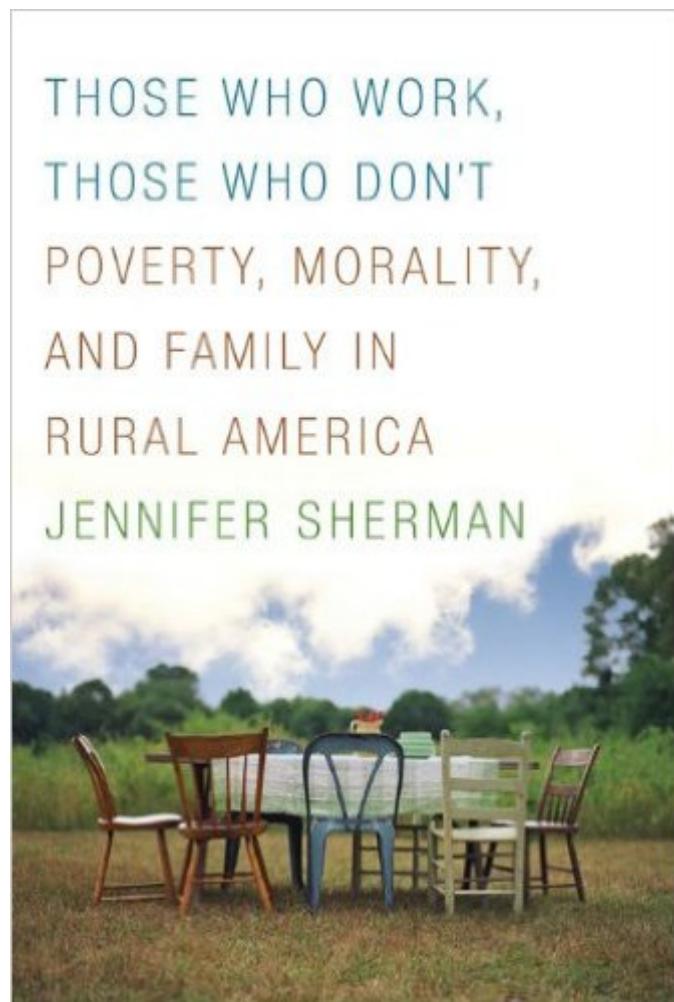


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# Those Who Work, Those Who Don't: Poverty, Morality, And Family In Rural America



## 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'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.

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.

It is clear that in the search for the perfect vacation spot, the city dwellers have beaten up on rural America. They only see the "spotted owl" which despite the effort is more rare to day than it was when lumber jobs gave families money to live on. The families are the ones to suffer. Sadly, this book... an expanded dissertation - will not do any more that raise an "oh too bad" among policy makers. As a resident of another place (Far Northern Wisconsin) where the Madison tree huggers have destroyed once solid employment opportunities so they might have a cheap place to vacation or when the DNR clear cuts to provide nesting sites for the Yellow Winged Warble (oh by the way they spread herbicides to retard the growth of native trees so allow for the popple whose buds are feed for these never before seen birds to get a head start - one can see a parallel. I was saddened to see the destruction of the rural social system... in the Northwest - but not surprised.

This book was painful to read. It's written by an urban liberal who spent a year living in an isolated conservative rural area in Northern California that was economically devastated by the spotted owl ruling. She really has no point in the book beside the fact that the people use moral capital to their benefit when they have little to no other capital. She has no real solution for the poverty in the area but somehow if the people swallowed their pride and went on welfare all could be right in the world. She fails to assign any blame to the government for creating the problem but somehow government is the solution.

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.

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 illustrated 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.

Jennifer Sherman has done amazing ethnographic research providing a window into the world of rural poverty in America. As a pastor my eyes were opened in reading her research as to how many impoverished rural Americans view morality. This book is a must read for anyone wishing to understand rural culture in the United States.

Great book with a great perspective.

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