



Social Sciences

A Promise in Haiti: A Reporter's Notes on Families and Daily Lives

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“Let us then hope better of our children, and of our children’s children; let us know, let us know there is cure, there is to be an end to it,” wrote James Agee after a month-long depression-era visit to Alabama, praying for an end to the poverty he saw among families of tenant farmers in Hale County.

Mark Curnutte, a reporter who covered football for nine years for the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, learned about Agee’s writing during an interview with a filmmaker. Tiring of a life on the sidelines of “the toy department of human affairs,” Curnutte set out to do in Haiti what Agee had done in Hale County: to document with “unsentimental exactness” the lives of three families steeped in poverty and to reveal in a book the “vast commonality” that all people share, hoping to stir compassion among readers for the poor of another country. The four weeks he spent with the families in 2006 and 2008 gave him the material he needed to paint the exquisite portraits—in text and photographs—that he presents in *A Promise in Haiti: A Reporter’s Notes on Families and Daily Lives*.

Among the people Curnutte meets are two men, masons who rarely find work, a woman who wanted to be a seamstress but was unable to afford the required training, and a family of thirteen that lives in a two-room house, headed by an unemployed widow. Food is scarce: three-meal days are unusual for all the families. Yet amid the deprivation, Curnutte sees dignity and resilience, the Haitians “enduring almost unimaginable hardships with little complaint, all the while planning and agitating to make a way where there appeared to be none.”

Curnutte does not propose a “sweeping program” to solve the nation’s troubles, nor does he suggest massive infusions of foreign aid. The best that outsiders can do is “to stay engaged over time,” working with Haitians without trying to “fix their country for them.” By writing about the families, Curnutte has fulfilled his promise to one of his hosts, who encouraged him to continue with the project when Haiti’s overwhelming problems appeared to weaken his resolve.

That the book's description of conditions in Haiti will elicit expressions of concern, perhaps outrage, from readers, is certain. More heartening is the prospect, even if slender, of material change that a future visitor, retracing Curnutte's steps fifty years from now, may be able to detect.

Mark Curnutte