

## *New Hires, Job Tests and Commercial Brainwashing*

Alex Frankel, *Punching In: The Unauthorized Adventures of a Front-Line Employee*, New York: Collins, 2007.

reviewed by Russell Harrison

*How in the hell could a man enjoy being awakened at 6:30 a.m. by an alarm clock, leap out of bed, dress, force-feed, shit, piss, brush teeth and hair, and fight traffic to get to a place where essentially you made lots of money for somebody else and were asked to be grateful for the opportunity to do so.* — Charles Bukowski<sup>1</sup>

This is a book in the tradition of Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* (2001). It involves a journalist going "undercover" to see what it's really like to work a (bad) job, i.e., a job like those held by the vast majority of Americans who *have* jobs. An important difference between the two books is that Ehrenreich was also interested in the lives and economic struggles of these low-wage workers outside of work. Frankel's workers would appear to be somewhat better off than those Ehrenreich met. This is naturally a plus for them, although for the reader it raises unsettling questions about the quality of work life in the U.S. The companies for whom Frankel works are: UPS, Enterprise Rent-A-Car, Gap, Starbucks and Apple.

But are these all bad jobs? For Frankel, UPS and Apple seemed not to have been, while one gets the impression that the others, especially Gap, were.<sup>2</sup> He seems particularly enamored of the UPS job. Although this was the first one that he wrote about, he returns to it in the last two pages. After he has quit, he returns a week later to pick up his last check. There is a sign-up form for those who want to work longer for the company:

"I was tempted to sign up, to keep my investment in the company growing and to stay a part of it. I managed to keep a few pieces of my uniform that Carolyn [a permanent worker] had given me, and a year later I'd pull on the warm brown quilted vest and feel a sense of power and place." (208)

This is the type of statement that in the normal course of reviewing a book, one might feel, "ah ha, now we're on to something." But I was on to nothing and I think that was because Frankel was on to nothing too, or at the least lacked the interest in probing further. Too often the book is like that.

There are insights and a number of competently described scenes; Frankel is an intelligent and clear writer. But what seems lacking is a larger context. In the introduction, trying to explain his reasons for undertaking such a project, he writes that he had:

"a deep-seated curiosity, an urge to understand the commercial world that surrounds us by interacting with it in an all-encompassing way, to experience firsthand what it felt like to be part of an interconnected global workforce by becoming a piece of it. Eventually I knew I had to apply for work for UPS" (4).

Again, and even more, this seems unanalyzed, almost filler.

But the book holds one's (limited) interest, as does most such literature, by virtue of the nitty-gritty minutia of jobs. Ehrenreich had noted (in *Bait and Switch*) that in these hard economic times, employers were demanding a new quality in an applicant: passion for the job. Frankel, too, notes this. At Starbucks, the "employees were hired for their passion about coffee" (164). One manager said: "When I ask them what they

like about coffee and their eyes just kind of light up, those are the ones I hire” (164). I find this hard to believe and, if true, appalling.

What is missing here (and quite present in the passage above from Bukowski’s *Factotum*) is the sense of exploitation, i.e., the sense that through the sale of one’s labor power, one not only reproduces one’s own life, but creates a profit, a surplus of value, for the owner (in this case Howard Schultz). Frankel’s book seems to have been finished sometime during 2006-2007, before the collapse of Starbucks’ share price and the announced closing of stores and the impending laying-off of thousands of Starbucks employees. I wonder if those eyes are quite so lit up at the moment.

But, sarcasm aside, there is an important issue here, which is underlined by Frankel’s experiences with three companies where he was *not* hired: the Container Store, Home Depot and Whole Foods. Frankel failed to be hired at these stores because he fell afoul of their pre-hiring screening techniques, including quite extended texts, some of which even required short essay questions, and multiple interviews. This is a far cry from the crude tests that Ehrenreich wrote about.<sup>3</sup>

It seems to me that there is an odd kind of commercial brainwashing going on here. Through the barrage of tests that the work force, especially younger workers, has now become accustomed to taking (along with drug tests and being fingerprinted), a workforce is being created that (thinks it) knows what these tests want as a response and thus shapes its answers accordingly, also thinking that it can preserve some safe house for its authentic identity. This is questionable. Identities are more malleable than we like to think. It is only so long that we can pretend a false consciousness before we develop an authentic false consciousness.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Factotum*. (127)

<sup>2</sup> Marc Bousquet presents a very different picture of UPS, See his *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (2008). After he leaves UPS, Frankel arranges to go as a journalist to Worldport, one of UPS’s huge sorting facilities. In passing, he remarks that the facility is “Staffed by 5,000 workers each night (75 percent of whom are college students, many of whom get tuition paid for by UPS)” (46). Bousquet paints a very different picture, of exploited part-timers, so fatigued and injured that they often dropped out: “Metropolitan College is, in fact, little more than a labor contractor. Supported by public funds, this “college” offers no degrees and does no educating. Its sole function is to entice students to sign contracts that commit them to provide cheap labor in exchange for education benefits at the partner institutions.

<sup>3</sup> At Whole Foods there were “more than 200” questions about Frankel’s work habits (64).