

RIVETHEAD

Tales from the assembly line

by Ben Hamper

1992, Warner Books, 234 pages

For my mother it [Family Night at the old Fisher Body Plant in Flint] was at least one night of the year when she could verify the old man's whereabouts. One night a year when she could be reasonably assured that my father wasn't lurchin' over a pool table at the Patio Lounge or picklin' his gizzard at any one of a thousand beer joints out on Dort Highway. My father loved his drink. He wasn't nearly as fond of labor. — from the first page

Right from the gitgo Ben Hamper's Rivethead grabs you with gritty gusto of passages such as the above; Hamper is an extraordinary writer about life for the ordinary guy... at least the ordinary guy who winds up as an automotive assembly-line worker for General Motors in Flint, Michigan—once considered the Automobile Capital of the World. The author is a natural shop rat, growing up in Flint, with an alcoholic mostly absentee father and a long-suffering, working-three-jobs mother trying to raise the family as practicing Catholics.

Our neighborhood was strictly blue-collar and predominantly Catholic. The men lumbered back and forth to the factories while their wives raised large families, packed lunch buckets, and marched the kids off to the nuns.— page 10

Well, Ben practiced a lot but never quite got the hang of Catholicism, and seems remarkably free of any guilt on that score. His good-natured development thru the Catholic school system showed no particular aptitude for much of anything except drinking, smoking dope, chasing skirts, and postponing the inevitable as long as possible... the inevitable being following in his old man's footsteps and the footsteps of several other ancestors, walking into the GM Truck and Bus plant on Van Slyke Rd and wrestling with the parts.

The descriptions of the shop floor, the foremen, his coworkers, the penguins of the front office, the top brass—Hamper more or less scoops his good friend Michael Moore (Roger and Me) by eventually adopting an obsession to go bowling with Roger Smith (former Chairman of GM), complete with T-shirts and written invitations—and everything else in this scary world ring loud and true. Especially loud... and slow. The clock is the average assembly guy's bête noire, occasionally his Waterloo; some workers, despite the high wages and antics to make time fly, are driven to drink, drugs, panic attacks, or other neuroses. The reader will find Hamper's narratives on resolving the many unique challenges posed by repetitive manual labor humorous, often approaching poignancy.

He writes with the kind of honesty that will make any committed corporocrat cringe. For example, the first of the two women assigned to his area—the first was primarily for PC reasons, she was quite a bit older and had absolutely no reason for being assigned to the Rivet Line—gets walloped on her noggin with a rivet gun, knocking her senseless and straight to the floor. Someone pushes the Stop-Line button.

Uh oh. The red alert. If for whatever reason you wanted to mobilize a frantic bunch of white-collar power thugs in the direction of your area, nothing worked as well as pushing that sacred stop button. They'd come a swoopin' outta the rafters like hawks on a bunny. Within 30 seconds, every tie within a 300-yard radius was on the scene—demanding answers, squawkin' into walkie-talkies, huffin' and puffin' like the universe had flipped over on their windpipes.

What a pathetic display of compassion this turned out to be. While this little old woman lay crumpled beneath the crawling frame carriers, all these nervous pricks wanted to know was WHO IN THE HELL TURNED THIS LINE OFF!...

"Goddamnit," I yelled, "What about the old lady?"

Then he continues by describing how this poor woman finally is helped up, crying partly from the terror of it, partly from the humiliation. She's probably somebody's grandmother having been slammed on the oily woodblock floor, with all the... "banners and coffee cups urging SAFETY FIRST and similar lies. Here, an old

woman had come dangerously close to bein' crushed and all these bastards in the white shirts cared about was their precious production quota."

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Occasionally there have to be layoffs, which mean a trip to the local office of the Michigan Employment Security Commission (MESC). Hamper's description of the unemployment office shuffle is similarly cautionary; he even suspects that these Guardian personality types are plotting to destroy anyone who doesn't follow orders, get in the right line, or who comes up with an issue the bureaucrats haven't heard of before. When these poor noncompliant individuals are told to wait forever in a special area then ushered into a back room, our author is convinced they're "disappeared" as if they never existed—for the crime of defective paperwork:

A miniature Auschwitz had been assembled far behind the clicking of the cashier's keys, far removed from the lazy shuffle of the fresh claimant's feet, off in the back where you now only waited for the pellets to drop and the air to get red.

Oh, I guess it could have been worse. You could have been burned to death in a Pinto. You could have been snagged in a plane prop. You could have been fatally trampled at a Paul Anka concert. You could have had to go out and find a job.

"To find a job or not to find a job" of course captures a quality I recall all too well from my years in Michigan. Back in the day, when an auto worker was laid off (at a significant percentage of his salary), he had absolutely zero incentive to find another job: the layoff was always temporary (tho often lasting several months), the job he was laid off from he always considered "his," and the chances of finding another job for (relatively) unskilled labor that paid even half of what he was making for doing nothing was practically nil.

Rivthead is gonzo journalism at its best. In fact it's not true the author learned nothing in his Catholic school upbringing: he was good at poetry and music. The prose he shares with us displays a truly benevolent and caring soul who's basically just not all that ambitious; sure you can argue the dude has an alcohol problem, then later we learn of some other psychological deals. Still he works hard, gets to the job on time, makes the cars with genuine pride of workmanship. (His description of what it takes to handle a rivet gun and perform his tasks should dissuade anyone that working on the assembly line is a walk in the park.)

Ben Hamper is Hunter S. Thompson without the drug problem or the preoccupation with firearms and sleazy politics. And I appreciate his drawing to our attention that a significant portion of the car you drive is still physically made by the manual labor human beings down in a smelly old loud, backstraining plant environment—not by the Roger Smiths of the world, nor the bean counters, or even the engineers. And these carmakers are human beings who can benefit as much as the car buyers from basic intelligence and decency in the front office.

Let me leave you with sort of a summarizing excerpt.

In contrast [to blind ambition], working the Rivet Line was like being paid to flunk high school the rest of your life. An adolescent time warp in which the duties of the day were just an underlying annoyance. No one really grew up here. No pretensions to being anything other than stunted brats clinging to rusty monkeybars. The popular diversions—Rivet Hockey, Dumpster Ball, intoxication, writing, rock 'n' roll—were just inventions of youth. We were fumbling along in the middle of a long-running cartoon.— p 185

Well, I know guys such as Ben Hamper, though not too many who can write so brilliantly. Sure, he doesn't have the ambition one may regard as desirable or even necessary for survival, but at least he's honest about it. He'd be a great neighbor, and as president he'd be a hundred times better than Dull Shrub. Make that a thousand.

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