

Entin, J. (2023). *Living Labor: Fiction, Film, and Precarious Work*. University of Michigan Press.

Review by Tracy Floreani

Drawing its title from Marx's concept of "living labor" as existing in opposition to the vampiric, mechanistic "dead labor" that results from the unchecked growth of capitalism, Joe Entin's new book focuses on stories of lived experiences of laborers in the post-industrial U.S. With theory-inflected but very readable prose, he posits the concept of living labor as a useful means by which to "think about class beyond the conventional parameters," to consider the reciprocal shaping of economic systems and individual lives informed by "experiences, vectors of identification, histories, and cultures outside the workplace, beyond the realm of production" (p. 17). It's fitting that this title appears in the context of increasing success in the campaigns for a "living wage" for workers in the service sector. The rhetorical savvy of that campaign displaces the "minimum" that an employer must pay a worker and brings to the foreground the needs of the person receiving the wage, connoting all that one does with a paycheck to *live*—to secure consistent nutrition, clothing, safe housing, and health care for themselves and dependents. Similarly, this book examines a collection of stories that reveal all aspects of the living of modern laborers. Beyond the workplace setting, this study brings together stories of "food, health, housing, and incarceration" as narratives of worker and class struggle in the "post-imperial" global economy. In so doing the book offers four main chapters—two on literature and two on film—as case studies that outline an emerging narrative subgenre Entin has termed "precarious realism." The "precarious" of "precarious realism" has double meaning, referring not only to the situation of the workers depicted in these narratives, but also to narrative realism itself, which, Entin argues, is "interrupted and interwoven with other modes, including magical realism, surrealism, and neorealism, in an effort to show the often volatile and perilous state of social life for itinerant workers and the refusal of their stories to resolve into stable forms of class consciousness or composition" (p. 9).

One of the book's strengths is its attempts to be inclusive in exploring representations of class in contemporary narrative. Entin echoes the years-long sentiments of those in our field who insist that we get past the nostalgic view of labor: "The landscape of work and workers was always vaster and more variegated than suggested by the association of the U.S. working class with a white guy laboring in a steel or auto plant" (p. 2). While the study is focused on U.S. narratives, the author's perspective is global in scope in that he regularly reminds readers of the ways in which global economies have created a migrant work force across the western service sector, the "postindustrial vision of the working class as 'essential workers,' composed in large part of immigrant, BIPOC, and women workers laboring across a wide array of fields, from health care and goods delivery to retail and meatpacking" (p. 3). To that end, he focuses on books and films of the past forty years or so—in registers ranging from neo-realist to fantastical—that "are emerging to narrate the tumultuous remaking of the U.S. and world working classes in the global present" (p. 3). It's a bit of a surprise, then, that the first chapter forefronts the Anglo-American perspective with a focus on Russell Banks's novel *Continental Drift* (1985), a narrative set primarily in New England that

centers the experiences of an Anglo-American man in the evolving, post-industrial economy. In doing so, however, Entin establishes a kind of foundational chronology for the rest of the book through the question of how narratives address the “dynamics of economic restructuring” and engage the consequent social effects. With a case study on Banks’s “understudied” novel, he marks an evolutionary shift from traditional proletariat literature toward a post-Fordist narrative mode beginning in the 1980s as an outgrowth of Reaganomics. As in several of the narratives discussed within this book, *Continental Drift* centers in part on the interactions between the dispossessed white male, industrial worker and the racialized or ethnic groups by whom he feels either “displaced” or forced to engage for economic survival. Not surprisingly, when the study turns to filmic narrative, this trope returns in an analysis of Clint Eastwood’s 2009 film *Gran Torino*.

Titles that represent the more diverse content appear in the book’s second chapter, “Maps of Labor’: Globalization, Migration, and Contemporary Working-Class Literature.” Three works of literary fiction from the nineties receive close readings here: Karen Tei Yamashita’s playful, magical realist gem of NAFTA commentary *The Tropic of Orange*; Helena Maria Viramontes’s migrant farmworker tragedy *Under the Feet of Jesus*; and Francisco Goldman’s lyrical story of migrant placelessness, *The Ordinary Seaman*. Among the many borderlands narratives of the 1980s and ‘90s, for Entin these stories focused on Latin American migrant laborers in the U.S. borderlands serve as some of the best examples of the new precarious realism, as novelists of that decade worked to document the frustrations and growing activism of migrant laborers in response to the rapid growth of transnational, neo-liberal capitalism.

The analysis moves to the northern border in the next chapter with a discussion of the 2008 feature film *Frozen River*, among others, in which a working-class, Anglo, single mother engages in cross-border smuggling with a Mohawk woman who sees the U.S.-Canadian border as arbitrary in its position on indigenous land. Other themes and diverse representations of the precariat class’s lived experiences in the chapters focused on film include police violence against African Americans (*Fruitvale Station*), precarious day labor and sweatshop solidarity (*La Ciudad*), the vulnerabilities of pushcart entrepreneurship for South Asian migrants in New York (*Man Push Cart*), and underground economies (*Chop Shop*). Each of the detailed readings of the novels and films includes insightful interpretations of the plots, characters, and aesthetics as well as relevant details—particularly for the films—about critical and commercial success in circulating the stories of precarious realism in recent decades.

While the book’s overall argument for this emerging subgenre is persuasive, the chapters stand as strong articles on their own and read equally well as individual class-based readings of the specific novels and films. The book’s availability as an open-access e-book makes use of the individual chapters quite convenient (<https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/z316q3876#toc>). And while the focus on U.S.-based narratives makes sense for the purposes of limiting the scope of the book, the texts chosen also highlight the transnational reality of labor and the arbitrariness of borders in such a way that one sees room for non U.S.-based narratives in future study of “precarious realism” as a globalized genre, which might include novels like Pakistan-based Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* or the works of British filmmakers Ken Loach and Mike Leigh.

All the texts chosen for *Living Labor*, with perhaps the exception of the Clint Eastwood film, could be described as “high literary” rather than popular narrative. This choice makes sense in many

ways, given the depth of implicit argument in these texts and their sometimes non-mainstream subject matter. They perhaps undermine, however, Entin's argument for the primacy of novels and films as "crucial modes of contemporary storytelling" (p. 6). While he acknowledges that other print and visual media do successfully represent the global working classes, he argues for the "power of fiction and film to juxtapose and combine continuities and discontinuities, to allow for intense and deep characterization as well as sweeping stories," with the unique ability to track "contemporary stories of American and global labor's long restructuring" (p. 6). It's a valid argument, but the book's focus on the self-contained narratives of film and novels (and, notably, few narratives dated after 2010) misses a great opportunity to engage with some of the high-quality narratives of what media critic David Bianculli is calling the "platinum age" of streaming, serial television. (Arguably, more people were exposed to an in-depth narrative of precarious realism in something like the 2021 Netflix series *Maid* than saw some of the independent films included in this study.) Nonetheless, *Living Labor* brings lesser-known or forgotten narratives to the forefront and demonstrates effectively how they build upon the proletarian narratives of the past and contribute to a nascent, working-class narrative mode—one we should all keep our eyes on as it continues to evolve in an age of enduring precarity.

Reviewer Bio

Tracy Floreani is professor of English at Oklahoma City University where she teaches American literature and academic writing. She also serves as Director of the Jeanne Hoffman Smith Center for Film and Literature, OCU's public humanities initiative, and as president of MELUS. She is the author of *Fifties Ethnicities: The Ethnic Novel and Mass Culture at Midcentury* (2013), editor of the MLA *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Ralph Ellison* (2024), and is currently working on a biography of Fanny McConnell Ellison.