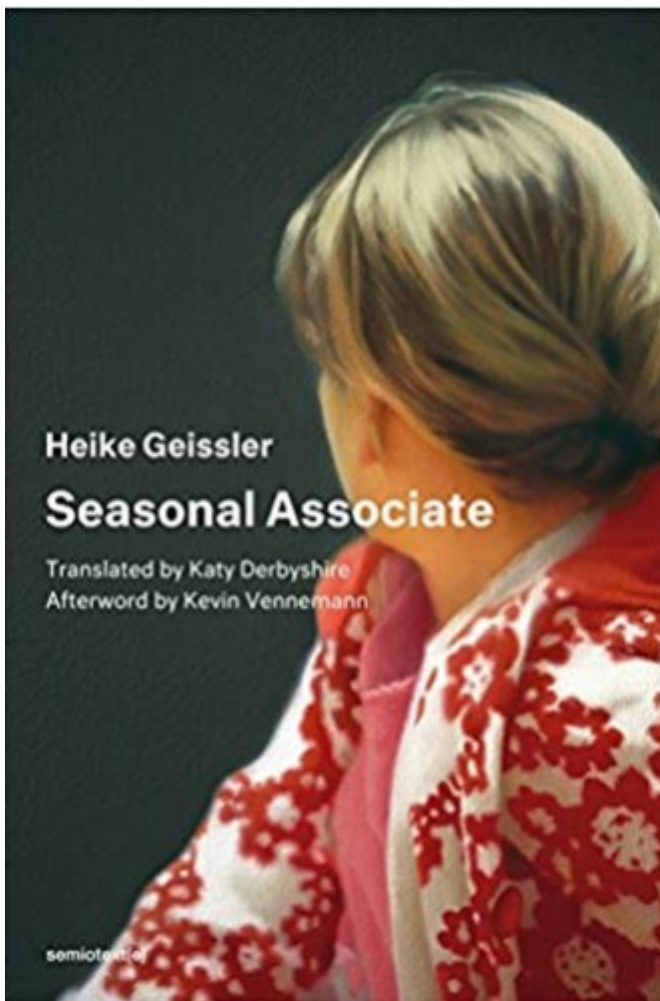


A story that puts you in an Amazon warehouse worker's shoes

Heike Geissler's account of her time at Amazon is far more than a workplace exposé.

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#) in the [December 5, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Seasonal Associate

By Heike Geissler, translated by Katy Derbyshire
Semiotext(e)

In 2010, when her freelance writing and translating gigs weren't producing enough income to pay the bills, German novelist Heike Geissler took a seasonal job at the Amazon distribution warehouse in Leipzig. There she spent her days (and sometimes nights) unpacking items from boxes, inspecting them for damage, scanning them into the computer system, and placing them in a crate that the managers insisted she call a *tote*—a homonym for the German word for death. The work was boring, physically demanding, and demoralizing.

Geissler's account of her time at Amazon is more than a workplace exposé. Hovering somewhere between memoir, cultural criticism, and fiction, it's a compelling meditation on the psychological and physical harm of working for a large corporation in a society driven by neoliberal economic goals. In the middle of an argument with a coworker about the right way to stack boxes and crates, the narrator comes to a sober realization:

You're like a coal miner who wants to split a rock with a big heavy hammer, who raises a hammer he can hardly lift, and brings the hammer down on the rock with full force, but can't make even the tiniest chink. You hope for fast results, where only continuous light work is possible and necessary on that rock.

It's not clear whether the rock is the coworker, who can't be bothered to work in anything but a lackadaisical way, or the job itself, which is so dehumanizing that it strips workers' labor of any moral value.

What's clear is that the packages keep coming and the workers keep unpacking them, barely making a dent in the stream of merchandise. A glass bathtub duck. A used-looking baseball cap with an Iron Maiden logo on it. Advent calendars containing daily teabags whose labels have drawings of politicians on them. Italian model cars. Unpack, inspect, scan, put into a *tote* (whose name reminds you of death). Repeat. "Everything exists, in case you were going to ask. Absolutely everything exists, and people can buy it all."

The people who "can buy it all" include anyone who has ever purchased an item through Amazon. The reader becomes the oppressor: we are all complicit in the cycle of production and consumption that turns factory workers into robots, people without voice. At the same time, Geissler places the reader in the role of factory

worker by using the second-person point of view through most of the book.

You, in the midst of your coworkers, in the midst of strangers with coats and bellies, frozen and in some cases chapped hands on handholds, are nothing but a placeholder for machines that have already been invented but aren't yet profitable enough to permanently replace you and your workmates, who are very low-cost. The fact that your presence is necessary troubles your employer, who dislikes dealing with troublemakers. You're a tool gifted with a voice no one wants to hear.

The "you" here, Kevin Vennemann writes in the afterword, represents Geissler's split-off self, illustrating the damaging psychological fragmentation that Karl Marx diagnosed in workers. True, perhaps, but Geissler's writing is so vivid that the reader is as likely to put herself in the place of the "you" as she is to contemplate what is happening to the author. Vennemann seems to acknowledge this: what makes the book so terrifying, he notes, is that Geissler has "touched on the most harrowing future scenario the majority of us, her lettered audience, are capable of entertaining," the possibility that we too may someday need to take up menial labor.

As the book proceeds, Geissler takes increasingly more control over the "you" she addresses—and she does so in a seemingly arbitrary way, mimicking the way owners and managers use their power to chip away at their workers' personhood.

For example, you start out being, like Geissler, a female German writer and translator "with two sons and a partner who suits you well." But a few chapters later, she takes away your family: "To begin with, I pretended you had my boyfriend and my children, but that's not how it is. I'm not going to share them. I can't do that. You're me, but you don't have my entire life." Then she gives you a fever and makes you go to the doctor to get a sick-note to justify the days off.

She isn't entirely merciless: sometimes she puts a funny book into the box you're unpacking to make you laugh. Another time she makes you fall in love (and then quickly out of it) with a forklift driver. Eventually, after suggesting how you could be subversively disruptive—putting preordered goods in the wrong tote, deliberately miscounting items, or inserting into books Post-its with insults written on them—she takes away your agency altogether: "We're not leaving this book until you've taken action."

And this is where the reader's identification with Geissler's "you" begins to break down. The reader, through Geissler's well-crafted prose, can vicariously experience the life of a factory worker—but can also opt out of the experience by putting the book down. The factory worker has no such luxury.

Geissler doesn't explicitly address such questions of agency, but there does seem to be some moral purpose to the book. We are all children of capitalism, she notes in the final chapter, and she wonders, "What can a person actually do, considering we all need money?" After critiquing an article she's read about a woman who lives merely by bartering, Geissler poses a challenge to her readers: "You don't want reports on exotic antitheses to the world, you want theses with possibilities for living in this world."

Whether this challenge leads to resignation or ethical deliberation is up to the reader. Merely by issuing the challenge, Geissler does something her employer would never think of doing: she gives you back your agency.