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Waltzing with the Ghost of Tom Joad: Poverty, Myth, and  
Low-Wage Labor in Oklahoma (review)

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*Waltzing with the Ghost of Tom Joad: Poverty, Myth, and Low-Wage Labor in Oklahoma*

Robert Lee Maril.

Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2000.

208 pp Paper \$19.95

*Reviewed by Dawn Colley*

Robert Lee Maril, in *Waltzing with the Ghost of Tom Joad*, discusses the plight of the impoverished in Oklahoma, the reasons behind the prevailing mind-sets about poverty, and finally, the ways in which the public, poor and affluent alike, can join together to create a better living environment for the people of this state. In the opening chapter he tells the personal stories of twelve households in four different areas of Oklahoma during the summer of 1995; Maril brings the difficulties of poverty to the reader on an intimate level. The areas he includes in his study range from the rural to the urban, highlighting the fact that poverty exists in all regions of the state. In the following chapter, Maril chronicles the lives of the same twelve households during the late fall of 1997, two-and-a-half years after their initial interviews. He explains, "While the households are different from each other in a variety of ways, certain patterns unfold over the years, some of which were apparent in the initial study, some of which were not." Patterns he traces include the problems of finding quality health care, lack of educational opportunities, difficulty of making ends meet even while working one or more minimum-wage jobs, poor health, and mounting debt. Maril demonstrates that many families are caught in an inescapable situation. For example, many in the study were forced to continue to work while sick because they could not afford a doctor and they needed the paycheck, causing serious health problems in the long run.

After his discussion of the specific families, Maril then turns his attention to the statistical data of four decades of research, from 1960 to the 1990s, which help to illuminate the reasons for Oklahoma's unusually high poverty rate when compared to the national average. He writes, "Over the last forty years state poverty rates, including the numbers of families in poverty, have ranged from 1.3 to 1.5 times the national rates." Citing a number of correlations of poverty, from poor



Tom Joad  
Drawing by  
Thomas Hart  
Benton.

*Courtesy of Limited  
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health to crime rates to housing conditions, Maril once again turns the statistical numbers into people, refusing to impersonalize his study. He then tackles the prevalent social myths that people readily accept and rarely scrutinize, explaining, "Myths that misrepresent and trivialize the poor so dominate personal socialization and public discourse that the poor themselves often hold tightly to them." Covering topics such as "the poor are lazy," "poor Oklahomans are minorities," "the poor cheat on welfare," and "the cost-of-living myth," Maril explains these commonly held beliefs and then works to dis-

prove them. He concludes his study by providing information on how poverty is created and why it flourishes in Oklahoma; he then discusses current public policy in regards to the poor and what changes could be made to improve the situations of those in poverty.

Referring often to Tom Joad's continual presence in the lives of poor Oklahomans, Maril asserts, "He is for many, then, less a hillbilly, and embarrassment to the state, than a time-worn symbol of the rugged and ragged Okie who will, above all else, persevere." And similar to Steinbeck's own desire to return respect and dignity to the dust-bowl migrants, Maril's study demonstrates his enthusiasm for changing the prevalent perceptions of the poor in Oklahoma. By steadily focusing on personal stories rather than statistical data, he presents the reader with an intimate portrait of the lives of the impoverished. Although at times overly protective of the families in his study, Maril is careful not to misrepresent their situations. He is both informative and reflective, examining the implications of his research on society as a whole, and his recommendations for societal change are practical and well-considered. This book is valuable not only for people interested in sociology but also for those who have an interest in helping their fellow man.

*DAWN F. COLLEY recently graduated from the University of Texas at El Paso with an MA in English. She has presented on Steinbeck at "John Steinbeck's Americas: A Centennial Conference." In the fall of 2003, she will begin her Ph.D. work at the University of Colorado at Boulder.*