

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

DON'T LOOK DOWN

The new Depression journalism.

BY GEORGE PACKER

In early 1931, Edmund Wilson left his desk job as the literary editor of *The New Republic* to travel around the stricken country and write a series of articles on the effects of the Depression, then in its second year. The publication of "Axel's Castle" was about to make him America's most famous literary critic, but the stock-market crash diverted Wilson's attention from Mallarmé and Joyce. He was in an apocalyptic mood. The very structure of American society seemed to be collapsing: it was the end of industrial capitalism, of representative democracy, and the start of something radically new. He urged the magazine's readers to shake themselves loose from the liberalism of John Dewey and Herbert Croly, move left, and "take Communism away from the Communists."

There was nothing unusual in those days about an owl-eyed literary man from the landed gentry, Princeton '16, showing up in Virginia coal country. Sherwood Anderson was there, too—"all full of Communism," Wilson reported to his friend John Dos Passos. "He doesn't know much about it, but the idea has given him a powerful afflatus. He has a new girl, a radical Y.W.C.A. secretary, who took him around to the mills. He is writing a novel with a Communist hero and I have never seen him so much aroused." After Dos Passos finished the second novel of his "U.S.A." trilogy, he joined a group of writers led by Theodore Dreiser on a trip to Harlan County, Ken-

tucky, where they held hearings on the miners' living conditions, and were charged by local authorities with "criminal syndicalism." (Dreiser, who had brought his own new girl on the trip, was also indicted for adultery; he denied it, to reporters back in New York, on the ground of impotence.) When Wilson visited Kentucky, delivering food and clothing to striking miners, he was part of a group including his *New Republic* colleague Malcolm Cowley, the writer Waldo Frank, and the future music producer John Hammond (who later signed Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, and Bruce Springsteen to Columbia Records). Wilson and his comrades braved heavily armed sheriff's deputies, before being driven across the state line amid death threats.

"We feel for a moment the tremendous intoxication with history that is the great achievement of communist solidarity," Dos Passos noted in a dispatch from an otherwise dreary rally at Madison Square Garden. More than simple idealism or ideology, the intensity of that feeling was what moved some of the country's leading writers—as well as many of its mediocrities—to turn literature into a form of activism. They were pursuing the social muse. Marxism and an awareness of class conflict gave them "a powerful afflatus," a ready dose of inspiration and a new language that could be both gritty and prophetic. To sit in a room writing essays on beautifully in-

ward novels while history was revving its engine right outside might amount to a kind of creative suicide. Two of Wilson's best friends of the twenties, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Louise Bogan, were undergoing nervous breakdowns around this time. Wilson had recently recovered from his own, in time to leap headlong into the thirties.

For a few years, the most compelling form of American writing was a genre that didn't even have a name—Wilson later described it in the negative, as "my non-literary articles." His portrait of America at the start of the Depression, "The American Jitters: A Year of the Slump," published in 1932, is a forgotten masterpiece of documentary journalism. From Ward, West Virginia, to San Diego, the country was a scene of endless devastation and wasted human life. Wilson tracked down three attempted suicides on one "bad day in Brooklyn." In the Kentucky hills, he followed a county agent into a shack where the children were starving.

But there's nothing depressing about Wilson's sentences—they glow with the energy of a terrible beauty being born. In a chapter titled "Detroit Motors," the mass production of automobiles is new enough to evoke a hellish sort of thrill, though used cars are being bought up by Henry Ford at twenty dollars apiece from customers too poor to keep them, and melted down for steel:

The home of the open-hearth furnaces is a vast loud abode of giants: groans, a continual ringing, the falling of remote loads. The old automobiles sent in on little cars are like disemboweled horses at the bull-ring whose legs are buckling under them. A fiend in blue glasses who sits in a high throne on an enormous blue chariot or float causes it to move horizontally back and forth before the white-glowing mouths of the furnaces, feeding them the flattened cars like so many metallic soft-shell crabs—ramming each one in with a sudden charge, dropping it quickly with a twist.

There is little overt didacticism in "The American Jitters." Wilson was a meticulous and unsentimental reporter, focussing the same critical intelligence on Detroit and Kentucky that he later brought to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the literature of the Civil War. But he applied the high voltage of modernist prose to a deliberate end—persuading his liberal, literate readers to join the

A cotton sharecropper in Alabama, 1936; below, a former autoworker, his wife, and their foreclosed Detroit home, 2009.



cause of the dispossessed. He wanted to sweep aside a dying commercial civilization and replace it with a humanistic one, based on justice. At times, he thought the new society was inevitable. Then he returned to his books, and spent the rest of the decade in the deep study of Marxism. By the time "To the Finland Station" was published, in 1940, the intoxication with history had worn off, and Wilson was ready to leave Communism to the Communists.

Our own slump has produced a very different kind of writing. The most widely read books to come out of the financial crisis and its aftermath have been explanatory works of economics and politics, or narrative accounts focussed on players at the center of the action: traders and hedge-fund managers (Michael Lewis's "The Big Short"), bankers and regulators (Andrew Ross Sorkin's "Too Big to Fail"), mortgage lenders and housing executives ("All the Devils Are Here," by Joe Nocera and Bethany McLean; "Reckless Endangerment," by Gretchen Morgenson and Joshua Rosner), and political leaders (Ron Suskind's "Confidence Men"; Noam Scheiber's "The Escape Artists"). A collection called "The Great Hangover: 21 Tales of the New Recession from the Pages of *Vanity Fair*" includes pieces on Bear Stearns, A.I.G.'s Joseph Cassano, the criminal financier Allen Stanford, "Wall Street High Society in Free Fall," "Rich Harvard, Poor Harvard," and the business travails of the New York *Times*, plus an entire section on the Madoff family. It's as if no one could be

induced to read a story about the crisis without a disgraced celebrity plutocrat as the protagonist. Schadenfreude seems a more contemporary emotion than hope or pity.

Marxism, for writers in the nineteenth-thirties, gave the ruins of the Great Depression a certain glamour. In reporting on the mill town of Lawrence, Massachusetts, Wilson believed that he was getting closer to the heart of history: the workers and their defiant leaders weren't marginal losers—they were the prophets of the future. But, for a media culture without such political commitments, this second depression has interest chiefly through the filter of elite experience. The American jitters belong to the likes of Hank Paulson, Richard Fuld, Angelo Mozilo, and Timothy Geithner. Some have suffered damaged reputations; a few have seen their net worth drop; none have had to hunt for food in garbage cans.

Neither "The American Jitters" nor "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," James Agee's baroquely composed study of Alabama tenant farmers, with photographs by Walker Evans, came close to being a best-seller (Agee's book sold barely six hundred copies before going out of print), but they were two of the most important literary works of the era. Today, few leading novelists, poets, or critics have devoted serious effort to recording economic conditions in obscure corners of America. Books of documentary reportage on the new depression have come and gone without much notice. That's a shame, because, separately and together, they create a portrait of the country that is deeper,

more disturbing, and, finally, more persuasive than tales of great men flying too close to the sun.

It isn't easy to dramatize this depression. Wilson and Dos Passos went to the hollows of West Virginia and found miners and cops at war. Go there today and you would find people watching TV, sending out résumés over the Internet, and waiting for their unemployment checks. The visuals are quiet ones: a jobs fair with people in business attire doesn't have the immediate power of a breadline. "A photo of a dirty child standing before a tent captures that child's horror," Dale Maharidge writes in "Someplace Like America: Tales from the New Great Depression," a 2011 work in the Agee-Evans grain, with photographs by Michael S. Williamson. "But a picture of a poor child in front of a suburban house... well, the child looks middle class." The leading symbol of recent economic distress is an abandoned house in a brand-new subdivision, with telltale weeds pushing up through cracks in the driveway. That's been photographed many times, and so have the trashed living rooms of foreclosed homes, and the picturesque decay of Rust Belt cities: the most vivid images tend to show depopulated landscapes. They lack the indelible intimacy that Walker Evans located in those ravaged faces. Even the confusion over nomenclature—is this a depression or a recession, or some qualified version of either? should it be capitalized or not?—suggests that the engine of history might just be idling loudly.

In "Down the Up Escalator: How the 99% Live in the Great Recession" (Doubleday), Barbara Garson addresses this problem directly. "Poor' Americans are surprisingly rich. The breadlines of 1929 have been staved off by unemployment insurance," she writes in her introduction. "Most people who are out of work not only eat but stop for take-out coffee. Not a single one of the long-term unemployed you're about to meet carried a thermos." Garson achieved minor fame as a playwright in the sixties with the antiwar satire "MacBird!" Since then, she's written several books of social reportage about work and money, and this steady engagement over many decades has honed an appealing voice: wry, modest, realistic. She's like a sympathetic but slightly



critical friend, ready with a hug and unable not to give advice. When Alice Epps, a single black homeowner in Richmond, California, is slow to grasp the advanced state of her foreclosure case, Garson can't stay out of it. "Alice, I'm practically pleading, it's too late for lawyers. You have to think about where to move."

Garson is writing about the formerly middle class. Her characters (they and their ex-employers are given pseudonyms, which occasionally leads to narrative awkwardness) have not abandoned hope or turned against the system. They don't expect much help from anyone, especially the government and the banks. Their dominant emotions are shame and fear, not anger. Instead of strike committees, Garson finds the Pink Slip Club—four New York friends, two men and two women, who have lost their mid-level office jobs and relieve the numb terror of having no work by meeting regularly for solidarity and gossip. They need money, but they also just want to be useful. As months go by, the friends start to face the possibility that the American economy might no longer need "four generous/selfish, mellow/excitable, unique/ordinary, and highly employable individuals." A club member named Feldman finally says, "If this country doesn't get it together, they're going to storm the White House. It will probably turn into anarchy, and then it will turn into martial law, and the government will be forced to, you know, use their own military against their own people." This is the closest anyone in the book comes to expressing a revolutionary thought. Garson, always levelheaded, tells Feldman, "It's funny, but I don't hear any rumblings of things like that."

She pays attention to the subtle ways in which economic pressure undermines personal ethics and social cohesion among decent people. In Solano County, California, Cindi and Amanda are trying to figure out how to hang on to their condos—is it better to keep paying the mortgage, or to stop and wait for the bank to negotiate? "I was still mildly shocked to hear well-dressed professionals coolly consider default," Garson admits. "But I was beginning to realize that white Californians who drive new cars and speak TV announcer English may be poorer than they look."

The book is essentially an account of Garson's many interviews, and one set

piece follows another until, at the end of her investigations, she articulates their meaning and the indignation that's been simmering in her readers:

When American companies began moving manufacturing jobs overseas in the 1970s, the idea was to make products more competitively for the American market. Today, American CEOs impress potential investors with their foreign sales figures and their plans to open new markets abroad. *The companies that wrote us off as workers now write us off as consumers.*

If you're not a worker, not a consumer, and you don't earn significant income from investments, then you don't have much of a place in capitalist society. In the course of this recession millions more of us have slipped into that no place. Most of us will still manage to eat and keep our televisions connected. But it can't be pleasant to live in a country whose elite have no regular use for us.

In 1974, Studs Terkel published "Working," a brilliant collection of oral histories of Americans in every conceivable occupation, from washroom attendant to film critic. In the very first interview, a steelworker named Mike LeFevre—who hates his job, like most of the people in the book—declares that the side of every building should show the names of all the workers who helped build it. "What can I point to? A writer can point to a book. Everybody should have something to point to. It's the not-recognition by other people." What a steelworker in the early seventies wanted was acknowledgment.

Within a few years, steelworkers in cities like Youngstown started to disappear. (Maharidge and Williamson record their demise in "Someplace Like America," and in an earlier collaboration, "Journey to Nowhere.") Four decades after "Working," the interview subjects in D. W. Gibson's homage to Terkel, "Not Working: People Talk About Losing a Job and Finding Their Way in Today's Changing Economy" (Penguin), crave something more basic than recognition—they want work. Those dirty, thankless factory jobs have become objects of nostalgia, Mike LeFevre's daily humiliations have been transformed in memory into blue-collar male pride. Clerical and managerial jobs are also on the way out. Tina Hall, a former supervisor at a mortgage company, loved her next job, working with schizophrenic adults. When she lost that, she became a teacher's aide in special education and loved, loved, loved it. When that position was terminated, she cleaned houses, then took care of a couple of kids

after school, making just sixty-five dollars a week—falling into the ranks of the working poor, a few rungs down the socioeconomic ladder from Garson's characters. She tried to keep smiling. All she wanted was more work. "I figure eventually, I'm going to pay my dues and something's going to break," Tina says. "When I'm working, that's when I'm focused. It's the most important thing."

The same scene is detailed in one oral history after another: the almost hallucinatory experience, a shock even when long expected, of hearing the words "We're going to have to let you go." The dominant mood in "Working" was of being trapped; now there's a pervasive sense of instability, of wasted talent and unspent energy, and the unemployed can't help blaming themselves for being let go, laid off, managed out.

Why haven't victims of the new depression come together in a mass movement? Where are the Bonus Marchers, the Townsend Clubs? Partly it's the lack of a vision of the future, whether inspired by a false god like Marxism or by a terrestrial program like the New Deal, and the moral and intellectual energy such a vision confers. After decades of global competition—the biggest difference from the thirties—American workers have a sober appreciation of their relative unimportance in the grand scheme. A couple of years ago, in the office of a foreclosure defense attorney in Florida, I met an unemployed boat salesman, dying of cancer, who gave a more personal reason: "Imagine getting up every day and not having a purpose. You're not working, your self-worth goes down the toilet. You don't interact with people. You stay in your house. You don't want to answer the phone. It isolates you. I can't even go out to get a bite to eat. I don't want to spend fifteen dollars."

The Great Depression left people more helpless and isolated—Agee's sanctified tenant farmers are passive and alone—but the new depression seems to have produced less hope. Over the years, the structures that were built during the Roosevelt Republic to secure Americans against another catastrophe—banking regulations, collective bargaining, federal credit, business-labor cooperation, public education, a scrupulous press—have steadily eroded. So has the public's faith in institutions, and the idea of sure upward movement through each successive

generation. Americans have been thrown back on their oldest belief of all, the cult of the individual. Its current deities, objects of worshipful fascination, are celebrities and entrepreneurs who preach the native philosophy of mind-cure, handed down from Emerson by way of Napoleon Hill to Oprah Winfrey and Timothy Ferriss: if you can think it, you can do it—you are responsible for your own success, your own failure.

The authors of "Someplace Like America" have been reporting on the American working class for thirty years. Dale Maharidge is the son of a Cleveland machinist, and he grew up on Steinbeck novels and his elders' stories of the Great Depression; Michael Williamson's mother was a barmaid, and he was raised in foster homes. Both work self-consciously in the vein of the thirties documentarians. They started out in 1982, riding the rails with the new homeless of the Reagan recession, and in the ensuing decades they continued to check in with some of the down-and-outs they met along the way, while widening their scope as the economy increasingly discarded the comfortable.

In 2000, at the height of the dot-com boom, they met Maggie Segura, a full-time Texas state employee with a young daughter, who was standing in line at a food bank. By 2009, Dale Maharidge was interviewing a woman in suburban New Jersey named Lisa Martucci, whose husband had lost his corporate job and had to stock supermarket shelves at night. "There is no support for us," Lisa says. "I won't entrust my well-being with the state. I'm more comfortable with individualism. You have to take care of yourself. I teach my daughter to think like this. Don't expect the cavalry to come in. Government at all levels bails out the special interests . . . but not the rest of us." In the new depression, Maharidge and Williamson find that Americans are growing tomatoes in condo courtyards, raising chickens in back yards, and trying to start businesses out of living rooms. They know they're on their own.

Reading "Someplace Like America," you realize that any story of the new depression needs a thirty-year prologue. The water had been rising from the basement for a long time, rotting the foundation of the economy, until it began to enter the

rooms of the middle class, around 2009. That year, a Michigan woman who lost her dry-cleaning business, her house, and her marriage declared, "I think there has been a merging with the lower class. The middle class has been eliminated. You're either really rich or you're in the poverty level"—summing up what Maharidge and Williamson documented in their travels across the country and over the decades. "It's frightfully easy to find desperation in America today," Maharidge writes. "You simply have to go out there and listen." "Someplace Like America" is unrelenting prose, not poetry, but what the book lacks in intimacy it makes up for in breadth and persistence. There's something doggedly heroic in this commitment to one of journalism's least glamorous, least remunerative subjects. The working class no longer has a place in the public's imagination. Food banks, children with disabilities, long drives to badly paid jobs in big-box stores, advanced diabetes: if this is indeed the future for half the population, it's a future few want to read about.

At several points over the years, Maharidge asked himself why he kept doing it, and at least once he vowed to stop. Why subject another human being at the worst moment of his life to prying questions and the shutter clicks of Williamson's camera? If the motive "was to use his story of quest and struggle to inform the larger world so that attitudes and policies might change," Maharidge admits, "our track record . . . has thus far been dismal." Garson has similar doubt about the value of her work. Talking in a restaurant booth



with Alice Epps, who is bravely fighting foreclosure, she suddenly gets up, goes around to sit down beside the woman, and begins to cry, because "my books never do anyone any good."

The documentaries about the new depression all betray uneasiness in the relation of journalist to subject. The writers keep returning to their own class background and financial standing (not great in the era of digital journalism), their reportorial methods, how they met the peo-

ple they're writing about, their hesitations in making an approach, their moral ambivalence about whether and how to help. This impulse to equivocate and explain wouldn't afflict a foreign correspondent covering a war or a famine in the same way: we're more embarrassed by hardship in our own country, faced with the knowing gaze of compatriots. Dozens of pages of "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men" were devoted to Agee's self-lacerating Christian anger and guilt. By contrast, Wilson remained an imperturbable observer throughout "The American Jitters," only once pausing to note that he made good money in the first year of the Depression. When the working class seemed to be the future of the human race, the writer was more worried about finding his own place in the revolutionary society to come than about whether or not to call the number he's scrawled in his notebook.

At the bottom of the American economy lies Detroit. In 1931, it was the temporarily paralyzed dynamo of industrial capitalism. In the nineteen-fifties, it was one of the richest cities in the world. Half a century later, it had been left for dead. Then came the financial crisis, and the collapse of the auto industry, and Detroit's spectacular decay became a symbol of the country's distress. "Suddenly the eyes of the nation turned back upon this postindustrial sarcophagus," Charlie LeDuff writes in "Detroit: An American Autopsy" (Penguin Press), a reporter's memoir filled with death and its metaphors. LeDuff was raised just outside Detroit, the product of a working-class family with more than its share of troubles and mysteries. He made a name for himself at the *New York Times*, then quit after his editor dismissed his subjects as "losers." (The paper might have a different version of his departure.) In the historic year 2008, LeDuff moved his young family back home and joined the staff of the fading *Detroit News*. It seemed to some like a perverse decision, but he knew a good story when he saw one: "I made myself a promise. I'd build a castle of words so high on the banks of the Detroit River that they couldn't help but see it from Times Square."

LeDuff's Detroit is the most harrowing place in America. Toilet paper is in short supply in schools and firehouses—children and firemen have to bring their

own. A corrupt city councilwoman named Monica Conyers, the wife of a senior congressman, squeezes LeDuff's testicles under the table in a sleazy bar where he's arranged to interview her. "Are you wearing a wire?" she wants to know. A frozen corpse, upside down, legs sticking out of the ice at the bottom of an elevator shaft in a burned-out warehouse, remains there for weeks, until LeDuff hears about it via an "urban explorer" who was playing hockey in the building's basement, and splashes the story across the front page.

The city's death spiral gives LeDuff a powerful afflatus. He has all the moves of a hardboiled metro reporter, including razor-sharp moral observation. Noticing that a man who collects bodies around the city, including the frozen one, makes fourteen dollars for a human corpse and nine dollars for an animal, LeDuff writes, "The difference between a dead dog and a dead man is \$5, exactly the amount Henry Ford used to pay for a day's work." A few lines later, we get this zinger: "The story was not the only thing that hit the streets that morning. A middle-level manager who had been laid off from General Motors dove out of his downtown high-rise apartment just as a bailiff knocked at the door to evict him." LeDuff can't stop posturing—he's always got a tough-guy comeback. The line between indignation and sensationalism is easily and often crossed. He solves the problem of his own place in the narrative by putting himself at the center of every page. This makes "Detroit" more fun to read than "Someplace Like America" but less reliable. (For a more modest and explanatory account of Detroit's demise, there is Paul Clemens's 2011 book, "Punching Out: One Year in a Closing Auto Plant.")

Chris Hedges was another ambitious *Times* reporter who chafed against its standards. After the paper reprimanded him for speaking out against the Iraq war in a commencement address in 2003, he left to become an anti-corporate activist. In "Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt" (Nation), he collaborates with the graphic artist Joe Sacco in documentary reportage from what Hedges calls "the sacrifice zones, those areas in the country that have been offered up for exploitation in the name of profit, progress, and technological advancement." These include the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, in South Dakota; the blighted city of Camden, New

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Jersey; the depleted coalfields of southern West Virginia; and rural Florida's slave-like migrant-labor camps. If Maharidge and Williamson frame the current slump in the context of a three-decade economic history, Hedges and Sacco see it as the culmination of centuries of violent plunder.

The stories in "Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt" are devastating and often revelatory. Sacco's cartoons—visual oral histories—give the short, simple annals of the poor the rich individual voices they deserve. But Hedges can't describe a dilapidated house without pronouncing damnation on the corporate state. Edmund Wilson conveyed the ruthlessness of West Virginia coal operators with passionate precision: "They put in mechanical cutters and loaders, and lay off as many men as they can. The first to go are the men over forty-five and the men who have been crippled in the mines (at Andrew Mellon's mine, they never keep a man who has been injured)." Here is Hedges on the same subject: "Those who carry out this pillage probably believe they can outrun their own destructiveness. They think that their wealth, privilege, and gated communities will save them. Or maybe they do not think about the future at all. But the death they have unleashed, the relentless contamination of air, soil, and water, the physical collapse of communities, and the eventual exhaustion of coal and fossil fuels themselves, will not spare them."

In LeDuff's case, the inflated prose is an expression of personality; with Hedges,

the son of a Presbyterian minister, it's a matter of homiletics, a vision of sin and salvation. The final section of "Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt" turns to Occupy Wall Street, which Hedges takes for the first tremors of a revolutionary uprising against the long history of corporate and state atrocities described in his book. He ends with a dramatization of his arrest at a protest in front of the Goldman Sachs building. Hedges thinks of the faces of children dying in all the hellholes that he covered as a foreign correspondent. Then he thinks of the traces of tuberculosis in his lungs, contracted from famine-stricken Sudanese:

The scars I carry within me are the whis- pers of these dead. They are the faint marks of those who never had a chance to become men or women, to fall in love and have children of their own. I carried these scars to the doors of Goldman Sachs. I placed myself at the feet of these commodity traders to call for justice because the dead, and those dying in slums and refugee camps across the planet, cannot make this journey. I see their faces. They haunt me in the day and come to me in the dark. They force me to remember. They make me choose sides.

But Occupy turned out to be a moment of its time—a *cri de coeur*, stylish, media-distracted, and (to invert one of Agee's best-known sentences) not so hardly wounded as easily killed. There's no shortcut back to the thirties. Without an idea of the future that's genuinely shared by large numbers of people—a real and lasting solution to the conditions described in these books—an arrest on Wall Street becomes one more story from an age of individuals. ♦