

## STEAL STUFF FROM WORK

Jasper Pierce

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We might consider *Steal Stuff From Work* an anti-capitalist manifesto in novel form, a call to arms whose urgency is dampened only by the malaise that washes the narrative. Debut novelist Jasper Pierce has created a world defined by worker dissatisfaction and its attendant resentment, recognizably ours but pushed a notch out of realism and into the realm of the near-dystopic. That this near-dystopia hews so closely to social realism is telling, and shows a novelist hitting his mark with a strong indictment of the US labor system.

Dramatizing the plight of various characters stuck in menial jobs with no benefits or health care, the book extends this realism into the speculative, imagining what might happen if such laborers united—and revolted. The results are mixed, making for a more complex argument than simply socialist revolution as easy fix.

We follow Kemp as he moves from job to job, his fragmented narration effectively mimicking the fragmentary nature of a life lived in part-time, the uneasy feeling of losing one's identity to multiple meaningless, disposable jobs. How to maintain some semblance of personal dignity in the capitalist workplace? Following Kemp's logic, you steal stuff from work. He explains his MO early on:

I've had jobs every day of my life since I was eight. My spirit had just about been hammered flat. Working took its toll on me, until the day I started taking my toll on it. I had become so exhausted and demoralized that by the end of the day I was no longer taking any of myself home from work. So I started taking some of my work home with me.

As Kemp moves from job to job, from dishwasher to server to telephone book distributor to bookseller to Web designer to bed-and-breakfast lackey, he swipes, or helps others swipe, the following: steaks, alcohol, a mounted black bear, gardening tools, books, records, a city bus, a hotel room, the obligatory toilet paper, and more. He collects jobs; he collects things stolen from jobs.

When he finds himself reunited with his old friend Jasper, who has made a home of his workplace, a Rent-a-Room inside the mall where Kemp distributes phone books, a revolution is hatched. Or rather, an already hatched revolution swells, as it's really Jasper's brainchild from the start, with Kemp putting aside his apathy to help make his friend's vision reality. Jasper is more elusive and transitory than Kemp, his politics more radical; if this were *Fight Club* (1996) (and the two texts' similarities are worth noting), Jasper would be the Tyler Durden to Kemp's anonymous narrator.

Together, Jasper, Kemp, and their cohorts found Steal Stuff From Work Day, concentrating on

spreading word to disgruntled employees nationwide in preparation for the November 11th holiday. Kemp builds a website where he uploads SSFW business cards to be downloaded and printed by their network of Kinko's employees. The group plans and pulls off (or doesn't quite) pranks like making CDs and playing them in stores that sell CD players. "When it explodes," the mastermind explains, "the employees go to turn off the music and find a label on the CD with a note about Steal Stuff From Work Day." Through these kinds of schemes, the group is able to organize and execute a day of mass-scale vocational kleptomania.

Through relating these schemes, too, the novel acts as a how-to manual for the reader, its title functioning as much as a command as a description of the events its covers contain. A number of schemes are offered up as ways to blast holes in the system, ways to unite the masses. There is a note of caution, however, as the pranksters don't always win. People get hurt. There are fires. Injuries. Citywide calamity.

As all this goes on, Jasper, Kemp, and their crew are squatting in a farm-turned-commune guarded by stolen police cars. Kemp, the apathetic foil to Jasper's radical socialist, asks himself whether this new situation is much better. Disillusioned with

the community he has helped create, Kemp wants out, and quickly leaves to fend for himself. While the novel at times veers anxiously close to *Adbusters* didacticism, Kemp's sustained ambivalence about the movement he's founded keeps it from reaching that point.

As well, Kemp's contradictory ethics are questionable, making him somewhat unreliable and thus more complex as a narrator. "I'm principled," he says. "I never steal from coworkers or customers, only from the job itself." Despite these self-proclaimed principles, he can't help but steal wine from a friend, and vegetables from the farm. Kemp's politics are earnest, but his principles breached. Who is the enemy? It's no longer clear: his kleptomania overpowers his ideology.

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The novel enacts a revolution whose consequences remain ambiguous at the close of the book. Whether or not Steal Stuff From Work Day is a feasible solution to the problem, the problem exists: humans as workers are undervalued. The novel's great strength is its ability to proliferate parables describing this problem, and Kemp's rhetoric frequently sears. While his more ideologically driven moments occasionally come off as overwrought, their sheer earnestness forgives the melodrama. Structured as a progression of short vignettes, his narration is interspersed with shorter, more urgent passages rendered in italics and often using the collective "we" to abstract Kemp's story to a more universal problem. "What was wrong with us that we couldn't pay for childcare, tuition or a trip to the dentist?" he laments. "Given every chance to become middle class, we had fallen flat."

Steal Stuff From Work Day provides an opportunity for the employees of the world—and by this time, the organization has made a global impact—to

seize power and resources. And it works—or seems to, at least partially. The aftermath, according to television and newspaper accounts, is part apocalypse, part new world, with neither version winning out. When, in the last few passages, the point of view shifts from Kemp's "I" to second person and finally to third-person limited, there is a confusion of perspective that seems intentional. Where throughout the novel the reader is asked to do a good bit of work filling in gaps left when jumping between scenes and temporalities, here the reader is left with a number of irresolvable ambiguities. This is less irksome than it is fitting, for, by the end of Steal Stuff From Work Day, few people, Kemp included, know what has happened. The revolution has taken place. Now what?

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