

***Making Fast Food : From the Frying Pan into the Fryer.* By Ester Reiter. (Montreal : McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991. Pp. 211.)**

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## BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

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*Making Fast Food : From the Frying Pan into the Fryer.* By Ester Reiter. (Montreal : McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991. Pp. 211.)

Undeniably, fast-food franchises are a prominent part of the North American landscape and, increasingly, that of the world. The question of their place in providing for everyday needs, i.e., meals for families, is worthy of exploration. What kind of place do they provide for workers is a second question and the principal one tackled by Reiter.

Reiter ambitiously sets out to analyze the complex problem of the "market moving into the home." She states that "[t]he flourishing fast food industry represents the dominance of one particular blueprint for how to live" and asks "Are there better ways to organize life ?" This question is left unanswered for the readers.

The first four chapters of *Making Fast Food* set the stage, the following three develop from Reiter's experience of participant observation working without pay for five months in a Burger King outlet. The initial chapters document all aspects of the development and operation of fast-food franchises : the history of the restaurant industry in Canada, growth and corporate mergers of transnationals, and the history of women's increasing participation in the labour force, together with theories of scientific management and Marxist analysis. Many interrelated forces favoured the development of fast-food. As tasks moved out of the home, women sought jobs, and individuals and families increasingly ate out. In Chapter 3, "The Fast Food Invasion", Reiter describes the development of franchising in food service and quotes Ray Kroc, founder of McDonald's : "It is ridiculous to call this an industry. This is not. This is ... dog eat dog..." This provides a theme for much of what follows.

The Burger King outlet where Reiter worked was located in a separate building with landscaped "garden," parking lot, and drive-through, part of a shopping mall in a suburb of Toronto. Reiter does not give the date of her Burger King experience, apparently some time between 1979 and 1989. She gives detailed descriptions of the site, dining/eating space, customer flow, work flow, costs, kitchen layout, and worker's stations in production and service. The clientele consisted mostly of men and teenagers, with families with small children on Friday nights.

Workers can become customers, and customers workers. What reasons bring people to work at Burger King ? Workers come from those "outside the traditional discourse of class position" and consist of women, teenagers,

immigrants, visible minorities, and, increasingly, retired persons and those with disabilities. Their reasons for accepting fast-food work are related to their lives off the job : family responsibilities, school, or few job opportunities.

What kind of a job for Burger King employees in the 1980s does Reiter describe ? She illustrates problems and complexities, the negative aspects of de-skilled part-time jobs, and exploitation of workers for the sake of profit for large corporations. The corporate image of benevolence and wholesomeness disguises exploitation. Even presumably charitable acts of the corporation are really dependent on contributions of work and time provided by the employees.

One aspect of the job that Reiter found especially irksome is the requisite standardized or, one could say, "mechanized" smile and response to customers. This staged performance she sees as not from the heart but a co-opting of the worker's emotional expression. "All the world's a stage" and food service itself a performance. But Reiter objects to the hypocrisy in this image manufactured solely for sales, competitive advantage, marketing and profit.

Burger King tells its employees, "Your job is a sort of social occasion." One example of social experience provided for customers is the staging of children's birthday parties. Here we are reminded of the social dimensions of eating and festivity illustrated in its great variety in Theodore and Lin Humphrey's *"We Gather Together"* (1988). Although Reiter notes workers' objections to being asked to sing "Happy Birthday," the possibility does exist of creating a festive occasion (and providing relief for mothers). Reiter's description of the Baker's Dairy Restaurant in the 1920s, an example of human adaptability and resilience, showed how people used a restaurant as their own space for socializing and providing support for one another. Even in today's fast-food work world of standardized franchises and transient labour forces, Reiter finds that the workers' shared experiences off the job at home and school enable them to create a social life at the workplace, saying "The interaction in the crew room was generally quite enjoyable across generations, class, and gender."

The work itself creates several of the aspects of job pressure, psychological effects on workers researched by Kohn and co-workers (1983), conditions such as sudden changes in work hours and schedules, extra demands, job uncertainties, and the worker's low place in the organizational structure. What options do these BK workers have to express dissatisfaction? Union organization is shown to be extremely difficult if not impossible. With no voice in management decisions, the workers' only remedy is to leave. This option is again dependent on workers' situations and family responsibilities.

*Making Fast Food* contains interesting material but it is up to the reader to ferret out themes and meaning. The concept of fast food as a blueprint for how to live is not consolidated into a picture to compare with other alternatives. Now, in 1996, the job market and employment are in a state of flux and uncertainty. An important question to ask is whether low-paid part-time jobs are really opportunities

for young workers to get training and experience or dead-end stop-gap work needed for survival. If they are “bad” jobs, who bears the brunt of the negatives ? The book’s most important contribution is providing detail for this discussion and debate.

### References Cited

Humphrey, Theodore C. and Lin T. Humphrey, eds. 1988. *“We Gather Together” : Food and Festivity in American Life*. Ann Arbor : UMI Research Press.

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*An Unfinished Conversation : The Life and Music of Stan Rogers.*  
By Chris Gudgeon. (Toronto : Viking/Penguin,  
1994. Pp. 216.)

Stan Rogers was a big man with a powerful voice and a matching personality. He was an outstanding songwriter, touching something that was lacking in the songs of this time. In the mid-seventies, a great many urban singers pretended that they did not have families, let alone roots. Yet, Stan’s clear voice ran out, “My Sally’s like a raven’s wing, her hair is like her mother’s” (p. 156), evoking images of places where people were connected by kinship and friendship, like the Maritime communities in which I spent much of my life. When I first heard Stan perform as a relative unknown at the Mariposa Folk Festival in 1975, I knew that I was listening to a very special singer. Word spread at the festival that he was someone to hear and his performances only improved over the years. Al Simmons, a western Canadian performer, described the last performance of Rogers and his band in 1983 :

Stan later said it was the worst show he’d done in years... But I was absolutely blown away, and they had the audience absolutely hypnotized. I’d never seen anything like it before. When he sang and when he performed, the power coming off the stage was incredible. [21]

Though I knew Stan only casually, I found him to be a man of great warmth. He welcomed me into a rather closed scene which centred on the Toronto Folklore Centre, a music store and folk revivalist hangout. However, Stan could