



Excerpts from
On the Job: Fiction from the World of Work
 an unpublished anthology
 edited by [James Reed](#)

This anthology grew from simple need. I was preparing a syllabus for a creative writing course focusing on work and jobs as depicted in literature. I wanted a reading list that reflected a wide variety of experiences and people, that showed interesting views of workplace issues as human events rather than case studies. People spend so many hours at their jobs that much of their understanding of the world is tempered if not in some instances actually determined by that block of time, that eight- or twelve-hour shift. The set schedule of going to work is such a large and fixed item in people's lives that it didn't occur to me a ready store of fiction contemplating that experience would be unavailable. I discovered otherwise.



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"Tunnel beds, Boston's Big Dig"

While jobs and the workplace appear in fiction, they are greatly-and I do mean greatly-outnumbered by stories about families and love and relationships gone wrong. Reading more and more in this vein, it began to seem as if the short story in English concerned itself with little else. Jobs might be mentioned, but only as places characters returned to or came from. Work itself was dismissed and dismissible. People's real lives occurred elsewhere, at home or in cramped motel rooms, hurriedly, in flurries of furtive passion. The hours of one's main economic activity were regarded, apparently, as economic only, a sort of necessary dead period or spell of dormancy which yielded contempt and hatred and docility if anything at all.

This view seemed contrary to my own experience with jobs, in which people clearly led rich if not always pleasant emotional lives, and gradually I began to locate fiction which focused on the impact of our time at work. There were jobs I excluded from consideration; academic jobs, for example, as well as those in the arts, the military, and most of medicine, were so specialized in nature that they seemed outside the day-to-day range I wished to consider. Other than the sense of dailiness, however, I sought variety, wanting stories showing how a job feels instead of simply describing its hardships. It is one thing to issue or read a policy statement defining and forbidding sexual harassment and quite another to live inside the situations revealed in Frederick Busch's "North" and Mary Gaitskill's "Secretary." Unemployment is not a glazed-eye statistic in "Glossolalia," by David Jauss, or in Ilene Raymond's "Taking a Chance on Jack." Human Resources/Employee Relations are the bump and glide of people in daily life, and not merely a department with a budget line, in Charles Dickinson's "The Jinx" and Ralph Lombreglia's "Inn Essence."

In selecting these and other stories for this anthology, I wanted pieces in which work played a dominant part in their characters' lives, but I also tried to avoid those with an obvious social and political agenda, although pieces like William Harrison's "Roller Ball Murder" and Russell Banks' "The Gully" obviously might strike some readers as exceptions to my rule. I drew together, in purely subjective fashion, the stories which most interestingly fulfilled my criteria. These are stories I particularly liked

about the world of work. They are presented under topic headings I found convenient. Several stories, of course, resisted easy placement in one category or another. In such cases I trusted my hunches and considered the problem to be the fault of the categories and not at all of the stories themselves.

— James Reed, Omaha, Nebraska, February 2001

Michael Darcher, [from "Dead Bob's Story"](#)

Stephen Dixon, [from "Layaways"](#)

Alvin Greenberg, [from "Flush"](#)

Michael Martone, [from "It's Time"](#)

Cris Mazza, [from "Is It Sexual Harassment Yet?"](#)

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