

whose names are unknown

a novel by

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One of two books that the Pasadena Covenant Men's Book Group read about the dust bowl, this one is a novel by an author who had firsthand experience both in western Oklahoma and in the camps in California. It was not published at the time it was written because it was submitted within weeks of **The Grapes of Wrath** coming out and the publisher reluctantly rejected it as being redundant. Viannah tells me that this wouldn't happen today. Not only would it be normal to publish two books on the same topic at about the same time, but amazon.com and every other promoter would be saying things like, "You liked **The Grapes of Wrath**? You should try this!" When I told this story in the kitchen after the book club meeting, both of the other men there said things like, "Oh, I don't know, I already have something like this." Clearly from the "wear it out or do without" generation.

One distinction between this account and **The Worst Hard Time** (the other book from the men's group) is that this one doesn't seem to have as much wind. Dust just appears and settles on everything. People can't breathe and they're putting towels around their doors and windows, but they're not explicitly getting sandblasted, at least not the way I remember it reading. There was grit in everything, water in pails became mud, and no one or nothing was ever clean.

The story begins in the Oklahoma Panhandle where the Dunnes live in a dugout on their homesteaded farm. The Dunnes consist of the old man, his son Milt, Milt's wife Julia, and two young daughters, Lonnie and Myra. They have a car, animals, a garden, and fields. Julia is pregnant. They are hoping for a boy, and a crop next year, and maybe enough surplus to build a modest house with a wood floor one of these years. (This is not unlike my great grandparents living in a dugout near Floydada, but they got into the burgeoning real estate business and were more successful. My great grandfather was rancher then realtor then public servant, but never a farmer.)

Many of the chapters are brief and succinct. The first several are of the good times before the dust. They establish the characters, the relationships, the situations, the hopes, and the possibilities. It looks like things could be all right if the weather holds. People go to the grocery store and shop with what little money they have. They avoid credit but sometimes credit is a necessity. We meet the neighbors. Some of them are better off than others. One nearby family, the Brennermann, has lots of acreage and some surplus and two daughters who are grown, or nearly. Anna, whose boyfriend is the strapping, ambitious Max, is the school teacher, to the extent that there is money for a school. The other, Frieda, is about ready to leave home. Maybe

she'll work in the bank where her dad is one of the board members. The Starwoods, by contrast, are as poor as can be, but are able to work and don't mind carrying on while they are able. People talk about getting too old to work and not wanting to get to the point where they couldn't work and what would happen to them if they did.

Anna and Max are secretly betrothed, and act like it.

Are the Brennermanns smarter or luckier or more shrewd than the others that they are staying ahead or are they just pinching pennies at their neighbor's expense? It is hard to draw a fine line.

The tragedies and ecstasies are narrated in excruciating detail. Shoots are coming up in the field, the fall chill is in the air, kids go to school some days, then the dust comes. The dust totally blankets everything, for days, for weeks on end. Hope stretches out for several chapters, through a snowfall, through a rare rainstorm, but in the end there is no crop.

One day, Mr. Starwood is coming home in his truck and gets caught in a dust storm and suffocates. He writes his will on a sack and though he is found alive after the storm, doesn't live long. Now Mrs. Starwood is a widow with children and her own aging body to deal with. The men stand around at the funeral and talk business and politics, a representative sample of the dust bowl area in the midst of the Great Depression.

Julia and the kids walk to buy a dime's worth of milk from the Brennermann one day. It is getting close to dinner time and Mrs. Brennermann doesn't want to offer them anything so they start walking back home and get caught in a storm. The resulting panic ends in a miscarriage. It would have been a boy. He is weak, undernourished, and early and doesn't live long. Milt privately buries his son way out in the field, deep as he can dig, wondering what kind of life he might have had, wondering whether, in these circumstances, life or death was better.

Was Julia unconsciously imposing? Could Mrs. Brennermann have saved the situation? Milt knows, but the family shushes his complaining. There's nothing to be done now.

I've heard that before.

The grocer is a genial, pleasant, generous man who sympathetically extends lots of credit to folks who can't help it that they have no money and no crops. But one day he doesn't open the store. At length the authorities break down the door and find him dead in the back. Mrs. Starwood sees it and is nauseated with the details of the suicide that also nauseate the reader, being recounted in great detail. He has burned or otherwise destroyed every vestige of a bill or credit line that anyone had, and so had generously taken all that trouble with him. This is a relief to the otherwise honest, hardworking folks. They had no money to make it up in any case, even if they could figure out what or who they owed.

Mrs. Starwood is furious with her foreclosure notice. The bank didn't even trust them when they did have a harvest, garnishing their earnings at the grain elevator before they could even see their money and honestly pay their bills. Now this! She brings a dead skunk to the bank and leaves it right there in the middle of the building, telling them off good.

“Mister, my husband is dead now, and I got a houseful of children to raise. I can work in the field like a man, and when there's a crop, I'll pay my debts, the same as we always have. But . . .” she gulped for breath, her eyes stern and straight in her pale face, ‘but, godalmighty, I can't make it rain or stop blowing dust, and I can't make the world right when it's busted. All I know how to do is work and if I can't pay back that little mortgage on our things you'll stop me working.’”

That is the essence of the problem. A group of people imposing economic rules and agricultural techniques in a place where neither could work, then some of them suffering as individuals as if they have failed or as if they had been negligent. If they had indeed been negligent, the pain of failure might be considered appropriate, but they have not failed, they have *been* failed.

After twenty four chapters of this, the book switches from Part One, “Oklahoma Panhandle”, to Part Two, “California.”

Widow Starwood and her children and the Dunne's excepting the old man are going to caravan to California, if they have enough gas money to even get there. They are getting ready to leave before sunup when Frieda Brennermann comes in wanting to go with them. Perhaps her less uncomfortable future here is less to her liking than the adventure and the prospect of “anything else.” She brought what money she had saved so far in life to help the group. She ends up using the last of it to buy the group a tent.

In California, their circumstances are very reminiscent of **The Grapes of Wrath**. Some camps are better than others, but the “Okies” are the lowest form of life on the earth, lower than even the Negroes and Hispanics. They are kept down by low wages, forced to use a company store, and have very little in the way of a place to stay. And the people who were there first think that they deserve to be that way and aren't good for anything else.

A wildcat strike is attempted and ultimately fails, leaving the Dunne's and the Starwoods even worse off than before. They get involved with the strike organizers but things do not improve. There are occasional letters to and from home when they can afford stamps. Kids go to school but are so ostracized that they decide to quit. Hired heat beats up labor organizers. The book ends unhappily. The people are in the midst of a long, possibly endless struggle for survival. They have resorted to stealing because it is less evil than starving.

Babb's account is arguably more authentic than Steinbeck's. Steinbeck went and worked in the camps and experienced the life about which he wrote. Babb was born into it. She grew up in the

Oklahoma of Lonnie and Myra and Frieda and went to California and worked in camp administration. This is more than first-hand.

I can't say this more succinctly myself. Before the novel begins, there is an explanatory *Author's Note*:

“The title of this book is taken from a legal eviction notice: *To John Doe and Mary Doe Whose True Names Are Unknown*. The time is the 1930s, the time of the Great Depression and the dust bowl disaster. Earlier the government had opened the dryland grazing plains of buffalo grass to farming; one could obtain 320 acres for “proving up” the land by living on it, building a home, and working it. It was a mistake to plow the plains in a land of little rain and wind, wind, wind, and the mistake resulted in the dust, which covered fields and buildings, killed people and animals, and drove farmers out with nothing.”

The questions are ageless. We are given a situation in which the systems of our society don't work and everyone is expected to buck up and take it, and they do this well, but eventually it comes to the worst and vestiges of civilization are frayed. Then, those who in good faith proved up the land which died around them go off and are the most marginalized and abused people on the west coast for over a generation. Should the government “do something”? What can it do effectively? Should the landowners have some compassion, in the face of their own “greed” and peer pressure? Groups of people made the problems, plowing the plains that should have been left grassland. Can groups of people cooperate to solve these problems? Can they be incentivized somehow? Are there systems that could “work”?

These problems persist up into our own age. There are remnants of these very issues, under and over reactions written into law and implemented fairly to poorly. Meanwhile, new groups have arrived in new versions of economic distress and are marginalized and blamed in their own turn for all of society's woes, while others in better circumstances concentrate their misdirected hatred in a vain attempt to feel safe, or just ignore everything.

These are the problems of every age. People are tribal and everyone else's tribe is wrong. Enlightened self interest goes only so far. Economic incentives goes only so far. People who are near starvation will go very far. The possible answers to the human condition frighten me. I am afraid to pursue them.