

Hard Times; an Oral History of the Great Depression Study Guide

**Hard Times; an Oral History of the Great Depression
by Studs Terkel**

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Plot Summary

Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression by Studs Terkel is a panoramic chronicle of the 1930's, comprised entirely of interviews. It provides a top to bottom vision of the Depression, from the establishment that coped with the crisis to the hustlers and hobos that scraped by through it. Written in the late 1960's, the book also includes interviews with younger people. In his prologue, Terkel explains that the time has come to speak to the ignorant young about catastrophe.

The first of *Hard Times'* five books gives an overview of the Depression. It begins discussing the veterans' Bonus March in Washington that put the nail in the coffin of the Hoover administration. On one hand, it deals with the traveling culture of hobos and itinerants and the means by which families survived. On the other hand, in the chapter *The Big Money*, Terkel shows how the affluent dealt with the Crash of '29. The book ends with two chapters that discuss the rise of labor unions in the United States.

Book 2 focuses on the means Americans used in the 1930's to survive the Depressions' depredations. This book includes inspiring tales of sheltered persons who lose nearly everything and find their humanity. It also profile hustlers, con men, and bootleggers who survived by any means necessary. Terkel focuses on two groups of Americans that were particularly vulnerable: coal miners and farmers. In these sections he explores how their pain was alleviated to some extent by unions and government intervention, respectively.

The establishment of the Depression is the focus of Book 3 of *Hard Times*. Terkel begins by interviewing power players and brain trusters of Roosevelt's New Deal. He goes on to discuss other major players in the political situation of the time: Huey Long, Dr. Townsend, and Alf Landon specifically. He also interviews players in the leftist movements of the time: Communists, Catholic workers, Wobblies and the like. In this book, Terkel seems to refute the notion that a socialist revolution was brewing in America.

The brief Book 4 concerns the approach of World War Two and its effects in ending the Great Depression.

In the final book, Terkel brings his gaze sharply to the way people survived personally. We learn of unemployment councils that helped evicted persons, lawyers and judges that bent laws to ease poor peoples' pain, and public servants that faced public anger and accusations of Communist sympathy to help communities. Terkel talks to artists of the Federal Arts Project. He ends the book speaking to people of individualism and self-determination. He seems to ask whether a person could scrape by on his or her own.

Throughout the book Terkel juxtaposes the wounded voices of Depression survivors with the more confused words of the young. His epilogue does just this: a young man wonders what wound the hard times left on his father. An older woman wonders if the children of the sixties will enact the change her generation could not.



A Personal Memoir (and Parenthetical Comment)

A Personal Memoir (and Parenthetical Comment) Summary and Analysis

In *A Personal Memoir*—a prologue of sorts—Studs Terkel explains his reason for conducting the interviews of this book: those that lived through the Depression are loath to speak of it. For this purpose, he includes the voices of younger people who know little of the hard times.

Terkel tells his own story of the Depression. He is young and knows nothing of the Crash. All he notices is that rooms in his parents' hotel are suddenly going vacant. Long term guests are—to their deep shame—losing work. Terkel attends the University of Chicago at this time. He learns about the blues and black culture. He eventually joins the Writer's Project of the WPA. Later he joins the fight to unionize newspapers.



Book 1: The March, The Song, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band

Book 1: The March, The Song, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band Summary and Analysis

The March concerns the Bonus March of 1932, in which veterans of the first World War protest in Washington for their delayed bonuses. Jim Sheridan is not a veteran, but having heard about the march from a friend he decides to join in support. Sheridan rides with a group of vets in a boxcar. En route, one of the vets' children dies of smoke inhalation. Arriving in DC, he finds large shanty-towns—Hoovervilles—set up throughout town, inhabited by vets. They are squatting in abandoned office flats. Eventually, Hoover sends MacArthur himself—aided by a young Dwight Eisenhower—to disperse the crowds. Over the next couple days, the veterans are assailed with guns, bayonets bludgeons, tear gas, and the shanties are burned. Terkel also includes interviews with a government employee and a vet who recall the march. The vet, in particular, holds no animosity to the soldiers who were doing their jobs.

The Song is an interview with E.Y. (Yip) Harburg, who wrote "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" He recalls working in the financial sector before the Crash. After he loses everything, his friend Ira Gershwin recommends he write tunes. His song, he believes, reflects the anger of those who worked for America only to be left with nothing. They who thought their free market system was foolproof suffered the most when it failed.

Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band involves interviews with younger folks, varied in their understanding of the Depression. Lily, Rob and Buck are in their late teens, and they recall in garbled detail the stories their grandmother would tell. Diane, a young journalist, resents the older generation's use of the Depression as a weapon to undermine her experience. She thinks they reaped what they sowed in the twenties. Most vivid are Marshall and Steve, two young intellectuals. They reflect at length on the fear that the Depression engendered and how that fear is still an entrenched part of American life. This fear, they say, is what their generation is protesting.



Book 1: Hard Travelin'

Book 1: Hard Travelin' Summary and Analysis

Hard Travelin' is concerned with the itinerant lifestyle that developed among laborers and hobos in the Depression. It begins with an interview with Ed Paulson, who takes to the road at 14. When he is in his early twenties, he becomes a supporter of Upton Sinclair's campaign for governor, a campaign that will figure prominently in the book. During this time, he educates himself at the library. Paulson travels to Kansas City, where he is fired upon by railway cops. Soon thereafter, he is taken to one of the newly formed Transient Camps, where he is given food and a decent shelter. From there, he becomes a social worker with the National Youth Association. He considers this his salvation, keeping him out of prison.

In this chapter, Terkel also interviews Frank Czerwonka, whose mother ran a speakeasy during the Depression. After the repeal of Prohibition, alcohol becomes markedly less lucrative, and Czerwonka takes to the rails. He becomes a hobo.

Emma Tiller, Kitty McCulloch and the critic Pauline Kael describe the hobos who came by their houses in the thirties. No one has much, but folks with houses give the hobos what little they can to keep the men in fresh clothes and food. Kitty's daughter recalls the marks hobos would put on houses to tell each other which people would help them.

One of the most vivid figures in the book, Peggy Terry, appears in Hard Travelin'. She is a self-styled spokesperson for Southern whites. She states over and over that the world today teaches Americans that poverty is a personal failing. She recalls with fierce defiance that the Depression brought people together through collective want. Most touchingly, Terry recalls how her deeply ingrained racism melted away in the thirties. She reflects a sentiment stated over and over throughout Terkel's interviews: if the Depression happened today, there would be violence everywhere.

Terkel interviews the famed labor organizer Cesar Chavez in this chapter. Chavez recalls his father losing their farm to the bank when it refused to approve a loan. He relates stories of widespread striking that never yielded anything but continued out of necessity. He also speaks to the enduring racism against Mexicans that continued throughout the thirties.

The final interview of this chapter is with a car dealer named Blackie Gold. He, like most of the interviewees, speaks to an enduring sense of gratefulness for his present success. Gold grows up in an orphanage and eventually goes to work for the Civilian Conservation Corps. There he helps maintain national forests and learns a military-style discipline that serves him the rest of his life. Unlike many interviewees, Gold has no problem with the current hippie-trend that has consumed the national consciousness.



Book 1: The Big Money, Man and Boy

Book 1: The Big Money, Man and Boy Summary and Analysis

In *The Big Money*, Terkel turns his attention to the haves of this era. He begins with William Benton, who founds the advertising firm Lord and Thomas in 1929. He is one of the first persons to recognize the potential for selling products on the radio. The unprecedented success he experiences renders him largely oblivious to the widespread suffering of the Depression. Benton goes on to manage both Muzak and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Arthur Robinson is a former war correspondent and successful New York businessman. He has many friends who are ruined during the Depression, many who take their own lives. Robinson expounds on the rigged casino that Wall Street became in the twenties. Over and over, he mentions friends who say there is no point in having money if you are not using it to make more money. After the Crash, the Street is dead. Robinson's friends beg him for seed cash, but he can rarely afford to give it to them. He recalls days he spends with thousands of dollars in his sock while the banks are closed by the government. In several interviews, this theme of an investment and speculation community run rampant in the twenties is repeated.

These stories are juxtaposed with Jimmy McPartland's. Partland is a jazz musician, and he recalls the feast and famine lifestyle that entailed. He tells stories of friends lending him hundreds when they were flush on a job and he was out of work. Weeks later the tables would turn, but nobody makes a big deal of it. Partland reiterates throughout the importance of doing a job, or feeling useful. He gives Roosevelt credit for making this a priority.

Martin De Vries is a dissenting voice as well, a former investment banker who despises Roosevelt for what he sees as an attack on free enterprise.

The chapter ends with Dr. David J. Rossman, a psychoanalyst during the thirties. He recalls intense anxiety from his clients, but he admits that his profession did not acknowledge outside forces as much in analysis. Rossman, in the end, argues that people in the modern world expect too much of the government; they do not take personal responsibility for their own lives.

The boy in *Man and Boy* is Alonso Mosely, a VISTA worker. He knows nothing about the Depression except what was taught him in school. The man is Clifford Burke, who says that that the black man could survive the Depression because his wife was more supportive than the white man's wife.

Book 1: God Bless' the Child

Book 1: God Bless' the Child Summary and Analysis

This Chapter deals with how people cobbled together a living in the thirties. It begins with the interview of Jane Yoder of Evanston, IL. She recalls the deprivation of this time, when Karo soup and a new sweater was an absurd luxury. Her son Tom finds it absurd that only forty years ago this was the case.

A recurring theme in this chapter is the moment people who were younger realized a major crisis had hit. Robin Langston recalls the lights going out in his house. Daisy Singer recalls family meetings and one of her favorite parks turning into a shantytown. Dynamite Garland and Phyllis Mortimer had to move.

Another theme of this chapter is the sudden inversion of social mores. For example, Robin Langston, a black man whose father owned a restaurant in the thirties, recalls white folks hocking their radios to his father. He recalls that his family—once looked down upon—never bought on credit and was always in the best financial shape. Phyllis Mortimer, meanwhile, is brought up in an upper-crust Connecticut family and must move west when they lose all their money. She discovers a gift as a chorus diver in Hollywood musicals. Her snobbish brother is embarrassed, but for the first time Phyllis feels accomplished.

Slim Collier expounds on a major theme of the book: the psychological effect joblessness has on able men. His Anglo-Irish father is laid off from his tool-and-die job and has to resort to odd jobs. At this time, going on relief even in desperate circumstances is considered a sign of weakness. Collier recalls his father's obstinacy, which drives Slim from home to work as an itinerant farmer.



Book 1: Bonnie Laboring Boy, Three Strikes

Book 1: Bonnie Laboring Boy, Three Strikes Summary and Analysis

Bonnie Laboring Boy focuses on the push to organize workers during the Depression. He begins the chapter with the interview of Larry Van Dusen, who provides an overview of the life of an organizer, constantly hunted by police and hired muscle. The violent reaction to attempts at organizing recurs throughout the chapter.

Perhaps the most brutal depiction comes in Jose Yglesias's description of the cigar rollers strikes of this period. The rollers intentionally call wildcat strikes at times when the tobacco leaves will dry out. Old women attack other old women who are scabbing. This passage also depicts the movement to replace the conservative—and thus toothless—American Federation of Labor with the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

In this section, we first learn in detail about the Bob La Follette movement. La Follette, a Wisconsin governor and republican, ran for President as a Progressive candidate, pressing for workers' rights. Hank Oettinger speaks of his fathers' dedication to La Follette's campaign. This narrative takes an odd twist as Oettinger's father later turns to the radio addresses of Father Coughlin, an early supporter of New Deal programs who later becomes a fascist apologist.

Perhaps the most affecting story of this chapter is E.D. Nixon's description of the Sleeping Car Porters' push to unionize. This narrative unites two themes of Terkel's book—exploitation of the worker and exploitation of black Americans. The porters face deeper opposition because they are almost universally black. Fewer take their part when they are summarily fired under false pretense.

Finally, Gordon Baxter, a corporate attorney, speaks of management's reaction to the new call for worker's rights, specifically regarding the Wagner Act. This legislation protected the right of workers to organize by making it illegal for employers to punish workers for trying to start a union. Baxter tells an eerily comic story of an attempt on his part to destroy a stack of dossiers about agitators in a client's factory.

Three Strikes—true to its title—tells the story of three major strikes in the rust belt. The first is the sit-down at the Flint Ford plant. The sit-in is intended to deprive management of the ability to bring in scab labor. This means that organizers have to take care that the plant is well-maintained during the strike. A miniature world develops around the strike, with soup kitchens feeding the workers and locals coming by to deliver news. As told by striker Bob Stinson, the sit-in takes a psychological toll on men fearing reprisal and the loss of their income. Above all of this is Michigan governor Frank Murphy, seen



as weak-willed by many for not sending in troops but viewed as a union sympathizer by auto workers. In the end, the workers get a CIO contract.

The Battle of Detroit is the second strike of the chapter, in which the Ford plants of Detroit, Hamtramck, and Dearborn are shut down. The battle itself derives from the "service department," a group of armed thugs employed by the automaker. The organizers shut down the highways around the area to coerce Governor Murphy to force Ford management not to bring in scabs. Recurrent in this is Ford's desire to work with the AFL rather than the more radical CIO. Again, eventually the workers get a CIO union.

The last of the three strikes is Memorial Day, 1937. Steel workers are picketing Republic Steel in Chicago's south side. Authorities open fire on them and Dr. Lewis Andreas treats the wounded and dead. He testifies later that most were fired on from behind. Andreas becomes a vocal supporter of unionization in America, providing free medical care to strikers. He is a firm believer in free health care for everyone.



Book 2: Old Families, Member of the Chorus, High Life

Book 2: Old Families, Member of the Chorus, High Life Summary and Analysis

Old Families deals with folks who came from money. These interviews vary between deeply inspiring stories of people finding their humanity through hardship to those who seem strangely aloof to the realities of 1930's America.

In the former category is the story of Diana Morgan, a self-acknowledged Southern belle who, after her family's decline, goes to work in a relief office in North Carolina. There she becomes comfortable dealing with the poor and understands the world more fully. She weeps as she recalls interviewing her former maid to put her on relief. From there, Morgan recalls going to work for the Rural Rehabilitation program in the New Deal. To this day, she cannot understand people who choose not to acknowledge the poverty around them.

In the latter category is Mrs. Winston Roberts of Chicago, who maintains her life—maid and all—by selling handcrafted clothes to her friends. At the end of her interview, Roberts sums up her Depression experience: "I became more serious-minded. But I never did get interested in the sufferings of the world." (180)

Member of the Chorus is the interview of Win Stracke, a Chicago balladeer. During the Depression, Stracke sang in the most prestigious clubs, but he often found himself without work because of his left-leaning views.

High Life deals with the seedy and ebullient life of the Depression. It focuses on bootleggers, songwriters, gangsters and the like. The chapter begins with Sally Rand, a dancer who in the hard times develops a now-famous burlesque in which she dances nude with two large fans obscuring. Rand becomes a sensation, especially after she invades the decadent Beaux Arts ball on horseback as Lady Godiva. The act is at once titillating and defiant, chastising the wealthy in times of great poverty. Rand goes on to become a fixture at Chicago's Century of Progress.

The other dominant interview of the chapter is Doc Graham, an old Chicago gangster. Cantankerous and still vicious, Graham ruminates on the essential elegance of a good con man. He considers himself the best. Graham recalls the lionization of Machine Gun Kelly and John Dillinger as crusaders against the powers that be. Perhaps most compelling about Graham is the way in which he detests Franklin Roosevelt, whom he considers a despot and cheap con. From Graham's point of view, the only good thing Roosevelt did was repeal Prohibition.



One of the most haunting interviews of *Hard Times* is Jerome Zerbe, an effete New York photographer. Zerbe developed the art of celebrity photography and was paid well for it. He expounds at length about the innate beauty of 1930's stars and starlets. What is most disturbing about the interview is that Zerbe seems to have completely divorced his experience from the suffering in America during this time. Indeed, he closes his section with the declaration that it was "a glamorous, glittering moment." (217) Terkel, as he often does, juxtaposes Zerbe with a younger person, Judy. Judy asserts defiantly that the pain of the Depression is a direct result of the over-consumption of America at the time.



Book 2: At the Clinic, Sixteen Ton, The Farmer Is the Man, Editor and Publisher

Book 2: At the Clinic, Sixteen Ton, The Farmer Is the Man, Editor and Publisher Summary and Analysis

In this chapter, Dr. Nathan Ackerman—a psychiatrist—explains how during the Depression, analysis was not concerned with social situations. As such, people were complaining of anxiety and chronic sadness, paying large sums for diagnosis, and analysts were not connecting the anxiety with the patient's social precariousness.

Sixteen Ton is focused on the campaign to organize and regulate the coal mining industry. Right from the beginning, with the interview of Buddy Blankenship, the reader is informed that miners are living in Depression circumstances long before the thirties. The Company owns entire towns, pays barely subsistence wages, and it pays in company vouchers to be used in company-owned stores. The 1930's desolation brings the move to organize to the Appalachian coal country, leading to an all-out war with Company thugs in Blankenship's county.

Aaron Barkham speaks to an oddity of Appalachian society at this time: the tenuous relationship between the Ku Klux Klan and the unions. Both want a fair wage and both want to fight the coal companies. At this time, indeed, there are Appalachian chapters of the Klan with black members. Together, they manage to set up United Mine Worker locals throughout the area.

The other recurring topic of this chapter is the horrid safety conditions of the mines. Dust collects and the company will not slow production to hose down the shafts, leading to explosions. Small cracks in mine walls lead to collapses, killing hundreds of miners at a time.

This chapter focuses on the plight of the American farmer in the Midwest. The problems that beset corn farmers in particular—and the solutions to those problems—would be ironically funny were it not for the pain inchoate in them. As explained early by Iowa farmer Harry Terrell, the price of corn dropped so low with the farmer could not make a living. To get the price up, farmers organized to stop corn deliveries, depleting the supply. Terrell gives credit to Henry Wallace, Roosevelt's secretary of agriculture and later vice president, who opened a national granary to buy and store excess corn at cost.

Later interviewees in the chapter describe the dark consequences of these price fluctuations. Corn farmers, when the corn price was low, bought many pigs to feed the corn to and slaughter. When the corn price went up, they could not afford to feed the pigs, and the government—fearing a drop in pork prices—bought up the pigs and killed them.



Several interviewees describe an incident in Iowa in which a judge—notorious in the area for foreclosing on farms at the drop of a hat—was tarred and feathered by an angry mob. Some say he was strung up on a tree and nearly hanged by the mob. Orrin Kelly of Le Mars, Iowa, tells of being rounded up with scores of farmers accused of taking part in the near-lynching. He was never brought to trial.

Terkel ends the chapter with the sad stories of Emma Tiller, a black woman, and Sumio Nichi, a Japanese American. Tiller describes a group of armed men who had to occupy a relief house in order to ensure the black population was given proper food. Nichi describes his farm before he was sent to an interment camp. Later he joined military intelligence and returned to California to find his farm occupied by a white family.

Terkel turns his focus to the press in *Editor and Publish*. He begins locally with Fred Sweet, the one-time editor of a town paper in central Ohio that went broke because he would not charge foreclosed farmers to post their auctions.

Terkel then juxtaposes two ideological opposites. W.D. Maxwell worked for the center-right Chicago Tribune which lambasted New Deal legislation, especially the WPA. Carey McWilliams, editor of the *Nation*, argues that greed created the Depression but only the poor and marginalized suffered. He supported the candidacy of Upton Sinclair in the mid-1930's.



Book 3: Concerning the New Deal, An Unreconstructed Populist, Peroration

Book 3: Concerning the New Deal, An Unreconstructed Populist, Peroration Summary and Analysis

The third book of *Hard Times* is concerned with the establishment of the 1930's. *Concerning the New Deal* looks at in the Roosevelt administration. Terkel interviews people in and around the administration and covers a large succession of events, from planned farm communities to the Bank Holiday.

The Bank Holiday is covered at the beginning of the chapter with Gardiner Means, who works under Henry Wallace. The Holiday was intended exclusively as a salve to prevent a run on failing banks. By closing them down and allowing the healthy ones to reopen in a couple days, the Roosevelt administration tacitly guaranteed people's savings. Means points out that *laissez-faire* economic policy basically ended with the Crash; government committed to take part in the process.

C.B. (Beanie) Baldwin, another aid to Baldwin, speaks of the Rural Rehabilitation Division. The most controversial component of this was the Resettlement Administration, which created combined farm and manufacturing camps outside of major cities and resettled unemployed workers and farms. To opponents this reeked of Stalinist collectivism, but the inhabitants viewed them as a stepping stone to owning their own farms. The camps, oddly, became an empowering influence, but they were all closed after Roosevelt's death.

This reflects the fractious nature of the New Deal coalition, which consisted of fiscally conservative leaders and young idealist who were given immense power. Raymond Moley, a well-regarded aid to Roosevelt, speaks of the influences—be they leftist brain-trusters or Huey Long—that moved the administration ever leftward. James Farley, the postmaster general, relates the two Roosevelt decisions that alienated much of his initial cabinet: packing the Supreme Court with political allies and choosing to run for a third term. As time went on, Farley states, Roosevelt grew more demagogic, refusing to cede any executive authority. Still, just about all the administration insiders agree he was the only man who could save the US economy.

The paradox of the Roosevelt administration is perhaps best expressed by former Fed board member (and Nixon Secretary of the Treasury) David Kennedy. He states that the administration was a convocation of big egos and sharp minds. This had its downside in that there was always some favorite in the cabinet: Morgenthau and Ickes, for example. There was a chaos to decision-making and a recklessness. Kennedy gives Roosevelt credit for stemming the misery of the Depression, but he rejects the notion that the



President saved America. Most of the programs, in Kennedy's opinion, were stop-gaps to keep the economy alive, and their lasting influence is a sense of entitlement in the American psyche.

Also mentioned in this section is the conscious decision made by government officials to document the realities of the Depression from the point of view of migrant workers, leading to such famous pieces as the film *The River* and the haunting portrait photos of Dorothea Lange.

The Unreconstructed Populist of this Chapter is Texas Congressman C. Wright Patman. A self-professed country boy and man of the people, he was the driving force behind the Bonus legislation promised World War One veterans. He pressed for the impeachment of Hoover's Treasury Secretary for stopping payment of the bonus. In discussing the enemies he made in the US Congress, Patman mentions General Smedley Butler, who reported to Congress an attempt by fascist sympathizers to stage a coup. None of the conspirators faced charges.

Peroration is an interview with Colonel Hamilton Fish, a conservative former Congressman. His interview is in direct juxtaposition to Patman's. Fish was a supporter of the red-baiting Martin Dies, a man convinced the agents of the New Deal were communists. He passed legislation establishing the House Un-American Activities Committee. He makes clear throughout the interview that he never considered Roosevelt or his wife to be communists. Fish fervently opposes the US entering World War Two.



Book 3: Scarlet Banners and Novenas, The Doctor, Huey and Mr. Smith, The Circuit Rider, The Gentleman from Kansas, A View of the Woods, Campus Life

Book 3: Scarlet Banners and Novenas, The Doctor, Huey and Mr. Smith, The Circuit Rider, The Gentleman from Kansas, A View of the Woods, Campus Life Summary and Analysis

Scarlet Banners and Novenas is concerned with the left-wing political movements of the thirties. It begins with the interview of a William Patterson, a black lawyer who becomes engaged in the American Communist Party during the Depression, even studying in the USSR. Patterson recalls how essential the Communists were in this time, both as advocates for the poor and marginalized—especially minorities—and as community organizers.

Max Shachtman, a doctrinaire Trotskyite, recalled the unprecedented popularity the Communists had during Hoover, when capitalism seemed doomed. In his interview, Shachtman charts the decline of the Party and the moderation of the American Left. Communists, he states, lost credibility when they supported the Hitler-Stalin Pact. The New Deal saved capitalism and formed a union between the far left and the Democratic Party. Shachtman now laments the toothlessness of progressive America.

Terkel also covers two other left organizations. The legendary founder of the Catholic Worker, Dorothy Day recalls the tenuous association her organization had with the atheist Communist Party. Fred Thompson speaks of the Industrial Workers of the World (Wobblies), who advocated for an end to the wage system in America and constantly fended off charges of being Communists.

This chapter deals with three public figures whose grassroots movements shook the establishment: Dr. Francis Townsend, Huey Long, and Gerald L. K. Smith. Dr. Townsend's grassroots movement worked from a simple premise. If younger Americans who were not struggling contributed money to a fund for the elderly, the latter would be able to afford basic necessities and medical care. He went from town to town setting up such funds. Many accused him of stealing the money—a scurrilous rumor—but his ideas gave rise to Social Security.



Huey Long, the demagogic governor of Louisiana, advocated the redistribution of wealth to poor farmers. His populist message made him a household name. His son, Russell, recalls nights when his father would give a speech and every radio in Baton Rouge was tuned to it. Long would have run as a progressive candidate for President if he had not been assassinated in 1935.

His second in command, Gerald Smith, took over Long's tenuous coalition, which soon became riddled with corruption. Smith is interviewed by Terkel and recalls the maelstrom that followed Long's murder. He became the third populist voice in the public dialogue along with Dr. Townsend and Father Coughlin. Like Coughlin, too, Smith is famous for fomenting anti-Semitic sentiment along with his man-of-the-people message.

The Circuit Rider is an interview with the Tennessee native Claude Williams, who becomes a traveling preacher in the South. He uses the Bible as a textbook for social change, a sermon he delivers with fiery language. He argues for unionizing and empowerment for marginalized people, a message that loses him more than one congregation.

The Gentleman from Kansas is Alf Landon, the 1936 Republican candidate for President who was trounced by Franklin Roosevelt. The interview is bookended by notes by Terkel indicating how few people remember him. Landon himself is good-natured and seemingly unaffected by his poor showing in the election. Landon discusses how although he did not oppose much of Roosevelt's New Deal legislation, he became emblematic to opposition. Right-wing politicians spoke to him as though he were a demagogue for deregulation. Landon makes clear throughout that he did not think the country was in peril under President Roosevelt.

In this chapter, historian Christopher Lasch offers a high-level explanation of the social reality of the Great Depression. From his standpoint—both vocationally and as someone who lived through it—revolution was never a serious possibility, even in the darkest days. America was never going to be a socialist country, and Roosevelt's New Deal was created to preserve the capitalist system. As such, the Depression was a missed opportunity for the American Left.

Terkel also interviews business executive Robert A. Baird and his two sons. Baird recalls the social upheaval in Michigan as the auto industry foundered during the Depression. His elder son Peter—a member of the domestic terrorist group the Weathermen—considers his father's Depression lessons quaint and naïve. Terkel discusses the effect of the Depression on university campuses in this chapter. Speaking with former students—including film critic Pauline Kael—he uncovers the friction that existed. Scholarship students gravitated toward leftist organizations, and wealthier students gravitated toward fraternities, which served as de facto strike busters during student protests. Robert Gard, now a professor of theatre, relates stories of students living in their cars and all-but-starving over the course of semesters.



Book 4: Merely Passing Through, Three o'Clock in the Morning, A Cable

Book 4: Merely Passing Through, Three o'Clock in the Morning, A Cable Summary and Analysis

This chapter concerns people that were not as overtly affected by the Depression. One man never bought anything on credit; so as prices dropped he bought a Studebaker and began investing in new businesses. Most affecting in the chapter is Scoop Lankford, who was in a federal prison in the thirties. He acknowledges that during the Great Depression, conditions inside worsened, but he feels that the walls essentially shielded prisoners from the worst of the degradation.

In this chapter, Terkel interviews the inebriated journalist Wilbur Kane, who recalls the joyous night when his leftist family sat in a room with a group of Nazi sympathizers and listened to Joe Louis defeat the German boxer Max Schmeling. By the end of the interview, the belligerent Kane is cursing Roosevelt for his unwillingness to confront Hitler until after Pearl Harbor.

The titular cable of this chapter was sent by the actress Myrna Loy to the Czech dissident Jan Masaryk. She wished to thank him for his courage in speaking out against the Nazi occupiers. As a result of her public support for anti-fascist and leftist causes, Loy was constantly chastised by producers and film financiers. She also relates her many attempts to meet her fan Franklin Roosevelt, all canceled or diverted at the last minute, possibly by Eleanor.

Book 5: The Fine and Lively Arts

Book 5: The Fine and Lively Arts Summary and Analysis

The Fine and Lively Arts concerns the lives of artists and performers during the Great Depression, particularly in relation to the Federal Arts Project of the WPA. The chapter begins with an interview with Hiram (Chub) Sherman, who relates one of the most famous artistic moments of the thirties: *The Cradle Will Rock*. *The Cradle Will Rock* was a musical written by the radical playwright Marc Blitzstein and directed by Orson Welles. The theatre in which it was being performed was chained shut on opening night, and the actors union forbade the cast to perform onstage. Welles and producer John Houseman proceeded to move audience and cast down Times Square to another theatre, where Blitzstein played piano and the cast performed from the audience.

Sherman proceeds to mention his involvement with the actor's union and their push for better pay. Over time, he was marked as a Communist and—despite the falsehood of the accusations—removed from Equity leadership.

Neil Schaffer performed popular "repertoire" sketches in the Midwest (420). His country entertainments were huge draws during the twenties. As people's disposable income decline after the '29 Crash, the Schaffer Players had to change tactics, offering first acts for free and creating a sort of season pass, which allowed locals to get a discount rate with a pass given out for free.

Jack Kirkland wrote a stage adaptation of the Caldwell novel, *Tobacco Road*, which becomes a sensation in New York. Dealing with the plight of the American farmer and the general suffering inchoate in the Great Depression, the play was regarded as revolutionary. It was one of the first popular entertainments to deal with the social decline of America in the Thirties. Eleanor Roosevelt herself raved about the New York production.

Perhaps most affecting of the interviews of this chapter are the observations made about America by artists who made observation of the Depression their vocation. Paul Draper—a dancer—is most eloquent in his assertion that the Depression gave rise to the realization that the poor were not a separate entity from the rest of America. They are us.



Book 5: Public Servant - The City, Evictions, Arrests and Other Running Sores

Book 5: Public Servant - The City, Evictions, Arrests and Other Running Sores Summary and Analysis

This chapter—focused, obviously, on public servants in the Depression—begins with an interview with the former chief of the Housing Assistance Administration, Elizabeth Wood. Wood explains how the idea of the housing project in the early years of the Depression did not take on a negative connotation. Public housing was nicer than private in most respects. Project dwellers took pride. This changes in 1949, when projects are purged of higher earners and integration begins. Integration incited many white families to flee. Wood says this was the beginning of welfare culture in America.

Chicago principal Elsa Ponselle recalls being a public school teacher in the thirties when the city runs out of money and they are paid in IOU's. She marches with other teachers for better pay even as they continue to teach. They formed what is now the Teacher's Union. Ponselle is one of the most viscerally engrossing interviews in the book; she laughs heartily while remembering the fear millionaires had during the Depression, afraid the workers would rise against them.

Dr. Martin Bickham worked for United Charity in the thirties, helping them develop a private relief program. What he discusses is one of the major motifs of the book: the American desire for work over charity. Bickham convinces his employers to develop work programs, and his reasoning is the same the Roosevelt administration uses to defend the WPA: we must protect the bread-winning drive of the American worker.

Arrests, Evictions, and Other Running Sores concerns the way the poor and marginalized dealt with the depredations they faced. Terkel begins the chapter with a lengthy interview with Willye Jeffries, who was involved in her local Chicago Worker's Alliance. This group acts as a safe-guard against eviction and police harassment for their community. Indeed, Jeffries herself becomes known to the police and building owners and landlords.

Terkel juxtaposes Jeffries with Harry Hartman, a levy bailiff's custodian. In essence, he removes goods from the dwelling of indebted individuals. His stories often reflect the maddened desperation of proud people—most of them firmly middle class—who would sooner die or go to jail than suffer the humiliation of losing all their belongings. Often, people would lose everything because of a relatively small debt, and Hartman states that he sometimes intentionally left things behind.



Terkel also focuses on the legal end of the spectrum, with a lawyer and judge discussing the challenges facing individuals of conscience wanting to act within the letter of the law. The lawyer, Max R. Naiman, describes a large group of individuals who were protesting landlord abuses. They are arrested and eventually acquitted with Naiman's help, but none have money to get home. Naiman ends up sleeping with all of them in a park for lack of other options. The judge, Samuel A. Heller, sickened by police treatment of poor people, often goes so far as handing arraigned people off the construction crews for free labor.

As he often does, Terkel ends the chapter with a younger person, a man who does the same job today as Harry Hartman did in the thirties. He is progressive in his ideas, and he justifies his work to himself by reasoning that he has to survive somehow.



Book 5: Honor and Humiliation, Strive and Succeed

Book 5: Honor and Humiliation, Strive and Succeed Summary and Analysis

Honor and Humiliation deals with the general fear created by the Great Depression. It begins with a series of shorter interviews illustrating the desperation of the times. Eileen Barth, a social worker in Chicago, must cope with fear after a caseworker is murdered by a desperate client. Ward James, a publisher, is fired for union activity and discovers he is ineligible for relief because his former employer has deemed him so. He must go through the humiliation of a relief interview and investigation to get his money.

This chapter includes one of the stranger interviews of the book. Stanley Kell represents a neighborhood in northern Chicago that is fighting to keep black families from moving in. He rails that he has had to scrape for every penny he has; he has earned his way into this neighborhood, and he refuses to allow people to move in who have not earned it. However, at the end of the interview he mentions that he himself is in favor of integration. The council he represents is not, and he must reflect their wishes.

Kell, of course, is juxtaposed with black sociologist Horace Cayton, who relates the struggles unemployed blacks faced in the thirties. He speaks of the lie-ins, in which black protesters stopped streetcar traffic in Chicago by lying on tracks. At the heart of these protests was the desire for a job, not the restructuring of society. This, Cayton says, is why the black community never joined the Communists en masse. Cayton ends by praising Roosevelt's foresight in creating the WPA, and giving people work instead of a handout.

Strive and Succeed begins with a quote from *Struggling Upward* by Horatio Alger, that bastion of American self-determination. The chapter concerns individuals who survived the thirties and found success in spite for the general depredation.

Harry Norgard blames the monetary loss of the Depression on the excesses of the twenties. In his mind, most people that failed were asking for it. He fears that Roosevelt's programs led to the lawlessness and apparent entitlement of the Detroit sit-in, which he recalls as much more destructive to the industry than is related in *Three Strikes*. He felt the Depression was necessary to humble the proud, but he would not want one again.

Emma Tiller talks of her time as a cook for a stingy, rich white lady in the thirties. Her fondest memory was intentionally walking out on this woman the day she was supposed to cook a dinner for a large group of her friends. For Tiller, once a person has enough money to get by, the important thing is maintaining one's dignity.



Two voices are juxtaposed most effectively at the end of this chapter. The first is that of W. Clement Stone, a giant of industry who made his money in the thirties selling life insurance. He espoused the philosophy of the Positive Mental Attitude. With the self-determining idea of success in mind, he says anyone can sell anything to anybody. In Stone's memory, the thirties was not a time of Depression.

After Stone is the story of Ray Wax, who was just entering adulthood in 1930. Living in New York, Wax doggedly sought employment with the tenets of Horatio Alger in mind. His story is absurdly funny, almost Candide-esque. He begins to sell flowers on the subway and attempts to ingratiate himself to his boss with new business ideas. His boss tells him to keep his mouth shut and just skim off the top like everyone else does. Wax frequents prostitutes, runs away from home when his parents start stealing his money, and joins a group of radicals in Baltimore. He does odd jobs throughout the country. The chapter ends with Wax acknowledging that Horatio Alger was of no use to him.



Epilogue

Epilogue Summary and Analysis

The Epilogue of *Hard Times* involves two interviews, one with a younger interviewee and one with an older one. Reed is a recent high school graduate who intends to raft down the Mississippi like Huck Finn with his buddy Chester. They tell Reed's father, who is visibly shaken by such a plan. Reed's father suggests they go to Europe instead and offers to pay for the trip. Reed is confused as his father expounds on the Depression, explaining he had such dreams at Reed's age that he could never realize. Reed is dumbfounded by the emotion the conversation elicits in his father; there is something about the Depression he will never understand.

Virginia Durr is a former "southern snob" (528). She recalls how the Depression cured her of her naivete. She acknowledges that many who survived it have become vehement consumerists as a result. She feels that the right reaction is a desire to change the system. She loves that the youth of the sixties want to overturn the tired system; she only hopes they can find something good with which to replace it.



Characters

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the 32nd President of the United States. He was elected in 1932, defeating Herbert Hoover. He drew support among Democrats and many Republicans in large part as a repudiation of Hoover's failed attempts to stem the downturn in the US economy.

Many interviewees point out that Roosevelt ran on a rather conservative platform, largely committing to balance the federal budget. Upon taking office, however, he and his "brain trust" realized that massive government spending and intervention into the private sector would be necessary to combat the deepening economic depression. Perhaps the most controversial of his early efforts was the National Recovery Administration, which among other things set minimum wages. He closed the nation's banks to assess their solvency. He threatened financial institutions who made a run on gold, silver, and other precious metals.

Various interviewees argue that the grassroots movements of Huey Long and Dr. Townsend pushed many of Roosevelt's leftward moves. Townsend's movement pushed Roosevelt's hand in creating Social Security. Huey Long's groundswell populism pushed Roosevelt into expanding New Deal programs like the Works Progress Administration, which created large building projects to put Americans to work

Two later decisions by Roosevelt emerge in the chapter Concerning the New Deal as alienating to many of his cabinet members. The first was his attempt to fill the Supreme Court with political allies, a failed move on his part. The second was his decision to break with the unspoken tradition of Presidents and run for a third term. Many of his most trusted advisers left the administration over this choice. Several former aides speak of Roosevelt as autocratic at the end of his second term, convinced that he was indispensable to the survival of the nation.

Interviewees throughout the book are intensely divided. Many revere him—and his wife Eleanor—as saviors of the American way of life. Others view him as an American dictator, a despot who did everything in his power to consolidate power and destroy the capitalist system.

Huey Long

Huey Long was a governor from Louisiana and populist demagogue during the Depression. Famous for his fiery speeches and flamboyant colloquialisms, Long became a national star and contender for the presidency. In his speeches, Huey Long argued that the wealthiest Americans should be forced to hand over a certain percentage of their money to the poorest.



Speculation that the grassroots reformist might make a run for the Presidency in 1936 put fear in the Roosevelt administration. Throughout much of Book 3, government insiders theorize that had Long run he would have split the center-left vote, and Alf Landon would have won. Long was assassinated by a lone gunman in the Louisiana State Senate chambers in Baton Rouge and thus never ran for President. Many credit his popularity with pushing the Roosevelt agenda leftward in the middle of the Depression.

Father Coughlin

Father Coughlin was another influential demagogue of the 1930's. A Catholic priest and popular radio personality, Coughlin spoke out against the growing economic disparity in America and in support of the New Deal policies. As time went on, however, he focused his criticism less on wealth in general and more on Jewish wealth in particular. Flagrant anti-Semitism became the hallmark of his radio broadcast, rendering him an apologist for fascism by the end of the 1930's. Coughlin was eventually silenced by Rome and faded into obscurity.

Bob La Follette

Bob La Follette was a Republican governor and senator of Wisconsin in the 1910s and 20s. In 1924, he ran for President on the Progressive ticket. A stern fighter for workers' rights, La Follette pushed for greater unionization and government intervention in the private sector. He garnered a respectable percentage of the popular vote in his Presidential bid, and he died shortly after the election.

John L. Lewis

John L. Lewis is considered by many to be the father of the modern American labor movement. He came to public prominence in the twenties as president of the United Mine Workers. Later he became the face of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The CIO became the workers' alternative to the compromised AFL.

Dr. Francis Townsend

Dr. Francis Townsend was a physician whose popular, progressive ideas regarding American healthcare became the template for the American system of Social Security. The Townsend plan involved raising funds from younger Americans—on a local community level—to sustain older folks during the Depression. Townsend was accused throughout his life of stealing people's money, though there is no evidence that this ever happened.



Alf Landon

Alf Landon was the 1936 Republican Presidential nominee. Regarded by his contemporaries as a boring and hopeless candidate, the Kansas Senator supported most of Roosevelt's New Deal legislation. He was trounced in the election, and many interviewees barely remember him. Landon is one of the few national figures of the Depression interviewed in *Hard Times*. He seems genuinely unaffected by his poor showing in the 1936 election.

Upton Sinclair

Upton Sinclair, the renowned American author of—among others—*The Jungle*, is mentioned throughout the book in reference to his 1934 campaign on the Democratic ticket for Governor of California. Concerned about the burgeoning migrant fruit picker population, Sinclair vowed, if elected, to end poverty in California (EPIC, as his campaign materials called it). He lost, but the movement was a populist windfall that brought many new voices to the public dialogue.

Herbert Hoover

Herbert Hoover was the 31st President of the United States. He was President during the Crash of '29, and his toothless stimulus programs failed to stem the deepening Depression. He was defeated by Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. Many blame Hoover for the Great Depression, and the shantytowns that cropped up across the country in the 30s are popularly known as Hoovervilles.

General Douglas MacArthur

General Douglas MacArthur was an American General famous primarily for his leadership during the Second World War and the Korean War. In this book, he is mentioned primarily as the commander of troops who put down the Bonus March of 1932. Many interviewees recall his riding a white horse through Washington, DC as marchers were gassed and beaten by their fellow servicemen.

Chairman Martin Dies

Martin Dies was the chairman of the Dies Committee during the Depression. The Committee—ultimately a forerunner to Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee—sought out Communist activity in Roosevelt's advisers and the WPA.



Objects/Places

Works Progress Administration

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was a central component of Roosevelt's New Deal. Recognizing the psychological effect relief had on the unemployed, the WPA created large building projects to create work.

National Recovery Administration

The National Recovery Administration (NRA) was an early and controversial program of the New Deal. Among other things, it allowed larger governmental regulation of the economy, applied a minimum wage, and ensured collective bargaining for unions. Eventually, the Supreme Court determined the NRA was unconstitutional.

The Bonus March

Following World War One, Congress passed legislation promising a bonus of several thousand dollars to returning veterans. Following the Crash of '29, President Hoover put a hold on bonus payment. What resulted was the Bonus March of 1932, when thousands of unemployed vets descended on and occupied Washington, DC. Eventually, Hoover had the vets removed from the city by fellow soldiers with tear gas, bludgeons, and bayonets.

The Wagner Act

The Wagner Act ensured the ability of workers to unionize by restraining employer ability to fire, intimidate, or persecute employees for union involvement.

American Federation of Labor

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) was the dominant national workers' organization before the Depression. Largely viewed as compromised and toothless, unions turned to the more radical CIO in the 1930's. Eventually the two merged to form the AFL-CIO.

Congress of Industrial Organizations

The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), founded by John L. Lewis, was formed as a more radical alternative to the compromised AFL. Viewed as more committed to

worker rights, it became the dominant American labor organization in the 1930's. Eventually the two merged to form the AFL-CIO.

The Wobblies

The Industrial Workers of the World—the IWW or Wobblies—was a radical organization that advocated the abolition of the wage system. Though often accused of being Communists, the Wobblies have no affiliation with the American Communist Party.

Hooverilles

Hooverilles, derogatorily named after Herbert Hoover, were large shanty-towns of itinerants that cropped up throughout the United States during the Great Depression.

Unemployment Councils

Unemployment Councils were organizations that developed in urban areas to protect unemployed people from eviction. Generally they either returned evicted persons' items to their former lodging or put together a large protest in front of the building.

Soup Lines

Soup Lines became a frequent sight in America during the Depression. Charity organizations, wealthy industrialists, and even Al Capone funded these lines.

Relief

Relief was the equivalent of unemployment insurance during the Depression. With it came an awful stigma in the 1930's. Applicants had to go through a long and invasive interview to determine if they qualified, and in some circumstances former employers could deny relief to fired employees.



Themes

Out of Disaster Comes Community

A recurring theme throughout *Hard Times* is the notion that out of the desperation of a crisis, community forms. This manifests itself in many ways as related by the interviewees in the book, from unions to farmer's movements, government developments to artistic communities.

The most frequent form of community mentioned throughout the text is the labor union, perhaps most vividly in the 1936 Flint Sit-Down strike. In order to pacify both Chrysler leadership and Michigan governor Frank Murphy, strikers create a small community in the plant, ensuring no car part, machinery, or other company property is damaged. Local supporters bring food and encouragement to the autoworkers.

John Beecher describes in *Concerning the New Deal* what was considered a miracle at the time: a self-governing Negro community built in Alabama. Local authorities claim that the black population is incapable of civilized society. Beecher, upon opening the modern camp, tells new tenants that "they could make it a bad camp or they could make it a good camp" (315). Within days, the black tenants set up a local governing board, plant crops, and outlaw drinking.

Throughout *Hard Times*, as well, is a sense of improvised community. People help each other out because they know times are bad. Jimmy Partland describes the jazz scene at the time, a world of feast and famine. Working musicians give large sums of money to unemployed peers, knowing that once the tables are turned they will be repaid. This sort of impromptu generosity, this unspoken contract, is at the heart of the book.

The Depression Left a Mark

In the final pages of *Hard Times*, a sensitive but befuddled teenager named Reed says of his father, "it wasn't as if it was a memory, but an open wound." (527) Terkel in his *Personal Memoir* at the beginning of the book admonishes his generation for neglecting to speak to the youth of the sixties about the Great Depression. They are not protecting their children, he argues, but depriving them.

Terkel's argument—indeed, his purpose for writing *Hard Times*—is that the Great Depression is a singular experience for our nation. Many interviewees shakily compare 1930s America to the Weimar Republic of Germany or Russia in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. Americans were so terrified, so desperate, that they easily allied themselves with demagogues like Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Communist Party.

The author's primary means of highlighting the strange essential mark the Depression left on its survivors is juxtaposing their stories and opinions with the observations of



their children. These children—many of them sixties radicals of various forms—often resent the lasting obsession with money and fear of the precariousness of financial security. More often, the children are simply perplexed. Their parents will not discuss the 1930's, as veterans are loath to discuss a war. As such, the younger generation cannot understand the experiences of its predecessor.

American Society Could Not Survive another Depression

The final question Terkel asks every interviewee generally is whether America could withstand another Depression. Occasionally, a survivor who is particularly discouraged by the state of the nation comments that another Depression would be good for America, but by and large interviewees are horrified by the prospect and dismiss it hastily.

Interviewees cite two principal reasons why American society cannot survive another Depression. The first of these reasons is the American fixation on wealth. This is ironic given that this consumerism is linked throughout the book to the want of the Great Depression. Interviewees throughout fear that Americans would be gripped by a despairing paralysis if the country's economic collapsed again.

The second reasoning behind this is, paradoxically, that American's youth are far more militant than the most radical of protesters in the thirties. Over and over in *Hard Times*, subjects say—in so many words—that were the Depression to happen today, Americans would simply take what they did not have. People recalling the unrest of the 1930s theorize often that this country was on the brink of revolution. The book was written in 1970, at the height of the Vietnam War and the black power movement. Revolution seemed to be in the streets and the elder generation fears an economic downturn would spark the fuse.

Style

Perspective

Studs Terkel is a chronicler at heart, and more than anything he simply allows his subjects in *Hard Times* to talk. Clearly, when dealing with labor organization or the New Deal, his sympathies lie with union leaders and fighters against poverty. Occasionally, in Terkel's questioning, one can detect a certain note of incredulity, as when Charles Stewart Mott and Harry Norgard decry the treachery of the Flint Sit-Down Strike by citing faulty historical data. In terms of the interviewees, their perspectives are divided into three camps: those for the New Deal, those against it, and the young.

Those for the New Deal comprise the largest tent in *Hard Times*. They are former hoboes, politicians, labor organizers, fallen aristocrats, and civil servants. Even Alf Landon, the 1936 Republican Presidential Candidate, is a supporter.

Those against FDR's programs are also diverse to a certain extent. By and large they comprise right-leaning politicians and financiers upset by the NRA and other blows to capitalism. However, New Deal detractors also include independent workers and hustlers like Doc Graham, who consider Roosevelt a "despot" and "the lowest human being that ever held public office." (210) Even Fred Thompson of the Wobblies is ambivalent about New Deal policy, fearing it stymied the labor movement.

The last perspective on the Depression is that of the young people Terkel interviews, the children of Depression survivors. Their perspective ranges from utter ignorance to contempt of either their parents' lording the era over them or living in a consumerist mindset bred from the era. Their relationship to the material is far more intellectual than visceral. They reflect how one generation removed from the cataclysm loses all sense of its reality.

Tone

As *Hard Times* is oral history—a series of interviews conducted by the author—its tone varies according to the speaker. However, running beneath the interviews—as always in a Studs Terkel work—is the vibrant sense of national dialogue. Even those that the author has to prompt frequently have something vital to say about the nature of want, the role of government, and the value of labor. In Terkel's America, the zeitgeist is being formed minute by minute in the words of its citizens.

Often this results in a tone that is downright inspirational, to a level that would seem corny were it not for the fact that these stories are true. Peggy Terry, for example, talks of how the degenerative poverty of the time helped her develop fidelity with blacks and Mexicans. Phyllis Lorimer, a debutante who is forced to move west after her mother loses all her money, becomes a chorus girl in the movies, and one day she chastises her brother for being embarrassed by her career.



In *Concerning the New Deal*, *Public Servant—the City*, and *The Farmer is the Man*, much of the narrative take on a more officious air. These chapters deal with the minds and will behind the New Deal. While they include specific anecdotes, these interviews primarily concern policy, labor relations, and national politics.

As always, the interviews with younger folks reflect something more cynical than the interviews of their parents. Their screeds reflect either apathy or a sort of new radicalism, concerned with the overthrow of bourgeois society.

Structure

Hard Times, being an oral history, consists of interviews that range from a couple of lines to over ten pages. These interviews are grouped into like themes in chapters that contain anywhere from one to fifteen interviews. The topics of these chapters concern labor organization, farmers, the Roosevelt administration, eviction advocacy, the Federal Arts Project, and other topics. The impression created is one of a top-to-bottom profile of a disaster. These hundreds of voices create the central character, the Great Depression.

Hard Times is divided into five books, most between 80 and 120 pages. Book 4, however, is only ten pages in length and deals mostly with the specter of the Second World War. At the end of the novel is an Epilogue comprised of two interviews, both intensely thoughtful. The first is from a young man frustrated and trying to comprehend the affect of the Depression on his father, the second an older woman trying to understand how the lessons of the Depression inform the modern world.

The book is heavily footnoted and more than half of the footnotes are quotes from interviews. Terkel only inserts an editorial voice when summarizing certain points, providing quick historical background, or inserting his own questions to the interviewee. The result is a book that seems entirely comprised of voices, a pure and authentic work.



Quotes

"There are young people in this book, too. They did not experience the Great Depression ... It's time they knew. It's time we knew, too—what it did to us."

A Personal Memoir, p. 4.

"That's one of the things about the Depression. There was more camaraderie than there is now. Even more comradeship than the Commies could even dream about."

Book 1: The March, Jim Sheridan, p. 14.

"We thought American business was the Rock of Gibraltar. We were the prosperous nation and nothing could stop us ... Suddenly the big dream exploded."

Book 1: The Song, E.Y. (Yip) Harburg, p. 21.

"I remember it was fun. It was fun going on the soup line ... Today you're made to feel that it's your fault."

Book 1: Hard Travelin', Peggy Terry and Her Mother, p. 52.

"So even though we were all in the same boat, I'm still white and you're still black, so we don't need to get together. Things are going to get better for the white folks."

Book 1: God Bless' the Child, Robin Langston, p. 103.

"If he had been reelected ... but the public wanted change. Hoover was a humanitarian, more than any President we've ever had."

Book 2: Old Families, Edward A. Ryerson, p. 170.

"Until you actually see someone dying, you can't know what war is like. Now I have an inkling how it was for some people, although I never slept under the bridge."

Book 2: Old Families, Julia Walther, p. 184.

"We lived in a company house. We had to buy every bucket of water we used ... I bought my food from the company store, and we bought our furniture from the company store."

Book 2: Sixteen Ton, Mary Owsley, p. 226.

"In retrospect [The Congressional Hearings] make the finest comic reading. The leading industrialists and bankers testified. They hadn't the foggiest idea what had gone bad."

Book 2: Editor and Publisher, Carey McWilliams, p. 270.

"The New Deal was a young man's world. Young people, if they showed any ability, got an opportunity. I was a kid, twenty-two or twenty-three. In a few months I was made head of the department."

Book 3: Concerning the New Deal, Joe Marcus, p. 299.

"John L. Lewis has stated it more clearly than anyone else. Without the organizational ability of the Communist Party, the CIO might never have come to life."

Book 3: Scarlet Banners and Novenas, William L. Patterson, p. 332.



"In the Thirties, I learned what is to me a big idea: providing people with a sense of power. Not just the poor ... Everybody."

Book 3: Scarlet Banners and Novenas, Saul Alinsky, p. 354.

"They were denied schooling. They were called rednecks and crackers and damn niggers ... It was a protest against things economically unavailable. I interpreted this protest and related it to the Bible—instead of calling them rednecks and hillbillies."

Book 3: The Circuit Rider, Claude Williams, p. 374.

"If a semblance of vigorous leadership hadn't been forthcoming on the part of Roosevelt, there might have built up the kind of pressure that swept Mussolini into power in Italy."

Book 3: A View of the Woods, Christopher Lasch, p. 384.

"Now, for the first time we face the dreadful reality that we are not separated. They are us ... in shock, we are becoming aware that it is ourselves, who have to be found wanting, not the poor."

Book 5: The Fine and Lovely Arts, Paul Draper, p. 424.

"Their faces, I'd stand and watch their faces, and I'd see that flat, opaque, expressionless look which spelled, for me, human disaster ... They had lost their jobs, lost their homes, lost their families. And worse than anything else, lost belief in themselves. They were destroyed men."

Book 5: The Fine and Lovely Arts, Herman Shumlin, p. 434.

"They were so God-damned scared they'd have a revolution. They damn near did, too, didn't they? Oooohhh, were they scared! What's more scared than a million dollars?"

Book 5: Public Servant—The City, Elsa Ponselle, p. 444.

"I feel anything can happen. There's a little fear in me that it might happen again."

Book 5: Honor and Humiliation, Ward James, p. 483.

"It wasn't as if it was a memory, but an open wound. He talked about the Depression as if it had happened yesterday. We touched a nerve."

Epilogue: Reed, p. 527.

"And there was a small number of people who felt the whole system was lousy. You have to change it. The kids come along and they want to change it, too. But they don't seem to know what to put in its place."

Epilogue: Virginia Durr, p. 529.



Topics for Discussion

Terkel's recurring tool for analyzing the Depression from different angles is juxtaposing the commentary of young and older people. How are the views of the young regarding the Depression's significance different from the older generation's? Discuss this dichotomy.

Discuss shame. How is shame a driving force for people in the 1930's? How do interviewees think the role of shame has changed in the intervening years?

Discuss the causes of the Great Depression as described by interviewees in this book. How are these causes similar to those affecting the current US economy? How are they different?

Much is made of the idea of work in this book. How does working or not working affect a person's self-image? Why do some interviewees think people do or do not want to work? How did FDR's New Deal promote and undermine the idea of work?

Discuss the differing opinions expressed in *Hard Times* regarding the New Deal. Why do some people detest its policies? List out positive and negative results of the New Deal.

Discuss the relationship between the Great Depression and the modern American labor movement. What organizations and movements grew out of the Depression? How did the idea of workers' rights change?

Discuss race in the Great Depression. In what ways were black, Japanese, and Hispanic Americans more severely affected by it? To what extent did previous hardship make the Great Depression less shocking for them?

Stud's Terkel's interviews give a panoramic view of the Depression by presenting many individual stories. As a class, discuss the individual changes that interviewees describe. How does the Depression change certain people? How do they grow and become more fully human?