

Laura Hapke, *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

Laura Hapke further solidifies her influential position in the field of working-class studies with her most recent project, *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction*. A work of both labour and love, Hapke admits in her preface that this book represents a decade's worth of research and writing, which started with "revisiting [her] immigrant father's novella, serialized in a radical journal of the early 1930s" (xi). By revealing her very personal connection with American labour fiction, Hapke establishes her ethos as a scholar invested both academically and personally in the fiction of the American worker.

For those in the field of working-class studies, Laura Hapke, a professor of English at Pace University, has long been prominent in both research and writing. Her earlier works, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s* and *Tales of the Working Girl: Wage-Earning Women in American Literature, 1890-1925* are both integral texts to working-class studies. Her new work only further establishes her as a major academic in the field.

In *Labor's Text*, Hapke takes the reader on a journey to discover the American labourer – an oft-overlooked, if not discounted, character in literature. Hapke's work is impressive not only in its comprehensive view of American literature, which investigates everyone from the expected Upton Sinclair to the more obscure W.H. Little and Reginald Wright Kauffman, but also in the attention it bestows upon both historical events and cultural studies. Hapke includes in-depth looks at how the American worker is represented in the fiction of the antebellum period, through the Progressive Era, both World Wars, the Civil Rights movement, and Vietnam, to a more present-day investigation of the impact of "mass firings and plant closings" in the 1980s and 1990s (319). Further, *Labor's Text* gives attention to those workers who have been dually marginalized not only because of their socioeconomic status but also due to their ethnicity, sexual orientation, and/or gender. Some of the most revealing and fascinating sections of the book are those that look at the Native American, Chinese, or African-American labourers and their place in working-class literature.

In addition to the comprehensive and wide-ranging historical, cultural, and literary scope of *Labor's Text*, perhaps the book's greatest strength is its attention to those literary genres that are significant in terms of radical and/or working-class writings but tend to be ignored in favor of the more canonical works. For instance, Hapke's section on *The Masses*, the "oppositional arts magazine," is particularly astute in realizing the struggles that radical writers faced when trying to reconcile their politics with aesthetic ambitions: "most of the other Socialist magazines ... had little political patience for the arts. The cultural

rebels of *The Masses*, in contrast, found no contradiction between a radical commitment and imaginative literature” (130). This statement typifies Hapke’s dual emphasis on the political and literary implications of labour writing.

Along with attention to Socialist publications such as *The Masses*, Hapke also looks at works such as the “sex-trade novel” (157). Here, Hapke explores the gender and class implications of novels, particularly of the early twentieth century, that featured the young working-class girl turned prostitute. One might also recall that Hapke’s 1989 text, *Girls Who Went Wrong: Prostitutes in American Fiction, 1885-1917*, also focused on this marginalized group of women workers. As Hapke remarks, Reginald Wright Kauffman’s 1910 best-seller, *The House of Bondage*, was the “product of ten years of interviews in the vice districts of major American cities and an intensive knowledge of local and national reports on the ‘social evil,’ [and] it tried to do with the sex trade what a few years before Sinclair had done with the meatpacking industry” (157). These valuable connections that Hapke makes between a variety of working-class novels as well as her attention to the more obscure or taboo working-class trades establishes *Labor’s Text* as perhaps one of the most inclusive projects about the American worker.

While her attention to a variety of workers as well as her own familial interest reveal the very personalized investment Hapke has in *Labor’s Text*, she is also dedicated to providing a face to those workers whose voices we do not often hear in American fiction. Aside from the literary investigations, Hapke also provides the reader with poignant photographs and drawings of labourers at the beginning of each chapter. The strong connections between visual art and writing, particularly working-class writing, is further established in *Labor’s Text* and these photos seek to remind the reader of the very humanized nature of working-class fiction and characters.

With a work as comprehensive and compelling as *Labor’s Text*, one can find little room for improvement or change. Hapke even leads the reader to the present-day works of such contemporary writers as Paula K. Gover and Janisse Ray. Further, Hapke makes important connections between contemporary fiction about labourers and that of their working-class predecessors as well as showing what new directions are underway in American labour writing: “If the memory of labor’s hardships rather than the new voice of struggling or empowered labor is taking over the fiction of today, the memoir is creating a space for working-class people to represent themselves” (338). Here, Hapke acknowledges, that there is an important shift from bourgeois writing about labourers to a promotion of a more authentic, working-class-constructed writing and consciousness.

Labor’s Text: The Worker in American Fiction is a seminal work for scholars of working-class studies, literature, and American history. Hapke gives a voice to American workers who have long been silenced and, in the process,

provides the field of working-class studies with a comprehensive view of how writers have long depicted the labour force. Perhaps Hapke herself best sums up her work in *Labor's Text* when she states that the “very characteristics that have rendered the best work literature controversial have ignited its strengths: a critical engagement with the classism of the everyday; an insistence that identity dwells apart from economic gain; and a humanity that issues from acknowledging rather than disowning working-class origins” (339). If scholars and readers can take away these insights not only from Hapke’s project but also from labour fiction itself, then there is hope that working-class literature will no longer play a marginalized role to the more dominant, canonical discourse.

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Laurie Lisle, *Without Child: Challenging the Stigma of Childlessness* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

In the midst of the increasingly confused and confusing debate surrounding the implications of new reproductive technologies for individuals, families and society comes a book that addresses the most fundamental question of all. Is it so bad for women not to have children?

Merely posing such a question presents an author with a host of difficulties from the outset. Even finding an acceptable vocabulary to describe women who are without child is an impossible task. As Lisle points out the medical term for a woman without a child, nullipara “comes from the Latin root for empty, void, zero, like the word for a female who has never been pregnant, nulligravida.” Lisle casts around in vain for neutral terms and concludes that she is forced to employ a vocabulary that “polarizes us for or against parenthood but never indicates the dignity of nonparenthood.” Part of her task then is to establish the childless as occupying a fruitful and honourable role in women’s history. This is a theme that is addressed throughout the book, but given particular focus in Chapter Three “Searching History, Remembering our Maiden Aunts.”

Women have lived fulfilling and useful lives without giving birth, even though the dominant pronatalist discourse would have us believe that such an assertion is a contradiction in terms. Despite powerful cultural pressures for women to submit to reproduction, modern contraception, legal abortion and increased economic independence contribute countervailing social forces in the shaping of women’s lives. At the heart of the issue lies the pervasive representation of motherhood as “the essential female experience.” Real women have