

Hard-Hatted Women

edited by Molly Martin

Week: 2 of 3

Chapters/Pages: pp. 17-25, 216-224

Themes:

- ♣ Experiences of tradeswomen
- ♣ Sexism/heterosexism in the workplace
- ♣ Family/work balance
- ♣ Working class struggles
- ♣ Overcoming fears/struggles

Recommended Opening: “Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through the experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened.”—Helen Keller

- What do you think of this quote? Do you agree with what it’s saying?
- In your opinion, what does it mean to say someone has “character”?
- Why do you think the author believes that character can’t “be developed in ease and quiet”? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- What do you think it takes for someone to find strength in their suffering?
- Are there ways that people might take away something positive from their trials and suffering? In what ways have your experiences with trials and suffering had similar or different effects to this?
- As opposed to physically becoming stronger, how is “the soul strengthened”?

Before Reading:

- We’ll only get to read some of these stories together but they are all wonderful first-person accounts of pioneering women working in the trades.
- The book is out of print at this point, but you can look up and familiarize yourself with the terminology. If you want to find a copy on your own, there are some used copies available through the “marketplace” option on Amazon (and probably some other used book store hubs, if you wanted to find a different source).

Recommended Reading Passages and Questions:

Read Beth Szillagyi – Sheet Metal Worker, pp. 17-25 (until “I haven’t had to yet, fortunately”):

- What made Beth want to change jobs and become a tradeswomen? What are some other reasons women or people in general may be interested in working in the trades?
- How would you describe the exchange between Beth and “Cigar”? What kinds of things does he tell her to support why he thinks “women shouldn’t work here”? How do you reconcile these comments with his later one, “If any of those turkeys give you any shit, you let me know” (21)?
- How does Beth respond? What do you think you would do and say if you were in her shoes during that conversation? Why?
- How does Beth respond to some of the skepticism and harassment from men on the job? Do you think this is a good strategy? Why/why not?

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- How do you foresee responding to situations like this, if you encounter it?
- How do you think you should judge when to speak up and advocate for yourself and when to let something go? Why?
- Beth talks about being prepared with a “bag of tricks” for different situations. What tools do you think you’ll bring to work that will allow you to deal with conflicts that might arise in the workplace? What skills or tools do you want to hone or work on to prepare you for your work?

Read Susan Eisenberg – Electrician, pp. 216-218:

- How would you describe Susan’s feeling of connection to other women? Do you feel more connected to a community of women because of this path you’re choosing? Why/why not?
- Susan explains how she formed a group with the few other female electricians in her local. Do you have any hopes or fears related to working with other women in your trade? What are some of the potential benefits, if any? What are some of the potential drawbacks, if any?
- What are some of the problems Susan faces as a woman in the trades?
- Susan wonders whether she made the right choice in how she dealt with offensive comments. What do you think of how she handled this? What do you think you would have done in these situations?

Read Susan Eisenberg –Electrician, pp. 219-224:

- What are your reactions to Susan’s choice not to tell co-workers about her first pregnancy? What are some advantages of this? What are some drawbacks?
- Do you think she made the right choice? why/why not?
- What changed for her during the second and third pregnancy?
- How does being pregnant or being a mother affect how people treat you generally? How does it affect you specifically at a job?
- Have any of you received special treatment (whether good or bad) because you were pregnant or are a parent? Do you think a workplace should make adjustments for pregnant/parenting women? If yes, what kinds of adjustments? If not, why not?
- How has Susan’s job changed the dynamics in her marriage/family? What relationship, if any, do you see a relationship between women in nontraditional work and women in nontraditional marriages/families?
- In what ways is Susan trying to push the unions to change their policies and practices? From what you know, what changes do you think have been made in this respect?

Recommended Poetry: “Escape” by Theresa Hossfeld

- What is the tone? How would you describe in your own words what the poet is feeling?
- Who do you think she’s talking to?
- “Who can I follow?/Cuz I don’t want to lead...” What does she want? Who does she want to follow? Why might she not want to lead?
- “I must take this test just like everyone/Takes tests...” Are there tests you go through to “find your power”? If so, what are they? What does it feel like to go through a test like this?
- What would it mean to find power? Where do you look? How do you find it? When, in your life, have you felt powerful? When in your life have you felt disempowered?
- Why do you think this poem is entitled *Escape*? What do you make of the lines: “I am closing in on the sky/Hoping it will try to escape...”? How might it be helpful to try to escape from your pain or challenges? How might it be harmful?

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- What kinds of things do you need on the “search for your power”? What helps you through difficult situations?

Recommended Poetry Prompt: “Searching”

Think about a time in your life when you had to find your way through a difficult situation. What helped you get through? What path were you looking for? Write about why you stayed in the situation and what you found by going through those challenges.

Recommended Closing: Closing: “To have courage for whatever comes in life—everything lies in that.”—Saint Theresa of Avila

Notes: