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A Novel Idea: Fiction for Labor Activists

January 31, 2013 / Laura McClure

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Cartoon by Bill Yund.

When we're not reading *Labor Notes*, many activists rely on fiction for inspiration, new perspectives, and, of course, entertainment. For some of us, novels even helped start us down our paths of activism.

But—*which* novels? A survey of a handful of labor activists and educators revealed their favorite class-conscious novels.

Strikes!

Since fiction is built on conflict, it makes sense that some powerful novels center on strikes.

Longtime CWA organizer Steve Early recommends *The Ink Truck*, by ex-journalist William Kennedy, a "comic novel about a flailing and failing newspaper strike. It's a must-read for any strike organizers sitting around fantasizing about what might rescue them from impending defeat."

John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*, about a strike by fruit pickers in California and the difficulties of organizing, is controversial, says labor educator and author Stanley Aronowitz, because it "does not glorify the decisions the organizer makes to win."

God's Bits of Wood by Ousmane Sembene, nominated by UE organizer Erin Stalnaker, tells the story of a strike by Senegalese railworkers against their French employers in 1947-48. The novel isn't just about anti-colonialism—it's also a nuanced exploration of solidarity, including by women, who eventually become leaders in the strike begun by their men.

Michael McCormack Enriquez of Kansas City's KC99 likes Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*. The backdrop for this detective novel is the 1917 strike by copper workers in Butte, Montana—and the murder of IWW organizer Frank Little, perhaps by Pinkerton goons. Hammett had a firsthand feel for the story, since he'd been a Pinkerton goon himself.

SAG-AFTRA organizer Allison Harger says one of her favorites is *Sometimes a Great Notion*, by Ken Kesey. The famous counter-culturalist of the 1960s here digs deeply into the motivations of a family of Oregon loggers who keep working during a bitter strike. (Paul Newman directed and starred in the 1970 Oscar-nominated movie.)

Early also mentions *Strike!* by labor journalist Mary Heaton Vorse, based on the 1929 action by textile workers in Gastonia, North Carolina. Says Early: "It's an American *Germinal*, about a much-red-baited revolt by North Carolina workers that the state has been ashamed of ever since."

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class exploitation, poverty, and misery, says Lary, and Lida's fictionalized account of a French miners' uprising "will seem very familiar to those following recent strike activity—and its bloody repression—in the South African mining industry today."

Just Life

While strike novels may occupy a special place in organizers' hearts, most books on the list don't feature organizing at all. They're about the everyday lives of fellow working-class people, whether familiar or unfamiliar.

For instance, I like Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, which pulls no punches on class politics or racism in 1930s Georgia. Health care organizer Teresa Tobin recommends Sandra Cisneros's intimate novel *The House on Mango Street*, whose heroine Esperanza Cordero straddles cultures as a Chicana growing up in Chicago.

"Dorothy Allison is my girl!" writes Portland organizer Kari Koch, who grew up in Oklahoma. "All her books are working-class as hell and Southern to boot. *Bastard Out of Carolina* is only the tip of her great works."

Ontario labor radio journalist Scotty Hertz suggests the 1987 novel *In the Skin of a Lion* by Canadian-Sri Lankan writer Michael Ondaatje, about the immigrants who helped build Toronto (but didn't get the credit).

Aronowitz recommends several other poignant novels about immigrants, including Pietro Di Donato's 1939 *Christ in Concrete*. Like the protagonist, Di Donato was 12 when his father, a bricklayer, was killed in a building collapse.

Aronowitz mentions Mike Gold's classic *Jews Without Money*, about growing up in Manhattan's Lower East Side in the 1920s; *Low Company*, by Daniel Fuchs, about restaurant workers in Depression-era Brooklyn; two by maritime organizer Alexander Saxton, *Grand Crossing* and *The Great Midland*; and Harriet Arnow's *The Dollmaker*, a portrait of a woman and her family who move from Kentucky to Detroit seeking work in the factories of World War II.

Jane Slaughter of *Labor Notes* suggests another of Arnow's books, *Hunter's Horn*, nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1949 and set in the Kentucky mountains. "On the surface it's about fox-hunting—the mountain way, not the English lords and ladies way," she says, "but deeper down it's about the lives available to girls and women." She adds that "the people are poor, yes, but the novel is not 'about poverty.'"

Several readers suggested stories or novels by Sherman Alexie (such as his 2005 *Reservation Blues*). "Most of his characters struggle with racism and poverty living on the reservation," says *Labor Notes*' Samantha Winslow, "and feel conflicted, if they leave the reservation, about whatever success they achieve."

Winslow also recommends Toni Morrison's classic *The Bluest Eye*, for its portrait of the "divide between the poor and the working class" in an Ohio African-American community, and Junot Diaz's Pulitzer Prize-winning 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, whose Dominican-American characters "are the first in their families to go to college, struggling to find a place in the U.S."

Retired auto worker Dianne Feeley cites *The Street*, by Ann Petry, about a young black woman trying to raise her son in 1940s Harlem. Dianne says *The Street* "ranks with the work of Richard Wright and is told from a woman's viewpoint."

Feeley's top picks sketch out some of the diversity of the 20th century U.S. working-class experience: Zora Neale Hurston's black feminist classic *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, set in rural Florida; Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*, about several generations of a Chinese-American family; Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl*, about moving from farm to city life in Minnesota; Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, in which a young woman from Barbados comes of age in Brooklyn; and organizer Tillie Olsen's collection of short stories, *Tell Me a Riddle*.

Natasha Beck, a Portland educator and activist, suggests a slew of books by women authors with women protagonists, including Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *Meridian* and any of Marge Piercy's varied novels, such as *Woman on the Edge of Time*, about a future society where everyone has their own room.

me. He describes it as a classic introduction to Black cultural classism, following its hero's "journey through structures that do not see him, from the 'Negro college' to the Communist Party to the Black Militant to the white liberals."

And speaking of life-changing classics, several people mentioned Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Aspen Swartz, a member of the Carpenters and the Labor Chorus in Seattle, says simply "Dickens!" (I just reread Dickens's own personal favorite, *David Copperfield*, and was surprised by how funny it was—and tender, of course.)

Swartz also adds Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. "It's written from the point of view of an aristocrat, but it gave me some insight into the lives of the serfs," she says.

Work

Some novels highlight the experience of work itself.

Steve Early suggests *The Sweet Hereafter*, by Russell Banks, a book about "how the already hard life of a school bus driver is changed by a fatal accident on the icy roads of her small upstate New York town. The movie was good, the book is even better, because nobody writes with more sympathy and insight about blue collar workers in small towns than Banks," Early says.

Early also likes Richard Ford's *Independence Day*, about "the agony and (much less frequent) ecstasy of a real estate agent in the suburbs of New Jersey—one of the best accounts ever written about this kind of white collar work."

Bob Downing, who organizes hospital workers in Seattle, says he's "a big fan of B. Traven. *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* is a brilliant and fun statement against the rush for riches that defines capitalism. (I love the movie too.) *The Death Ship* is a harrowing tale of the hopeless life of a merchant marine—less fun, sort of like a Conrad novel written from the perspective of the lower decks."

Natasha Beck recommends two by Meredith Tax: *Rivington Street*, about women involved in the Women's Trade Union League and garment workers' organizing in the early 1900s, and its sequel, *Union Square*, about women's organizing during the Depression.

Dianne Feeley was powerfully affected by *On the Line*, a collection of short stories by Harvey Swados about the tumultuous lives of auto workers in New Jersey in the 1950s. "It was the first book I ever read about people that were like my family. It changed what I looked for in fiction!" she says.

Ed Ott, former executive director of the New York Central Labor Council, recommends a novel soaked in New York City: *Table Money*, by the famously salty columnist Jimmy Breslin, centers on the raucous life of Owney Morrison, an alcoholic Vietnam vet and tunnel builder.

Ott also likes *Empire Rising* by Thomas Kelly, a vivid account of 1930s New York and the people who built the Empire State Building. Both of these books, says Ed, "understand that a job is about more than a paycheck. There is dignity in all work."

I'd like to add here a short gem by labor cartoonist Bill Yund, *Reaper's Choice*, a quietly gripping story about love and danger among the construction workers who cluster around Mick's Paradise Lounge in 1960s Pennsylvania.

And Labor Notes staffer Al Bradbury chimes in with one of my favorite authors: Barbara Kingsolver. Bradbury suggests Kingsolver's 2009 novel *The Lacuna*, "whose main character crosses paths with the Bonus Army of World War I vets demanding their paychecks, as well as Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Leon Trotsky, and the House Un-American Activities Committee." I love Kingsolver's earlier books too, beginning with *The Bean Trees*.

Fun

Steve Early suggests *Nobody's Fool*, a funny, wise book by one of my favorite authors, Richard Russo. The main character is "a struggling building contractor, who's been reduced to working as a 'handyman'" and who is "a walking, talking, flush-broke, hard-luck example of why many workers with building trades skills are anything but 'independent.'" I find a lot of warmth and respect for working people (often blue collar guys in upstate New York) in all of Russo's books. And they're fun to read.

Erin Stalnaker also has some fun suggestions, including John Nichols's *Milagro Beanfield War* and John Sayles's short story

Konopacki likes Walter Mosley's mysteries, "especially his Easy Rawlins series, which has a great African American working-class perspective." Mosley's most recent Rawlins mystery is *Little Scarlet*.

I'd like to put in a word for Barbara Neely's mystery series featuring a middle-aged black mother, domestic worker, and amateur sleuth named Blanche White. The series starts with *Blanche on the Lam*.

Sara Paretsky writes about a female private investigator, V.I. Warshawski. Paretsky takes on issues ranging from racism and homophobia to blacklisting and corporate conniving. And she never neglects class.

Donna Leon is one more class-conscious mystery writer, though she's best known for her rendering of Venice and the quietly sensual and deeply ethical Commissario Brunetti. Her *Through a Glass Darkly* tackles not only political corruption but also unsafe working conditions and environmental pollution in Venetian glass factories.

Class for Kids and Teens

We have four books for younger readers:

For teenagers, Dan Lutz of the New York State Nurses Association submits *For the Win*, a sci-fi novel by Cory Doctorow (no relation to E.L.). Says Lutz: "The main characters are 'gold farmers,' kids in India, China, and Singapore who play online games—and then sell their accumulated gold, swords, spaceships, and ray guns to Westerners who want to level up fast (a totally real phenomenon). They work in sweatshop conditions—until they decide to organize their own cross-border union."

For the younger set, Change to Win researcher Mariah Montgomery writes, "One of my favorite books growing up was *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, about a black family in Mississippi during the Depression. They are small landowners, but most in their community are sharecroppers. The main character, an 11-year-old girl named Cassie, is coming of age and understanding more about racism and violence, and her family's (and others') struggle to push back against a white landowner."

Surgery resident Elinore Kaufman suggests the *Ramona Quimby* series by Beverly Cleary. Kaufman writes, "The Ramona books were the first books I ever saw aimed at kids that had any mention of class issues at all."

And for the littlest class-conscious readers, I'll put in the picture book *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows that Type* by Doreen Cronin, about intrepid farm animals organizing for justice: "Dear Farmer Brown, The barn is very cold at night. We'd like some electric blankets. Sincerely, The Cows." They don't stop at petitioning.

What class-conscious books have *you* loved? Please share your thoughts in the Comments section.

Laura McClure, a long-time labor journalist, is author of [Organize or Die](#), a new mystery novel about love and organizing. Read a review [here](#).

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COMMENTS

A few more favorites (maybe more than a few)

MaxOctober | 03/20/13

Stone Butch Blues by Leslie Feinberg is about the lives of butch

gender liberation. Any of Corinne Hansen's plays, but especially Raisin in the Sun and Les Blancs (which is more about colonialism which is a kind of class struggle). Bud, Not Buddy, about a family of auto-workers in Detroit. Make Lemonade, by Virginia Euwer Wolff, for young adults, about a college-bound young woman in the inner city of Chicago (I think) who babysits for a young woman around her age who has two young children and is struggling to survive. Push, by Sapphire, and the sequel The Kid. Baseball in April, a collection of short stories by Gary Soto is great too. Virginia Hamilton's The Planet of Junior Brown. Shakedown Street by Jonathan Nasaw was a favorite when I was a kid, about a homeless family (mom and teen girl), though I haven't read it in a while. Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli. The Missing Gator of Gumbo Limbo by Jean Craighead George. Anything by Walter Dean Myers. Thanks for asking!

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A Couple of Good Reads

Ken in Milwaukee | 03/04/13

The following two books were both great reading experiences that portray working people and unions honestly.

The American, by Howard Fast. A 1946 book that still seems fresh. This is the story of a courageous politician (surprise!), John Peter Altgeld of Illinois, who pardoned three of the surviving martyrs of the Haymarket Affair of 1886. Even though a conservative, this principled governor put his career on the line. Written as a fiction novel, with good historical background and great portraits of the martyrs and Gov. Altgeld.

Given Day, by Dennis Lehane, concentrates on two families -- one white and the other black -- in 1919 Boston, featuring not only the racial issues but also the impact of the famed Boston Police Strike and Molasses Explosion.

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Don't miss "LOON LAKE" by E.

DavidPWilliams | 02/11/13

Don't miss "LOON LAKE" by E. L. Doctorow Which has an exposition of Marxist theory alongside the working class hero of the novel.

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Two Great Novels

iamjh | 02/05/13

"Freedom Road" by Howard Fast is a terrific story about the short-lived period after slavery was abolished, when former slaves had a measure of freedom, which was then crushed by the withdrawal of federal troops from the South in 1876. This book was the most widely read novel in the world; some countries came up with a written language for the first time in order to translate Freedom Road.

"Between the Hills and the Sea" by KB Gilden (actually a wife/husband writing team) is a great story about the life of a union local under the advancing crush of McCarthyism. Real shop floor perspective -- and written about the place my father worked for 44 years: the GE plant in Bridgeport CT.

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Hollywood Writers Union

labortlou | 02/05/13

What Makes Sammy Run by Budd Schulberg (1941) has a great subplot of studio bosses busting a union organizing drive by Hollywood Script Writers...

Missing masterpieces

Robert Schwartz | 02/04/13

For my money the very best American working class novels have been written by Denise Giardina. Storming Heaven and The Unquiet Earth are spectacular accounts of a family caught up in the West Virginia mine struggles of the 20th Century. Strikes, shootings, reeds, and sad love stories.

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Great list

Rob | 02/04/13

What a great bunch of suggestions. I've got enough recommendations to last for a good while. (Though I'm proud to say I've read about half the authors mentioned.) I'm not sure there's many more I can think of at the moment. But wait, did nobody mention Grapes of Wrath? Actually my son is working on a high school paper comparing the anti-capitalist messages in Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists, Grapes of Wrath and Catch-22 (remember Milo?) I just finished two of Richard Russo (also recommended by Steve Early): Empire Falls and Risk Pool--both great reads. How about Earnest Gaines' Gathering of Old Men and Lesson Before Dying? Some of Howard Fast's books fit the bill. I've always liked Citizen Tom Paine. And I'd like to second the suggestions of Going Away by Clancy Sigal and B. Traven's books (any of the "jungle series" or Treasure of the Sierra Madre." I will check in again if I think of others or next year when I finish reading all these books. Thank you Laura McClure!

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How could anyone forget the

DavidBerger | 02/01/13

How could anyone forget the "Ragged Trousered Philanthropists," a great working class novel written by Robert Tressell first published in 1914. Tressell was a house painter who wrote about his fellow workers.

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background history & more novels

ethan young | 02/01/13

Google Alan Wald for fascinating historical background on U.S. writers in every genre who talk that good ol' social justice. Plugs for overlooked writers - from the Depression, Albert Halper (Union Square, The Foundry), influenced by John Dos Passos. Postwar: Thomas McGrath's This Coffin Has No Handles is a noir antidote to On the Waterfront. Two novels about being a red: Harvey Swados, Standing Fast, & Clancy Sigal, Going Away. Finally, extra-rare - 2 novels about the Knights of Labor from the 1880s, in The Knights In Fiction from U. IL. Press.

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Favorite books...

AIShur | 02/01/13

I couldn't leave this out! It is my favorite (of all!) book and was a book that pushed me to become involved with my union and the labor movement! While it is not fiction it is mentioned in at least two of Kurt Vonnegut's novels! So it is "Fiction by proxy!"

I MUST recommend a non-fiction book, published many years ago, that reads like fiction. In fact: if you were reading on Mars, without any sense of history, you might swear it is a book of fiction short stories. The book, published originally in 1955 but

novels.

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don't forget the wonderful Lenny Moss novels by Tim Sheard

[paul.landsbergis](#) | [02/01/13](#)

Great list above. But, don't forget to add the wonderful Lenny Moss novels by Tim Sheard: <http://www.timsheard.com/>. The Lenny Moss novels are filled with the stories of real working class men and women toiling in the American health factory, aka, "the hospital". Lenny is a janitor and union shop steward who helps to solve murders with the help of his union members and friends.

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awesome idea, great list, a few of my favs:

[Gabriel](#) | [02/01/13](#)

Big Octavia Butler Fan, Kindred blew me away and who can really resist a story about queer poly vampires fighting white supremacy (Fledgling)? Also just read Ursula Le Guin's 'The disposed' a novel that takes on a capitalist world that has an anarchist society on its moon. Another of my absolute favs is 'The God of Small things' by Arundhati Roy, also the Novel co-written by Subcomandante Marcos and Paco Ignacio Taibo 'the uncomfortable Dead' is pretty awesome. thanks for putting this list out, really excited to check out 'For the Win'.

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A Novel Idea

[MarkRoss](#) | [02/01/13](#)

I've read a number of the books on this list. I would like also to recommend Ernest Poole's THE HARBOR. About organizing on the waterfront in the early part of the last century.

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Ragtime

[ToddReynolds](#) | [01/31/13](#)

Used to be a Lit prof, and am now a union organizer with the AFT.... How about Doctorow's _Ragtime_ (Bread and Roses Strike is in a portion of that novel)
Theresa Malkiel's _Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker_
Sister Carrie
just so many I'm sure I'm missing!

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'80s SF films...

[RachelF](#) | [01/31/13](#)

This makes me think about the brief era of working-class blockbuster SF in the '70s and '80s, when we had *Alien*, *Terminator*, and *Star Wars* (the latter of which is of course a total fantasy, but the characters' identity is still loaded with class-related overtones -- Luke's dream is to escape a life of subsistence farming by joining the navy, and Han, for all his self-admiring bluster about staying independent, is a truck driver firmly under the thumb of his abusive boss). Modern additions to all these franchises were all incredibly muddled from a class perspective -- they engaged prominently with conflicts between classes of some sort (Jedi Knights and good-hearted politicians

scientists vs. an all-powerful corporation, but none of them have any characters with a sense of working-class identity in the same way that Sarah Connor, Ellen Ripley, or Han Solo do. Instead of truckers or waitresses, the heroes are action monks or nebulously employed knowledge workers.

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Also anything by China Mieville

[Chris_B](#) | 01/31/13

I highly recommend any book by China Mieville, his book Perdido Street Station is an excellent starting point.

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Lonely Crusade by Chester

[DavidChristian](#) | 01/31/13

Lonely Crusade by Chester Himes. It's about a young, not terribly idealistic African American organizer at a defense plant during World War 2. This book did not win Himes any friends among the pro-CP literary establishment of his day as our hero maneuvers his way between corrupt union officials and manipulative Party activists. He finds his only trusted ally outside the workforce itself in a Jewish communist who's been expelled from the Party. It's been some time since I've read it but it is a must for a list such as this.

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More fiction

[BobSimpson](#) | 01/31/13

Science fiction writer Ursula K. LeGuin includes working class themes in much of her work. My favorite is "The Dispossessed" about a society based on anarchist principles. It's on a moon that is in orbit around a planet whose political situation is very similar to Earth's during the Cold War period.

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