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## Caution: Writers at Work

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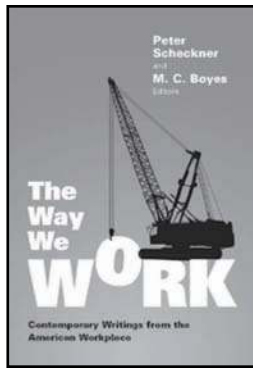
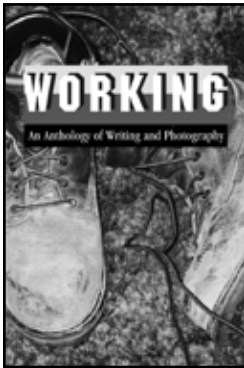
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## Caution: Writers at Work

### **Working: An Anthology of Writing and Photography**

Edited by Greg Hart, Mary Ellen Mangino, Zoeanne Murphy, and Ann Marie Taliercio

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2008

### **The Way We Work: Contemporary Writings from the American Workplace**

Edited by Peter Scheckner and M. C. Boyes

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2008

Reviewed by Katherine Sciacchitano

Over the last two decades, with the help of the working-class studies movement, class has managed to expand beyond its restrictive perch as a category of political and economic analysis into a broader lens for shared experience. Conversation about class may still be discouraged, even punished, but fewer question the political and social importance of personal struggle and reflection around our class experiences and origins.

*Working: An Anthology of Writing and Photography*, and *The Way We Work: Contemporary Writings from the*

*American Workplace* give us a chance to read and think about class (in the case of *Working*) and work (in the case of *The Way We Work*). Read together, they also invite us to reflect on how our class experience affects us as readers and writers and how the act of writing, in turn, affects our experience of class.

*Working* is testimony written by workers. *The Way We Work*—an anthology of pieces culled from both previously published work and responses to an ad in a literary journal—is self-proclaimed literature. As testimony, *Working* demands that we remember both the condition of the speaker and the circumstances of the account. As literature, the stories in *The Way We Work* often conceal both the processes and the experiences of their authors. Reading testimony challenges us to reevaluate our own experience in light of the speaker's. Reading literature, we know we're not only entitled to but are, in fact, expected to judge from a distance. Literature offers process and order, imagery and transport, not to mention a celebration of the skill of its creator. As the editors of *Working* both tell us and show us, sometimes writing isn't literature, but rather "that complex intermingling of necessity and intellect that marks working-class culture" (p. 7). And some authors are not celebrated, but forgotten.

The authors of *Working* reach into their experiences of working-class life to make collective sense of their struggles for economic and emotional survival, and intellectual understanding. The power of the more than two dozen short pieces, poems, and photographs in the collection doesn't come from imagery and order. First and foremost, it comes from the authors' survival and courage, not only to express their experiences of class but to force us as readers to confront their experiences with them. The result is still transport, but of a different kind: transport that doesn't focus on specific words or images, but on quiet contact with the complex realities

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of gender, race, and class that are both brought into existence and strangled into silence by the structures of everyday life.

In short, *Working* returns us to ourselves by forcing us to listen to others. The result is an immediacy that is slow for the reader to grasp and feel, but hard to let go of.

*Working* is the product of a writing workshop run for workers in Syracuse, New York, a once-thriving industrial city that—within the last quarter-century—has fallen into the throes of deindustrialization, downsizing, and privatization. Its texts and images deal with work and survival, family and community, the intersection of gender and class, defiance and gratitude, and—most of all—change.

As important as what *Working* contains is what it doesn't. There is no escape from family tragedy. No movement from working-class to middle-class status. No "success stories" of financial or professional fulfillment. Most importantly, there are no generalizations of what it means to be working-class. As a reader working in a middle-class job but coming from a working-class background, I experienced palpable relief at not being asked to distance myself from my own felt reality, not being asked to assume my middle-class armor or attitude of intellectual control.

Some stories in the collection are brief, such as one describing the memories of grandparents who take in boarders. One photo shows an alley behind a substance abuse clinic where clients are forced to take breaks because they are not allowed on the sidewalk in front. Longer stories describe entering the workforce and show how supporting a parent shapes one teenager's sense of manhood and responsibility. A few pieces

reflect on an entire life's work. Another offers a harrowing account of firefighting.

There are surprises. A biting, witty account of class and gender. A former restaurant owner working ten-hour days as a telemarketer—"put your hands on [either side of] your face . . . that's the space I work in" (p. 64)—tells us how she gets through it by sticking Post-It notes of poetry on her cubicle wall, teaming up with co-workers who find any excuse to celebrate, and accepting the surprising companionship offered by many people she calls, people who break all the stereotypes.

But most of all there is a pervasive sense of loss. A poem cries out to us, "The company filled their pockets with a vicious wealth/They did it by taking my best friend's health" (p. 24). A young girl learns what it means to be trapped in the world of blue-collar work after she leaves each newspaper-bundling shift with one arm covered in welts, because there is no safe way to operate the machinery. Awareness of time only deepens the wounds. A tradeswoman writes of the women who preceded her in struggling with the sexism of their union brothers: "[T]heir sacrifices have not gone unnoticed. Only us women know what it is like—the slow eating away of acid on metal . . ." (p. 23).

**As important as what *Working* contains is what it doesn't. There are no generalizations of what it means to be working-class.**

And throughout there is change—change that results from facing (not transcending) necessity and limitations. Children adapt to the reality of work. A videotape editor chronicles changing technologies, knowing he, too, is replaceable and

will have to move on some day. A community organizer, the only person in her family to finish college, learns from her father's death that "a person should not have to die to earn a living," and from her mother's life that doing work that is not valued—and especially doing it in isolation—can be psychologically devastating (p. 42). She embraces C. Wright Mills's belief that "individual" troubles are caused by structures of power that are not easily changed. So while she defines work as contributing to her community, she recognizes that the organizations she works for are too embedded in the governing power structure to achieve much:

*When work is degraded or devalued, when the requirements of making ends meet assault the quality of family life, force workers to risk life or limb, prevent us from giving to the very young and the very old the care they deserve, obstruct us from participating fully as citizens, and require us to sacrifice our souls, I fear for our future. We have holy work ahead* (p. 45).

Reading *The Way We Work* after *Working* feels a bit like getting the bends coming up from a deep dive. There is a ripping away and a loss.

While *Working* is unabashedly about class, *The Way We Work* is about work. The occupations represented run the gamut from agriculture to social work, and the concerns include relationships on the job, how work shapes leisure, and even death. Although the diversity of the pieces in this collection seems to invite contemplation of the relationships between work, culture, and society, it also precludes any defined focus. And while an editors' introduction catalogs contemporary economic changes and their effects on jobs, *The Way We Work* displays little of the urgency about the decline in living standards that we find in *Working*.

*The Way We Work* includes a short work-biography of its contributor after each entry (save one: an anonymous

story about a letter carrier who finds he is invisible to the people on his route when they fail to recognize him without his uniform—a sly choice by the author). What we learn from the bios—themselves interesting reads—is what we have already guessed. Virtually all the contributors have done many kinds of work, often menial. But with few exceptions, all are looking back on this early work from the vantage points of academic or literary careers.

## ***The Way We Work* represents the American problematic of class transitions and exits, of crossing borders and subsuming identities.**

This positioning makes a keen difference in the immediacy of the stories. The standouts of the collection—a piece about driving a city bus route; a stunning poem remembering work as an underground miner; and stories about a young boy's introduction to peach-picking by older workers, life on a summer construction job, and reporting on sex crimes (among others)—seem to have been written not only from the writers' actual experiences, but by writers who remain close to these experiences. (A major exception is a strong piece by Tom Wolfe on work in a freezer warehouse.)

A few pieces in the collection reveal what happens to the force of working-class experience when actual voices are replaced with "literature." Compare, for example, the roles that class and occupation seem to play in these excerpts:

In *Working*, a retired firefighter writes:

*The heat is rolling under the top of my helmet and burning my forehead, eyes, nose, mouth, neck and ears. My hands are burning . . . I trip. I fall. I fall through ceilings . . . Nails go through . . . my foot. Another trip to the emergency room—but not before the fire is under control.*

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*My lungs hurt . . . Someone is following with a hose . . .*

*There is a man in a chair. He is badly burned . . . His skin falls away and he screams in pain. He dies before an ambulance gets there . . . I want to quit (pp. 48-49).*

Now, from Rick Bass, a former geologist, in *The Way We Work*:

*There is always excitement and mystery on a fire call. It's as if these things are held in solution, just beneath the skin of the earth, and are then released by the flames . . . and there are rivers of blood below, and rivers of fire, rivers of the way things used to be and might be someday again—true but mysterious, and full of power, rather than stale and crusty (p. 210).*

In the end, however, what defines the tone of *The Way We Work* is the collection's emphasis on work, rather than the broader matrix of class. This emphasis is reflected, among other places, in the collection's last piece—an essay that condemns the American drive for success for leading people into overwork. What is strange about this is not that the pace and volume of work in American society are viewed as anathemas to freedom or threatening to democracy. It's that the book ends with a piece that seems to ascribe how much we work to culture and personal choice, divorced from economic imperatives and constraints.

Still, *The Way We Work* leaves lingering questions about its contributors' work lives and class trajectories, many of which seem to be defined by the struggle to write successfully. Whether reaching *back* to early class experiences or reaching *past* one's experiences to understand the experiences of others, the collection appears to represent the American problematic of class transitions and exits, of crossing borders and subsuming identities.

Several years ago, I designed a writing course that centered on the class experiences of the students and how they saw and experienced whatever transition they were making (or hoping to make) as they got their degrees. I also wanted to help students find their voices as they wrote.

Identifying the primary texts for the course became increasingly problematic as the voices of middle-class authors writing about working-class experience became more and more jarring. Eventually, I settled on *The Heat*, a forceful collection of stories and poems written by steelworkers; *How to Tell When You're Tired*, a book about manual labor written by Reg Theriault, a retired longshoreman who dropped out of a literature program at Berkeley to continue working as a fruit tramp; and *Striking Steel*, an historical and sociological memoir of the 1959 steel strike written by Jack Metzgar, the son of a participant, who asks how the memory of the longest strike in U.S. history came to be erased from working-class consciousness and most histories of the period. What these books—and other readings I chose—have in common is that each deals with the direct experiences of its author(s). Each tackles the problems of memory, change, and class with transparency and courage. Each generously shares that courage with its readers and implicitly invites them to join in the feat.

Few of us who make class transitions escape without the emotional and intellectual confusion created by the pressures to forget and to pass. Those of us who teach have a particular responsibility to help students remember. With or without additional texts, *Working* and *The Way We Work* give us a chance to reflect on our own experiences and present additional ways to take these questions into the classroom.