

BOOK REVIEWS:

Schlosser, Eric 2002. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. New York: Perennial Books, 383p.

Fast Food Nation is a chilling indictment of the fast food industry in the United States on two levels. First it delves into the history about how the concept of the 'all-American' fast food meal took shape and then traces how the food gets produced today. It is the truth about the modern-day slaughterhouse -- from the "pop, pop, pop" sound of live cows being stunned, to the sight of a blood-drenched man slitting their throats to the stink of their organs dumped on the kill floor. It is also the story of spanking new plants in which tonnes of potatoes are shot out of a high-pressure hose at 117 feet per second then forced through a web of sharpened steel blades to make perfectly cut french-fries. Second, *Fast Food Nation* tells the tale of the industry's workers, their working conditions and their lives. The book details the horrendous and disfiguring injuries and deaths suffered by workers in the meat plants, the lack of health and safety regulations at many plants. Workers suffer the further indignity of relatively low pay coupled with the corporations' successful attempts to break or whip the unions in many facilities.

The book is certainly shocking. Disaffected employees sneak Schlosser into the slaughterhouses, french-fry factories and back ends of fast food restaurants -- places that do not consent

to workplace tours. As he criss-crosses the US Midwest, he reveals a new lexicon of slaughterhouse jobs: knocker, sticker, shackler, rumper and navel-boner. He reports on tragic accidents and deaths of workers -- notably contract cleaners in the plants -- that should have been prevented. Perhaps the most shocking and unpredictable health and safety transgression is the fact that in the US in 1998, more fast food restaurant workers were killed on the job than were police officers. The author explains that up to half a dozen fast food workers are killed at work every month -- often in the course of a robbery. According to Schlosser, fast food restaurants in the US "are now more attractive to armed robbers than convenience stores, gas stations, or banks." Canadians who work in fast food outlets are also not immune to violence; a decade ago three young McDonald's workers were murdered and one was left for dead at the restaurant in Sydney, Nova Scotia. Eric Schlosser's book presents a searing social critique of just about every aspect of the fast food industry -- but it is a criticism made all the more immediate and damning because of the author's skills as an investigative journalist and his talent as a consummate storyteller.

Schlosser is not the first writer to come out with a book that looks at working in the fast food industry. In fact there have been at least two Canadian-authored books on the subject. Ester Reiter's excellent *Making Fast Food: From the Frying Pan into the*

Fryer (1991) comes to mind as does Phonse Jessome's book *Murder at McDonald's: The Killers Next Door* (1994), which details the McDonald's workers' murders in Sydney. But in a way, Schlosser has built on both books. He takes an intensive look at the fast food industry, from 'raw materials' to production; he follows workers lives at the abattoirs and in the restaurants; he examines the safety of the food, advertising pitched to children, ethical issues and mad cow disease. He devotes a whole chapter to serious public health risks like new pathogens, including E.coli 0157:H7, found in the everyday hamburger and their effects on an unknowing public -- children especially.

The final chapter of the book details the globalisation of fast food. A Chinese anthropologist tells Schlosser that to her fellow countrymen, McDonald's represents "Americana and the promise of modernisation." In 1992, thousands queued for hours to eat at Beijing's first McDonald's. McDonald's is the largest private employer in Brazil. McDonald's restaurants have sprouted in Turkey and Tahiti. The book points out that nowadays McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) earn most of their profits outside the US. The author's knowledge of the fast food industry is encyclopedic, but his unflinching eye for detail makes this book a must-read.

Still, the chapters on the workers in the fast food industry are, in my view, the best. The slaughterhouses, despite their poverty wages, are a magnet for new industrial migrants, especially those from Mexico, Central America and Southeast Asia. One plant has an

annual turnover of four hundred per cent. In the plants, the speed of the disassembly line is a key factor in the rate of injury. The faster workers have to work, the more injuries. Half a century ago, Chicago meatpacking plants slaughtered 50 cattle per hour. Twenty years ago, that figure jumped to 175 cattle per hour. Today meatpacking plants in the US Midwest are slaughtering over 400 head of cattle per hour. Every minute about six animals are going down the assembly line. Workers, standing within inches of each other, have to carve very fast just to keep up; there is no time to break or to sharpen their knives. Injuries such as cuts and stabbings are common. Workers get shifted to easier jobs if they agree not to report accidents. Some workers are even sent back to Mexico to recuperate and then return to the plant - all in an effort to deter them from seeing a doctor and having the accident mar the plant's safety record.

Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* is a landmark 1906 novel about life and death in a Chicago meat-packing plant of 100 years ago. Sinclair wrote this warning: "This is no fairy story and no joke. The meat would be shovelled into carts, and the man who did the shovelling would not trouble to lift out a rat even when he saw one - there were things that went into the sausage in comparison with which a poisoned rat was a tidbit." According to Schlosser, things have not changed significantly for the better.

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