

Bait and Switch
Barbara Ehrenreich

- General theme that job hunting—and some white-collar jobs, to a certain extent—are largely a bureaucratic game
- Career coaches sound like saviors but actually end up leaching much needed money off those in need of true guidance
- Book demonstrates that success in job hunting, much like on-the-job success, is all about perception

Finding a Coach in the Land of Oz

- p.28 “If she doesn’t know I’m a complete fake, and I don’t think I’ve given her any reason to suspect that I am, she nonetheless has a remarkably clear idea of how to perpetuate fakery. Which may just be the essence of resume writing.”
- p.34 Outcomes from Meyers-Briggs test change over time: “One attraction must be that the tests lend a superficial rationality to the matching of people with jobs. No one, after all, wants a sadistic personnel director or a morbidly shy publicist; and if you failed at one job, it is probably comforting to be told that it was simply not a good “fit” for your inner nature.”
- p.39 “Even more staggering is my other major “takeaway” from this session (I’m at least picking up some jargon): that I am not the only phony in the job-searching business. What I’ve been learning from Kimberly and to a certain extent also from the stolid Joanne is how to lie—how to plump up an undistinguished resume, how to project a kind of confidence I neither feel nor deserve to feel. Deception is part of the game.”

Stepping Out into the World of Networking

- p.51 “But Ted’s breakdown does reinforce the impression that, whatever is going on in the corporate world today, whatever wild process is chewing up men and women and spitting them out late in life, damage is definitely done.”
- p.58 Don’t Send a Resume by Jeffrey J. Fox: “According to Fox, no one is interested in my background or “career objectives”; all the companies want to know is what I can do for them—which means many more hours at the computer, researching each company in detail, identifying its problems, and dreaming up solutions.”
- p.62 Networking: “It feels “fake” because we know it involves the deflection of our natural human sociability to an ulterior end. Normally we meet strangers in the expectation that they may truly be strange, and are drawn to the multilayered mystery that each human presents. But in networking, as in prostitution, there is no time for fascination. The networker is always, so to speak, looking over the shoulder of the person she engages in conversation, toward whatever concrete advantage can be gleaned from the interaction—a tip or a precious contact. This instrumentalism undermines the possibility of a group identity, say, as white-collar victims of corporate upheaval. No matter how crowded the room, the networker prowls alone, scavenging to meet his or her individual needs.”

Surviving Boot Camp

- p.73 “But the white-collar workforce seems to consist of two groups: those who can’t find work at all and those who are employed in jobs where they work much more than they want to. In between lies a scary place where you dedicate long hours to a job that you sense is about to eject you, if only because so many colleagues have been laid off already. I’ve read about a form of depression called “survivor syndrome,” which is said to be rampant in layoff-prone firms...”

- p.85 “But from the point of view of the economic “winners”--those who occupy powerful and high paying jobs—the view that one’s fate depends entirely on oneself must be remarkably convenient. It explains the winners’ success in the most flattering terms while invalidating the complaints of the losers.”
- p.89 Referring to the advice about searching for a job: “You have to structure it hierarchically, complete with someone playing the role of boss, preferably a paid coach like Ron. Thus the one great advantage of unemployment—the freedom to do as you please, to get up when you want, wear what you want, and let your mind drift here and there—is foreclosed. Just when you finally have a chance to be fully autonomous and possibly creative, for a few months anyway, you have to invent a little drama in which you are still toiling away for the man.”

The Transformation

- p.95 “...getting a job is like gaining acceptance into an eighth-grade clique. There exists an elite consisting of people who hold jobs and have the power to confer that status on others, and my task is to penetrate this elite.”
- p.111 “...but I am suddenly gripped by queasiness. I understand that to make myself into a “product” that I can market, I must first become a commodity, a thing.”
“What I had not understood is that to become an object, a thing, you must first go through a kind of death.”
- p.113 “Today, in the wake of the last recession, companies are intent on being permanently lean; they churn people in and out as needed, so that the average executive or professional can expect to hold—what?—about ten or eleven jobs in a lifetime whether he or she wants to or not.”

Networking with the Lord

- p.142 “What we want from a career narrative is some moral thrust, some meaningful story we can, as Sennet suggests, tell our children. The old narrative was “I worked hard and therefore succeeded” or sometimes “I screwed up and therefore failed. But a life of only intermittently rewarded effort—working hard only to be laid off, and then repeating the process until aging forecloses decent job offers—requires more strenuous forms of explanation.”
- p.146 “So this is the new ideal Christianized, “just in time,” white-collar employee—disposable when temporarily unneeded and always willing to return with a smile, no matter what hardships have been endured in the off periods.”

Aiming Higher

- p.153 “Now, however, people seem to be churned out of their companies every three years or so. Ron confirms my impression; an executive today can count on having eight to nine jobs in a lifetime. “You always think the next job will be the last one, but it never is.””
- p.162 “I approach Roger from State Farm and ask him to outline for me, as a newcomer to the corporate world, his “typical day.” When it turns out to involve ten hours at his desk, I ask whether the demands decrease as he rises in the hierarchy. For a moment his smile fades; no, with each accomplishment, the expectations only increase.”
- p.164 “While blue-collar workers invite injury and exhaustion through physical exertion, white-collar workers endure the sometimes equally painful results of immobility. Maybe the whole point of a college education, which is the almost universal requirement for white-collar employment, is that it trains you to sit still and keep your eyes open.”
- p.169 “One thing I’ve learned, though: a Gap of any kind, for any purpose—child raising, caring for an elderly parent, recovering from an illness, or even consulting—is unforgivable. If you haven’t spent every moment of your life making money for somebody else, you can forget about getting a job.”

p.170 Regarding responses from online job applications: “Mostly there is nothing at all, and it is this—the unshakable, godlike, magisterial indifference of the corporate world—that drives my fellow job seekers to despair.”

In Which I Am Offered a “Job”

p.189 “I had pictured the corporate world that I seek to enter as a castle on a hill, outside of which the starving vagrants wander, set upon by wolves and barbarian hordes, begging for entry into the safety of the fortified towers. But now I see there is another zone out here: a somewhat settled encampment, where people toil for uncertain rewards at minor tasks invented by the castle dwellers.”

Downward Mobility

p.210 “Experience is not an advantage; in fact, as Richard Sennett notes of corporate employment, “as a person’s experience accumulates, it loses value.””

Conclusion

p.216 “Middle-class Americans, like myself and my fellow seekers, have been raised with the old-time Protestant expectation that hard work will be rewarded with material comfort and security. This has never been true of the working class, most of which toils away at wages incommensurate with the effort required. And now, the sociologists agree, it is increasingly untrue of the educated middle class that stocks our corporate bureaucracies.”

p.224 “It is the corporate, or collective, aspect of corporations that has fallen into despair. There are two legal ways to make money: by increasing sales or by cutting costs. In most cases, a corporation’s highest operating expense is its payroll, making it a tempting target for cuts. In addition, the mergers and acquisitions that so appeal to CEO egos inevitably result in layoffs, as the economies of scale are realized.”

p.225 “There are limits of course to this kind of Darwinian struggle. At some point the survivors will no longer be able to absorb the work of those who have been eliminated, no matter how hard they try.”

p.230 “For all the talk about the need to be a likable “team player,” many people work in a fairly cutthroat environment that would seem to be especially challenging to those who possess the recommended traits. Cheerfulness, upbeatness, and compliance: these are the qualities of subordinates--of servants rather than masters, women (traditionally, anyway) rather than men.”

p.232 “It is the insecurity of white-collar employment that makes the demand for passion so cruel and perverse. You may be able to simulate passion, or even feel it, for one job, but what about the next job, and the next?”

p.233 “The “business professions,” on the other hand, are so called mainly as a matter of courtesy.”

p.235 “...the CEO may be a fool; the company’s behavior may be borderline criminal—and still you are required to serve unstintingly and without the slightest question. Unfortunately, as the large numbers of laid-off white-collar workers show, this loyalty is not reliably reciprocated.”