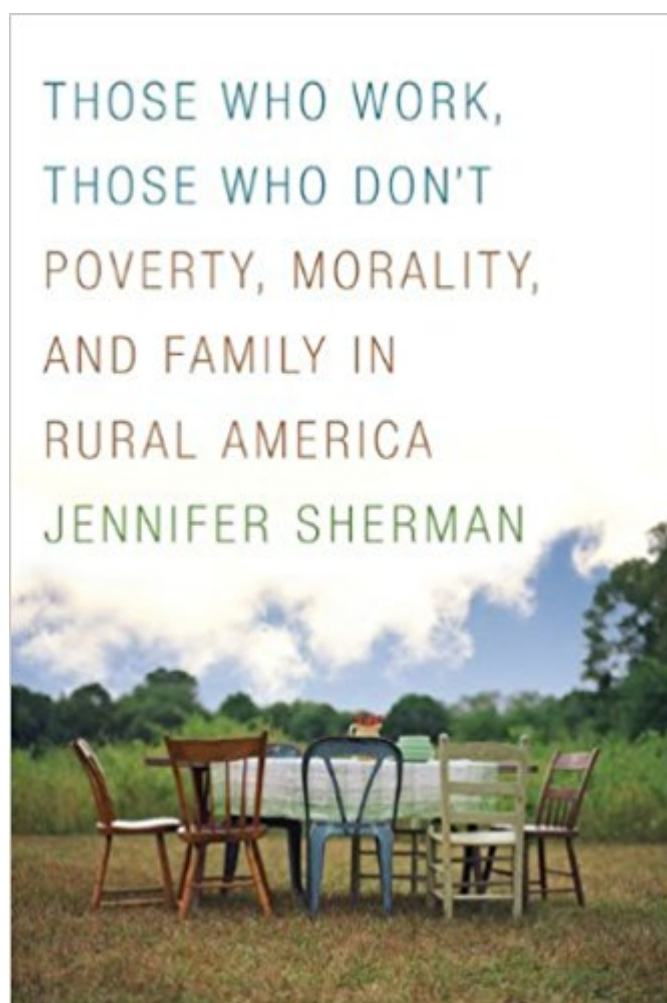


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Those Who Work, Those Who Don't: Poverty, Morality, And Family In Rural America



Synopsis

When the rural poor prioritize issues such as the right to bear arms, and disapprove of welfare despite their economic concerns, they are often dismissed as uneducated and backward by academics and political analysts. In *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't*, Jennifer Sherman offers a much-needed sympathetic understanding of poor rural Americans, persuasively arguing that the growing cultural significance of moral values is a reasonable and inevitable response to economic collapse and political powerlessness. *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't* is based on the intimate interviews and in-depth research Sherman conducted while spending a year living in "Golden Valley," a remote logging town in Northern California. Economically devastated by the 1990 ruling that listed the northern spotted owl as a threatened species, Golden Valley proved to be a rich case study for Sherman. She looks at how the members of the community coped with downward mobility caused by the loss of timber industry jobs and examines a wide range of reactions. She shows how substance abuse, domestic violence, and gender roles fluctuated under the town's economic strain. Compellingly written, shot through with honesty and empathy, *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't* is a rare firsthand account that studies the rural poor. As incomes erode and the American dream becomes more and more inaccessible, Sherman reveals that moral values and practices become a way for the poor to gain status and maintain a sense of dignity in the face of economic ruin.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Jennifer Sherman is assistant professor of sociology at Washington State University.

The content isn't the most upbeat, however it definitely has great insight and perspective into lifestyles that many don't know or understand. It was a quick read and interesting peak into a mindset/mentality that is foreign to most.

Great book with a great perspective.

I enjoyed this book a lot. It did a good job exploring the culture of rural America, and had a lot of interviews and direct quotes to clearly illustrate what Sherman was getting at. It was a little too academic, did not have a great flow, and at times redundant. Still, if you're interested in rural sociology it's one of the better books I've read. It primarily focuses on a small logging town in California, but really speaks to the issues of any number of towns built around dying, extraction-based industries.

I read an article somewhere recommending that anyone who wanted to understand Trump's rural voting base should read this book. It was genuinely eye-opening for a big-city liberal.

Jennifer Sherman's incredible research on a poor rural community affected by the shutdown of the logging industry in Northern California reads like a novel. As a Ph.D student when she lived among these rural poor, she was obviously very different in background, experience and outlook from her subjects yet she managed to get them to open up to her and reveal their values as well as the day-to-day realities of their lives. She found that this group of people used their version of morality as a way to mark "class" distinctions among them despite the common poverty or near poverty of just about everyone in the community. Their sense of place and attachment to both the land and the people of Golden Valley helped them to reshape their worldview so that they could continue to live where they felt at home despite lack of employment and other opportunities for their families. Being a city person myself, I found it fascinating to get such a close look at Americans who are so different from me. Sherman's explanations of how knowledge of this and other groups of rural poor could help government understand their needs as well as their political leanings shows just how valuable this research can be for the country.

This is a brilliant book in modest garb, an exemplary piece of sociology published in 2009 that is wholly relevant in 2017. Sherman put in the time and hard work necessary to understand the subtle

social dynamics at play in an impoverished rural community in northern California, and she emerged with acute insights that are significant far beyond that circumscribed geography. She moves smoothly from the particularities of one community to an assessment of how common policy approaches to alleviating poverty are poorly matched to residents' needs and worldviews. She raps both Republicans and Democrats for failing to understand the residents of communities like the one she studied, and she suggests approaches to policy that could be more effective. The 2016 election results confirm her insights.

This book seems to give some deep insights into poor rural communities, the reasons that folks stay in these communities, and the ways that they cope with the lack of opportunities. (I say 'seems' because, hey, I have no way of vetting these insights, other than my limited experiences with the rural South, but they pass the smell test.) If accurate, this is important information to have as we try to ensure that all Americans have a chance at success and happiness. It's a tough read, though, as the writing is repetitive, overly formal, and clunky. The book probably could've been half the length and made the same points and included the same testimony from the residents. Some personal reflections from the author would've been welcome -- the tone of this is fine for a dissertation, but it could've been so much more and reached so many more people. Maybe future books from the author can be more personal (post-tenure?).

Sociologist Jennifer Sherman lived in the (pseudonymous) town of "Golden Valley" in Northern California for a year, working as an anthropologist to study the local way of life and tell the stories of some of the residents. The result is an unusual look at rural existence in a little down-and-out former lumber mill town. Sherman has performed a significant service in helping us urbanites understand what life is like in at least one such place. I only wish her book had been longer and her report wider ranging. Ms. Sherman, if you are reading this, please accept my plea that you write another volume about "Golden Valley," or maybe some other rural community. Your book's subject is a much-neglected, much-needed aspect of US history and culture.

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