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Martin Goodman. *Bastards at Work: Universal Lessons on Bullying from Contemporary French Storytelling*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021. xi + 342 pp. Notes, tables, graphs, photographs and index. \$70.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781800794740; \$67.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781800794764.

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What are the responsibilities of contemporary fiction? In a world organized on the principles of an accelerating neoliberalism, does storytelling still play a critical role in social commentary? According to the vocal Irish critic Joe Cleary, cultural producers have an artistic obligation to address the inequalities engendered by the twenty-first-century neoliberal consensus. The problem, however, is that very few have taken up the challenge. In a searing commentary on recent Irish writing, Cleary claims he is able to find only one or two examples of fiction-makers who have done so.<sup>[1]</sup> Martin Goodman's recently published book, *Bastards at Work: Universal Lessons on Bullying from French Storytelling* (2021), echoes Cleary's appeal to literature's ethical imperative. Contemporary cultural producers, Goodman claims, have a responsibility to represent "contemporary working life in ways that are clearer and more authentic than organizational discourse with all its serpentine contortions" (p. 266). And recent French literature, according to *Bastards at Work* at least, has been forthright in its critique. Goodman's professed goals are to collect and to make visible, through comparative analysis, a host of fictional accounts of workplace bullying in France. By chronicling the desperate lows of corporate life, he suggests, good storytelling has functioned as a "counterweight" (p. 10) against the vague and ideological "fictions" (p. 24) of contemporary corporate speak.

Goodman's project is timely. If there is a global problem with work, then in France the problem has appeared most magnified. France has one of the highest rates of work-related suicide in the world.<sup>[2]</sup> It is also a country where workplace troubles are routinely discussed, queried, and sometimes resolved in the public domain. While this has especially been the case in law, where court hearings involving workplace bullying have recently resulted in new legislation being passed, the topic has also recurred in recent political debate, in journalistic commentary, and in academic exchanges. Yet it is the cultural realm that has arguably produced the biggest discursive exposure of rotten workplaces in the past twenty-five years. Since the millennium, France has witnessed a glut of page-turning novels and films of work, particularly the *roman d'entreprise* which address the problems of "immaterial labor" and the country's gradual transformation into a "knowledge economy".<sup>[3]</sup>

Across seven chapters, *Bastards at Work* assesses this wealth of recent French novels, films and playscripts, documenting how they depict trends of systematic workplace coercion, domination,

and psychological game-playing. As a former HR director and management consultant himself, Goodman probes the parameters of his former profession with an urgent intensity. Chapter one sets up Goodman's arguments about the role fiction can play as an antagonist to the overarching violence of the neoliberal organization of work, not only in its capacity to act as a "counter-discourse to corporate messaging," but also in raising awareness of the far-reaching effects of banal forms of violence at work (p. 29). Goodman turns his attention to systemic violence in the workplace in chapter two, reading (among others) the box office hit *Corporate* (Dir. Nicolas Silhol, 2017) and Sylvain Levey's play *Au pays des* (2011) to explore how violence "comes to the fore and festers" in a neoliberal environment characterized by worker passivity. (p. 92). In chapter three, Goodman attends to the phenomenon of "homo oeconomicus," reading call-centre novels such as Thierry Beinstingel's *Retour aux mots sauvages* (2010) and Tatiana Arfel's *Des clous* (2010) to probe the economic rationalizations and one-size-fits-all performance standardizations that have come to define twenty-first-century work.[4] Chapter four focuses on how knowledge workers experience forms of psychological violence, from being coerced into wellbeing initiatives to being forced to engage with mystifying corporate jargon. Goodman investigates the medicalization of bullying in chapter five, while in chapter six he explores the phenomenon of co-worker complicity in workplace bullying through, among other cultural expressions, the film *Trois Huit* (Dir. Philippe Le Guay, 2001). Chapter seven concludes the book by restating the value of storytelling as an "advocate" (p. 260) of genuine lived experience in current debates on the horrors of work. Storytelling, Goodman emphasizes, has the power to "communicate messages that are universal" (p. 255), while, critically, providing "an uncomfortable and piercing reflection" of lived experience (p. 265).

A strength of *Bastards at Work* is its multidisciplinary scope. While fiction takes center stage, Goodman underpins his study with a pantheon of European philosophers, whose writings he uses to elucidate how the world of work has found itself where it is today. He draws on Foucault and Deleuze to describe a transition from a disciplinary society to an autonomous society, and turns to Bourdieu and Žižek to account for a movement from symbolic power to the symbolic violence that, he claims, now saturates corporate organizations. Beyond these big names, however, Goodman gives a panoramic view of approaches to the workplace across the wider humanities and social sciences. He makes use of cultural historians such as Alain Ehrenberg on the topic of depression, as well as research from sociologists, psycho-sociologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and scholars in organizational studies who have explored issues of workplace stress and bullying. All these perspectives, seamlessly woven into Goodman's readings of fiction and film, allow for a unique contribution to contemporary debates on the French workplace, adding new depths to the work of Christophe Dejours, Danièle Linhart, and Dominique Lhuilier.

Another of Goodman's innovations is his use of graphs and tables, which he deploys to map a range of workplace tendencies. *Bastards at Work* features six graphs and ten figures, including Goodman's own "conceptual framework for analysing storytelling" (p. 16), and his highly original "witness complicity gauge" (p. 232). This last figure, in particular, is a compelling aid. In a protractor-shaped image, it plots degrees of witness complicity in workplace bullying, situating characters in different French work stories across an arc according to their degree of sympathy with both bullies and victims. Elsewhere an outline model, inspired by Foucault, shows competing discourses in power relationships between workers, management, and medical and psychological professionals in the form of speech bubbles. All of these visual additions—whether inspired by Goodman's past profession, or by prior literary scholarship that has plotted graphs

to encapsulate critical tensions and trends—not only bring Goodman’s analysis to life, but also succeed in drawing the reader, perhaps seductively, into the mindset of bureaucratic life.[5]

At the core of *Bastards at Work*, however, is an exploration of the deeper societal changes that have shaped the twenty-first century workplace. Why, Goodman asks, has bullying at work become more psychological than physical? There is, of course, an easy answer to this question, supplied in the work of French post-’68 thinkers. Arguably, the past decades have witnessed a transition from a disciplinary society, defined by the question “May I?”, to an autonomous society, defined by “Yes, we can!”[6] Yet, as philosopher Byung Chul-Han has suggested, the achievement society—understood as a society of affirmation and heightened productivity goals—is, at its essence, only a natural outgrowth of the disciplinary society. “Where increasing productivity is concerned,” Chul-Han suggests, “no break exists between *should* and *can*; continuity prevails.”[7] So, perhaps the transition between the two is not as straightforward as it seems. If there has been a decline in physical violence in the post-disciplinary age, it has not necessarily followed that physical domination has left the workplace. Bodily, disciplinary violence has conversely continued to rear its head, notably in the scarcity-oriented mind games that have underpinned global neoliberal assumptions. Goodman inevitably describes this tendency himself, including stories where people are subjected to physical pain under certain working conditions, such as in call centres (the novels of Beinstingel and Arfel), where poorly fitting headsets and one-size-fits-all ergonomic planning contort the bodies of employees. In these contexts, it is easy to see how psychological bullying tactics can also result in very real physical bodily dysfunctions.

The more time I spend with *Bastards at Work*, the more I am drawn into the blurred lines that exist between fact and fiction, between the corporate world and its fictional re-telling. Goodman suggests that corporate-speak is itself a form of fiction: a slippery discourse that rides roughshod over what really matters; a cultural construct aimed at bamboozling interpreters and establishing managerial authority. But other hazy thresholds are illuminated throughout the book. Intriguingly, the majority of writers Goodman includes are, like himself, ex-corporate workers. Some, such as Thierry Beinstingel and Marin Ledun, are alumni of France Télécom, long mired in controversy. Others, such as Delphine de Vigan, are veterans of marketing and PR firms. In today’s publishing world, where auto-fictions like those of Annie Ernaux sit at the top of the pile, we might question how “fictional” these accounts really are. How is it possible in these cases to establish the boundaries between fact and fiction, or else to read the complex interactive effects between the two? Given these imbrications, is there a limit to how far literary accounts can contribute to Goodman’s general wish to counterbalance the fictions of corporate life in the real world?

Goodman’s experience in the corporate world seems to have given his work both a political mission and an ethical drive. Storytelling, he pleads, “can improve our understanding and probe the complexities of workplace suffering, especially mental bullying” (p. 204). There can be little doubt he has risen to the task. As an academic plunge into the murky depths of French corporate life, Goodman’s book is both intrepid and intimate. It is also singular. To date, no other Anglophone commentator has got to grips with the breadth of French fictional accounts of work to this extent. Building on the foundations laid by the studies of Sarah Waters, Martin O’Shaughnessy, and Jeremy Lane, *Bastards at Work* captures the miseries of twenty-first-century work, but also— best of all—the joys of writing about it.

## NOTES

[1] Joe Cleary, “Horseman, Pass By!': The Neoliberal World System and the Crisis in Irish Literature,” *boundary 2*, 45:1 (2018): 135-169.

[2] For a recent comprehensive interrogation of the phenomenon of workplace suicide in France, see Sarah Waters's recent book, *Suicide Voices: Labour Trauma in France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

[3] These phrases refer to the changes in work in the late twentieth century from factory forms of production to ones based on ideas, information and intellectual capital. The term “immaterial labor” was first coined by the Italian autonomous thinker, Maurizio Lazzarato, to designate “labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity.” Maurizio Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labor,” in Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno, eds., *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 133-147 (p. 133).

[4] Goodman, following Vincent de Gaulejac, parses *homo oeconomicus* as the subject whose “every behaviour is considered rational and quantifiable and can be predicted in the pursuit of achieving organizational objectives” (p. 97). Wendy Brown designates *homo oeconomicus* as “the contemporary ‘economization’ of subjects by neoliberal rationality,” a subject driven to “self-invest in ways that enhance its value or to attract investors through constant attention to its actual or figurative credit rating, and to do this across every sphere of its existence.” Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), p. 309.

[5] One example of this is the work of Italian literary scholar, Franco Moretti, who suggests that we should deploy a form of “distant reading” to map and chart the history of literature. See his “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54-68 (p. 56).

[6] Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993); Gilles Deleuze, “Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle,” *Pourparlers* (Paris: Minuit, 1990), pp. 240-47.

[7] Chul-Han, Byung. *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 9.

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