

Athens Plus

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Alain de Botton Swiss-born author talks about the small, unnoticed aspects and big patterns of modern labor

Work – how does it work?

BY HARRY VAN VERSENDAAL

After dissecting love, status, travel and architecture, the Swiss-born best-selling novelist and essayist Alain de Botton has returned with an essay on what we spend most of our lives doing; work. De Botton, in Athens for the launch of a Greek translation of his book "The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work" (Patakis), spoke to Athens Plus about his latest project.

Is giving interviews one of the sorrows of your work?

No, it's actually one of the ways in which you get to realize what you've written. Often being asked to describe what you've written in other words can help you to focus. Sometimes I get a depressing realization: "Oh, that's what I should have said." You can capture an idea sometimes with a clarity that you were struggling for in a book.

So what are the pleasures and sorrows of working as a writer?

Writing is a very intrinsic need; it's something that you would do just for yourself, and the idea that you can do something that is a passion as a career is a very nice feeling. That's the pleasure. The sorrow is that it's extremely precarious. If you're trained to be a doctor and then you become a doctor and you have that qualification, you have it for life; whereas, as a writer, you always start from zero. There is no intrinsic loyalty from your audience, and there is no intrinsic loyalty – to be pretentious – from your muse.

How did working on this book change the way you see your own work?

Most of us know one area of work, the one that we do most of the time. I was very familiar with the world of writing and associated industries. But I was a complete foreigner to lots of other fields of work. I didn't know anything about the world of accountancy, biscuits or satellite launches and yet was incredibly curious.

I suppose one of the things I learned was that all jobs are quite similar – if that doesn't sound too weird. There's fascinating connections between all jobs. All jobs are at some level about trying to identify and then satisfy a hunger in another person whether that's a physical hunger, a hunger for data, for biscuits or a hunger for ideas. Structurally, it's kind of quite similar. The other terrible cliché generalization about work is that everything is very complicated. In order for anything to exist, this glass, this machine, this pen, an incredible number of people had to cooperate and coordinate their activities at a level that seems almost unbelievable to me outside it. To get anything off the ground, it just involves so many things. As consumers we tend to forget. You go out there and you look at tea being served. This is an incredible kind of ballet going on to get that room organized. It's like a monument to civilization and order. What you actually think of tea



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HOW CAN I HELP YOU, SIR?

You mention that employers used to hit people, now they are urging them to "have fun." Surely, it's not because they are nicer people.

That's right. If you look at the business section of a book shop, most of books are about this thing called "management." What is management? Management is how you "incentivize" people to feel engaged and excited about jobs that they might not naturally feel engaged and excited about. And a lot of jobs are essentially service jobs in one way or another. They are jobs that can very easily be destroyed by lack of motivation or even an unhelpful smile. That's why there is an enormous investment in the pseudo-happiness of employees.

or of its ultimate purpose is another question. But it's an impressive piece of organization, and everything tends to be.

In your book you seem to suggest that modern man is more interested in consumption than in the whole production process – meaning how stuff ends up on our plate or in our living room.

I think modern man is almost not allowed to be interested in production because, for whatever reason, producers are not interested in letting us know about their processes of production. I did this little book about Heathrow Airport in which I say that it's far more interesting to look into how an airline meal is made than to eat it. Eating it is not interesting; it's quite boring, almost horrible. But if you see how it's made, it's absolutely awe-inspiring. And that applies to so many different jobs. It's fascinating how tourism is always identified with leisure pursuit.

If I went to the concierge now and said: "I'm in Athens and have bit of time. What shall I do?" Museum, church, monument etc. This is what the concierge would suggest. If I said I want to see how Athens works, I'd like to go to an office, they would say I'm crazy.

Because nothing works, perhaps?

Well, yes, even that is interesting. Even the nonworking is interesting, the bizarre stalemates and so on. But that is not the tourist agenda.

You start out by describing the cargo docks in London. Why did that place intrigue you?

Partly, it was the idea that I had been living in London for 25-30 years and I'd never actually known about the place. I just didn't think about cargo really. I just didn't think about where stuff came from. And there is an almost childish interest and pleasure in working out where stuff comes from.

What about the other occupations you describe?

They're all areas that kind of fascinated me and it's hard to know exactly why. They were unfamiliar, for example. A lot of them were slightly off-kilter. If you watch TV, there's quite a lot of information about being a nurse or a doctor, there's always hospital dramas. There's quite a lot of information about being a lawyer or a criminal. But there's not much information on logistics or biscuit manufacturing. So I wanted to pick things that I was rather curious about that but don't get much media time. And each of the jobs that I chose sits on an intellectually interesting area. Take the chapter on biscuits. It could have been something else, like cheese or soap. What I wanted to look at there was the way in which in capitalist society's enormous industries are built up out of selling things which will occupy on-

ly a very small moment or place in an individual's life.

It's something that leads to curious feelings of dislocation. Because if you're a pretty highly paid accountant at the biscuit company, you've got a company car, a nice office etc, and you stand back from your life and you think: "OK, what am I doing? I am accounting the Jaffa Cake. That's my job." Again, there is a kind of disconnection between the seriousness of the means and tools and the relative lack of seriousness, the lack of deeper meaning of the thing you are involved in.

Modern man was the first to see work as something you can derive pleasure from. Do you think the economic crisis is changing that? For example, these days, people are glad just to have a job.

That's right. The educational system is predominantly middle class. It is the promoter of a kind of bourgeois ideology. No one thinks that the mere point of work is survival. The idea is that the point of work is some sort of higher fulfillment. And that is the linchpin of a type of bourgeois ideology. And, of course, it crushes headlong into economic reality. The classic situation now is the guy with a PhD and a master's who can't find a job. But I think that will pass as the economic crisis eases. The deeper current is toward the bourgeois idea of work as self-realization – which remains a very difficult thing to do. People wonder: "Why is it so hard to have a beautiful, creative job? Why is it hard to be Steve Jobs?" And it's not merely because of the economic crisis but because most jobs in industrial civilization are procedural jobs, they are about making relatively routine processes more efficient. Competition is won by marginal efficiencies that require incredible disciplines of essentially accountancy and systematization. And that's why not many people are going to be Steve Jobs.