

ALL DAY LONG
JOANNA BIGGS
A PORTRAIT OF BRITAIN AT WORK



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IN DOVER

IN THE COLD BACK ROOM of a charity shop, a group of volunteers are working. Eve steams clothes with an orange Hoover-like machine, eating sweets from a bag in her pocket as she goes. Every so often the steamer fogs and she tops it up with water. It's March 2014, and three times a week she works a morning shift; on the other days she goes to English and maths lessons. 'I've done my ones, twos, threes, fours, fives, sixes – I'm on my seven times tables now.' Eve's 50 and grew up in a children's home; her best job before this one was sorting potatoes on the back of a tractor. She's shocked I have never eaten Kentish gypsy tart, and offers to make me one. Is it like Bakewell tart? 'It's more whipped,' she says.

Eve's paper bag of sweets came from Sarah, who she met at literacy classes. Sarah's 23 and had just done a trial at a supermarket – 'I couldn't read the products' – and one for a cleaning job – 'They say I'm not suitable for doing the paperwork to be a cleaner. That is so ... How do you need paperwork to work, to be a cleaner?' – but she wants to work in a nursery. 'That's why I'm doing my English.' She receives Disability Living Allowance and comes here four times a week, brings sweets, makes cups of tea. Today she arranges an armful of plush cats and dogs on a shelf, after Karin, the shop's manager, has pierced the ears with a price.

If you ask people why they work, most will say for money. Eve and Sarah work without getting paid; Karin gets the minimum wage of £6.50 an hour, but works so much overtime she earns £3.27 an hour. What we do for money seems like the essential

but dull part of our lives – in tired phrases such as ‘work–life balance’, work is set against life, as if it were life’s opposite – but it’s also where we make friends, exert power, pass the time, fall in love, give back, puff ourselves up, get bored, play, backstab, bully and resist. And as the days slide by, it changes us almost unobserved. Jane Eyre goes to Thornfield Hall as a governess but by the end of the book, she’s its mistress. Brontë’s novel is on one hand a love story: a plain, far-seeing girl gets beneath the rough surface of her master. On the other it’s a *Bildungsroman*: a friendless orphan’s work gives her the confidence to brave the rattling attic.

Karin runs a covertly Communist system; from each according to his talents and to each according to his needs. Karin began volunteering in charity shops when her children were small, worked in a dress shop when they were bigger but didn’t like it (‘pressure selling’) and then managed the charity shop in aid of the People’s Dispensary for Sick Animals in Ashford for twenty-three years. Now that she runs the Dover branch she takes a sporting pleasure in surpassing Ashford’s daily earnings; last week they managed it twice. She chose the PDSA because the family dog got sick once when she was a child: her mother sent her from their council estate in South-East London to the local PDSA. She held the money, her sister held the dog’s string and their little brother followed behind. The vet handed over an envelope with white pills inside, ‘and the dog got better’. What needs does work meet for Eve, Sarah and Karin? ‘I love working here. It’s well nice,’ Eve says. ‘You meet new people,’ Sarah says. ‘Here, animals suffer if you don’t make money,’ Karin says. Sorting through bin bags of donations is one of Sarah’s friends from school, Kayleigh. ‘Are you a journalist?’ she asks. ‘I can’t speak to you then,’ she says and listens instead.

The radio plays ‘Simply the Best’ by Tina Turner. I can see the board game Battleship, a ‘Cadbury Collection’ 100-piece puzzle, a tiny blue satin Chinese tunic on a hanger, embroidery hoops

in different sizes, books by Alan Titchmarsh and Barbara Taylor Bradford, children's plastic sunglasses with coloured frames and a box of 'Ladies' Microwave Slippers'. Katherine untangles costume jewellery. She's wearing a gold 'key volunteer' badge and says we used to go to school together, but at first I don't recognise her. She'd wanted to be a librarian, but when she became one for Kent County Council the dusty life she'd hoped for no longer existed. Being a librarian now meant helping people get on the internet and extinguishing burning loo rolls in the toilets. She left and worked here and there, trained to determine the clarity, cut and quality of diamonds at a jeweller, the reason she's given the necklace tangle to sort out, then had seven months off work. It hits me: her red hair used to be brown in the sixth form at Dover Girls' Grammar School. I can picture her waiting for Latin while I waited for my French lesson. She works a Saturday morning at the PDSA even though she has a new job in planning at a perfume company. 'Anyone can do my job. I do enjoy it and I get on with my colleagues and that, but I do it to pay the rent. If I had a choice ... If I won the lottery, I'd just study, and volunteer here. There's a lot more pride in what I'm doing here. And I feel a lot more loyal to the PDSA than I do to work. Work's just work. I can work in Tesco if I have to! I don't want to,' she laughs, 'but, you know ...'

At five I told my mother I wanted to be an actress, at nine I said a dancer, but later I more wisely said I wanted to go to university (my parents hadn't gone). At 22, just graduated from Oxford, I hoped to do something meaningful, absorbing and perhaps also glamorous, like Esther Greenwood going to work on a women's magazine in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Work I might love. I had babysat, delivered newspapers, helped my mum with Avon orders, washed cars, worked in the office of a translation agency, sat on a till in WHSmith on Saturdays, stuffed envelopes for one miserable half-week, assisted the manager of a Christmas card

factory (who used to say ‘we’re cooking on gas, and we’re cooking on gas’ which I still hear in my head in his voice), took payment for water bills and logged car crashes in a call centre. I came to London to study for a Master’s degree in eighteenth-century literature, still not quite knowing if I wanted to be an academic or not, and moved in with two girls I knew as an undergraduate: one was starting work on a national newspaper, the other at a literary agency. In the evenings, we sat on the floor of the mostly empty two-bedroom Hackney flat we were using as a three-bedroom one, shared a plastic bag of prawn crackers from the Chinese around the corner and talked. I heard about worries, colleagues, expectations; who sat where, what happened at lunch, what everyone wore. It was a way of finding out what we wanted to avoid and who we wanted to be. University had made us employable, but hadn’t prepared us for work. The novels we had studied were about love and depravity; they weren’t set in offices.

When I started an entry-level job at a literary magazine at the end of the year, I finally got to join them. We were (mostly) conscientious and wanted to do well at work, as we had done at school, but it wasn’t just that: before the financial crash in 2008, there was a general sense that the work we were beginning would fulfil us for a long time. Companies talked about themselves as ethical employers, threw parties with fizzy wine at the Groucho Club and gave out silk scarves at Christmas. If we stayed late and worked well, work would return our love. The benevolence of the businesses we worked for muffled our doubts. (In that first year, I spent a lot of time opening envelopes.) And besides, at house parties, leaning against kitchen counters sticky with spilled beer, we were asked: ‘What do you do?’ and we weren’t ashamed to reply.

Karin doesn’t stop for lunch. There’s a hot dog van outside the shop’s open door, and the smell puts her off. There are two shifts of volunteers: one leaves and the other starts at 1 p.m. (The PDSA

estimates that it would cost £12.5 million to run their shops for a year if they paid the volunteers.) The charity no longer accepts people on the coalition government's programmes known as workfare, but they used to. They require people who have been unemployed for three months or more to work for free or lose their Jobseeker's Allowance; workfare was judged in the appeal court to be illegal. 'It's not right,' Karin says. She remembers those on workfare 'didn't want to be there quite a lot. Yes. And they would do a lot of sitting about and all the rest of it, so.' The shop does take people on 'Community Payback' who have been ordered by the courts to work unpaid. Karin finds them 'more capable'. I never discover what Ben, tattooed and Reeboked, did wrong. He helps Eve, Sarah and Kayleigh sort out donations and tidies crammed clothes rails. Chelsea is getting beaten by Aston Villa, and he chats to Eve, a Liverpool fan. Sarah finds a dictionary among the donated books: does anyone want it? 'Nah, my phone does everything,' Ben replies. He says he doesn't trust himself talking to me. Before I can persuade him otherwise, someone rings to say his daughter has had a fall and he leaves early.

Work can also be about guilt. In Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Tess, having confessed her 'not inviolate past' to her husband, leaves the dairy farm's lush fields to work at the 'red tyrant' of the threshing machine. That part of the novel is called 'The Woman Pays'. 'Community Payback' itself suggests a debt – moral as well as financial – to be worked off. Who are we if we don't work? Politicians of all parties talk of 'hardworking families'; the Protestant work ethic persists. The idea that work is a duty and a calling, or even recompense for original sin, is embraced from the church to the charity shop, prison, nursery and gym. In the 1963 film *Billy Liar*, Billy fantasises about leaving his dull job at an undertaker's but when Julie Christie as Liz comes to take him away, he can't leave. Work has a hold over him he didn't realise it had.

ALL DAY LONG

Every so often someone will burst into the back room for knitting needles, or children's sunglasses, or to ask: 'Somebody wants to reserve the wedding dress until Wednesday. Do we do things like that? I don't know why Wednesday.' Katie has arrived for the afternoon shift. She's been volunteering for eight years as she doesn't like the thought of people being cruel to animals. Katie, Karin jokes, is her 'project': she's being trained on the till (not everyone can be trusted on the till). In Ashford, Karin had brought a young man with learning difficulties out of his shell; he ended up running the shop on Sundays singlehanded. (Karin has a nice line in teases: 'We get on well, don't we?' Eve says. Karin replies, 'Yeah, and if we don't, I hit them.') Katie sells a pair of lime, turquoise and pink running shoes for £7.49 to a girl who's wearing the grey blazer of Dover College, the private school a few minutes' walk away. 'Everyone loves a bargain,' the girl's mother says. Pauline, a volunteer in her seventies, suddenly feels faint and Ben sits with her in the back room until he's called away and I take over. She would be 'bored stiff' indoors; it's no good to be around your husband all day every day. The shop has fallen quiet an hour before closing time, and Karin has me walk Pauline to the bus stop on my way home.

The average full-time worker in the UK works 39.2 hours a week and earns £27,200 a year according to government statistics, but these numbers, like the rise and fall of GDP, don't get at what work feels like. Katie's work looks like rearranging clothes but it might bring her a sense of ownership. Ben seems to be sorting donated books but it could feel to him like admonishment. Katherine is pairing up cheap earrings but she gets more from it than from what she does for money. Karin's job began as a way to get out of the house but has become a sort of social activism.

I walk back to my parents' house along the High Street. The travel agency where Mum and I arranged a holiday one dull Easter is now an empty glass box with a red and yellow estate

agent's sign propped on the floor. The KFC is quiet at this time of day, but in my teens, it was where everyone met to kiss and make bad jokes and fight after the clubs shut. The banks are still here, joined by pawnbrokers; the PDSA competes with the British Heart Foundation, Scope, Barnardo's and the RSPCA. I pass Allen Hughes, the gentleman's outfitters, virtually unchanged since the 1960s. From here you can look up towards the Western Heights, the fortifications first put up in 1804 against Napoleon's armies, now overgrown. The beauty salon that used to be a game shop that used to be a record shop is a few doors away from what was an independent café. I stop to read a handwritten note in faded biro taped to the inside of the door:

Dear Loyal Customers

I can only apologise for this inconvenience.

Have tried to succeed in very hard times but to no avail!

Many thanks for your support over the last 6 years. I am extremely sorry it has come to this.

I will try to open a new outlet for the bakery.

Thank you for your understanding.

J. King and staff

J. King and staff don't have to say there's now a branch of Costa Coffee next door.

Woolworths has gone; Boots is clinging on; M&S is there for a while longer, but there are shops whose names I don't recognise: Shoe Zone, Savers, Store Twenty One, Card Factory, Price Less Furniture. And there are amusement arcades that weren't there when I was younger. The signs say: CA TLE AMUSEMENTS, PALACE AM S MENTS.

The high streets and the market squares of the country can't help but reveal how work has changed since the 2008 debt crisis. The PDSA's Dover branch itself would close in the autumn of 2014, when the lease came up and the shop was sold; Karin

held the Christmas party on 29 September. The cost of living has gone up by a quarter while the means of earning one became less stable. Workers have agreed to freeze their wages, to take fewer hours than they'd like, or to set up on their own to avoid being made redundant. Wages are 8 per cent lower than they were before the crash; wealth has accrued to the already rich. The nation of shopkeepers has become a nation of disappointed bakers and momentarily cheerful hot dog men. The idea that good work brings a good life no longer holds.

In 1974, Studs Terkel travelled America talking to workers about what they did all day; while spending the last two years talking to workers from the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides to the North Wales coast, I've often wondered what Terkel would make of how we think about our work now. Wages were at their highest in the USA in 1973; as the economic historian Robert Brenner has shown, the beginning of the 1970s can now be seen as the start of a long downturn that followed the postwar boom. I've tried to capture what work as a CEO, a below minimum wage care worker, a ballerina or a robot feels like seven years into a financial crisis. When our work is less reliable, less remunerative even, how do we feel about it? I continuously heard that people loved their jobs, and sometimes this worried me: it felt as if work was becoming more insecure on one hand, and the work ethic increasingly revered on the other.

I can't pretend to have covered all the work done, in all its forms, by 30 million Britons. When I told people I was writing this book, they said: what about a window cleaner, someone who works in a betting shop, a shaman, a chimney sweep? Do they still have chimney sweeps? I didn't have a good answer for them – the obvious ones of time and money excepted – and I've called the book 'a portrait' because that's the only thing it can be. But a few ideas guided me. I wanted to think about work not simply as waged labour, but more broadly: isn't being a mother work too? Wages have gone down and work has become more