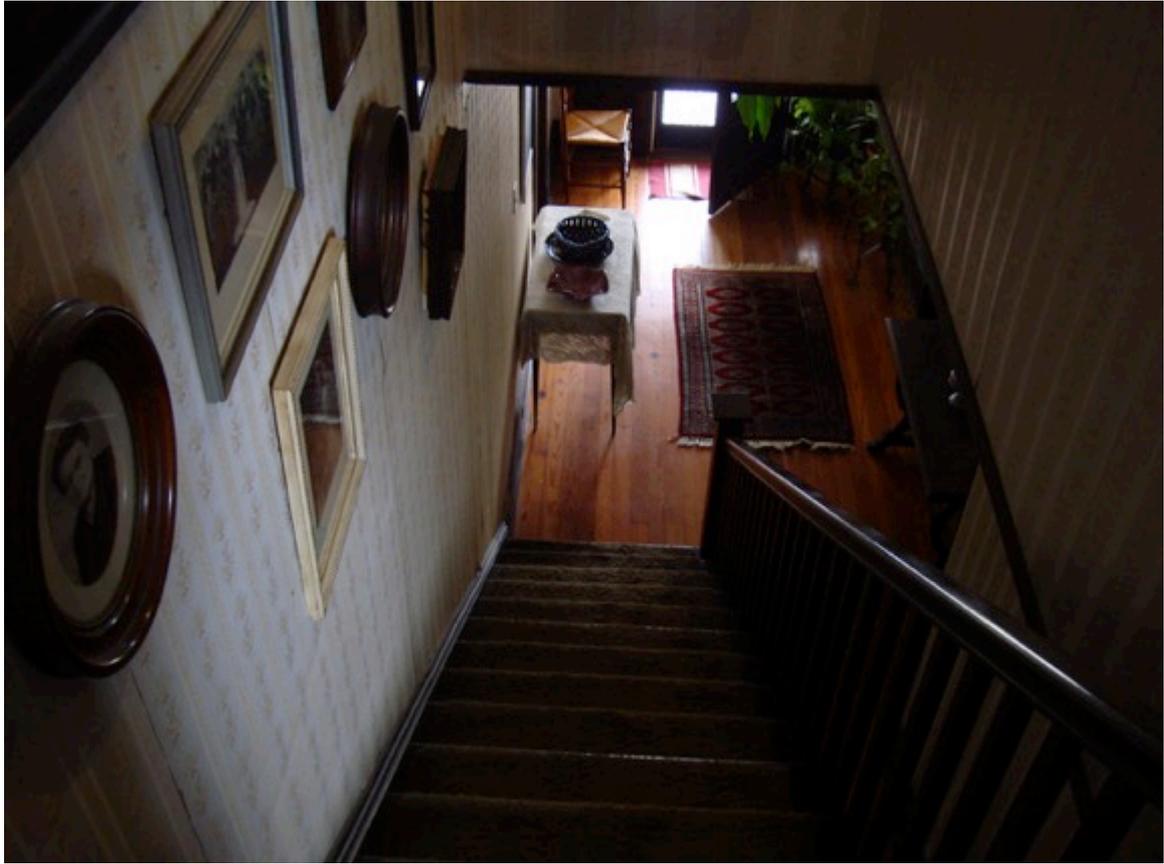
I saw his face. There wasn't a glimmer of pain in it. Only – a kind of surprise. Startled."

"He never knew he was dying," she says, "not a minute, not one moment, to know, his life was ending."

Hanna puts a quick hand to her shoulder. Andrew drops to his knees before her, takes her hands and says, most earnestly, "Mary, in God's name be thankful he didn't. That's a hideous thing for a man in the prime of his life to have to know. He wasn't a Christian you know," he blurted out fiercely. "He didn't have to make his peace with God. He was a man with a wife and to children, and I'd say that sparing him that horrible knowledge was the one thing we can thank God for!" He adds, immediately, in a desparate voice: "I'm so terribly sorry I said that, Mary!"

But Hannah, who had been gently saying, "He's right, Mary, he's right, be thankful for that."

And to Andrew: "It's all right, Andrew." And Mary, whose eyes are fixed upon his, with increasing shock and terror, now says tenderly, "don't mind, dear, don't be sorry."



I understand. Don't grieve over it, Andrew. Please. Look at me please." He looks at her. She continues: "It's true I was thinking as I was bound to as a Christian, but I was forgetting we're human, and you set me right and I'm thankful. You're right, Jay wasn't – a religious man, in that sense, and to realize could have only been – as you said for him. Probably as much so, even if he were religious."

Andrew: "What they think is that Jay must have hit a loose rock with one of the front wheels, and that gave everything a jolt and a terrific wrench at the same time. They think it must have wrenched the wheel right out of his hands and thrown him forward very hard so that he struck his chin, just one sharp blow against the steering wheel. And that must have killed him on the spot. If it had been even a half an inch to one side, he'd be alive this minute."

"O God, forgive me," Mary moans. "Forgive me! Forgive me! It's just more than I can bear! Just more than I can bear! Forgive me."

Hannah taking her wrists and talking earnestly into her streaming hands: "Mary, listen to me. Mary. There's nothing to ask forgiveness for. Do you hear me, Mary?"

Mary nods within her hands and shakes her head. Then she says: "Please don't feel sorry, Andrew. You're right to tell me every last bit you know."

I want to know – all of it. It was just – it just overwhelmed me for a minute." After a silence, she adds: "He was thirty-six. Just exactly a month and a day ago."

## 7th scene

The next morning. Rufus wakes up. He hears sparrows making a racket outside. He gets up, puts on his cap and runs into the corridor crying "Daddy, Daddy!" and rushes into his parent's bedroom, stopping dead in his tracks because his father isn't there. His mother is resting in the bed, her head on both pillows, as if she were ill or very tired. She holds out her arms to him murmuring something strange and affectionate.

"Where's Daddy?" he shouts imperiously ignoring his mother's arms.

"Daddy – isn't here yet," she tells him in a voice like hot ashes, and her arms sink down along the sheet. "Where is he then?" he demands, in angry disappointment. The boy's little sister arrives, still half asleep.

"Come close," the mother says, and she touches each of them. "I want to tell you about Daddy." Her voice trembles. "Can you hear me, Catherine?" she asks. "Are you waked up enough yet, my darling?" She goes on speaking to them: "Daddy, your father, children..." They both come nearer. She puts her arms around both of them. Tears in her eyes. "Daddy didn't come home. He isn't going to come home ever any more. He's – gone away to heaven and he isn't ever coming home again. Do you hear me, Catherine? Are you awake?" Catherine stares at her mother. "Do you understand, Rufus?"

He stares at his mother. "Why not?" he asks. She looks at him with extraordinary closeness and despair and says: "Because God wanted him. Daddy was on his way home last night – and he was – he – got hurt and – so God let him go to sleep and took him straight away with Him to heaven. She sinks her fingers in Catherine's springy hair and looks intently from one to the other. "Do you see, children? Do you understand?"

"Is Daddy dead?" Rufus asks. His mother doesn't answer, but only nods her head once and then again, and then several times rapidly, while one small squeaky "yes" comes out of her. She takes again her children in her arms and says: "We'll always remember him. Always. And he'll be thinking of us. Every day. He's waiting for us in heaven. And some day, if we're good, when God comes for us, He'll take us to heaven too and we'll see Daddy there, and all be together again, forever and ever."



Simon who plays James Agee at the age of six



# Epilogue

Rufus is in bed in his parent's home. It is nighttime. Waking up in the darkness, Rufus looks towards the window. Against the curtains some light reveals the moving shadows of the leaves outside, the shadows play against the curtains and between the curtains and the windowglass. The text that follows is being read by the actor. He is sitting next to the filmmaker who is wearing headphones. She has Agee's novel in her hand and follows the lines being read. Then we see Rufus in his bed again; she watches him intensely to monitor how he plays the scene. There is the off voice again:

*I hear my father; I need never fear. I hear my mother; I shall never be lonely, or want for love. When I am hungry it is they who provide for me; when I am in dismay, it is they who fill me with comfort. When I am sick it is they who send for the doctor. When I am well and happy, it is in their eyes that I know best that I am loved; and it is towards the shining of their smiles that I lift up my heart and in their laughter that I know my best delight.*

Rufus screams for his father. The door of the children bedroom opens. The father arrives. His face is kind. "Wuzza matter?" he asks teasing gently, his voice at it's deepest. "Daddy," the child says thinly. "Why, what's the trouble with my little boy. What's he crine about? Bad dream?" The boy shakes his head. "Then what's the trouble? Afraid of the dark?" The boy nods, he has tears in his eyes. "Nooooooo," his father says. "You're a big boy now. Big boys don't get skeered of a little dark. Big boys don't cry." The father is touched and puts his hand on his son's forehead. "You just don't want to be left alone." The child lays still. "Tell you what I'll do," his father says. "I'll sing you one song, and then you be a good boy and go on to sleep." The child presses his forehead upward against the strong warm hand and nods. The father starts to sing, very slowly, while he and the child look at each other.

WHEN THEY KILL A CHICKEN, SHE SAVES ME THE WING, MY HONEY, MY BABY. WHEN THEY KILL A CHICKEN, SHE SAVES ME THE WING, MY HONEY, MY SWEET THING. WHEN THEY KILL A CHICKEN, SHE SAVES ME THE WING, MY HONEY. THINK I'M AWORKIN AIN'T ADOIN A THING. THIS MORNIN THIS EVENIN SO SOON

The child's eyes open and he watches his father, who now touches the forehead of his boy again, more lightly. "Go to sleep, honey," he says. "Go on to sleep now."

At one point, the mother appears in the doorway; she watches her husband and son tenderly. The filmmaker gets up. She speaks for a minute with the boy in a calm, gentle manner, then she speaks to the father. We then see, in a



shot/reverse shot, a close-up of the faces of the father and the son; they look into each other's eyes. It's the last time the son will look at his father, who he will never see again. There is something oniric about all this, as if the son were dreaming the scene. In fact, all the scenes in the novel played by the actors and actresses will take place as if in a dream. The past, the memories, the voices of the dead resuscitated have a dreamlike quality about them, an almost unreal quality. They come from the shadows and will return to the shadows. The paradise belonging to childhood is always a lost paradise, as the French writer Marcel Proust so accurately said. It's the loss itself that provokes a feeling of melancholy, but also the deformation of what is real via a memory that idealizes things. We again hear the voice of the actor:

*"I hear my father and my mother and they are my giants, my king and my queen, beside whom there are no others so wise or worthy or honorable or brave or beautiful in this world. I need never fear: nor ever shall I lack for loving-kindness. You hear the man you call your father: how can you ever fear?"*

We will see, of course, this last scene close to the end of the film. It may be the very last scene, or the next to last if, for example, the scene in the taxi of Agee dying is rehearsed. Our filmmaker will then end her inquiries into the life and death of James Agee with a visit to Saint Luke's Chapel in New York, where Agee's funeral was held.



# Last notes

The film will be structured partially on the filmmaker's inquiries into the life of Agee and partially on the scenes from the book focused on the death of the father and played by the actors and actresses. On both biographical facts, for the most part relating to Agee's work in the film industry and on the "art of the novel", i.e., on its metaphorical and poetical dimension. Both approaches, the documentary accounts and the playing of scenes from Agee's novel will be intertwined in the film: sequences of the filmmaker's inquiries and interviews will be intermixed with scenes played from the book. A logic and order to their intertwining will be defined during the editing.

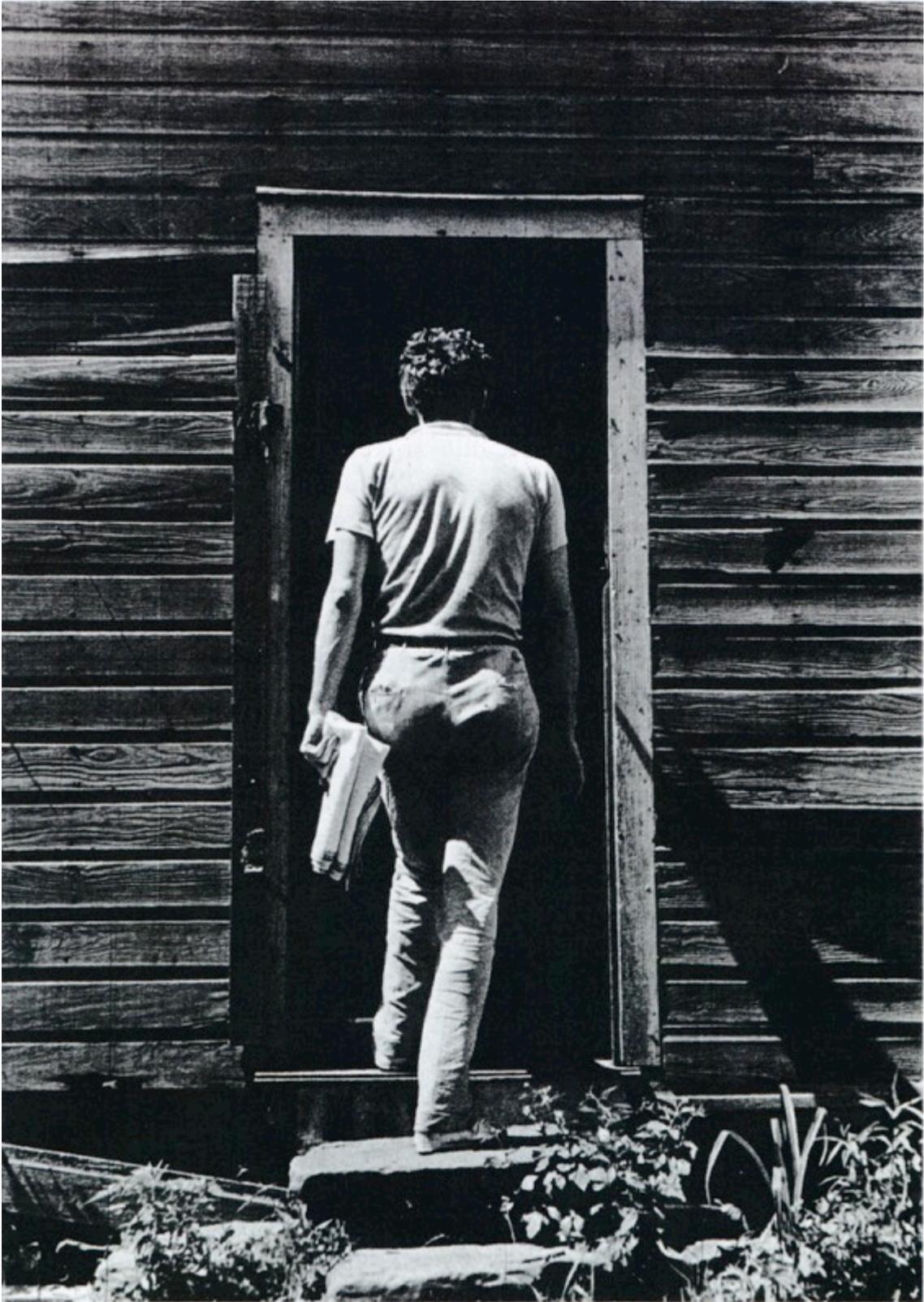
The actors and actresses are semi-professional players, i.e., they all have another careers, but regularly do theatre. The "mother", for instance is a psychiatrist, the "brother" a lawyer, who himself lost his father when he was 3 years old. He understands only too well what happened to Agee and will talk about this drama in the film. Agee's uncle was an artiste, a painter. They all don't look like "actors" at first, but as I would say "ordinary, decent, nice people".

The film will raise the question: "What is a father?", "How can one live without a father?" The death of Agee's father threw a black veil over the entire existence of his son, who never stopped thinking about his father, who idealized him, who lived painfully because of his absence, who suffered from his absence and finally died because of it.

Focusing on the rehearsals of a few scenes of the book, another question emerges: "What is an actress, an actor? What does it mean to speak, look, listen? How can the dead be remembered, represented, played? How can they be brought back to life via the magic of images, voices, cinema?" For a documentary filmmaker, filming actors and actresses basically means showing them "at work".

Music will also be part of the investigations carried out by our filmmaker. Just like she will be looking for her film, for her locations, for the actors and actresses, for traces of the past, she will also look for the music, which will not simply be added on off, but will also be filmed. Since Agee played the piano, she will select the boy to play Agee's role in the film from a music school where she will attend a piano lesson. Later on in the film we will see the boy again playing the piano by himself in his parents home, an excerpt from one of Beethoven's sonatas, Agee's favorite composer. The filmmaker will also listen to music on an old gramophone in Agee's old office in the Chrysler building in New York: an excerpt of Beethoven's ninth that Agee used to play very loudly out the window of his office into the city sky. In *Let us now praise famous men* he quoted this phrase of Beethoven: "He who understands my music can never know unhappiness again." An opera singer will sing a Christian funeral song at the wonderful Tennessee Theater in Knoxville with the "family" attending, i.e., our actors and actresses. RB Morris, "local" poet, song writer from Knoxville, will sing a "song of fathers" in a recording studio, a song that he will compose specifically for our film.

I have been thinking and dreaming about this project for forty years, about Agee's autobiographical novel, about his life, his person, about how to make a film about him. I feel very close to him on many levels. His novel expresses my own dream of language, my own personal problem, i.e. the absence of a father in my own life. And I completely understand and share his political leanings, his rebellion, his anger against social injustice, his



compassion for the poor, for the deprived, for the humiliated. And obviously I share the same passion for the cinema.

I left Zürich, the city where I was born and grew up, for Paris when I was 21 to see films at the French *Cinémathèque*. I saw only fiction films. At the time, the documentaries were practically inexistent. I thus learned my trade by watching fiction films, and especially American films, which have always fascinated me. My film about Agee is a condensation of all that I have accomplished as a filmmaker over the past fortyeight years, it is my last “great project”, a dream coming true after a very long time.

The film will thus be an “American” film, but its main subject, the death of a father, is universal. And what the film will recount about Agee as a film critic and as a Hollywood screenplay writer, and about his friendship with Chaplin, will surely be of interest to a public that loves the cinema and that considers it to be a universal, essential art in the history of modern society. But above all, it will be a film about one of america’s major intellectuels and writers of the 20th century.

# Filmography of Richard Dindo

The Repetition (1970)  
Dialogue (1971)  
Naifs painters in Est Switzerland (1972)  
Swiss in the Spanish Civil War (1973)  
The execution of the traitor of his country Ernest S. (1975)  
Hans Staub, reporter-photographer (1977)  
Clément Moreau, graphiste (1977)  
Raimon, songs against fear (1978)  
Max Frisch, Journal I-III (1981)  
Max Haufler, the mute (1983)  
El Suizo, a love in Spain (1985)  
Dani, Michi, Renato & Max (1987)  
Arthur Rimbaud, a biography (1990)  
Charlotte Salomon, life or theater? (1992)  
Ernesto „Che“ Guevara, the diary of Bolivia (1994)  
A Saison in Paradise (after the african diaries of Breyten Breytenbach) (1996)  
The Grüniger case (1998)  
HUG, the University hospitals of Geneva  
Genet in Chatila (2000)  
Inquiry and death in Winterthour (2001)  
The illness of memory (about the Alzheimer disease) (2002)  
Aragon, the novel of Matisse (2003)  
Ni Olvido ni Perdon (nor forgetting nor pardonning) (about the massacre of the 2nd of  
octobre 1968 in Mexico City) (2003)  
Three young women (between life and death) (2004)  
Who was Kafka? (2005)  
The Maternity of the HUG hospital (2006)  
La LUPA, „what a chance to be happy“ (2007) (about the italien-swiss singer la Lupa)  
The Marsdreamers (2009) (about Americans who dream to fly to Mars and create there a new  
civilisation)  
Gauguin in Tahiti and on the Marquesas (2010)  
Making of „2 days in New York“ by Julie Delpy (2011)  
The music conservatory of the town of Prague (2011)  
Vivaldi in Venice (2012)  
Women liking younger men (2013)  
Homo faber (three women) (after the novel by Max Frisch) (2014)  
About spousal violence (2015)  
The Voyage of Bashô (2017) (after the „Voyage diaries“ of the japonese poet who lived in  
the 17th century and who is the master of the japonese haiku poetry)

## Awards

Golden Ducate Award at the Mannheim Film Festival in Germany for *Naive Painters in Eastern Switzerland* (1973)

Best TV Documentary at the Mannheim Film Festival for *Swiss in the Spanish Civil War* (1974)

First Prize at the Mannheim Film Festival for *The Execution of the Traitor Ernest S.* (1976)

Awarded the Zürich city prize for the following films: *Max Frisch, Journals I-III* (1981), *Max Haufler, the Mute* (1983), *Dani, Michi, Renato & Ma* (1987); *Season of Paradise* (1996), *The Grüninger Case* (1998) and *Genet in Chatila* (2001)

First prize at the European Film Festival held in Lyon, France for *Dani, Michi, Renato & Max* (1987)

International Film Critics Award at the Berlin Film Festival for *Dani, Michi, Renato & Max* (1988)

Best cinematographic adaptation at the International Film Festival of Montreal for *Charlotte, Life or Theatre* (1994)

Golden FIPA for *Ernesto Che Guevara, the Bolivian Diary* (1994)

International Film Critics Award at the Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland for *Ernesto Che Guevara, the Bolivian Diary* (1994)

First Prize at the Montreal Film Festival for *A Season in Paradise* (1996)

International Film Critics Award at the Locarno Film Festival for *A Season in Paradise* (1996)

Nominated for the Swiss film award for *The Grüninger Case* (1998)

Special prize awarded by the Jury at the Amsterdam Film Festival for *Genet in Chatila* (2000)

International Film Critics Special Mention at the Locarno Film Festival for *Genet in Chatila* (2000)

Honorary award at the Denver Film Festival (Colorado, USA) (2001)

Swiss and Italian Film Critics Award for *Marsdreamers* at the Locarno Film Festival (2009)

Honorary award for a life's work in filmmaking at the Nyon Film Festival in Switzerland (2014)

## Retrospectives

Eight films at the Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia Film Institutes in Spain (1992) Fourteen films at the *Jeu de Paume* Museum in Paris, France (1995)  
Fourteen films at the Aix-en-Provence Film Festival (France) (1996)  
Five films at the Tchechien Film Festival in Prague, Czech Republic (1998)  
Eight films in Chicago and New York (1999)  
Six films in Cape Town, South Africa (1999)  
Six films at the Brooklyn Museum in NY (2000)  
Six films at the Denver Film Festival (Colorado, USA) (2001)  
Ten films in seventeen cities in the USA and Canada between 1999 and 2001  
Five films at the University and Film School in Los Angeles (USA) (2000)  
Six films at the Budapest (Hungary) and Cairo (Egypt) Film Festivals (2001)  
Eight films at the Buenos Aires (Argentina) Film Festival and at the Montevideo (Uruguay) Film Institute (2003)  
Five films at the Teheran Film Festival (Iran) (2003)  
Six films at the Strasbourg Film Festival (France) (2004)  
Ten films at the Rome Film Festival (2006), and in Bologna, Torino, Milano and Trieste (Italy)  
Four films at the Santiago de Chile Film Festival (2007)  
Five films at the National Art Gallery in Washington D.C. (USA) (2011)  
Five films at the Santiago de Chile Film Festival (2011)  
Seven films at the Madrid Film Festival (Spain) (2012)  
Six films at the La Rochelle Film Festival ( France) (2013)  
Five films at the Nyon Film Festival (Switzerland) (2014)  
Twenty-one films at the Lausanne Film Institute (Switzerland) (2014)