



## **Tobacco Road**

*Erskine Caldwell*

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# Tobacco Road

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**Tobacco Road** Erskine Caldwell

**Caldwell's controversial classic: the story of a Southern sharecropper family ground down by the devastation of the Great Depression**

Even before the Great Depression struck, Jeeter Lester and his family were desperately poor sharecroppers. But when hard times begin to affect the families that once helped support them, the Lesters slip completely into the abyss. Rather than hold on to each other for support, Jeeter, his wife Ada, and their twelve children are overcome by the fractured and violent society around them.

Banned and burned when first released in 1932, *Tobacco Road* is a brutal examination of poverty's dehumanizing influence by one of America's great masters of political fiction.

*This ebook features an illustrated biography of Erskine Caldwell including rare photos and never-before-seen documents courtesy of the Dartmouth College Library.*

## Tobacco Road Details

Date : Published June 21st 2011 by Open Road (first published 1932)

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Author : Erskine Caldwell

Format : Kindle Edition 187 pages

Genre : Fiction, Classics, Historical, Historical Fiction, American, Southern, Literature

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# From Reader Review Tobacco Road for online ebook

## Scot says

Once considered a classic of American literature, but rarely read today, I suspect, unless it is assigned, *Tobacco Road* is the remarkable story of the antics and tribulations of a destitute white trash family, the Lesters, written by Erskine Caldwell, and was later adapted into a play that was popular in the 1930s, and then adapted again to film by Nunnally Johnson in 1941. First published in 1932, it was followed the next year by Caldwell's other great work on poor whites in the South, *God's Little Acre*, which also went from play form to eventually become a film in 1958, including in its cast Buddy Hackett, Tina Louise, and a young Michael Landon.

Warning: this is a book most people will dislike, yet some people might find hilarious, because of the way it portrays poor southern whites in Georgia during the Great Depression. Do not read this if you are looking for something frivolous, or characters you can readily identify with. The characters are coarse and earthy, the bawdiness is truly remarkable for a work of serious literature in that period, and the reader should prepare to be shocked, or at least respond somewhere on the range from mildly to severely disgusted from time to time.

Why, then, would I give it five stars? Because, as Faulkner pointed out, Caldwell certainly has a knack for writing. I was drawn into the story and was compelled to learn what happened next. I also am fascinated by the fact that many people found this work so funny and entertaining then--it is a damning portrayal not only of the characters in the text, but on some levels, of the class sensibilities and lack of compassion in the entertained readers as well. (I don't mean to sound pompous or self-righteous here in judging them--truth be told, part of my revulsion was expressed with mixtures of chuckles and gasps as I read on, mesmerized by Caldwell's story-conveying ability.) The characters are caricatures, pathetic human beings, shiftless, lazy, and incredibly selfish. Yet there is a sense of overarching tragedy here as well, connected to the loss of arable land. And as a historical artifact, we can look here for significant antecedents of some powerful stereotypes about white trash that circulate in our society today, stereotypes widely propagated by the Jerry Springer Show and that live on through several reality shows currently airing on Viacom channels.

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## Howard says

### Second Reading.

Nathaniel Rich writes on "The Daily Beast" website, "As a comedy, *Tobacco Road* is a modest failure; as a tragedy, it is an abject failure" and that the novel is "as indelible as a freak show or car crash." Dwight Garner on the "Slate" website called it "a greasy hairball of a novel....one of the sickest and most lurid books to have emerged from the literature of the American South." Both writers, however, proceed to give the novel a generally positive review. Their conflicted response is typical of both critics and readers.

Experts, however, have ranked it as one of the hundred most significant novels written in English in the 20th century. And, especially after its success as a Broadway play, the novel eventually sold ten million copies.

Rich goes on to say that Erskine Caldwell is a "progenitor of what could be called the degenerate school of American fiction," which I suppose could be called a subgenre of the so-called grit-lit genre. At any rate, it seems that a straight line can be drawn from Caldwell to writers such as Harry Crews, who also attempted to

combine tragedy and comedy in their novels.

*Tobacco Road*, published in 1932, was meant to be a work of social protest, a condemnation of poverty among the poor whites of the Deep South. John Steinbeck wrote about some of the same issues a few years later in *The Grapes of Wrath*. But it is only on the surface that the two books are similar. Unlike Steinbeck, Caldwell refused to resort to sentimentality or to imbue his characters with any degree of dignity in coping with their suffering. Other than poverty and being dispossessed of their land, Caldwell's Lesters share very little in common with Steinbeck's Joads.

Most readers, and I include myself, struggle with Caldwell's depiction of the Lesters as being "ignorant, selfish, crude, sexually promiscuous, indecent, but also comic figures." Caldwell seems to simultaneously sympathize with his characters while at the same time maintaining a disdainful attitude toward them. The book is a call for social action to combat poverty, but one that provides no solutions.

Caldwell claimed that he wrote the novel as "a rebuke of the perfumed 'moonlight and magnolias' literature of the South." Well, it was that.

And there is this, too: it was edited by Maxwell Perkins; William Faulkner and Malcolm Cowley admired the book; and Saul Bellow thought Caldwell should have been awarded the Nobel Prize.

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## Travelin says

Erskine Caldwell was the son of a Presbyterian minister. It seems his Caldwell ancestors hailed from an area where one of my Caldwell ancestors came from, although the two families appear to have been unrelated. As a good Presbyterian, Erskine Caldwell couldn't help moralizing about personal responsibility, waste and lasciviousness, even if it was 3 years into the Great Depression. But as a rain-hardened Celt, a certain part of him seemed to be enjoying the craic. It struck me quite forcefully in the first chapters that I would be enjoying this humorous and mildly sarcastic send-up of self-destructing do-nothings far more than Angela's Ashes, which seemed like suffering without the benefit of 50 years hindsight.

The humour goes a long way in explaining how anyone as selfish as Jeeter Lester could make an entertaining and even sympathetic protagonist. Jeeter is at times brutally efficient, when it comes to denying food to his starving mother or assessing the marriage prospects of his daughter with a cleft palate. This is an ugly human being. The brutal, self-centred, but pleasure-loving assessment of other people plays out like a very funny home movie. I wouldn't be surprised if "The Beverly Hillbillies" and their car got some inspiration from these miserable, hilarious equivalents. Some of Jeeter's sexcapades would seem beyond rational possibility, except that a few modern Facebook sites from Ireland and England are so reminiscent of those intrusive sex jokes and motivations.

Caldwell makes these idiots sound sympathetic. But he does it without using The Great Depression as an excuse. He returns time and again to Jeeter's "love of the land" as his only reason for not making money in the cotton mills, as everyone else does. Really, the cotton mills were booming during The Great Depression? Possibly like a good Presbyterian preaching to the holier-than-thou, Caldwell isn't accepting grand excuses or, generally speaking, personal failure. Caldwell even goes so far as to suggest that none of the cotton farmers knew the basics of farming, and ended up burning down the trees on unproductive land every year, just because burning the land was simply tradition. I'm not sure I have time to research whether such

burnings helped fertilize the fields, but was this minister's son turned comedy writer also a farmer to die for?

The saddest lesson of the book is the effect of deprivation on families. It seems that Caldwell concluded that Jeeter was simply wicked at story's end, but that he and his family became sympathetic because forces greater than them but less than God had turned their people against each other, in the most brutally possible way.

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### **Teresa says**

Probably thirty years ago, if not longer, I read the play based on this novel and until now that's all I knew of the book, besides its being steeped in controversy. I understand why it is, but I think those who take offense are looking at only one part of the picture. If you believe Caldwell is mocking the poor sharecroppers, then what is he saying about the townspeople who mercilessly ridicule them, and in their hearing, also cheating them of the little bit of money they might have? None of that was humorous to me, though I have a feeling some found it so.

The Lester family is starving -- literally -- and the little they might acquire is consumed by a hierarchy, a survival of the fittest. Grandmother Lester knows she is expendable and keeps out of the way. For all the Lester females, silence is power to a certain extent. Except for the once-silent mother Ada and Bessie, who is not technically a Lester, I don't believe any of them speak; but they watch, and act when they can. The father Jeeter does not act, but he does talk, repeating himself all the time: no one is listening.

The book alternates at times between what comes across as almost slapstick (not something I care for, but well done here) and then musings about the Lester family history and their attachment to the land. I felt the last chapter was an elevation in both content and prose style, the perfect coda.

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### **Richard Derus says**

#### **Book Circle Reads 148**

Rating: 3\* of five

**The Publisher Says:** University of Georgia Press's sales copy--Set during the Depression in the depleted farmlands surrounding Augusta, Georgia, *Tobacco Road* was first published in 1932. It is the story of the Lesters, a family of white sharecroppers so destitute that most of their creditors have given up on them. Debased by poverty to an elemental state of ignorance and selfishness, the Lesters are preoccupied by their hunger, sexual longings, and fear that they will someday descend to a lower rung on the social ladder than the black families who live near them.

**My Review:** Ye gods and little fishes! Talk about "been down so long it looks like up to me!"

A shockingly honest book when it was published in 1932, it's still a picture that comparatively rich urban Americans need to see. The details have changed only a little in 80 years. This kind of poverty not only still exists, but these horrific racial prejudices do too. Read *Knockemstiff* and *The Galaxie and Other Rides* and *American Salvage* for the modern-day honest storytellers mining the same vein of American life. *Winter's*

*Bone* is its direct descendant! So many of the works I've labeled hillbilly noir...and this is the granddaddy of 'em all. I loved the fact that it was so grim when I first read it as an angry, angsty teen, and it still, or again, aroused my loathing and ire when re-read last year at 52.

I can't remember not thinking that people were vile, irredeemable scum, and reading books like this taught me I wasn't the first to have this insight. Even the best are brought low by the vicious kicks of a merciless gawd. They keep going to church, though, to get kicked again...ultimately the solace of "at least we're not black" (though they use the other word I can't stand even to type) isn't enough to overcome the characters' various phobias and anxieties.

This won't make sense to someone who hasn't read the book, and will if one does read or has read it, but constitutes no spoiler: GO RATS!! Sic 'em!

A megaton of misery detonating in your brain, leaving craters a mile wide for compassion to leak out of.

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## **Cathy DuPont says**

In Palatka, Florida, 36 miles from where I live in St. Augustine, the Latimer Arts Center (Prairie School of architecture and quite lovely) Larimer Arts Center served as the county library from 1930 until 1992. Atop the arched entranceway are the phrases "Ignorance Breeds Crime" and "Knowledge is Power." These two phrases have always intrigued me especially since I never thought of Palatka as the center of knowledge in northeast Florida. (In part, I must admit that comment is due to a local rivalry.)

## **Doorway of Larimer Arts Center**

With that said we know that reading is an education. Reading allows a person to learn about anything and everything. This knowledge can be obtained at your local library where readers can find information at their fingertips which, as readers, we already know.

## **Larimer Arts Center, Reid St., Palatka, Florida**

With that said, it bothers me to hear comments that readers didn't like the book because it was depressing, sad, dark, and inhumane. Even the word 'ignorance' came up; the ignorance of the characters.

There are many other adjectives to describe what's been said by Goodreads.com readers about *Tobacco Road* but I agree with Melanie Hierholzer who says "*I am amazed that so many people on this website just did not get this book.*" Here's Melanie's excellent review: *Tobacco Road*. Knowing the subject of the book and early in my reading, I was looking for a reader who I thought voiced an opinion that might be similar to mine. Thankfully I found Melanie's review and we had a great conversation.

I think every book I've ever read that was placed during the 1930's depression had a dark tone. The depression was not the best of times for America's economy (or the world for that matter) and of course, it's citizens.

Erskine Calwell is considered a naturalistic writer the definition being "characters can be studied through

their relationships to their surroundings.”

**The Theme of the Book is The Land** (My opinion, of course.)

The land kept the Lester family in food, clothing, and shelter for generations but when the land gradually lost the needed nutrients it grew less and less. A much larger land area (a plantation, can't recall) belonging to the Lesters was sold off gradually by each generation. Over time the land simply gave out from being overused with the nutrients gradually depleted from the planting of tobacco and later, cotton.

The land was all the Lester family had known as poor and illiterate farmers. (Of course this was prior to any Headstart programs, Food Stamp Programs, any governmental assistance programs whatsoever.)

Jeeter Lester, the patriarch of the family, would not and could not fathom working in the city in one of the cotton mills. The cotton mill was where their neighbors migrated to make a living. But the Lesters wouldn't leave the only thing they had ever known which was farming the land.

Every year Jeeter thinks “if I can get cotton seeds and guano” everything will be fine. But of course seeds and fertilizer cost money. There's plenty of hopelessness but no money. And Jeeter continues to await a windfall of some kind.

Talking to the shopkeeper asking for credit, Jeeter says “... You storekeepers won't let us have no more credit since Captain John (now owner of the land) left, and what is we going to do? I don't know what's going to happen to me and my folks if the rich don't stop bleeding us. They've got all the money, holding it in the banks, and they won't lend it out unless a man will cut off this arms and leave them there for security.” The Lesters blame the bankers and the shopkeepers for their plight, their inability to farm the land.

Boiled fatback once a day I guess can be a little filling when you add some cornbread. No, not cornbread, cottonmeal bread because cottonmeal stretches further in the household. And lordy, lordy, don't be late for dinner otherwise the table is empty; none of that “let's save some for Dude” the 16 year-old son in the family or Grandma Lester. It's every man for himself. Grandma Lester does her best to stay invisible since she's the oldest and least productive. She knows her death is just one less mouth to feed.

And they all slowly starve to death. The basics of survival have kicked in. This, I think, is what alarmed readers...that people could be both this selfish and this ignorant.

Everyone is unattractive, except 12 year-old yellow-haired and lovely Pearl Lester Bensey who is married to Jeeter's friend Lov Bensey. Ok, let's call it what it is, everyone seems to be ugly but it's all ugly; the land, the situation, their rag clothes, the corn husk beds, the dirty sheets. Everything is ugly and damaged just like the land.

The one thing Jeeter and his wife, Ada, accept is death. They tell anyone who will listen what they want to wear new and stylish clothes when they're “laid out.” Although it doesn't mention it, at the time when someone died they were placed in open wooden coffins in the main room of the house and relatives and friends came to pay their respects. In death Jeeter and Ada thought and wanted to look nice when they passed and were laid out.

No, the book was not depressing to me personally although it was a depressing subject. The book was about a hard life that was slow to disappear.

Hey, this is America. We can read what we like. If I don't like a book, I won't read it.

This book may not be for you and yes, you might find it depressing. If so put it down and pick up *Mary Poppins*, something that will make you happy.

I loved Caldwell's writing and will read more books written by him. It was all I expected and more.

### **My Family Story**

Years ago I was visiting Daddy's birthplace (at home) on a cotton farm in southwestern North Carolina, between Hayesville, North Carolina and Hiwassee, Georgia. I was sitting on the steps of Philadelphia Church with my cousin Rex and I asked him why Grandma and Grandpa moved around so much? He laughed asking me "you don't know?" No, I didn't know. Rex said they were itinerant sharecroppers and they had to move where land was more fertile, where their crops would grow to feed the family. (I'm from a small (pop. 13,900) Florida city in north Florida, not a farmer for sure, so this came as news to me, the why of their moving frequently.)

The one thing I did remember from visiting Grandma and Grandpa was that they never lived in any house where there was indoor plumbing. There was always an outhouse. To get to every home they lived in that I recall, there were always many switchbacks up a mountain.

I recall Daddy saying he looked at the rear end of a jackass from sunup until sundown for so many years he couldn't count.

They weren't much on education either with all, I believe, of the nine kids in the family dropping out of school and the girls, I think, marrying while in their mid to late teens. None ever divorced either.

Daddy said he never had a 'real' toothbrush until he joined the service when he was 17. (He made them from a twig of a specific tree branch by flaring and separating one end to act as bristles. He showed us how he did it on one visit to see Grandma.)

### **Grandma and Grandpa, Mary Jane Gibson Ledford and Mark Ledford ---Hard working people, maybe in early 40's?**

In talking to Rex and his wife Marie after reading the book, Rex said that they saw the movie *Tobacco Road* and Grandma and Grandpa's life and those of the nine kids (Daddy being the seventh, Rex's Dad the oldest) wasn't much different than the Lester's life as portrayed in the movie. Hummm, was my only response.

Daddy's great grandfather (can't recall how many greats) in the early 1700's came to America from Lancashire, England, a farming area in northwest U. K.

He, John, was 15 and came with two older brothers. At the time many immigrants got passage to America as indentured servants. John farmed for the boat/plantation owner for seven years and was a free man at age 22. No surprise that he farmed for his service.

### **Me and my brother on Grandma's porch looking like we fit in, barefoot, of course**

When we visited Grandma, Grandpa and our aunts, uncles and cousins, they thought we were rich because



we lived in Florida. They thought anyone who lived in Florida had to be rich. We look rich, huh?

### **How My Family and My GR Friend Jeff Keeten's Family May Have Fit Together**

In some specific reviews my friend Jeff Keeten has written that his cousin, in researching their family, found their lineage includes the Royal Dynasty of the House of Plantagenet. My response has been jokingly "my kinfolk were outside your castle in the rain planting, then picking and pulling food from the ground to place on the table of **your** family. I said it tongue-in-cheek. As a joke, you know and now it doesn't seem too far-fetched. Huh? Jeff? :D

Wish I had read this many years ago, however it's unlikely I would have much family background which made me relate to the book more than I probably would otherwise.

And no, you don't have to have itinerant farmers as relatives to praise the excellent historical writing of *Tobacco Road* by Erskine Caldwell, in my mind, a classic.

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### **Melanie Hierholzer says**

I am amazed that so many people on this website just did not get this book. Perhaps it has to do with their innate feelings about people from the South. Maybe they should look to own their prejudices.

This is one of the most powerful books I have ever read. While there were certain humorous passages, I did not find this book in the least bit funny, and I cannot understand the thinking of anyone who did.

The Lesters were a family who were caught up in the end of an era - the era of sharecropping, brought on by a sea change in farming practices and the Depression (anyone see any parallels here?). Yes, they were ignorant, but that is not to say they were stupid. They were facing the real possibility of starvation because the only life they had ever known had been taken away from them. They were desperate and concerned only with survival.

Of course they made silly choices, but they were aided in this by unscrupulous people such as the Captain, the car salesman, and the "hotel" manager. They did not know any better and were taken advantage of because of it.

I found Jeter Lester to be an unsympathetic character for the most part, until the very end, when Lov gave a kind of eulogy about people who love the land and what they expect from it. This passage gave me a better understanding of Jeter and I read it over and over again. Jeter had had the ambition and life beaten out of him by the breakdown of the only system he had ever known and the final betrayal was that of the land itself.

Altruism and high moral standards come easily in a wealthy society. This book points out what can happen to the people who are left behind.

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### **Connie says**

"Tobacco Road", written in 1932 in the tough years of the Great Depression, portrays a dirt poor white sharecropper and his family in Georgia. The Lesters have lived on the land for many generations, first

growing tobacco and later cotton, until the land was depleted of nutrients. They have no money for seed and fertilizer, and even worse, no money for food.

Their older children have left the family to work in the mills in the city. But Jeeter Lester feels tied to the land, and refuses to look for work in the city. Jeeter has been cheated by loan sharks in the past who have charged him high interest rates to borrow money, so he won't go that route again. The family is portrayed as hopeless and illiterate with their life reduced to basic longings for food and sex. They have no ambition and just hope that God will provide, unwilling to change as the world moves on. The women are just expected to do whatever the men decide. The family members seem to be overly exaggerated stereotypes of the poor.

The book often reads like a black comedy, especially when it deals with death. Nobody seems to care when Grandmother Lester and a black man are hit by a car in separate incidents. But the horrible events are part of a comic story about a young man who pays more attention to honking the car horn than watching where he is driving. There is also a flashback when a corpse is attacked by a rat, but it is also wrapped up in a humorous story. Caldwell also shows the hard life of the physically deformed, but they are portrayed as oversexed grotesque characters. Bessie spends all her money on a car to attract a man, but has no cash to fix a leaking roof or buy food.

Caldwell seems to be calling our attention to unwise agricultural practices, financial inequities, and the plight of the poor in the years before the government provided some kind of financial safety net. But the Lesters are such unmotivated, uncaring, unlikable people that it's hard to feel too much sympathy for that particular family.

3.5 stars

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## **Sue says**

Such a harsh story of hard times in a hard place. Though the Lesters definitely appear to be more a type than a real family (in fact no one seems particularly real) rural poverty certainly was (and still is) real. There are many messages here about the loss of land, the state of tenant farmers, etc, but there are also messages about personal responsibility.

I have seen Tobacco Road labeled as satire -- and I wondered given the degree of realism present. But then I think of Granny behind the chinaberry trees, Pearl with the almost unnaturally beautiful blond hair, Bessie the lustful preacher woman with "the face" no one can abide, and lastly the car -- the object that both embodies so much emotion and is the "vehicle" for so much pain and evil.

So I guess satire is there after all.

Caldwell occasionally steps somewhat clumsily into the narrative to discuss his message more boldly. Otherwise he lets the story provide the details of the rich in power, tenant farmers set loose with nothing, the land being lost to poor use practices over generations.

While I agree that government and ownership policy were long to blame, I also find individual actions (or inactions) very much at fault and Caldwell seems to point to that also. But isn't that the problem in much of life -- the complexity of much of life -- which requires us to think beyond easy solutions or quick fixes. Jeeter planned the same action every year with every year the same non-result. Caldwell would like us to look further, I believe.

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## **``Laurie Henderson says**

Back in the early 1980's, when I lived in Augusta, Georgia, there was a country backroad outside of town called Tobacco Road. I had heard of the book with this title and I wondered if this was just a coincidence or was this the setting for the book Tobacco Road.

Curious, I checked the book out of the library and found out that yes indeed, this road was the setting for this unrelenting tale of horror.

I didn't realize at the time that Caldwell wrote this book in order to justify eugenics and the cleansing of such as these poor southerners and others of their ilk who weren't as able and intelligent as Caldwell.

Caldwell tries with all his heart to make these characters little more than animals and does an incredibly good job.

So if you're in favor of genetic cleansing by all means read this book; otherwise, don't even think about polluting your precious brain cells with such garbage.

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## **Trudi says**

This was a tough one to get through. Almost too raw for me, especially that end scene with the grandmother and the family's treatment of her. I was extremely disturbed by some scenes and almost hoped Caldwell meant this to be a parody of harsh, destitute country life. But no. Whereas Steinbeck illuminates our humanity, painting portraits of human dignity and courage in the face of unspeakable tragedy, Caldwell zeros in on our baser natures. The characters of Tobacco Road are cruel, vicious beings driven solely by primitive urges. There is no humanity, and certainly no dignity. The whole book depressed me, but maybe I'm missing the point.

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## **Duane says**

Quote from Slate critic Dwight Garner: "Erskine Caldwell's Tobacco Road is a greasy hairball of a novel; one of the sickest and most lurid books to have emerged from the literature of the South". I can't disagree because it contains derogatory slurs against African Americans, women, the elderly, people with disabilities. There are references to incest, prostitution, child marriage. Well, you get the idea. Yet you can find this novel on several lists of best novels of the 20th century.

The people from that part of Georgia, around Augusta, despise Caldwell for his portrayal of the locals. But Caldwell wasn't trying to be sensationalist or funny. He believed he was calling attention to the plight of these dirt poor tenant farmers during the Great Depression. What it does call attention to is ignorance, the effect of zero education, of inbreeding, of exploitation of the poor by...well, by everyone.

It's hard to read, hard to listen to the words of ignorance and prejudice, but I believe these people existed, and I think some of their descendants are still trying to pull themselves out of that dark abyss.

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## David K. Lemons says

My parents grew up in Sabine Parish, Louisiana, and took me to the farms and back roads of the Parish, which was in many ways like those depicted in "Tobacco Road" in Georgia. They would tell me stories of poverty and leaving the land and working in the sawmill or the oilfield and the stress on the families and their struggle to exist and their striving for a better life. Erskine Caldwell's "Tobacco Road" shows that hard life better than any book I've ever read.

The reason I was drawn to it was because "Tobacco Road" was reviled by the church (any church) and the press because it was so graphic regarding sex. It also depicts the stark reality of life led by poor whites in the south, which is shocking even today, and hard for a people trying to forget their difficult past. So, I never read it, letting it pass me by, but it is merely written in the naturalistic style, which is taken for granted now.

I intend to read God's Little Acre by Caldwell next and perhaps his short stories.

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## Darwin8u says

*"He sometimes said it was partly his own fault, but he believed steadfastly that his position had been brought about by other people."*

? Erskine Caldwell, Tobacco Road

Sometimes, when I'm unable to understand Georgia's ability to support and defend Judge Roy Moore, it helps to read a little bit of Erskine Caldwell. "Tobacco Road" reminds me a bit of Hemingway, a bit of Twain, and a bit of Steinbeck. It is both a social justice novel and a darkly comic novel that paints the ugly corners of human poverty and depravity. The Lesters are a family of white sharecroppers that are basically rotting into the earth. Social and economic norms and even the family are lost. Religion is abused. Even new cars are abused and quickly swallowed by the Earth. The land is fallow, burned, and everything is going to Hell.

It is a good thing the novel was so short, because it was painful to read.

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## Vit Babenco says

What is primary: poverty or depravity? Actually, it is a vicious circle – poverty aggravates depravity and depravity exacerbates poverty until a human being has been reduced practically to the animal state. And then a man continues to live ruled by primitive instincts and physiological needs.

"When his father died, what was left of the Lester lands and debts was willed to Jeeter. The first thing that happened was the foreclosure of the mortgage. In order to satisfy the creditors, all the timber was cut, and another large portion of the land was sold. Two years later Jeeter found himself so heavily in debt that he did not own a single acre of land, or even a tenant house, after the claims had been settled. The man who purchased the farm at the sheriff's sale was Captain John Harmon. Captain John allowed Jeeter and his

family to live in one of the houses, and to work for him on shares. That was ten years before the World War. From that time forward, Jeeter had sunk each year into a poverty more bitter than that of the year before. The culmination had apparently been reached when Captain John sold the mules and other stock and moved to Augusta. There was then to be no more two-thirds' share of a year's labor coming to Jeeter, and there was never again to be credit for food and snuff and other necessities at the stores in Fuller. With him, Captain John took his credit. Jeeter did not know what to do. Without snuff and food, life seemed not worth living any longer."

And **Erskine Caldwell** specialized in portraying exactly this kind of living and was a great expert of human miseries. And *Tobacco Road* is one of the most effective trips to the bottom of human existence.

Once a man starts falling into an abyss, there is no way to stop...

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## Chrissie says

Read the GR book description one more time:

"Set during the Depression in the depleted farmlands surrounding Augusta, Georgia, *Tobacco Road* was first published in 1932. It is the story of the Lesters, a family of white sharecroppers so destitute that most of their creditors have given up on them. Debased by poverty to an elemental state of ignorance and selfishness, the Lesters are preoccupied by their hunger, sexual longings, and fear that they will someday descend to a lower rung on the social ladder than the black families who live near them."

I have underlined what I question. Does poverty do that to the extent that it is drawn in this book? I do not equate poverty with stupidity. The Lesters had seventeen kids. Five died. When the novel begins only two (Dude and Ellie May, an eighteen-year-old with an extremely ugly cleft lip) remain still at home with mom (Ada), dad (Jeeter) and grandma. The son Dude who is sixteen gets married to a women preacher named Bessie Rice. She is thirty-nine. She has a deformed face. These six individuals and a few others are drawn as imbeciles, as animals, as depraved, crude human beings. Religion is used as an excuse - for laziness, for doing nothing, for accepting fate. The only sign of hope are the ten children who have left. Little is known or said about them. The little that is said draws them too as unforgiving, cruel and uncompassionate individuals.

Is Caldwell criticizing society, which provided no help, OR the individuals for letting themselves fall to such a low level? One feels no sympathy for any character. Their behavior makes this impossible. I don't quite know what the author is trying to say. Yes, poverty destroys, but these individuals need not have fallen so low. So who is at fault?

The audiobook narration by John MacDonald is good. The intonation matches the language of these uneducated, poor, depraved souls. Of course the dialog is filled with grammatical errors.

Reading this book will sicken and shock you. The book holds together. There is nothing wrong with the writing, but what is the author saying?

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Lucille, a GR member has given me some interesting articles about Caldwell:

<http://www.ohioswallow.com/extras/082...>

<http://nhpr.org/post/archives-author-...>

<http://articles.chicagotribune.com/19...>  
<http://writing2.richmond.edu/jessid/e...>

The first link relates Caldwell's writing to the prevalent theories of eugenics in the 1930s.

The second link gives general information about the novel, Caldwell's writing and further reading sources.

The third link names the people Caldwell based his characters on.

The fourth link considers humor and Caldwell's writing.

I do not agree with all views expressed but I found the articles interesting.

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## **Margitte says**

### **BLURB**

"Set during the Depression in the depleted farmlands surrounding Augusta, Georgia, Tobacco Road was first published in 1932. It is the story of the Lesters, a family of white sharecroppers so destitute that most of their creditors have given up on them. Debased by poverty to an elemental state of ignorance and selfishness, the Lesters are preoccupied by their hunger, sexual longings, and fear that they will someday descend to a lower rung on the social ladder than the black families who live near them."

### **COMMENT**

Jeeter Lester could have moved away to the cotton mills, like everybody else, when the soil was so depleted of nutrition that neither tobacco nor cotton could grow in it anymore. But Jeeter was a man of the land. He would rather dream of trying to plant a cotton crop than go to Heaven. He was made to farm. He couldn't farm, due to his financial situation, but he was a religious man. God would provide, even if Jeeter sometimes had to steal sweet potatoes and turnips from the neighboring places, or even rob his son-in-law, until there was nothing left to steal. Ada, his wife, needed snuff to kill the hunger pains. He was unable to provide that. Neither could he buy her a decent dress to die in one day. Not that it was a priority for the head of the family. His needs came first, and he was not going to die and have the mice eat half his face away in his coffin, like it happened with his father. No, he had clear instructions on how he was to be handled when his time would come. Ada would just have to wait her turn.

He was a very sinful man. Probably the most sinful man in the country, he claims, with some of the neighboring children bearing his resemblance, and the new couple who moved in years ago ...Ada did not want him to finish his sentences, when he got this excited about his legacy. Seventeen legitimate children born by Ada later, with twelve surviving, he was a man who knew how to plant seed and let them grow. He did not see any other future for himself or his land, than planting as much seed in any way he could. That is God's plan for a man like Jeeter Lester.

Occasionally his conscience would remind him of his sins. Fortunately, there was neighbors like, Bessie, who could save his soul.

"The Lord told me to come to the Lester house," the woman preacher said. "I was at home sweeping out the kitchen when He came to me and said, 'Sister Bessie, Jeeter Lester is doing something evil. You go to his place and pray for him right now before it's too late, and try to make him give up his evil goings-on.' I looked right back at the Lord, and said, 'Lord, Jeeter

Lester is a powerful sinful man, but I'll pray for him until the devil goes clear back to hell.' That's what I told Him, and here I is. I came to pray for you and yours, Jeeter Lester. Maybe it ain't too late yet to get on the good side of the Lord. It's people like you who ought to be good, instead of letting the devil make you do all sorts of sinful things."

"I knowed the good Lord wouldn't let me slip and fall in the devil's hands!" Jeeter shouted, dancing around Bessie's chair. "I knowed it! I knowed it! I always been on God's side, even when things was the blackest, and I knowed He'd jerk me out of hell before it was too late. I ain't no sinner by nature, Sister Bessie. It's just the old devil who's always hounding me to do a little something bad. But I ain't going to do it. I want to go to heaven when I die."

Shocking, graphic, heartbreaking, bleak, often humorous, in a brilliant way. I can clearly see why Erskine Caldwell is regarded as a literary giant in the American psyche. He not only captured a situation completely with his observational and journalistic skills, in his graphic realism, but he also captured the heart and souls of the people he exposed to the world in their own language.

I couldn't decide if the dire poverty and destitution could be termed a tragicomedy or not. There was singular moments in which only humor could deflate a situation, but the underlining message was a tragic one. In other instances I was shocked to the core with the cold, inhumane actions of the family members who have lost their sense of dignity and compassion a generation or two ago.

*Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt had the same effect on me than this book. I laughed and cried simultaneously. Nobody or nothing in the book endeared me to the situation. Yet, I could not help but keep on reading, hoping that something good will happen for the family.

The author, in an almost cold calculating voice and graphic detail, described the lives of the Lester family; the situation of dehumanized paupers, the sharecroppers, living on the isolated back-roads of America. He meticulously painted the harsh realities of life in the American South during the Great Depression. But behind the ruthless exposure, hides the compassionate soul of someone who deeply cared and wanted their story told as part of the social history of a country. These people were exploited to the last quarter in their pocket by the affluent members of society. The Lesters, and all the hundreds of families like them, were regarded as the scavengers of humanity. Yet, he managed to give them a warm, endearing voice in which to tell their stories themselves.

The author clearly was way ahead in his thinking and wrote his stories for many generations later to appreciate and understand. During his own lifetime he was not appreciated.

"His first two books, *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God's Little Acre* (1933), made Caldwell famous, but this was not initially due to their literary merit. Both novels depict the South as beset by racism, ignorance, cruelty, and deep social inequalities. They also contain scenes of sex and violence that were graphic for the time. Both books were banned from public libraries and other venues, especially in the South. Caldwell was prosecuted for obscenity, though exonerated."

It takes a few hours to spend with a family like the Lesters, reading their story. It takes a lifetime to appreciate the message behind it.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.

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### FotisK says

Βραδυφλεγής και απίλута ελεγχόμενο βιβλίο τα "Καπνοτόπια" προχωρά με αργούς ρυθμούς, αφαιρώντας εκ προθέσεως τα ποια λογοτεχνικά στολίσια σε βάθος κουραστικά αλλά κρως ρεαλιστικά, προκειμένου σταδιακά να σκιαγραφήσει μια απίλута πεσιμιστική ατμόσφαιρα. Η φράση εδώ δεν κρύβεται στις τελόμενες πράξεις -και ως είναι σκληρές και οδυνηρές για τις αισθήσεις μας-, αλλά στην αταραξία με την οποία αντιμετωπίζουν οι ήρωες όσα ενσκήπτουν καθημερινά, σταθερά, με το ρυθμό της ανατολής και της δύσης του ήλου ή καλύτερα με εκείνον της σοδειάς του καπνού που στον "κίκλο" του ζουν και πεθαίνουν -με κτηνική απουσία ενσυναίσθησης - τα αποκαθάρζει ζωής. Δεν είναι το κίκιννο ή -βεβαίως- το μάρο το χρώμα του θανάτου, αλλά το λευκό. Θεωρούμενο ως απουσία, ως ατμόσφαιρα ακαμψά ανθρωπίνων ζωών που "αλθονται" στη "μυλπέτρα" της ιστορίας, αθρήματα καταστάσεων των οποίων το νόημα εσάς τους διαφεύγει. Η αρρώστια, τα γηράτειά, ο θάνατος -βίαιος ή φυσικός- δεν αποτελεί παρά μία ακμή στιγμή στο λευκό τοπίο του Limbo, όπου έχουν για πάντα μετακινηθεί οι ήρωες του βιβλίου. Μόχρι τώλους, τα πρόσωπα του δράματος (τόσο "αφυδάτωμα" απ' αισθήματα και ανθρωπινή ουσία που δύσκολα χαρακτηρίζονται "τραγικά") αγωνίζονται ήχι για να ξεπεράσουν τη δεινή κατάσταση στην οποία έχουν περιέλθει, αλλά για να επαναλάβουν την ήδια ακριβώς πορεία που τους οδήγη στον λυθρο "δειλό", μοιραίοι και βούλοι αντήμα". Αλλά το θέμα που προσμύουν δεν θα προκύψει για να τους σσει απ' τον εαυτό τους και το τώλος δεν είναι παρά μία ακμή επανήληψη της αρχής.

(Διαβήστηκε το καλοκαίρι του 2017)

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### sappho\_reader says

#### **Brutal. Horrific. Terrifying.**

*Tobacco Road* has haunted me for days. The characters and their shenanigans have permeated my subconscious. I cannot help but dwell on it even when I am not actively reading.

Jeeter Lester and his family are unforgettable. They live in rural Georgia during the height of the Great Depression and practically starving to death on their sharecropper cotton farm. The men are amoral, ruthless, and liars. The women have physical deformities and are just as mean-spirited. It is an unpleasant story to be sure.

Erskine Caldwell aims to take the reader out of their comfort zone into unknown territory. He wanted to challenge us. And he succeeded. Many scenes were filled with cruel images.

This is not a simple tale. There are complex layers that kept me thinking and thinking. The social injustice issues of the 1930's, the racial hatreds, the war between rich and poor, and the role of evangelical religion among the poor.



But despite all this there are hints of humor within the bleak landscapes and several times I couldn't help but laugh. A strange paradox.

Caldwell highlighted the cruelty of humanity and many will not like it one bit. Read at your own risk.

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## **Diane Barnes says**

A quick read but not an easy read. I have no idea how to do a review of this book. First thing is to categorize it in my mind.

Tragedy? Too many comic moments in this book for that.

Comedy? Likewise, too much tragedy to give it that.

Love story? Not unless you count Lov's love of Pearl's yellow hair curling down her back.

Documentary? Hmmmmm.....

Okay, that's not going to work.

Let's try this - just exactly what was Caldwell trying to say about these people? Did he love them or hate them? Was he making fun of their ignorance, or making excuses for it? And for that matter, were they really that ignorant and unfeeling, or had poverty and hunger just taken everything away from them? Lester Jeeter also had a love/hate relationship with God, blaming him for every bad thing that happened, apparently never hearing the adage "God helps those who help themselves." What was Caldwell trying to say there? Was he making fun of religion, or using it to justify poor people's reliance on it?

Maybe that is the brilliance (and it is brilliant) of this short tale of a few days with the Lesters. You don't really know what to think, but you continue to try long after having finished.

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