

# The most they ever had book review

Literature



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The Most They Ever Had The Most They Ever Had is a story of suffering, hard work, and sacrifice. It is a collaboration of interviews conducted on the textile workers of the Profile cotton mill in Jacksonville, Alabama. The author of the book, Rick Bragg, compiles the stories of these people because he is one of them. He was raised in Jacksonville, Alabama. His older brother, Sam, worked at the mill. Bragg wrote this story of his people because it was a story that needed to be heard.

The Most They Ever Had tells the simple lives of the men that just wanted to make a living to support a family and make it through this life to get to the next. The title is so fitting because they lived such simple lives that the mill coming to town meant survival. It meant having a somewhat stable job and the ability to buy a house and put food on the table. It was, in fact, the most they ever had. The job came with a price, however. The workers paid for their means of survival with their health. They worked unventilated rooms saturated with lint.

The constant inhalation of these minute particles eventually caused damage to the workers lungs causing a disease called “ brown lung. ” Because the job was so sought after, the workers could lose their job for the smallest mishaps, even missing one day of work due to illness. The workers could be sick as dogs, but they would still clock in and put in their daily hours. Their daily struggles can teach the readers a lesson--to never take things in life for granted. These workers labor tirelessly day in and day out just to put a roof over their family’s head and food on the table.

They worked in terrible conditions, but they rarely complained because they appreciated what they had. That, I believe, is a main purpose behind this book. Not only to tell the readers the stories of these true American heroes, but also to teach them this valuable lesson. The Profile cotton mill opened its doors in Jacksonville, Alabama in 1905 and remained open until 2001 when it shut down without warning and left the workers still trying to pay off mortgages with no pension. Bragg tells the stories of the mountain people from this region just trying to get by paycheck to paycheck. He insights us on the tyrant mill owners and managers.

He also informs us of the tragedies the workers endured like Charlie Hardy's story of how he, " one of the best front-porch guitar pickers," lost his " picking arm" to a machine in the mill and had to give up his talent. Or the tragic story of Leon Spears, the 65 year old man that began working at the mill when he was seventeen that has to carry an oxygen tank close by because of the damage done to his lungs by the cotton filled air of the mill. Bragg explains how the corrupt bosses would blame the workers' troubled breathing on hangovers and laziness rather than inadequate working conditions.

Still, however, the workers would show up day after day because they knew that the mill gave them a means of survival. The workers of the mill never gave up hope, though, that things would get better, and, eventually, they did. Over time conditions improved. Profile mill workers, in time, earned " one of the best blue collar paychecks in the foothills. " The book is informative because it does exactly that--it informs. If I had not read this

book, I would have never learned the stories of these brave Americans and their families. It tells you what life in a mid 20th century mill town was like.

Bragg doesn't stop at informative, however. He portrays the workers' stories in a way that one becomes attached to them. Bragg writes in such an eloquent and descriptive manner that by the end of the book, one believes that he or she actually knows the mill workers of Jacksonville, Alabama. One of the most amazing components of this book, in my opinion, is that the workers living this tragedy didn't even realize that they were living one. It was just their life. They worked in such harsh working conditions and under such greedy bosses, but they didn't look at themselves with pity. They didn't complain.

They did what they had to do to support their family and to make ends meet. Another intense part of the book for me was reading Charlie Hardy's story. Charlie lost his arm to a machine and by result had to give up on his talent of guitar playing. Since I am a musician myself, I can hardly imagine what it would feel like to be told that I would never be able to play the guitar again. Rick Bragg's *The Most They Ever Had* is amazing book of conquest over struggle. The mill workers of Jacksonville, Alabama gave life and limb to provide for their family and never gave up hope that someday things would get better.

They never gave up on their families that depended on that paycheck. *The Most They Ever Had* shows that things in life don't always come easy and that we must work hard for the things in life we love most. I highly recommend this book to anyone that likes a good conquest story because that's what this story boils down to. It's the story of how the workers of the

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Profile cotton mill trying to overcome the struggles of everyday life in the textile mill of Jacksonville, Alabama. Works Cited: Bragg, Rick. *The Most They Ever Had*. San Francisco: MacAdam/Cage, 2009. Print.