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Book Review: *Waltzing with the Ghost of Tom Joad: Poverty, Myth, and Low-Wage Labor in Oklahoma* by Robert Lee Maril

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Waltzing with the Ghost of Tom Joad: Poverty, Myth, and Low-Wage Labor in Oklahoma. By Robert Lee Maril. Foreword by Robert McCormick. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000. Notes, references, index. xviii + 190 pp. \$29.95.

The title of this book seeks to link the people whose lives it examines with the tale of the Joad family in John Steinbeck's classic *The Grapes of Wrath*. In addition, the author sets forth four ambitious goals.

The book reports on research funded by the Oklahoma Department of Commerce and conducted by sociologist Robert Lee Maril, assisted by staff and students from Oklahoma State University. The researchers examined the daily lives of Oklahomans in three households in each of four low-income neighborhoods in two cities and two small towns. Interestingly, no truly rural households were included.

About half of the book presents case studies of the twelve households. This is responsive to Maril's first stated goal: "to describe poor people and poverty in Oklahoma in detail." The other half of the book is devoted to the other three goals—responding to myths and stereotypes about people in poverty, defining the "real causes" of poverty in the state, and outlining policy choices that would help reduce Oklahoma's persistent poverty. The types of neighborhoods and family dynamics described in this book are typical of those that can be found throughout the Great Plains.

Maril's descriptions of the hopes, dreams, hardships, and frustrations of the twelve households studied are presented in a rambling and confusing manner. The results of 1995 interviews are presented in one chapter, the 1997 interview results in another. The case studies would have been more gripping had each household been described in a single section covering both sets of interviews. The reports on the people profiled in this book fall far short not only of the poignancy with which Steinbeck presented the Joads, but also of more recent profiles of people caught in poverty by

authors such as Nicholas Lemann and Jonathan Kozol.

The second, third, and fourth goals stated by Maril and addressed in the volume's second half are ambitious ones for even much longer treatises. Maril touches briefly, and inadequately, on a large number of complex topics. This reviewer reached the closing pages with a sense that the author had a lot of axes to grind, but failed to put a sharp edge on any of them.

The book is unlikely to have much impact on public policy or, unfortunately, on the lives of the poor in Oklahoma or in other Great Plains states.

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for Social Services, State of Oklahoma
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