

Anguish of Workaday World Explored by Studs Terkel

This book, being about work, is by its very nature, about violence — to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents; about shouting matches as well as fist fights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It's above all (or beneath all) about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us.

— From the Introduction

In this electronic age of Watergate when everybody and his brother can work a tape recorder (well, almost everybody, Sir) nobody works it better than that cigar chewing Chicago-based genius named Studs Terkel.

He makes it look so easy. All he does is interview people with a recorder running. A lot of folks do that — from Playboy Magazine to the President of the United States. But no one does it quite like Studs.

Most professional interviewers will wind up with interesting tapes.

What Studs Terkel winds up with is close to literature. People open up to him. Piano tuners, priests, policemen. Housewives. Hookers. Hockey players. It makes no difference. They talk to Studs like he's family.

"I'm a machine," the spot-welder tells him.

"I'm caged," says the bank teller.

"A monkey can do what I do," says the receptionist.

"I'm less than a farm implement," says the migrant worker.

"I'm an object," says the high fashion model.

"I'm a mule," says the steelworker.

A mule. Somebody built the pyramids, the steelworker goes on. Pyramids. Empire State Building — these things just don't happen. There's hard work behind it.

"I would like to see a building," he muses, "say, the Empire State. I would like to see on one side of it a foot-wide strip from top to bottom with the name of every bricklayer, the name of every electrician, with all the names. So when a guy walked by, he could take his son and say, 'See, that's me over there on the forty-fifth floor. I put the steel beam in.' Picasso can point to a painting. A writer can point to a book. What can I point to? Everybody should have something to point to."

There are over a hundred people represented in the collection and only a handful are "big names." There's George Allen, the football coach, and Rip Torn, the actor. There's Eric Nesterenko, the hockey player. And Bud Freeman, the jazz saxophonist. But the majority of interviews are with "little people" who have no illusions about their jobs. Some are white. Some are black. Some are men. Some are women. Most feel "Locked" into the system.

In Manhattan, a hustler could be speaking for all of them.

"You become your job," she said. "I became what I did. I became a hustler. I became cold, I became hard, I became turned off, I became numb. Even when I wasn't hustling, I was a hustler. I don't think it's terribly different from somebody who works on the assembly line forty hours a week and comes home cut off, numb, dehumanized.



BOOKS of
the TIMES

by GEORGE VUKELICH

WORKING:

People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do. by Studs Terkel, Pantheon, 589 pp., \$10.

People aren't built to switch on and off like water faucets."

The assembly line (at the Ford plant on Chicago's South Side) is the focal point for an interconnecting series of interviews — and some of them sound like the hustler.

- Phil Stallings, spot-welder: "It don't stop. It just goes and goes and goes. I bet there's men who have lived and died out there, never seen the end of that line. And they never will — because it's endless. It's like a serpent. It's all body, no tail. It can do things to you . . . (LAUGHS)"

- Hobart Foote, utility man: "I think a lot of it is in your mind. You get like what's his name that works in the body shop — Phil Stallings. He's grown to hate the company. Not me. The company puts bread and butter on the table. I feed the family, and with two teen-aged kids, that's a lot of wants . . ."

- Ned Williams, the stock chaser: "**Sometimes I felt like I was just a robot. You push a button and you go this way. You become a mechanical man. You get a couple of beers and go to sleep at night. Maybe one, two o'clock in the morning, my wife is saying, 'Come on, come on, leave it.' I'm still workin' that line . . .**"

The premise of "Working" is simplicity itself. An interviewer talking to interviewees. What gives the book its power is that you quickly know that these are **real** people, human as hell and captured in dimensions beyond the capabilities of most interviewers. Studs Terkel gives the book its brilliance. Most good interviewers get so they can **talk** to all kinds of people eventually. What makes Studs Terkel great is that he **listens** to each and every one of them.

Born in 1912, Studs Terkel grew up in Chicago, and graduated from the University of Chicago in 1932 and from the Chicago Law School in 1934. He has acted in radio soap operas, been a disc jockey, a sports commentator, a TV emcee, and has traveled all over the world doing on-the-spot interviews. Currently, he has a daily radio program on WFMT Chicago (broadcast locally at 9:30 Saturday nights over WHA-FM).

His previous books, "Divison Street: America" and "Hard Times" have been translated into every major Western language as well as Hungarian and Japanese.