

Working to Survive: Surviving to Work

The books in this study offer a variety of perspective concerning individuals and their work. A combination of realistic fiction and nonfiction, from various historical and cultural contexts offer discussion groups an opportunity to consider not only the economic and societal value of work (especially when it is lost), but more importantly, why we work to begin with. The first three books to be read portray employed characters and their struggles. These people want to work, but find that meaningful employment comes within contexts of extraordinary complications, especially affecting race and class. The first three books, in particular, suggest the outsider trying to gain acceptability and sustainability within the American workforce. These books show how closely work and culture are connected. The study begins with a classic novel, *The Jungle*, which represents the anxiety of 19th century European immigrants entering the American workforce, and society as a whole. In the second and third books, readers will see that a century later, issues of race and class are still alive. Injustices, some not necessarily maliciously intended, are readily prevalent in all three readings. Each of these first three works demonstrate characters eager to engage in work, though in less than ideal situations. The “Working to Survive: Surviving to Work” theme then shifts to a more existential/psychological reflection with the reading of *Bartleby the Scrivener* and *The Cliff Walk*. Though the existential and psychological issues of self-identity and human purpose are certainly implied in the first three readings of the series, they become pronounced in the final two selections. Readers, then, are encouraged to consider not only the material-ness of work, but also the emotional nature involved with work and survival.

Americans seem to have an implicit understanding that achieving the American Dream is only compatible with hard work. The New World, for all its abundance of resources, only availed itself to those whose work habits made it accessible. The Protestant “Work Ethic,” evidence of divine blessing, was more than just speculative theology. It found its strength in an audience that included most Americans, Protestant or otherwise. Alongside this religious motivation, Ben Franklin’s pragmatic, somewhat secular vision of “God helping those who help themselves” is deeply rooted in the American psyche. The motivation and opportunity to earn a living is a common denominator of an egalitarian, democratic society. Earning one’s way, and enjoying the fruits of one’s labor, is a value shared by most Americans. The desire for equality and the promise of a better life is linked to necessary, if not meaningful work.

But what happens when work is problematized? When there isn’t enough work to go around? What values determine our actions when issues of race and class interfere with those competing for honest work? What happens when the American Dream threatens to be an empty promise? The value of the individual, vitally linked work, suffers dramatically in these situations.

American history is punctuated with multiple stories of courageous individuals laboring against difficult odds, simply to provide for family, to struggle against forces that threaten

individual or familial survival. Depending on the time one looks into American history, it is possible to read stories of labor movements fighting to establish and guarantee worker rights, or to witness young men and women coming of age by leaving home to match their home-spun skills against the collection of similar individuals in the great urban societies. For over a hundred years, a significant number of the labor force was enslaved, and then, even after emancipation, too many Americans endured unequal and unjust situations due to Jim Crow laws and apartheid segregation customs. At times, even the middle class, that great, unique American marvel, hallmark of a democratic society, seemed destined to fail, taking its toll on hard-working Americans reduced to puppets reacting to the unseen string-pulling of corporate hierarchy.

So is work a blessing or a curse? Obviously it can be both. A good job can be emotionally, even spiritually satisfying. A gainfully employed individual feels dignity and purpose, in no small part, due to his/her employment. Working to survive seems natural, a necessary tradeoff: honest work results in dignity and equality, and provides enough financial gain to stabilize the family, even realize a dream or two. But to be ultimately satisfying, life needs to consist of more than just making ends meet. A fulfilling life requires more than fighting negative emotions and unjust situations trying to make sense of one's toil. The books in this study focus on the way work mixes with the quest for human dignity, the psychology of honest work and the existential meaning of individual life itself.

The Jungle
by Upton Sinclair

This 1906 novel produced by its muckraker/journalist author has become a classic. Its images and themes are deeply immersed into the American social consciousness. Sinclair exposed the exploitation of immigrant workers in American cities. Though many criticized his writing, nonetheless the publication of this novel led to the establishment of the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 (becoming the Food and Drug Administration in 1930). After reading the book, even President Teddy Roosevelt, who had disdain for Sinclair's political views, nevertheless was persuaded that capitalist greed was a problem. The president was directly instrumental in forming the government response to hazardous working conditions. The real political response generated by the book, is founded in the story of a Lithuanian immigrant, Jurgis Rudkus, trying to support his family in Chicago. Sinclair's stark portrayal of their bleak existence sets the tone for this study of the nexus of work and survival.

The Help
by Kathryn Stockett

Written from the perspective of African-American domestic workers in Jackson, Mississippi during the 1960's, this powerful novel puts readers inside the homes of both the white bosses and the humble dwellings of the African-American workforce. The sometimes unspoken but very real dividing line between employee and employer is felt throughout Stockett's rendering. The maids see glimpses of the Civil Rights movement on the television sets of their employers and hear snippets of news among members of their community, but necessarily carry on with their day to day duties, often in fear that a misstep could cost dearly. Their bone-tiring labor could be terminated with just a rumor. In this historical context, punctuated by the murder of Medgar Evers, an unlikely team of a white lady and suspicious maids secretly write their stories. The primary focus of the novel, however, shows the hard-working ladies tending to others, raising white children, cleaning bed sheets, toilets and anything else demanded by their employers. These ladies, with only their reputation as a calling-card, are grateful for their work, albeit in a harshly segregated society where one has to duck her head and take her employer's scolding with no recourse but her inner strength of character. *The Help* illustrates the system of domestic work, focusing on the individual lives of maids. Stockett's novel commemorates their faithful duty to their tasks, the courage their daily life demands.

***Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*
by Barbara Ehrenreich**

In her undercover journalism, Ehrenreich investigates life for the working poor in three American locales by working various entry-level jobs herself. Her experiment attempts to determine how one can survive financially by working entry-level, or relatively unskilled jobs. As her analysis points out, a staggering number of Americans hold these kinds of jobs, nearly 8 million holding two jobs simultaneously just to make ends meet. What does this situation portend for Americans? Admittedly Ehrenreich is not really struggling, not like the actual acquaintances she makes during her entrance into the part-time world of the 1990's. She could always just go back to her life of relative privilege, but in her desire to find out, she becomes part of a contemporary working subclass. The conclusions she reaches, based on her work is telling (she really did apply for the jobs and really did the work). Perhaps her conclusions are even more striking since so much of her discovery is surprising to her, and thus indicative of our general ignorance or willful distance from the work-a-day world of so many Americans. Ehrenreich's analysis also offers a variety of recent facts and statistics regarding Americans in the age of downsizing and outsourcing industry. How do our fellow citizens survive in this context? Is economic stability even a realistic dream? What is the future of a culture that allows itself to be pieced together by millions of citizens working regularly only to fall further below the poverty line?

Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street

by Herman Melville

In this classic story, Melville goes to the heart of the American economic system. Wall Street, the American symbol, and reality, of world economic supremacy provides the backdrop for the unusual interaction between an isolated scrivener, a copyist in a law firm, and his well-intentioned employer. In Melville's *magnum opus*, *Moby-Dick* (1851), readers see the horrifying consequences of one man's maniacal obsession, causing significant peril to his employed shipmates. In *Bartleby*, published two years later, Melville reveals the other side of obsession. A scrivener whose haunting line "I would prefer not to" all but dismantles the psychology and the efficiency of the workplace. The detached, dispassionate response to American opportunity, and charity, challenges the very social contract that links employees and employers in the chain of economic power. How tentative is the system that defines economic capitalism? What is wrong with someone who doesn't want to play the game, or even be saved? Has Wall Street really changed? How does the grandest economic system in human history affect an individual, and vice-versa?

***The Cliff Walk: A Job Lost and a Life Found* by Don J. Snyder**

In his poignant memoir, Snyder confesses that he has a dream job, though he wants more. His intellect, education and hard work put him in a place of privilege, professor at a prestigious university. He loses it all, drops into lethargy. He survives mainly because of his wife's faithful attention to mundane, daily life. In his downward spiral, Snyder eventually is forced to admit the hard facts of his existence. Ironically he is saved by a fortuitous return to blue collar work, something from which he has been running for much of his life. Set in the broader environment of corporate downsizing in the 1980's, Snyder's memoir is an uncomfortable reminder that even the middle class is not immune to economic challenge. His story checks the arrogance of assumption on the part of those tempted to claim entitlement due to race, class, education or societal connection. Snyder's journey illustrates the strain on the human ego, especially the American male ego when his economic and societal status is in jeopardy. What is to be done when the dream disappears? This book raises questions concerning what Americans *really* want. What is truly valuable? What is expendable?

Further Reading:

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