

Hands that labor and write

Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work. By Janet Zandy. New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2004, 240 pp., \$21.95/paperback.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, on average, nearly 11,000 workers are treated in emergency rooms each day, with about 200 of these workers hospitalized. Each day, thousands of employees require time away from their jobs to recuperate, while 15 workers die from their injuries, and another 134 die from work-related diseases.

These numbers are a chilling assessment of an average day in the United States in 2005. Do these numbers elicit the same response as the latest employment or inflation news? Can we begin to comprehend the risk and loss that workers and their families face on a daily basis? Numbers alone will not necessarily engender sensitivity to the daily concerns of workers, nor will they help us understand the historical struggle for safe working conditions. Janet Zandy, in *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work*, exposes us to how the physicality of labor has shaped culture and colored American labor history.

In the process of analyzing what constitutes working-class literature, the author provides a wide range of depictions of work and workers in literature, from some well-known authors of the past century to the growing ranks of worker-writers and poets in today's alternative press. *Hands* is Zandy's fourth book on working-class studies. Foremost literary history and criticism, this book is also a significant contribution to understanding labor history, especially with respect to working conditions, "in the skin of a worker."

Zandy, a professor of language and literature, shows us through examples of working-class literature, as well as

other writings and art, how work-related injuries "collectively attest to untold stories of labor." Early in *Hands*, the author asserts that "this book is dialectically grounded between the values and sustaining labor of my parents and other working-class people and their places of labor, toxic waste sites (metaphoric and actual) with all the occupational hazards and dangers those workers knowingly or unknowingly faced. How that dialectic exposes and expresses itself as cultural informs the writing that follows."

Hands begins with a series of powerful essays entitled "Loss: Circumstances and Choices." Included is a personal history of sorts—a tour of Trubeck Labs, where the author's father used to work in the 1950s, the remnants of which became a Superfund cleanup site in the 1980s. In "Dialpainters," the story of young women employed by the Radium Luminous Corporation in Orange, New Jersey, in the 1920s, Zandy relates to us class and gender issues that surrounded their compensation claims for radium poisoning. She also tells the reader about the efforts of the Consumers League, a voluntary women's organization, which fought for improved working conditions. In addition to the story of documentary photographer Lewis Hine and the photographs he produced, these writings also include descriptions of the Hawks Nest incident, "America's Worst Industrial Disaster," that claimed the lives of hundreds of West Virginia tunnel diggers to silicosis. With this collection of essays, Zandy challenges the reader to "widen the lens and see," in the words of poet Muriel Rukeyser.

Later in the book, the author documents both the terrible Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire of 1911 that claimed the lives of 146 workers, and its literary response: "fire poetry." Horrific photographs complement Zandy's description of the New York City incident. With the background the author provides—such as the earlier general strike that

began at the Triangle Company, and the seven prior fires experienced by the company's owners—a much different picture emerges than what was covered by most of the media in 2003, when the building where the fire occurred became a national landmark. Adding more current relevance to this event, the author notes that 45 years later, several blocks away from the triangle fire site, 24 workers died in another factory fire, because of inadequate fire protection. Even more recently, during the 1990s, similar events occurred in the Far East. Zandy notes, "The cause of death was not an unforeseen natural catastrophe, but rather unsafe working conditions where profits took precedence over human lives."

Zandy succeeds in demonstrating how unsafe work is a subject for literary and cultural expression. "Incidents that affect the lives of working people in one generation often become the historical and cultural antecedents for future generations." The essays in *Hands* are full of such examples.

Cultural expression is also revealed through collective remembrance. In "Ralph Fasanella: Epic Painter of the Working Class," the author demonstrates how "the working-class artist/survivor forges cultural expressions that expand loss and grief from the private to the collective and historical." In an essay dedicated to Workers Memorial Day, Zandy provides the background of the annual April 28 observance. As the director of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health said this past year, the day "is a powerful reminder that job-related deaths, injuries, and illnesses are national tragedies with serious ramifications for individuals, families, and society. Going to work should not result in the loss of life or well-being." Zandy describes how the day is much more than simply a reminder and how it has emerged as a public event, imbued with meaning. The day "merges statistics on job deaths and injuries, private memory, and public his-

tory with shared grief and outrage over preventable deaths and injuries to working people.”

In examining what is *not* a working-class novel, Zandy contrasts the works of different authors and offers explanations as to where they fail. Though Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of Lion* (1987) and other representations of labor effectively display the physicality of labor, Zandy claims they “are ultimately static representations of labor. They are without the costs of political engagement, the reader stays within a comfort-zone.” This contrasts with the emotional discomfiture of Tillie Olsen’s *Yonnonidio* (1975). In an essay entitled “Worker ghosts,” Zandy probes intentions and raises questions about representing worker subjectivities in books about job closures. These books function as “witness to the enormous industrial and economic shifts affecting the lives of ordinary workers,” but they are not necessarily considered working-class literature.

Zandy identifies some basic characteristics of working-class texts. At the

center of these texts is the living experience of the workers, as represented by the working class. A working-class text “recognizes and resists the transformation of the human I/we into an it—a thing, a commodity, a working unit, a disembodied hand.” Beyond affirming the working-class experience, these texts help recover “submerged labor histories,” according to the author. The genre defies traditional structure and form, challenging dominant assumptions about aesthetics. Another common element of working-class writings, according to Zandy, is class consciousness, with many working-class writers taking sides in their writing. “Their words offer hope and model struggle.” All of these characteristics are offered as an empirical framework for discussion, rather than a strict definition.

The author does not hide her political views, which are shared by many worker writers—the language of class oppression and labor exploitation permeate much of this work. Zandy sees a “historicity of class experience being inseparable from an understanding of

working-class literature.” That economic circumstance affects human relationships and creates disparities is a fact that few can deny. However, from reading *Hands*, one might have the impression that Zandy expects that working-class literature must recognize and conform to the dichotomous view of an ongoing class war. I think this view will only serve to diminish the “working-class agency” that this literature has the potential to produce.

Working-class writings, as an evolving area of study, refocus labor studies from the history of unions and collective bargaining to the living expression of laborer’s experiences and frustrations. More than once, Zandy warns that this is not an exercise about guilt. Instead, worker-writing is purposeful—it can uniquely convey the very real issues of worker health and safety and motivate for positive change.

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