

Get Real: The Worth and  
Current Status of the Literature  
of the Future—Work Writing

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## GET REAL: THE WORTH AND CURRENT STATUS OF THE LITERATURE OF THE FUTURE—WORK WRITING

*Arc's* work issue is one of those infrequent opportunities for readers to catch a glimpse of literature's future. At present, you can thumb through virtually any literary magazine, attend any literary festival, browse any bookstore or bookfair or anthology of Canadian literature and you are offered a literary portrait of a country in which nobody works. The absurdity of this artistic vision, as I've discussed in a number of talks and essays through the decades, is perpetuated in all the other arts as well.

A number of implications arise from the prevalent taboo against an accurate depiction of how daily work affects men and women, both at their place of employment and during their hours off the job. For one, governments' expenditure on the arts of tax dollars collected from the population at large is repeatedly defended by arts bureaucrats on the grounds that the arts tell humanity's (or the country's or the community's) story. In the introduction to my latest collection of essays I quote a former CEO of the Canada Council giving the usual pitch in the *Literary Review of Canada*. Art, he says, "inspires the reflection so needed to make sense of the complexity of our lives" and artists "through their reflective capacity help each of us better understand who we are and what it means to be human." The idea that these supposed accomplishments of the arts could be realized without even glancing at what happens to us as a consequence of our daily employment is nonsensical.

Daily work is not peripheral to the human story: our work is the central and governing experience of not only our own lives, but those of our family and community. For most of us, our job determines where we live, what our standard of living is, how much time and energy and money we have at the end of the shift to devote to family,

community, leisure activities. For most of us, our jobs determine who our friends are, and our views on a huge range of issues to do with ecology, economics, education, minorities, and more.

To claim that the arts reflect human experience when literature largely ignores daily work is as ridiculous as the now-debunked claim that a literature which largely ignores women's experiences depicts humanity's story. I'll argue that the present claim is even *more* ridiculous, given that the paid workforce involves the overwhelming majority of the population, men as well as women. The persistent creation of accurate imaginative writing about jobs is thus similar to the persistent creation by women of accurate accounts of women's lives during earlier eras when such writing was regarded by the arbiters of cultural significance as marginal, irrelevant, unimportant.

Just as the arts could not forever ignore the experiences of half the human race, so the arts cannot forever ignore the effects on human beings of how daily employment is organized. The inevitability of work taking centre stage in the arts, exactly as it is central to the lives of men and women, is why I call work writing the literature of the future.

I'm aware that the concept of daily employment becoming the main theme of art is close to anathema for most of today's artistic practitioners. Indeed, many adopt a life in the arts as a result of intuiting or experiencing the dark secret to how daily work is currently structured—the secret I'll consider in a moment. But given the poor financial returns garnered by most artistic products, artists ensure their biosurvival by either teaching the arts, if they're lucky, or working at jobs they often describe in disparaging terms, if their luck fails. In both cases, the tasks these artists would rather be engaged in are not those of their paid employment. No wonder they prefer to focus on art's traditional themes of love, death and nature, augmented during the last century with the theme of art about art (art that takes as its central concern, for example, color, "materiality" or language).

Yet unfortunately for a contemporary artist, his or her life is spent among relatives and fellow community members whose lives are shaped by their employment.

And by any measurable standard, most of these artists' actual contribution to their community occurs via the day jobs they despise.

In these people's defense, I'll note that the taboo against an accurate depiction of daily work and its effects on employees both on and off the job extends to the surrounding society as well. The media generally restricts itself to describing situations where people *aren't* working—strikes, or the precariousness of part-time gig employment, or how to dress or comport oneself during a job interview. The taboo leads to some hilarious scenarios: an academic sitting at a desk made in a factory, dressed in clothes made in a factory, using a computer made in a factory, drinking from a factory-made mug whose contents, coffee, are available to him or her as a result of a complex arrangement of underpaid agricultural laborers and networks of capitalized land ownership, transportation, warehousing, merchandising and retail sales. The result of the academic's earnest effort at the computer? A paper on how we exist in a post-industrial economy.

Less humorous is how our society's aversion to regarding daily employment as a key concern affects an issue such as immigration. Why do farmers, whose work feeds us all, not have sufficient return on their labour to enable them to hire farm help at a decent wage, and so must employ "temporary foreign workers"? How can this occur in a society which tolerates millions of dollars in annual pay going to those who do no productive work, like members of corporate sports teams, or to the executives of failing corporations, like Nortel, Postmedia or the Hudson's Bay? Is there really a shortage of skilled trades in Canada, or does something happen in the workplace that results in thousands of Canadian women who apprenticed at these trades not continuing in those jobs?

At the heart of the taboo which leads artists and others to avoid engaging with what happens to us on the job is that dark secret about how work is presently organized. At our place of employment, most of us are subject to unelected, frequently arbitrary, authority. In short, democracy does not extend to the jobsite: we are not free there.

This reality is evident in a couple of current phrases. “Freedom 55” (or some other age) implies that we at last obtain our freedom when we retire from daily employment. “Work/life balance” implies that somehow we are not alive during the hours we spend at the job. Obviously the latter notion is false, given that every human emotion is encountered at the workplace, from love to rage. But the phrase appears to urge us to regard our employment as dead time: the experience of living is to be reserved for any hours away from the job.

In fact, the lack of democracy at the heart of the day condemns us to a schizophrenic existence. On the job, we are expected to be unquestioningly obedient to people we have no say in selecting to have power over us. Yet the moment we emerge through the office door or factory gate again, we are told we are a free citizen of a democracy, practicing the skills of critical thinking to help determine the destiny of our community and nation. At least until the start of the next shift, when we’re again expected to revert to a state of docile servitude, with the actions of our brain and body controlled by our betters. Free/not free; free/not free: this constant shuttling between two opposing states gives the lie to the claim that we exist in a “democratic” country. And such continual shifting from being a responsible free citizen to being a submissive wage slave can’t help but negatively impact our functioning as voters, parents, ecological stewards, neighbours, and much more. If school didn’t prepare us to unthinkingly follow the instructions of those in authority over us, the workplace completes our training.

No wonder HR personnel and “life coaches” want us to consider our hours at work as dead time. No wonder the arts in general don’t want to shine a light on what happens to us on the job and on our work’s effects on our lives during our “free time.” Our jobs, however, enable society to function one more day: because we go to work, people are fed, clothed, housed, educated, provided with goods and services they need and want. Given that society is rebuilt each day by people continually yanked between two vastly different emotional, psychological, and, yes, political states, the wonder is

that milk is available for sale at the corner store and that someone can be called to repair your roof or unplug your drains.

The need to democratize work life as well as leisure life was once the primary demand of social change unions. Such organizations, an original branch of the union movement, did not disappear from the workforce until the Cold War in the mid-twentieth century saw the complete victory of business unions: labour brokers, in effect. Indeed, the fundamental philosophical basis of unionism is that as citizens of a democracy we have as much right to control our lives during our hours on the job as off. Instead of holding out the promise of emancipation, however, the current union movement would rather highlight amelioration: “We’re the folks who brought you the weekend.” Yet the environmental movement may yet restore what business unionism has abandoned. Corporations, and the governments they pay for, look unlikely to effectively counter the climate change their past decisions and present practices have set in motion. Without worker and community control of industry—that is, without the extension of democracy to the workplace—catastrophic environmental deterioration seems unstoppable.

Meanwhile, like those brave and determined women writers who described women’s lives during a time when such matters were deemed irrelevant to literature, across North America today organizations, publishers and individuals continue to articulate in writing what life at work is like.

One energy centre of the contemporary work writing movement is David LaBounty’s Blue Cubicle Press in Plano, Texas. Under the “Workers Write!” imprint ([www.workerswritejournal.com](http://www.workerswritejournal.com)), the press issues a series of occupation-based anthologies that include poems, fiction and work memoir. Each is called *Tales from . . .* and workplaces explored include everything from casinos to construction sites to cafes. The most recent one of these, published in June, is *More Tales From the Classroom*, a second collection of creative responses to employment in the education industry. The earliest is *Tales from the Cubicle* in 2005.

As well, every three months or so the press releases a single short story in a series called *Overtime*. So far, 52 of these chapbooks have been issued since 2006, the first about picking fruit at a commercial orchard and the latest, out this spring, about work in a fraudulent call centre.

Another energetic source of work writing is an annual weekend gathering each February in Astoria, Oregon of Fisherpoets, commercial fishermen and fisherwomen who write and perform poems, songs, and stories ([www.fisherpoets.org](http://www.fisherpoets.org)). Out of this event, masterminded for 22 years by Jon Broderick of Cannon Beach, Oregon, a number of anthologies have been published, including *Salt in Our Veins* (1999) and *Like Fish in the Freezer* (2004). The newest and in my opinion best of these anthologies is *Anchored in Deep Water* (2014) edited by Pat Dixon of Olympia, Washington, who also maintains an online anthology of fisher poems ([www.inthetote.com](http://www.inthetote.com)). *Anchored* consists of seven smaller (60-page) themed anthologies held within a wrapper that looks like a fish. The themes include family, maritime accidents, joy in the occupation, history of the industry, and women in fishing.

For 21 years, Milwaukee Road Railway machinist and poet Sue Doro, now retired to Oakland, California, has edited *Pride and a Paycheck*, a newsletter for women in trades. Each issue includes poems by tradeswomen; the summer 2019 issue ([www.prideandapaycheck.com/Summer\\_2019.pdf](http://www.prideandapaycheck.com/Summer_2019.pdf)), for example, contains poems about their jobs by a Portland, Oregon plumber, Kansas City, Missouri electrician, and San Jose, California paint factory forklift driver. Doro also started the Blue Jean Pocket Writers Workshop, held in conjunction with various women-in-construction-trades conferences.

A starker picture of the situation of women in the trades is given by Boston journeyed electrician Susan Eisenberg. A poet—Cornell University Press brought out a new and selected of hers, *Pioneering: Poems from the Construction Site*, in 1998 and *Stanley's Girl* in 2018—she notes (in her book on women's experiences in construction, *We'll Call You If We Need You*, also from Cornell in 1998 and reissued in 2018): "The [US Department of Labor] regulations established in 1978 blueprinted a course for the

construction workforce just past the start of the millennium to become about one quarter female . . . This is not what happened. Women’s overall percentage of the construction workforce grew to roughly two percent in the early 1980s and remained there.” As of 2018, the number was three per cent.

Eisenberg’s poems echo the delight of other women in trades at mastering tools and attaining a high level of skill, including celebrating the pleasures of satisfactorily completing a difficult job. At the same time, her poems document relentless harassment of women on the job, a multifaceted harassment that leads many women to leave the trades. Neither government, employers nor unions seem seriously interested in ending such behaviours.

Eisenberg’s on-line installation, *On Equal Terms* (<https://onequalter.ms>), offers 12 interactive rooms depicting various facets of women’s presence in the construction workforce, including mourning work-related deaths. Also here is a video version of a poem by Eisenberg about sexual assault. A six-week installation of *On Equal Terms*, which included four of her poems, was on display this spring in the lobby gallery of Washington, DC’s AFL-CIO building.

In Canada, I’m not aware of the same sorts of focused dedication to work writing as is currently evident in the USA. On the other hand, examples of the theme have appeared now and then from most independent Canadian (not branch plant) publishers. For example, during the past five years, books of poems from jobs in the oil patch include Garth Martens’ *Prologue for the Age of Consequence* from Anansi (2014), Lesley Battler’s *Endangered Hydrocarbons* from BookThug (2015), Kelly Shepherd’s *Insomnia Bird* from ThistleDown (2018) and Lindsay Bird’s *Boom Time* from Gaspereau (2019).

One publisher with a consistent interest in work writing is Howard White of Harbour Publishing. Some of White’s own books of poems—*The Men There Were Then* (1982) and *Ghost in the Gears* (1993)—describe his working life as a cat operator. As a publisher through the decades he has published work-based material ranging from Bus Griffith’s ahead-of-its-time graphic novel *Now You’re Logging* (1978), through anthologies of Canadian and US work poems I edited including *Paper Work* (1991), to



David Lee's illustrated *Chainsaws: a History* (2006), as well as various oral histories, including two volumes of his father Frank's hilarious and informative memoirs of his work as truck driver, logger, and service station operator, *Milk Spills and One-Log Loads* (2013) and *That Went By Fast* (2014). Howard White remains interested in how work-based writing evolves.

As for Canadian literary magazines particularly responsive to work writing, my experience has been that, as editors come and go, a given magazine's interest in this material waxes and wanes. But as with publishers, over the years work poems have found a home in many venues. A list of magazine credits, for instance, from the four oil industry books mentioned above includes *Arc*, *CV2*, *Event*, *filling Station*, *Other Voices*, *Prism international*, *This Magazine*, *The New Quarterly*, *Vallum*, and *West Coast Line*.

I'll emphasize that such lists as the above hardly indicate the appearance of a flood of this material. Rather, just as women wrote and published where and when they could before the content of their writing was taken seriously by the literary powers-that-be, so work writing survives, despite the prevailing taboo, underground.

For anyone dubious about what bringing the work experience to the forefront of art can accomplish, I'll close by referring the unconvinced to White Pine Press' *Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry* (2016). Though neither the editor, documentary filmmaker Qin Xiaoyu, nor the translator, Harvard's Eleanor Goodman, reveals in the accompanying material any awareness of North American work poetry, poem after poem by contemporary Chinese employees presents a searing picture of the largest migration in history, that of young rural Chinese men and women moving to the city to work, often illegally, under hideous conditions.

The book's title comes from one of the poets who committed suicide at 24, in part a despairing response to his life in a Foxconn factory making Apple products. The anthology's editor notes that Chinese government statistics indicate "the average number of workers killed in work-related accidents in a given year is around 100,000." Several of the poems deal with unsafe workplaces and industrial accidents as well as the tedium of factory dormitory life. The editor points out that the migration from the

countryside has meant, as one poem describes, “all of the able-bodied workers have left to find work, leaving behind children and the elderly, untended fields” (in case you wondered why a technologically advanced society like China needs to import Canadian canola and pork). Those children left back in the village? “[O]ver sixty million, or more than a fifth of the total child population,” according to the editor.

The poems in *Iron Moon* make evident to any reader the human and societal costs of the “cheap” made-in China products we’re sold by Canadian retailers. Understanding the workplace of another person, and a job’s effect on him or her, teaches us much about empathy and power relations. This is one of the gifts work-based art can offer: making real the bromides we hear about why art should be valued.

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Article commissioned by Ottawa’s *Arc Poetry Magazine* and published in their “Labour and Livelihood” themed issue (90 [Fall 2019])