

Angela Lait

Telling tales: Work, narrative and identity in a market age

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Reviewed by: Rachelle Pascoe-Deslauriers, University of Strathclyde, UK

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The core argument in *Telling Tales* is that middle-class professional public servants face a fundamental contradiction: that market culture is incompatible with the public sector service ethos through which much of their satisfaction of work is derived. *Telling Tales* contributes a literary critique of late-capitalist writing, using fiction, popular instruction books and corporate communication, to the debates around the impact of work alienation on individual well-being.

This book explores the changing work demands of UK middle-class professionals and its impact on their identities through examples of contemporary corporate, fiction and popular instruction literatures. Lait suggests that market-led corporate pressures destabilise and fragment the occupation-based identities of the professional middle-class and that time-intensive leisure activity, such as gardening and cooking, are presented as an alternative source for fulfilling, creative labour. This argument is constructed through literary analysis of corporate communications from the UK Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), Ian McEwan's fiction novel *Saturday* and popular practical instruction books on cookery and horticulture.

This book is divided into six main sections, each approaching the issue of work alienation and identity destabilisation from a different perspective. Chapter 1 *Business* considers how market-led values can be seen in the corporate publications and branding of Defra. The chapter identifies and critiques the contradictions between profit-maximizing ideologies and the public-sector service ethos. This chapter contextualises and illustrates the pressures placed on professionals in the public sector in the post-New Labour era. Lait argues that the language used in corporate messaging transfers managerial responsibility for employee well-being onto the individual, whereby workers must adapt to the expected 'overload without reward' (p.37). Chapter 2 *Identity* outlines the author's assumptions about the professional middle-class. Lait argues that the dominance of market ideology makes 'winners' and 'losers' with all other values being subordinated to economic imperatives (p.70). The implication for middle-class professionals is a reinforced concern of his/her sense of self. The continuous flexibility and change imposed onto civil servants through private-sector values is in conflict with their 'capacity to posit long-term goals and work steadily' which are defining characteristics of the middle-class (p.57).

Chapter 3 *Trauma* offers a literary analysis of Ian McEwan's fiction novel *Saturday* as an example of the professional middle-class' struggle to retain meaning in life. The literary analysis is used to illustrate how, within a work environment that imposes ever changing definitions of 'good standards', managerial targets and bureaucratic practices, the protagonist maintains his sense of self through the practice of 'old skills', such as cookery. Chapter 4 *Escape* posits that popular instruction books on cookery and horticulture are marketed to provide respite from the overburdened working life, while concurrently reinforcing normative ideals of divisions of labour and the ability to 'have it all'. Lait argues that common to each

of the narratives in celebrity chefs' books is the 'view of paid work in a formal capitalist economy as a kind of hell' from which they must escape to find meaning (p.139).

Chapter 5 *Recovery* builds upon the discussion in Chapter 4, suggesting that the role and purpose of this literature is to enable recovery from work alienation. The lifestyle literature and politics of slowness signal a voluntary rejection of the fast-paced, dominant Western culture in favour of re-establishing oneself as 'part of a natural order structured by biological and ecological rhythms' (p. 146). Lait cautions that the danger is that 'the new slow life may be as much an illusion as the fast one being escaped' (p.151). Lastly, Chapter 6 *Autobiography* discusses the simultaneous increase in the production of, and interest in, biographies and autobiographies. Lait argues that these genres offers a process of self-making that is a form of creative labour. The genre enables readers and authors opportunities to self-examine and self-scrutinise within a time-constrained modern world; it offers the opportunity to craft the self through reflection.

Lait uses a broad, interdisciplinary literary critique to highlight the intersection of individual identity, popular literature and work alienation. There is an implicit assumption in the book that the author's analysis can be generalised to the wider population. The extent to which the experiences in these examples of contemporary literature are applicable across the whole workforce of Defra, the UK Civil Service and to the middle class of Western economies is questionable. The book might have benefited on further justification of the selection of late-capitalist writing to make clear the relevance and applicability of these examples.

Overall, this book may be of interest to academics and students with an interest in business and management literature and history. Given the disparate bodies of contemporary literature explored, the book might appeal to readers in its component parts and as a whole.