

Beaton, K. (2022). *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands*. Montreal. Drawn and Quarterly.

Review by Katherine Arnoldi

If the definition of plot is a character who wants something with obstacles in the way, then the graphic novel, *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands*, by Kate Beaton is brimming with it. After college, Kate Beaton is back home in “have not” Cape Breton in the “have not” Canadian province of Nova Scotia with big school loans and no prospects of a job. Cape Breton has one export, people, so off Beaton goes to lucrative employment in the oil sands of northern Alberta.

Her father, a butcher, and her mother, who works at the credit union, are horrified. Why did she go to college, with all that expense, to just work in the western oil sands like everybody else in Nova Scotia? Her mother tells her nursing is a good field, one that, we assume, may have allowed her to stay close to home, but Kate has studied history and anthropology and wants to be an artist. “All I want to do is pay off my student loans,” (p. 25), she says, so she can have a chance at a job she might love. The plot is in motion.

At the airport, her mother sprinkles her with holy water, blames herself and laments how she had to work and never had time to be with young Kate and then breaks down sobbing, as though she has a premonition of the dangers to come.

In Fort McMurray, Alberta (motto: We Have Energy), Kate sees casinos and bars named Newfoundlanders and makes her way to Syncrude, the base mine where she will work the split shift, twelve-hour days, six on, six off. Right off the bat, she is told of work hazards, fingers cut off by saw blades, trucks with people inside squashed by heavy hauler machinery and fingers lost to frostbite. During her two years, she will hear of many such tragedies. There is a poster of a safety pyramid: 300,000 risk behaviors on the bottom, 300 near miss incidents on the next tier, 30 minor incidents almost at the top and the pinnacle is one word: fatality.

Equipped with a hard hat and steel-toed boots, Kate secures a job in the tool crib, relatively safer, except that there are fifty men for every one woman in this workplace depicted by Beaton as a flat, cold, barren moonscape of nothing. The men ask her the color of her underwear, trap her in hallways, try to open her locked door at night and eventually the worst happens, but who can report it and hope to keep their job? She befriends other women, one a welder out in the cold and scary fields and others inside with her and Kate survives her two years, noting that the man who raped her never gave it another thought, while it is a trauma that she will live with for an eternity.

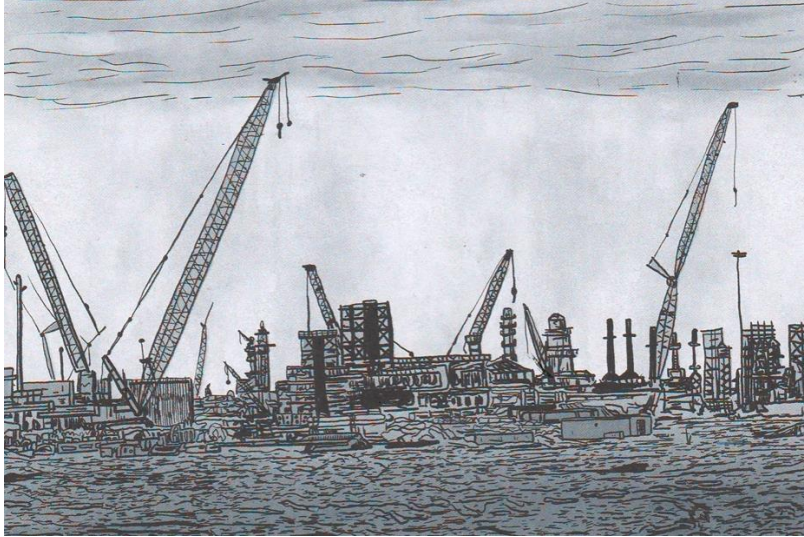
The black and white line drawings enhanced by grey washes show lighthouses and Kate riding a ferry, her hair flying in the wind, in Cape Breton, and cars trapped in snowbanks, along with dirty, barren, smoke-ridden industrial landscapes in Alberta. One night, as though to mock the devastation, the Aurora Borealis shimmers over the bleakness. Beaton reads about Greenpeace activists protesting the ducks that are killed in a polluted tailing pond and a fellow worker asks

her, “And who do you think cleans that up? Who puts their life on the line to unclog that pipe? I tell you it sure as fuck isn’t the president of Shell” (p. 347). Also, she learns of the effects of the pollution and devastation of the oil sands on the lands of the First Nation people. In the afterword, she lists them: the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Chipewyan Prairie First Nation, Fort McKay First Nation, Fort McMurray First Nation, Fort McMurry No. 468 First Nation, Mikisew Cree First Nation, and the Metis communities.



One man, who has nothing to show for years of labor in the oil sands with his only retirement or pension being his “praying for my health to last” (p. 312), warns Kate that many workers come to the oil sands thinking they are coming for a short time only never to leave. Desperation abounds and she receives a resume from a worker, born in 1947, with four years in mining and twenty-eight years at a fish plant in Newfoundland, who hopes to get on at the oil sands. Kate bristles at a reporter who wants her to condemn the men and concludes that the reporter apparently doesn’t think “that the loneliness and homesickness and boredom and lack of women around would affect their brother or dad or husband the same way” (p. 375).

Beaton has obstacle after obstacle to achieve her goal of keeping her job for two years to pay off her school loans but what about the others who cannot leave? Beaton tells us in the afterword that this book is her experience of the oil sands and there are thousands of other stories, but this nuanced, thoughtful and multi-level view, told through words and pictures, is one that surely must earn its place in working-class literature.



Reviewer Bio

Katherine Arnoldi's graphic novel, *The Amazing True Story of a Teenage Single Mom* (Hyperion, 1998) tells of her struggle to find the way to college as a teenage mother and also of four years working in a rubber glove factory in Ohio. It won two American Library Association Awards, the New York Foundation of the Arts Award in Drawing, was named a Top Ten Book of the Year by *Entertainment Weekly* and was nominated for an Eisner Award. *All Things Are Labor, Stories* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2007) won the Juniper Prize.