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March 29, 2012
Ethics and Visual Culture
Diane Zeeuw

Deception and cultural portrayal

“What ultimately concerns us as people living in a imperfect world is not the root causes of lies but the nature of any given lie—is it trivial or substantial? —The motive behind it—is it self-serving, is it intended to harm or be beneficial? —And its effects, both immediate and long-term.”¹ The accurate portrayal of a group people is a difficult thing to do. Stereotypes and misconceptions cloud judgment and change viewer’s thoughts. Evelin Sullivan in the “Concise Book of Lying” discusses the motive behind why people lie or deceive. There are many reasons why people lie or deceive with visual imagery. Sales and money are a large driving force when it comes to journalism, filmmaking and when it is someone’s profession to create images to sell. This is especially true when we are trying to tell the story through visual imagery or minorities. Throughout history people have been stereotyping others by where they come from, what they do as an occupation or physical attributes.

During the war on poverty in the 1960s, Appalachia was the epitome of those living in lower than par standards. It started with President John F. Kennedy and continued after that. The goal of the campaign was to bring awareness to the poverty stricken areas by sending photographers and journalists to the area.² Outsider coming into these communities in Appalachia would not accurately portray these people for news articles and create not necessarily true stereotypes. At the time it was money and the story that was

1 Sullivan, Evelin E. *The Concise Book of Lying*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001.

2 "War on Poverty." Home. Web. 15 Apr. 2012. <http://www.lklp.org/Overview/War-on-Poverty>.

driving these journalists. They didn't portray these people how they are or who they were they went with the image they saw at first glance which was that they were uneducated, godless, and genetically damaged from inbreeding. Their intentions originated positively but instead it ended up painting this subculture in a really poor light and was a lie to who these people actually are.

Since the world was giving these inaccurate portrayals of people of Appalachia living in poverty there has been other mass-produced media attention supporting these ideas. Movies like "Deliverance" were created and kept the deceiving ideas of what Appalachian life was about. It may be true that Appalachian Mountainous areas do live in poverty but the image of them being uneducated, angry, ungodly and inbred is by no means an accurate portrayal of their character which is what journalism started in the 1960s and what movies like "Deliverance" portray.

A photographer named Shelby Lee Adams tries to combat this negative stereotype with accurate images of what it is like to live in the mountains of Appalachia. Through analysis of the war on poverty, film portrayal of the Appalachian people, Shelby Lee Adams's images will be considered whether or not they portray a more accurate and less deceiving view on the Appalachian people and what their life is like.

"For experiment purposes, a stereotype has, in effect, been defined statistically as a collection of trait-names upon which a large percentage of people agree as appropriate for describing some class of individuals." Stereotypes are inaccurate by definition. They imply that ALL within a group contain certain characteristics and do not leave room for variety of people. In the article titled "Arriving at 'Truth' by definition: the case of Stereotype Inaccuracy" by Marlene Mackie, discusses that as people we "do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see." We allow our own brain to define and lie to us and

cloud what we actually see. There is very little personal experience that we have with other groups besides the one we reside. We allow television and news reports to act as proof in lieu of that direct experience.

Appalachia is a large area stretching across several states. These states include Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia. It is the area that the Appalachian Mountains span across. The economy of the people living in the mountains is farming to survive and coal mining for work. There are many controversial issues surrounding the coal mining industry. For it has environmental effect through use of explosives to tear down the mountains to uncover the coal. Specifically, the technique they used is Mountaintop removal, which is where they use the explosives to remove the mountain and uncover the coal. The most ethical issue involving those large corporations is how they get the land that they mine on. Those who work and live on the land, due to isolation, and especially older generations have the problem of being illiterate. There have been deals that involved them selling their land to large corporations without really realizing that is what the paperwork they were signing meant. Also the corporations would offer them a very large sum of money and make tenfold as much after they start digging up the land.

Deliverance was a film based on the stereotypes that were put in place by outsiders of the Appalachian culture. The simple plot is that a few men journey to go mountain climbing and rafting in the Appalachian Mountains and it is their fail on how they survive. Among many negative stereotypes there are two rapists and Lonnie who is supposedly inbred and mentally unstable because of it. The infamous taunt comes from this scene "I bet you can squeal like a pig" this is when suddenly the outsiders invading their culture becomes the victim and the film puts the blame on the Appalachian people that it is their

own fault they are like this and we should feel sorry for the outsider who only wanted to have a good time. The travelers end up killing one of the men that attacked them out of defense and they choose to hide the body. The aggressive inbred godless hillbilly is a common portrayal of Appalachian mountain people.³

Deliverance also displays a certain rite of passage for the travelers. They must conquer this land to prove them worthy. They must kill to survive and to protect each other this is sort of a man hood initiation process.⁴ This is very problematic because it is displaying that the Appalachian landscape is the savage land that needs to be fixed or concurred. They don't display this region as a community or even as a culture. They just display it as savages running wild doing what they want who they want to do it to.

An iconic scene in Deliverance is when the travelers come upon a broken down old gas station that would more resemble an automobile graveyard. One of the travelers has his guitar on him and starts to play a simple tune and the finds boy a boy with a banjo that mimics the sound he makes. This is the iconic dueling banjo scene the simple mimicking escalates into a sort of competition and the boy with the banjo ends up winning with the ability to play the banjo at an alarming speed. ⁵ The boy has some form of genetic disease. During the film they discuss it but it is ambiguous about what it is from. It does hint at the stereotype of the Appalachian hillbilly being inbred, which is what makes their genes supposedly damaged because of it.

The fact that the outsider has a guitar and the local Appalachian boy has a banjo does show a kind of social hierarchy. The banjo is known as a more primitive instrument that comes from African culture and the guitar is a more advanced instrument with more

³ Silver, Timothy. "The 'Deliverance' Factor." *Environmental History* 12.2 (2007): 369-71.

⁴ Lindborg, Henry. "James Dickey's Deliverance: The Ritual of Art." *The Southern Literary Journal* 2nd ser. 6 (1974).

⁵ *Deliverance*. Dir. John Boorman. Perf. Jon Voight, Burt Reynolds and Ned Beatty. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1972. DVD.

advanced sound. There are more strings on the guitar, which has 6 on the basic guitar, and the banjo has 4 strings so you are capable of having a more complex sound. ⁶ This shows that the boy then is primitive and less than the traveler even though he “won” the dueling stringed instrument competition.

Shelby Lee Adams was a child during the war on poverty days in the 1960s. After the Images from the war on poverty were released and newspaper articles were ran with this negative portrayal of the Appalachian people he made it his goal with his photographic work that he would right what the Journalists of the 1960s did wrong. During the war on poverty Adams actually lead photographers and journalists into the mountains to get to areas they would otherwise not be able to reach. The people living in the mountains actually told Adams that, that was not them that they are lying about their culture and they asked Adams never to bring those people back.

Adams grew up in Hazard, Kentucky. He lived just below what was called the “hollars” where the less fortunate of the Appalachian people lived in isolation because of the poverty. He traveled quite a bit with his father on business so he saw how those with money lived in places like California and New York. He spent a good portion of his grade school days living with his grandparents and going to school in the rural mountainous areas of Appalachia. He always thought of this area as home and the Appalachian people as his family. He ended up getting his bachelors and masters degree in fine art photography.⁷

During his collegiate years the knowledge of FSA photographers also known as the Farm Security Administration photographers had a huge impact on him. The FSA photographers were a group of photographers during the depression era that

⁶ Linn, Karen. "The "Elevation" of the Banjo in Late Nineteenth-Century America." *American Music* 8.4 (1990): 441-64.

⁷ Adams, Shelby Lee., James Enyeart, and Catherine Evans. *Salt & Truth*. Richmond, VA: Candela, 2011.

photographed the impact on the American people concentrating on the poverty stricken rural areas. There was the belief that social reform and education was the way to solve the problems at the time. So, many photographers documented the times and created a collective body of work that would document a specific time and place in America. The part that really would influence his work is that the FSA photographers also concentrated on keeping the dignity of their subjects. It was not supposed to be about showing the hardship but showing the strength and courage of the people. Adams was able to bring these ideas to his later work and this knowledge brought him back to his Appalachian heritage. Soon after learning about the FSA's work he would start photographing the Appalachian culture and its people.⁸

A quote from Adams that really discusses what he is trying to do is this: "Need can and should be implied, even strongly advocated – but without insulting the home, its occupants, or the culture." – Shelby Lee Adams.⁹ Adams talks about his work almost as though it is a joint effort between his models and himself. An example would be when he is photographing children he lets them wear what they want to wear and be with what they want to be with, such as a favorite animal, or toy. He asks their parents to step back and not micromanage how their children will look. He wants them to be natural and be who they are. He might take a dozen images of a child before they are happy and Adams is happy with the final product.¹⁰

He takes the same care in photographing adults as well. Every person that he photographs has the final say in the image. He never prints anything that they do not like.

⁸ Fogel, Jared, and Robert Stevens. "Images of the Great Depression: A Photographic Essay." *Organization of American Histories* No 16 Vol 1 (2001): 11-16.

⁹ Adams, Shelby Lee., James Enyeart, and Catherine Evans. *Salt & Truth*. Richmond, VA: Candela, 2011.

¹⁰ Adams, Shelby Lee., James Enyeart, and Catherine Evans. *Salt & Truth*. Richmond, VA: Candela, 2011.

Its kind of a back and forth thing with Adams. A lot of his images will never be printed or seen in the general public but he prints them and gives them to the people they are of as a form of community service and doing it just so they can have documentation of their life and their existence.

Other photographers and critics seem to either praise his work as an insightful new look at the Appalachian culture or they say that he is exploiting his own people and showing poverty because poverty sells. In the film “True Meaning of Pictures” there is a section that they are discussing the image of a young girl standing in a doorway and an older man in the background. The image itself is beautifully composed in a triangular composition, which Adam’s has always been fond of. There is a woman in the film discussing the photograph from the perspective that she is a relative of this young girl. The relative grew up in the Appalachian area but moved away for college and a “better” future. The first thing this woman says, “Why couldn’t he just make a pretty picture?” She states that this is a beautiful little girl but she is posed with her arms through the doorway which is just pointing out how poor she is and her surrounding being broken down and raggedy are just pointing out the poor Appalachian stereotype. Adams discusses the image by saying that yes she is a beautiful girl and that it is a beautifully composed photograph. The triangular composition makes the photograph interesting. The girl has this beautiful light coming in from the upper left that gives her an angelic presence and the light on the broken screen happened just at the right moment to really make this image pop.¹¹

Other critical evaluations are that he is “distorting distorted figures.” Speaking to Adams about this fact and asking why they were not true to scale and the images being a bit

¹¹ *True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams Appalachia*. Dir. Jennifer Baichwal. Perf. Shelby Lee Adams. 2002. DVD.

fish eyed he discussed how it was the only way to get the image. Most of his portraits taken indoors such as living rooms, dining rooms, bedrooms, and kitchens have a very unique look to them. You can see that he is using a wide angle or “fish eye” lens. This creates a “bubble” effect and distortion of the image. Technically speaking when you are inside of a small house or trailer living space you cannot back up to get everything in the image you want in the image. You need to resort to using a lens that has a wide enough angle to capture all the information you want in the picture, this angle creates the distortions that are seen in the final image.¹²

Shelby lee Adams had been photographing the Napier family for years. He met them and fell in love with them and them with him. They thought of each other as “kin.” He photographed them for years before ever really displaying the images. Prior to publishing his first book he went to Berthie who was the mother of the household and asked for a photo release. She refused to sign even though Adams’s photographs were displayed throughout her household and she trusted Adams. She displayed this reluctance due to being tricked into signing a bad contract and lost her land to a mining company because she is illiterate and was lied to. She believed all contracts must be bad and never to sign anything. After a local minister trusted by the family read the contract to her she signed the paperwork. Adams brought her the book and gave her a copy she was in tears and loved the book and it was a document of many years of her life that Adams had photographed. She spoke very highly of this book and she kept it safe in a chest at the foot of her bed.¹³

There is question from critical evaluations of the documentary authority of the images. In the film “True Meaning of Pictures” Shelby Lee Adams address the controversial

¹² “Shelby Lee Adams.” E-mail interview. 3 Mar. 2012.

¹³ Shelby Lee Adams. *Shelby Lee Adams*. Web. 21 Mar. 2012. <http://shelby-lee-adams.blogspot.com/>

Image “The Hog Slaughter. “The Hog Slaughter” is a black and white image with triangular compositions, which seems to be Adams’ trademark composition. The image is well composed with the tip of the frame, which is holding up a dead beheaded pig then downward with the Napier family and finally the head of the pig resting at their feet.

Looking at this image and thinking of it as though a journalist took the image and that this is a regular event for the family and an event that often happens would be a false image and it would be deceiving. Hog slaughters did happen in the Appalachian Mountains and they did happen in this fashion. The Napier family themselves were longtime friends of Adams and they agreed to do one and let Adams document it. The Napier family however was very poor and could not personally afford to purchase a pig. Shelby Lee Adams had the local minister donate one of his pigs for the production of this event and the documentation of it. With that being said this is a document of something that did happen that day but it is not a document of something that regularly happens for them and to say that of these people. The family talked about the day that they were able to do the hog slaughter and it was a really good day for them. The hog slaughter and the meat they were able to get from the hog were able to feed their family plus another for quite a while.¹⁴

In conclusion stereotyping is very problematic. Even if a large group of people believe another group is a certain way it will never be true about the group as a whole. The Appalachian subculture has been being stereotyped from every direction possible. Originally it was through positive origins in search of ways to help the poverty in the area through the war on poverty. Then as journalists and photographers found the area and the idea that poverty sells they began searching for the worst of the people to get the image to

¹⁴ *True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams Appalachia*. Dir. Jennifer Baichwal. Perf. Shelby Lee Adams. 2002. DVD.

reinforce these stereotyping ideas. Popular culture and in the Hollywood cinema they began to reinforce the ideas of the poverty and of a area that is not able to be helped with movies such as Deliverance.

We see that the ones who need to be photographing the area and the ideas of them are those who come from there. Photographers like Shelby Lee Adams who has the documentary authority because they come from there. Even though Adams has come from the Appalachian area there is controversy that he might be exploiting his own people. It is through the efforts of those to create a more truthful image that we need to listen to and learn.

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Deception, Truth and the Appalachian Stereotype

By Jillian Brown

Concise book of Lying

- ◆ “what ultimately concerns us as people living in a imperfect world is not the root causes of lies but the nature of any given lie—is it trivial or substantial?—the motive behind it—is it self-serving, is it intended to harm or be beneficial?—and its effects, both immediate and long-term.”

Stereotyping... why?

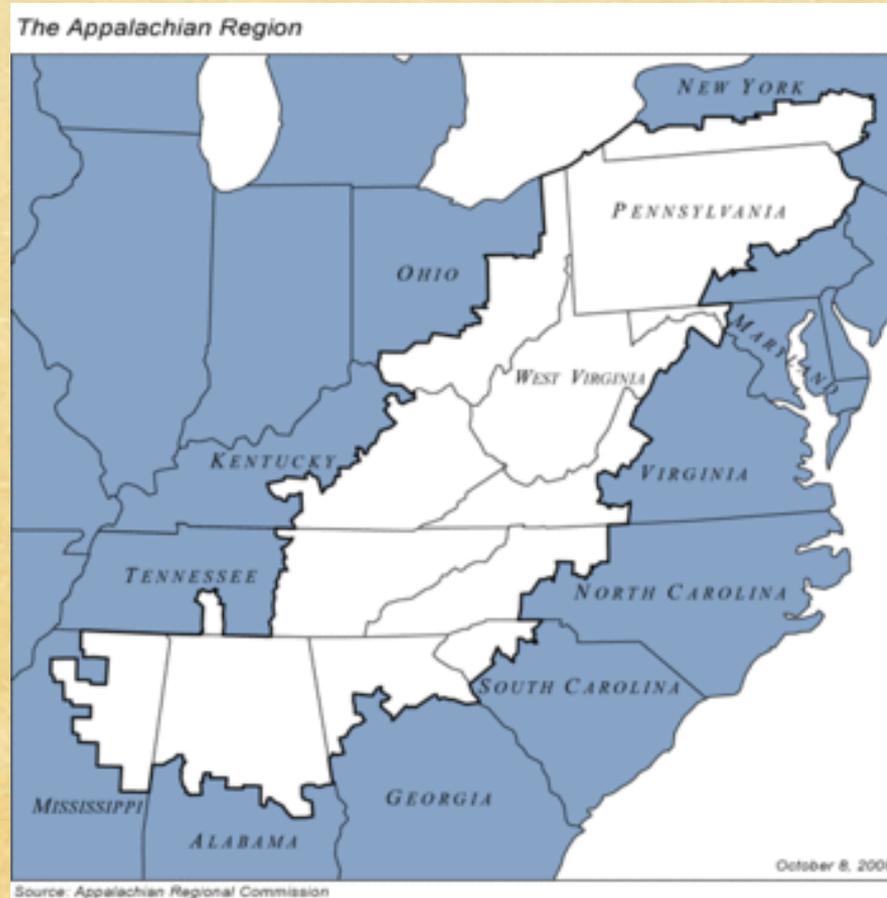
- ◆ Journalism....
- ◆ Media...
- ◆ Hollywood....

- ◆ Money and poverty sells.

What is a Stereotype

- ◆ “For experiment purposes, a stereotype has, in effect, been defined statistically as a collection of trait-names upon which a large percentage of people agree as appropriate for describing some class of individuals.”
- ◆ We don't see first, we define and then see
- ◆ We take medias portrayal of people as reality in lieu of first hand witnessing.

Appalachia



War on Poverty

- ◆ 1960s
- ◆ Campaign Started with John F. Kennedy
- ◆ Bring awareness to poverty stricken Appalachia
- ◆ Outsiders coming in was problematic

Deliverance

YouTube link to “Dueling Banjos” scene

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1tqxzWdKKu8>

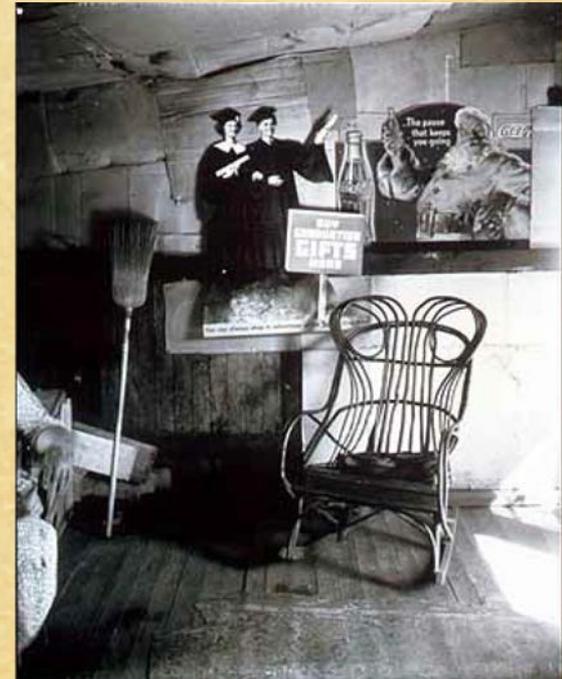
War on Poverty and Shelby Lee Adams



Shelby Lee Adams and FSA Influences



Shelby Lee Adams
Napiers living room

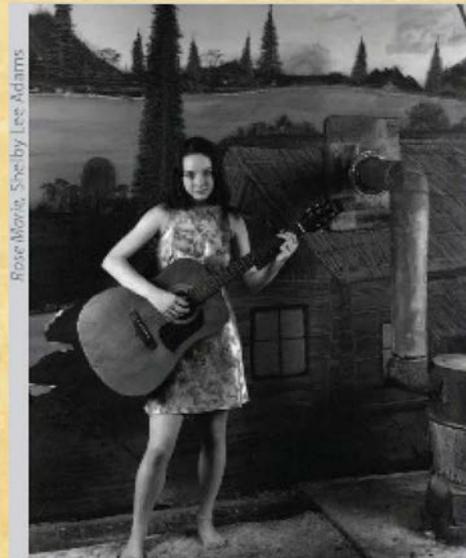


Walker Evans
Interior Detail, West Virginia Coal Miner's House

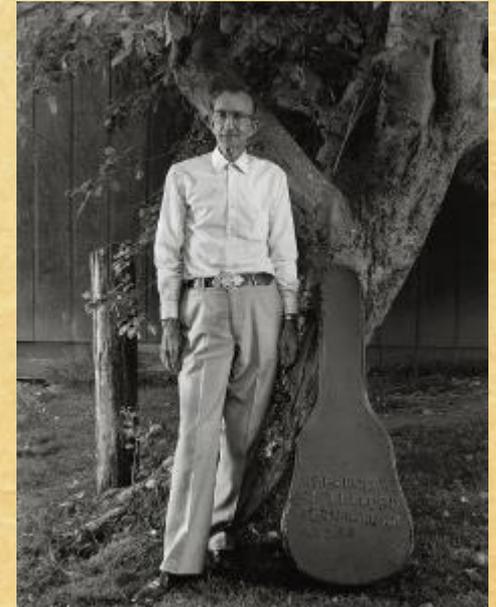
Adams

“Need can and should be implied, even strongly advocated – but without insulting the home, its occupants, or the culture.” – Shelby Lee Adams

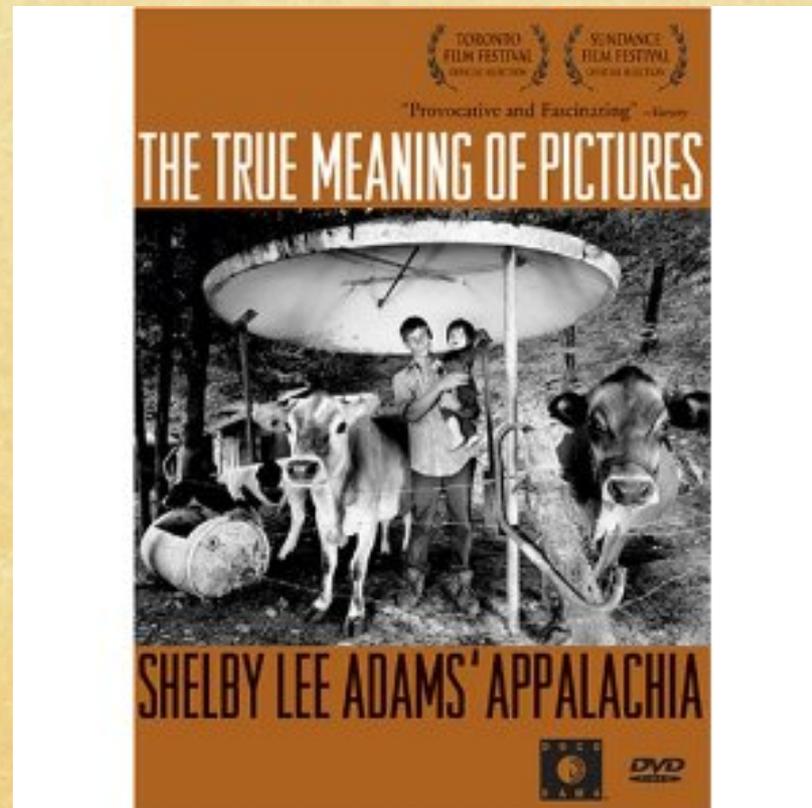
His photographer seem to be a joint effort



Rose Marie, Shelby Lee Adams



True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams' Appalachia





Distorting Distorted People



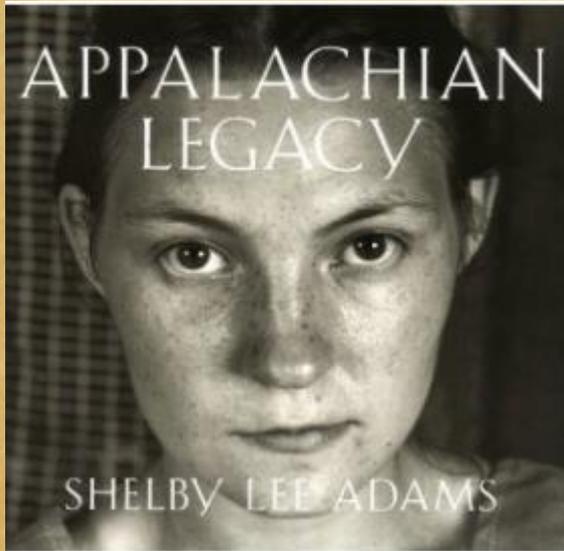
Napier Family



The Hog Slaughter



Was Adams Successful in his work? Does he bring “truth” to depicting his people?



15 of 16 people found the following review helpful

★★★★★ **Confusing** January 11, 2004

By [Bruce Hurley](#)

Format: Paperback

I grew up in rural Kentucky in an area where conditions were very similar to those in the Appalachian region. My first viewing of this book disturbed and angered me. I asked myself how someone could make a coffee table book out of subject matter which embarrassed me because of where I grew up! I knew and grew up with people no different than this and didn't like seeing what I was seeing. It was a bittersweet sensation. It was a paradox for me. On the one hand, I have beautiful memories of growing up in rural Kentucky. On the other hand, I've never been able to figure out how people could live like this. After reading the narrative, searching my soul, and talking with my wife, I realize that these people aren't dissatisfied with life! They live hard lives but still enjoy life just like my family did. We rarely had two dimes to rub together but I was always happy. Life was good. Now this book has a home on my coffee table and I look at it with fond memories and affection for the people who live there.