Inside the lives of everyday workers

Mark Larson’s collection of soulful interviews is a worthy successor to Studs Terkel’s 1974 classic *Working*.

by Jesse Lava in the March 2025 issue
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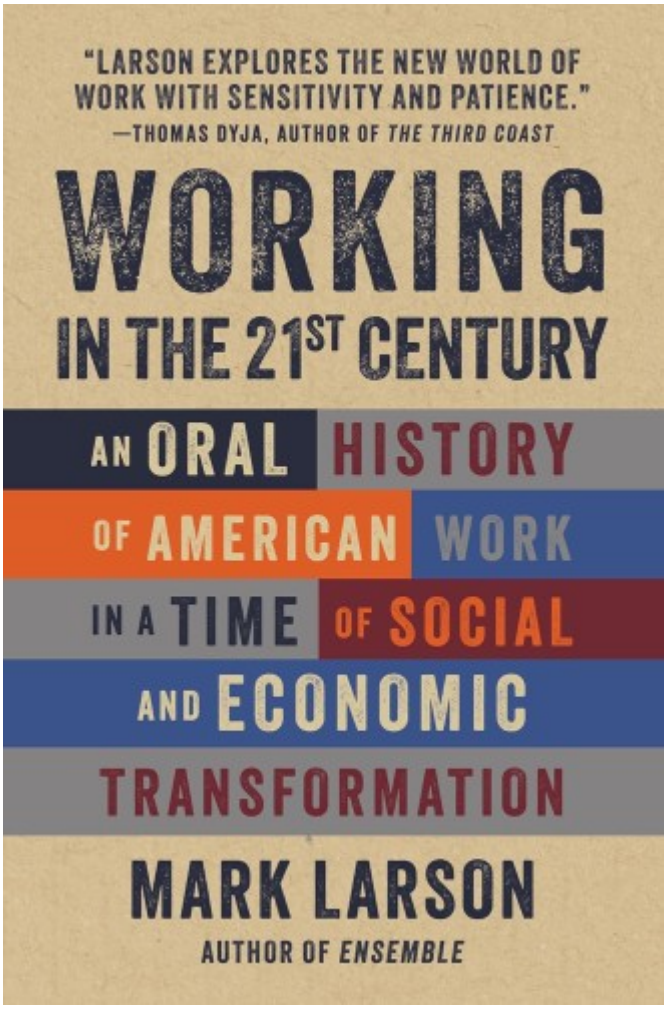
In Review



Working in the 21st Century

An Oral History of American Work in a Time of Social and Economic Transformation

By Mark Larson
Agate
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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

My 12th-grade English teacher was a curious and active listener. Whenever we sat together to discuss my latest personal essay, he'd ask, "What are you really trying to say?" I'd spill my guts—in ways I'd never done in school before. I told him about my hang-ups, my breakups, my dying mom. He listened in a manner that was simultaneously gentle and intense, and I got the sense that he respected me.

I'm not surprised that he has become an oral historian. In his new book, *Working in the 21st Century*, Mark Larson interviews more than 100 Americans about what they do for a living: what they love about it, what they're afraid of, what gives them hope. He peers into the lives of the idealistic abortion doctor and the frustrated middle school teacher, the carefree street performer and the frazzled stay-at-home dad, the wild land firefighter who is exhilarated by the work but embittered by the pay, the woman who—deep breath—wanted to go to law school but got incarcerated and became a welder before taking a job helping felons return to the workforce.

If the concept sounds familiar, it should. The release of Larson's book was pegged to the 50th anniversary of Studs Terkel's 1974 classic *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*. Larson's ambition is to update Terkel for the modern world. His interviews address issues that didn't exist a half century ago, like surviving the pandemic and being perpetually online. Yet the book is more a reminder that people are still people. They want to matter, they care about their kids, and they're alternately grateful and disgruntled. A glance at the table of contents shows the world hasn't changed as much as we sometimes think: a pastor, a police officer, a judge, an actor, a brigadier general—such workers do basically the same jobs they did in Terkel's day and probably still would if we lived in *The Jetsons*.

Larson says he shares the late Terkel's feeling of being "possessed by the mystique of work" and passion for "knowing what it's like to be you, whoever you happen to be." That's a theological starting point.

Accordingly, *Working in the 21st Century* is a sensitive, illuminating book. It's infuriating and heartbreaking to read about podiatric surgeon Lawrence Taylor, who

had the audacity to be Black in Mississippi. Legislators didn't like that he was lobbying to change a podiatry law, so he got indicted over and over on charges that were always dropped for lack of evidence. He was menaced repeatedly at his home. His lawyer wept, saying, "The thought of them running another Black man out of Mississippi is more than I can stand." Taylor ended up losing everything and starting over in Minneapolis.

Then there's Karen Grace, who has a doctorate in education but feels unsatisfied in her career and, at 40, is anxious and bitter that her family still lives paycheck to paycheck. "I'd love to be in a place where what I bring is allowed to flourish," she says. "I would love to be able to make a difference. . . . I keep saying, 'This one [opportunity] is going to [work out] or that one thing is going to go my way,' and then it doesn't.
. . . Will I find it? I don't know, I really don't know."

Not every story is a sad one. Amanda Lee Lazorchack is "enamored by brooms" and finds joy in harvesting wood from the Ozarks to build them. Doorman Wendell Dew loves chatting people up and gets told all the time how much he'll be missed when he retires. Jazz singer Kurt Elling feels privileged to take part in special moments that feed people's souls—such as a performance shortly after 9/11 that felt like "an act of mercy, somehow."

To be clear, the book is not a random sampling of the American population. Larson's progressive political commitments are unmistakable, as he is drawn to people who value anti-racism, labor rights, environmentalism, and the like. If any of the interviewees lean right, we wouldn't know it. There's no pro-life activist. There's no border guard who thinks immigrants are invading the country. There's a cop who thinks his profession has been unfairly demonized, but he's measured about it and never gets explicitly political.

I think that's a drawback, even though I myself lean left. Larson found interview subjects by getting introductions from one person to the next and seeing where his interests led—a method that echoes the social media algorithms that feed us videos similar to whatever we just watched. In an era of pernicious polarization, Larson missed an opportunity to show how our common humanity transcends political divides.

But then, Larson has no obligation to send that message. And his instincts fittingly resemble those of the famously leftist Terkel, who set a gold standard that we should be circumspect in criticizing.

Working in the 21st Century is a worthy successor to Terkel's seminal book. As with the original, a soulfulness is palpable in every story, marking each interviewee as both special and ordinary. Worker after worker finds reasons to be at once frustrated and hopeful, exhausted and energized. Although some of them feel like Sisyphus, they tend to follow the guidance of Camus and imagine Sisyphus happy. I can relate to that. The odds are better than a coin toss that you can, too.