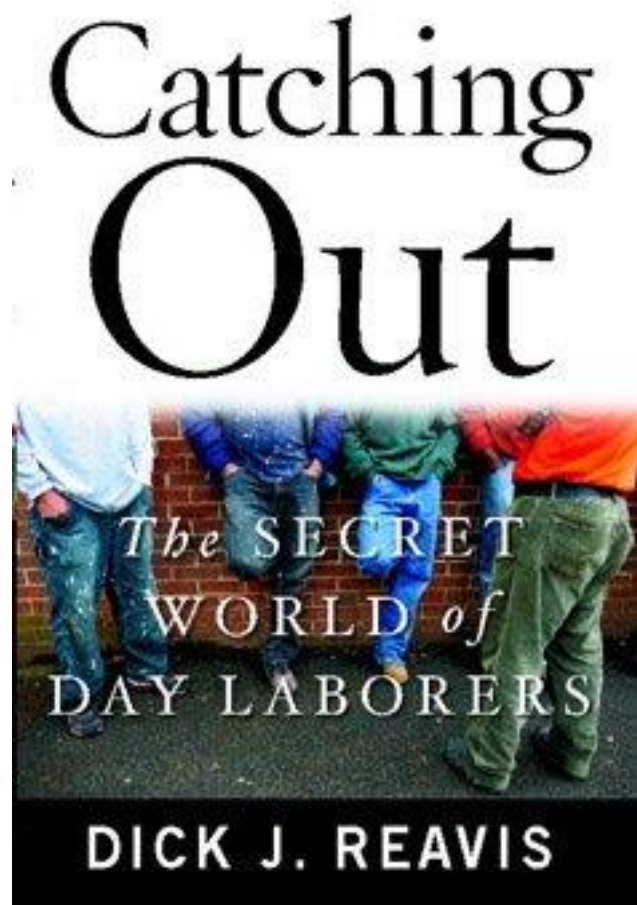


Hard Labor

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Catching Out

The Secret World of Day Laborers

by Dick J. Reavis

Simon & Schuster, 224 pages

IN *CATCHING OUT: THE SECRET WORLD OF DAY LABORERS*, Dick J. Reavis describes what life is like in a world most of us never see or think about. The secret world in the title is that of our fellow Americans who show up regularly at day labor work halls to earn meager livelihoods doing unskilled construction or other menial labor.

Catching Out is naturally compared to two classics: Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickle and Dimed* and George Orwell's genre-defining *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). Ehrenreich explored what it was like for a single woman to try to live on unskilled-worker wages. Orwell wrote about the social realities of living in rock-bottom poverty in Depression-era Europe. Reavis follows this tradition, describing "two summers of day-labor reprise" spent "catching out," slang for getting assigned a temporary job. He does not tell us the name or location of the hall. This has the effect of making Reavis' story into a kind of everyman fable.

Like Ehrenreich and Orwell, Reavis is well educated and different. Many of the people Reavis works alongside have no such protections. To his credit, he knows that. Reavis has a lifelong commitment to political causes and social justice, which gives *Catching Out* an honest matter-of-factness. These days he's a professor at North Carolina State University, but he's spent more than three decades as a journalist, including work for the *Observer*, and even longer as a progressive activist, including a stint in Alabama with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1965.

Staying low-key and observant, Reavis blends in and is treated as a regular by workers and employment hall managers. He gives us a feeling for these individuals and the small ways they preserve their humanity. Reavis provides economic context for day labor halls while showing us why some people choose this lifestyle. Day labor agencies exist because they free employers from paying medical and other benefits. But many day workers have their own reasons for accepting these terms, like the alcoholic, angry, poetic, charismatic, stylish and womanizing “jet-black man in sunglasses” known as Real Deal.

Reavis admires Real Deal, who has been arrested 39 times over 11 years. Real Deal asserts his own dignity through “his absurd and uncooperative view of life,” picking and choosing which jobs to take when others grab at any work assigned to them. Reavis gets across how Real Deal’s Cool-Hand-Luke defiance of authority gives other workers a vicarious sense that the system hasn’t beaten them. The other extreme in Reavis’ story is Henry Hilton, a “gentle and strong everyman” who tries to win permanent jobs by doing his all to please temporary bosses. Henry eventually disappears from the day labor agency, having caught a permanent nighttime job as a street sweeper. Reavis misses Henry. When Real Deal is arrested and taken away, too, “the hall became,” in Reavis’ opinion, “as silent and dull as a funeral home.”

Catching Out is not an all-out critical indictment of the temporary-labor industry. Reavis gives day labor agencies credit for protecting their workers against the extreme exploitation that illegal immigrant workers face on city street corners. But he makes clear that the agencies take half the pay that average full-time

workers would receive for equivalent jobs. Day laborers “don’t know when they’ll work or how long they must wait to find out if they’ll work.” They suffer from the petty tyranny of crew bosses who view firing temporary workers as proof of their *machismo*, that they have what it takes to be in positions of authority.

The tragedy comes at the end of *Catching Out*. Reavis writes, “The men and women with whom I worked by and large are accustomed to living on the edge.” When the current economic downturn begins to be felt, as a labor-agency manager explains, “Journeymen carpenters who made twenty dollars an hour” all of a sudden were “hoping to make eight dollars.” Day workers were “now being shoved off a precipice, into a chasm with no safety net. Even they were not prepared for that.”

Tom Palaima is professor of classics at the University of Texas at Austin and a regular book reviewer for the Observer and the Times Higher Education in London.