

Working-Class Wheel of Fortune

Erin Vincent

*Working-class people are stupid.
Working-class people are miserable.
Working-class people drink tea out of chipped cups, have bad teeth, are loud,
and drop their g's and don't cross their t's.
Working class people aren't creative like other people,
they don't write books and make films.
Working-class people are kind of...
less than.*

*

It turns out I am working class. I just didn't quite know it, but I knew I wanted to escape it.

Every Saturday night, when I was a child, my mother and I would watch old black & white movies where the people were nothing like us; they smoked but the smell didn't stick to them, drank but didn't get drunk, and wore glamorous gowns and said things like:

I *am* big. It's the *pictures* that got small.

or

Fasten your seatbelts. It's going to be a bumpy night.

and

Life's a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death!

There in the dark, sitting side by side, we would secretly and privately dream of escape to a place better than this... this place where my delivery-driver father went gold panning on the weekends with a machine he'd built that was almost the size of a small car, and my stay-at-home mother, who occasionally worked in factories, swallowed Bex Powders daily, and wished for a mink but got a coat made of cow hide.

And I, who got my first job at thirteen and joined a theatre company in the hope of a discovering a great talent that would save us all.

At school, instead of the required English essay, I dressed up as Chaucer's dirty, gap-toothed woman and performed for the class.

At school I auditioned for the role of Nancy but was cast as a poor little orphan who sat on the floor and ate gruel.

Little did I know, I was performing my future.

My parents, who yearned for better life, died in the process, hit by a speeding tow truck when I was fourteen and they were 41 and 43.

I was determined to not have their fate. I would do what they couldn't; achieve all they aspired to and more.

At fifteen I realised education might be my only way out. I was not going to be the poor little orphan. My *picture* might have been small, but I was going to be BIG!

I would become – as Robin Leach said on my then favourite show, *The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* – 'one of the lucky winners who hit the jackpot in life's wheel of fortune.'

I had to get moving. I had a lot to do. No more acting. Time to get serious.

So, I spun that wheel.

I put my head down and worked hard. Up at 4 study till 7, home by 5 study till 12. Working at my part-time job on Thursday nights and Saturday mornings and devouring the work of Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf whenever I had the chance.

At seventeen I asked my teachers what I might become and got no answer. I dreamed of university, but it appeared it was not an option for someone like me.

Spin the wheel.

At eighteen I got a job as a copy girl at Rupert Murdoch's News Limited emptying ashtrays for angry subeditors and running to the canteen library for arse grabbing journalists, and at night, to make ends meet, I worked until late in a food truck selling pies and mushy peas to sailors, night-shift workers, and drunk people on their way home from parties.

At twenty I finally became a cadet journalist but after five years I knew it wasn't for me when I was still getting the crumbly assignments and the graduates were getting the cream jobs, and when one day I was forced to do a 'death knock' on a family whose daughter had just been murdered.

Memories of my own front door being knocked when I was 14, for a glimpse of the "poor little orphans," danced around in my head.

Time again to spin the wheel.

They say clothes maketh the man (or woman) and I had learnt to sew when young, making my own clothes and even my school uniform. So, I did some courses in fashion design and pattern making and learnt to make glamorous gowns and then got on a plane and moved to Hollywood, as far from my past as I could get.

There I would become someone else.

Spin! That! Wheel!

In my late twenties and living in Los Angeles, my past, and especially my voice, was not a problem, it was an asset. No working-class twang here; all people heard was a cute 'Ossie' accent that made them think of kangaroos and cockatoos.

I was, somehow, going to be a designer to the stars, making those great and glamorous gowns for the Hollywood elite, but instead I got a job as a well-paid tailor, cinching in the waist and kneeling at the feet of the likes of Sandra Bullock, Meg Ryan, Jennifer Lopez, and Jennifer Aniston.

After a few years of this, Cameron Diaz did me in. When I walked into the Rodeo Drive boutique to hem her dress for the Academy Awards, I was invisible, as I always was on those jobs. I did not exist. Kneeling at her high-heeled feet as she laughed and chatted with her 'team', I put pins in her dress and held my breath...

...Then ran out to my bomby little car (parked around the corner so no one could see it) and sat down and cried. This was not who I was supposed to be! Someone was supposed to be hemming *my* dress.

Time to spin the wheel.

Next, I worked as my boyfriend's (now husband's) photographic assistant on *People Magazine* jobs. Once again... celebrities. There we would be in the famous person's backyard, me standing in front of them with the light meter... yawning. It turns out (surprise, surprise) most celebrities are narcissists, kind of boring to be around.

'Stop yawning,' my boyfriend-now-husband would whisper while the actor or actress was inside doing a costume change. 'You're meant to act like you're thrilled to be in their presence.' But it seemed I didn't have much control over it. I was, in fact, depressed, I just didn't know it yet. So, my husband eventually had to fire me.

Time to spin the wheel again.

In those days I was spending a lot of time in a bookstore, one of the biggest I had even seen, so I applied for job and got one. I was now a bookseller, making \$7.50 an hour and happier than I'd ever been, spending my days around books, talking about books, recommending books, shelving books, selling books, stroking books, smelling books, more books than I could have ever imagined.

How strange, I thought. Here I was broke again, but blissfully happy.

And then I read Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* and was shocked to discover that people like me actually could, and did, write books.

Maybe I could too.

Spin that wheel.

I thought, as a former journalist, who said things like, 'So my parents died, what the big deal?' that I could knock out a grief memoir in six months. It took six, long years, and a few more years to find a publisher.

By now I was the event manager at the bookstore, a job I loved and excelled at, a job I made look easy, so easy that the powers that be decided that a younger, less expensive, bookseller could do it, so they pushed me out, and after a year discovered it wasn't so easy after all... but that was too late for me.

Depressed, unemployed, and in the US without a college degree, and seemingly unemployable (I couldn't even get a job bagging groceries at the local Ralphs supermarket) I was forced to move back to Australia.

Spin the wheel.

At the age of forty I was back where I started, but worse. I wondered if I was being punished for all that ambition.

Having a book published did not change my life. Well, it did. But not in the way I'd hoped.

I was not transformed into some bright, sparkly new person, I was still me.

So, I applied for jobs I was overqualified for, and didn't get them, most times didn't even get an interview.

I couldn't work out why. Was it the slim education section on my resume?

Out of options, I went to work at a pub, where, as the newbie, I was required to scrub the floors and clean the men's and women's toilets at the end of every shift, something I didn't even have to do when I was fresh out of school with no experience whatsoever.

On the train ride to work I read books like George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* and started compiling a list of writers who worked menial jobs without the kind of shame I carried.

Then I found a better job, at a nicer bar, where my much younger boss asked me if I knew how to cut a lemon and then proceeded to stand over me, and criticize me, as I nervously cut up a bucket full of lemons.

And next, a job at a residential care home where I thought at least I could be of help to someone, where I had to wipe faeces off walls and people, and strip off my clothes at my front door when I got home after every shift so as to not take the smell inside.

It was official. My life really was in the toilet. I was the world's greatest failure.

I began to wonder if one day *I'd* end up in a home, or maybe even on the street.

At 49 I felt like I'd reached the end of the line.

So, I started seeing a therapist who one day asked a strange question... 'Have you ever thought about going to university?'

I laughed; I scoffed. 'What a ridiculous notion,' I said. 'How would that even be possible?'

But a seed was planted.

And eventually, I decided to...

Spin the wheel.... one... more... time.

At the age of 51 I attended university, sneaking in via the professional pathway, thanks to my past as a journalist and author. I felt like a fraud and hoped nobody would notice that I didn't belong there.

So, I began crossing my t's and not dropping my g's. At home, talking to my husband this way, felt like a kind of betrayal. This surprised me.

Who was I betraying? What was I betraying?

At university, I did not find my people, but I found me. I rediscovered my writer self and my bookish self, that girl who dressed up as *The Wife of Bath*, who read *The Bell Jar* when grieving, and *A Room of One's Own* when desperate to find her place in the world.

As a creative writing master's student, I read, I wrote, I researched. I felt alive, energised. This was the place for me. I wanted it to never end. So, as my studies came to a close, I wondered...

Could someone like me get a PhD?

Spin! That! Wheel!

The first person I asked about doing a creative writing PhD ignored my question and proceeded to tell me which of my fellow students would make *oh so perfect* PhD candidates and how much she would love to supervise them; this despite the fact that I graduated top of the class, top of the whole faculty, and was already a published author in Australia and the US.

When would it ever be enough?!

I thought the universal law was, that if I worked hard enough, harder than everyone else, I would be rewarded.

The next person appeared to physically recoil when I asked them if they would supervise me.

I wondered what I was doing wrong.

And then, finally, someone told me about an academic, saying, 'I think you and she would be a great fit.'

So, at 54...

My *last* spin of the wheel.

I had nothing to lose.

And she said yes. Just like that. Via email. Having never met me.

Ha! Maybe that was the key.

With that yes, this academic opened up a whole world to me, one I was beginning to think I'd never be allowed to enter.

I later found out that she comes from a working-class background, and is proud of it, embraces it, celebrates it in fact; has *not* spent a lifetime running from it.

...And has me thinking, maybe I don't have to hide anymore; maybe I could learn to celebrate it too.

*

Working-class people..... contain multitudes.

Working-class people... are me.

Author Bio:

Erin Vincent is a former journalist and author of *Fourteen Ways of Looking* (2026), which was published in Australia (Upwell), the UK (CB editions), the US (A Strange Object/Deep Vellum), and Canada (Strange Light/Penguin Random House), and was named one of Lit Hub's most anticipated books of 2026. Her first book *Grief Girl* (2007), published in Australia (Pan Macmillan) and the US (Penguin Random House), was named a New York Public Library Best Book. Erin's work has also appeared in *Meanjin*, *The Guardian*, *Electric Literature*, *Kill Your Darlings*,

Literary Hub, *The Offing*, and elsewhere. She holds an MA in creative writing from the University of Technology Sydney and is currently studying for a PhD in creative writing with a focus on fragmentary literature.