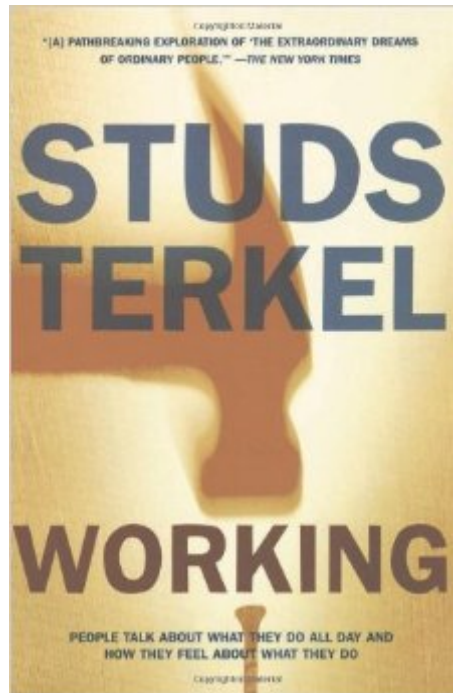


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# Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day And How They Feel About What They Do



## Synopsis

Perhaps Studs Terkel's best-known book, *Working* is a compelling, fascinating look at jobs and the people who do them. Consisting of over one hundred interviews conducted with everyone from gravediggers to studio heads, this book provides a timeless snapshot of people's feelings about their working lives, as well as a relevant and lasting look at how work fits into American life.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I feel compelled to respond to brothersjudddotcom. Nowhere in Terkel's book do I get the notion that he believes people "don't want to work." I imagine Terkel loves his own work. The subject of the book is the way that most jobs (even "good" jobs) have become dehumanizing. Robotizing. One of his interviewees, a filmmaker, comments on an "educational film" she saw, one intended to inspire "ghetto kids" to pursue their dreams. She remarks that the "most (financially) successful" subject in the film, a businessman, spoke about his money and his possessions while a "less successful" sculptor led a tour of his studio and spoke about his actual work. She says that she feels people are being deprived of the potential joys in work when we are trained to focus too much on status and salary. He also interviews actor Rip Torn, who laments that actors are expected to be "shills" to tailor their performances to the selling of products. For example, Torn tells a story about being required to smoke cigarettes rather than cigars in a particular role. Historically, the character would not have smoked cigarettes; the sponsor was a cigarette company. Torn felt that both his art and his intelligence, as well as that of the audience, were sold out by this demand. Far from being "badly

dated," Terkel's critique is monstrously accurate today. Now, as contrasted with the 1970s, in many families, both parents "devote" 10+ hours to power games at work at the expense of family time, personal health, community, etc. I believe that Terkel believes meaningful work to be essential to the human spirit. Problem is, as amount of work increases, meaning seems to be decreasing.

Studs Terkel's classic book "Working" is nothing more than a large volume of transcribed confessions of working people. The concept is deceptively simple, but what it reveals about a common activity that unites all of humanity is often truly surprising. Do you hate your job? Guess what. Most people do! Terkel gets workers from waitresses and steel workers to dentists and ad executives to confess what's really in their souls and how they really feel about what they do to make a buck. The surprise is how universal many of the feelings we have about our jobs truly are. One of the most striking things to me is how little has changed in the intervening 40 years since the interviews contained in "Working" were first collected. When describing work, nostalgia runs rampant among Americans. We look back longingly to the days when America was a mighty manufacturing powerhouse, when we domestically produced much of what we consume. We often think about steel or car manufacturing through a gauzy haze. "Working" clears the haze away and reveals a far less rosy truth: manufacturing work is often robotic, dehumanizing, and physically punishing. Men who do this work have no love for it and their bodies often pay a steep price for it. They didn't view it as romantic or noble then and they probably don't now. It's just a means to make a living wage. Of the dozens (and dozens) of interviews in the book, a series of common themes are present. Here are the ones that caught my attention. There's a recognition among long-time workers that profit is king over all. The people who produce product are mere cogs in the machine. Everyone has a secret dream job, what they imagine they'd rather be doing, where things would be better somehow. Even if people don't like their jobs, they're often proud of their personal ability, how fast they can complete a task, how accurately, tips they've learned through years of experience. They possess hard-won knowledge that took years to accumulate. Laborers often see management as oppressors who play for a different team. They're to be thwarted in petty ways whenever the opportunity presents itself. It's often a game to occupy time or a way to build camaraderie amongst peers. "How can we get back at the Man?" People recognize their own limitations and don't necessarily want to be treated as equals, but they do want to be respected, no matter what their station. They want others to recognize their value, that the product or service being offered by the company wouldn't be viable without their efforts. They know that society couldn't produce a steel beam or a car or serve hot meals to people who demand them if it weren't for them. These jobs lack

status and glamour, but the world would stop without them. The "old days" are always better, no matter what era you grew up in. Nostalgia for a better past is universal. There's a feeling that "back in my day, there was craft to the job, now work's just robotic or talentless." Also, "kids today!" and how they lack drive or commitment is a common refrain. There's nothing new under the sun. 40 years ago people were already complaining that the days of company loyalty were over, the idea that you could work for one firm for a lifetime and be rewarded or valued were a thing of the past. Corporate life is empty, and corporate success an illusion. Big money managers are petrified of the hotshot youngster nipping at their heels, angling for their job. They worry about their age, that they're disposable once they're over 50. Executives report feeling a moral hollowness about their work. As one of the interviewees put it "in the business world, in order to do a better job, you have to become ruthless. In order to make more money, you have to care for people less. In order to succeed, you have to be willing to stab your competitor in the back." People who have found ladder-climbing to be an empty pursuit stop hungering for status and no longer care about it. When that happens, they're free to pursue their heart's desire, or something that makes them feel like they're truly contributing to the world in a meaningful way, in a way beyond making profit for a corporation. Many jobs are "too small for one's spirit." People need to feel challenged in order to be fulfilled. A job which is secure and pays adequately may mean complete misery if there's no challenge or sense of meaningful contribution.

Working has been my favorite book - likely the book that had the most implicit impact on the way I think - for many years. I pick it up every year and read a random section, put it back down, and pick it up again. Real stories, genuinely collected. The comments are interesting - everyone interprets what Terkel gathered in a way that meets their own worldview. Not too surprising, but read it yourself, and draw your own conclusions - maybe even new ones.

Studs Terkel wanted to write a book about working for a living. So he sat down with a grocery store cashier and interviewed her about her job. He didn't ask very many questions; he just turned on a tape recorder and let her pour her heart out. She explained what she did for a living, how and why she came to do it, what she liked and disliked about her job. She talked about the little dramas and boredom that filled her working hours and the toll it took on her private life. When she was finished talking she had created a vivid "snapshot" with words of what it's like to work as a grocery store cashier. Then Studs interviewed a bartender, a teacher, a pro athlete and dozens of other people from dozens of professions. They each created in their own words unique self-portraits of

themselves at work. The book *Working* is like an art gallery filled with these detailed self-portraits. And just like strolling through an art gallery looking at paintings will give you a feel for the visions of a variety of artists, reading *Working* will give you a taste of the flavor of the working lives of its subjects.

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