

# Leichter, H. (2020) *Temporary*. Emily Books/Coffee House Press.

## Review by Lindsay Bartkowski

In the bizarre world of Hilary Leichter's 2020 novel *Temporary*, an underclass of workers must meet the shifting demands of their employers to become whoever and whatever they desire. Temporaries cycle through placement after placement, hoping and searching for a feeling of permanence to settle in, a 'steadiness' that suggests they've finally found 'the one'—their permanent position and place in society. The playful narrative recounts one woman's quest for stable employment: an unnamed narrator who 'the agency' sends to work as a mannequin, a pirate, Chairman of the Board, and even a ghost. She comes from a long line of temporaries who, the more Biblical passages suggest, were created in the early days of the universe to fill in when gods become weary. Says the unnamed narrator, 'I'm filling out forms, always. I'm shaking hands. I'm gainfully employed, again and again and again. The surest path to permanence is to do my placements, and to do them well' (p. 9).

It is a process and sentiment that contingent employees, including those like myself who are searching for work in academia, know all too well. While enduring job insecurity has often been imagined as an unfortunate consequence of economic downturn or the necessary result of a surplus of academic labor, the fact of the matter is that a flexible labor force constitutes the vast majority of higher education—70% of all instructional staff appointments, according to pre-COVID statistics assembled by the AAUP. This contingent and temporary class of workers is not, in other words, an excess of institutions of higher education, but rather is integral to their operation. Like the system of temporaries that Leichter describes, we are contingent by design. Non-tenured and adjunct faculty reapply for placements all over their cities, semester after semester and year after year, in order to someday prove valuable enough to become permanent.

Leichter's novel, in its absurdist register, follows this economic restructuring to its most extreme end, imagining a world in which temporaries not only take on the roles and responsibilities that their placement requires, but are expected to *become* the person, animal, or apparition that they replace. A temporary aboard a pirate ship must not only fulfill the role of the ship's parrot, but, to the extent that it is physically possible, must *become* the parrot. Temporaries are shapeshifters, required to take on the affect, personality, personal history, and social network of the person that they replace. It is a system that requires that they have no self-interest, no personal history or social network of their own, and no autonomous identity. A mostly light-hearted premise, this idea has darker implications for the narrator.

When she is hired to replace 'Darla' on a pirate ship, the narrator must infer from her shipmates what it means to be Darla. Says the narrator: 'I try to feel Darla's absence as it relates to every other person... I sense Darla is someone both loved and feared, and I try to adjust my temperament to properly fill her boots. I slap a lot of backs and laugh a lot of laughs, and other times I walk the deck with stern and hollow eyes' (p. 30). Her shipmates are generally pleased and the temporary even earns the affection of Pearl, Darla's best friend. They shower the temporary with a chorus of suggestions, trying to help her do as Darla would do. She wouldn't steal a pudding or brew herself some coffee, but she would drink ale. She would never ask for overtime nor severance, and worst of all, according to the 'first mate of human resources,' Darla would never 'say no' to his sexual advances. The scene of assault is brief and narrated

with the same detached and sardonic tone as the rest of the novel. Coercion, the temporary knows, is a necessary facet of her relationship with her employers and coworkers. To do her placement well, she should comply with their wishes and conform to their expectations in order to become precisely what they want and expect. Leichter reminds us that within an economy that prizes workers' 'flexibility,' even mundane 'bullshit jobs,' to use David Graeber's term, are sustained by violence. When employers demand that workers pledge allegiance, perform accommodation, and provide service 'with a smile,' they enlist workers in a deeply alienating and coercive relationship, even if it is apparently premised on friendship or affection.

But Leichter's protagonist is not without agency, nor does she uncritically accept the terms of her employment. Her transgressions of her employers' wishes begin innocently enough: stealing a pair of shoes from a particularly insufferable employer, declaring on her resume that she can 'totally handle seasickness.' But when she's pushed, when her shipmates require that she mete out 'severance'—which on the ship means that she literally 'sever' another employee—the temporary chooses to deceive the group instead. In order to effectively perform as 'Darla,' the temporary presents the ship with a bloodied knife, proclaiming that she's gone so far as to sever the head from the employee in question. But, in truth, the temporary has sliced her own arm open and allowed the woman in jeopardy to jump overboard and go free.

From here, the novel escalates towards more and more violent work, as the temporary becomes the assistant to an assassin, and then, as a 'fugitive temp' working on a blimp, pushes the button that drops bombs on coordinates below. Says the narrator: 'Harold explains that if the supervisor doesn't touch the buttons, then technically, she doesn't drop the bombs. And if the supervisor doesn't drop the bombs, then neither does the owner of the blimp. And since fugitive temps are hidden and without recourse, we technically don't exist, at least not in the eyes of the law. And if no one drops the bombs, no one can be blamed for dropping the bombs, and no one can be tried, and no one can be hanged, and no one can be held accountable, and it's maybe as if the bombs were released by none other than the wide and wondrous sky itself' (p. 122). The fact of her simultaneous existence and non-existence as an 'illegal' or 'off the books' temporary allows her employer to deny any liability for the damage and death caused by the bombs. These are jobs that enlist workers to do harm to others, to enact systemic violence, even as they themselves are exploited and working always under duress. It is here where the novel's protagonist draws a sharp line, invoking the sentiment of Melville's *Bartleby* to declare: 'I refuse' (p. 123). The temporary 'refuses vehemently,' and comes to the realization that 'subordination doesn't lead to steadiness' (p. 125).

Like many contemporary novels about work, Leichter's isn't exactly a call to action. We can't so easily open the hatch and extract ourselves from systems designed to do harm. Rather, as a meditation on the changing relationship between self and work in the neoliberal era, Leichter's novel and others like it ask us to consider what opting out might look like. Novels like Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021), for example, are similarly invested in exploring and laying bare the alienation produced by neoliberal economic and cultural structures. Their protagonists—an overly-committed salesperson who continues work even as the world crumbles around her, and an artificially intelligent robot built to serve—reach the end of their usefulness and must consider what's next amidst the wreckage. For working-class scholars and activists, these fictions provoke questions about the conditions of our own work and the viability of the institutions in which we operate. After the pandemic, how will working-class studies, and academia more broadly, be changed? How can we refuse—whether through our academic, artistic, or organizer labor—to comply with the demands of an exploitative system?

### **Reviewer Bio**

**Lindsay Bartkowski** is an independent scholar, labor organizer, and writer. Her research studies the role of literature and culture in shaping perceptions and attitudes about work in the U.S., with a particular focus on service labor.