

Black Inc. Book Club Notes

TITLE: On the Line

AUTHOR: Joseph Ponthus; Stephanie Smee

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SUBJECT: Fiction; Translated fiction

Book description

A multi-award-winning French bestseller that brings poetry to the factory floor

Unable to find work in his field, Joseph Ponthus enlists with a temp agency and starts to pick up casual shifts in the fish processing plants and abattoirs of Brittany. Day after day he records with infinite precision the nature of work on the production line: the noise, the weariness, the dreams stolen by the repetitive nature of exhausting rituals and physical suffering. But he finds solace in a life previously lived. Shelling prawns, he dreams of Alexandre Dumas. Pushing cattle carcasses, he recalls Apollinaire. And, in the grace of the blank spaces created by his insistent return to a new line of text – mirroring his continued return to the production line – we discover the woman he loves, the happiness of a Sunday, Pok Pok the dog, the smell of the sea.

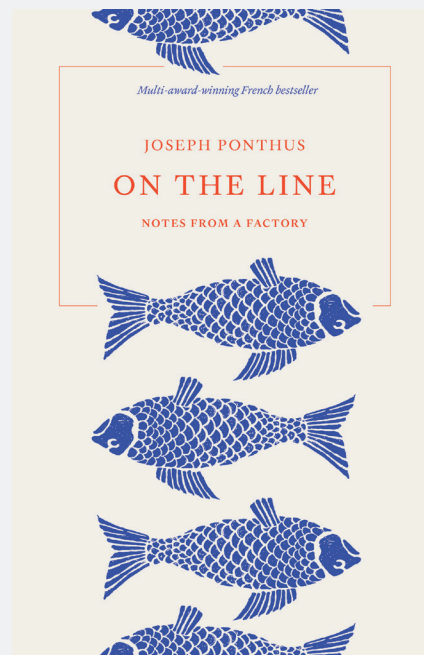
In this celebrated French bestseller, translated by Stephanie Smee, Ponthus captures the mundane, the beautiful and the strange, writing with an elegance and humour that sit in poignant contrast with the blood and sweat of the factory floor. *On the Line* (*À la ligne*) is a poet's ode to manual labour, and to the human spirit that makes it bearable.

Praise for On the Line

'Poetic and political, lyrical and realistic, Joseph Ponthus' spirited elegy is at once surprising, captivating and affecting.' —**TÉLÉRAMA**

'It is not every day that one witnesses the birth of a writer.' —**FRANCE 5 LA GRANDE LIBRAIRIE**

'A work that is powerful, clever, benevolent, optimistic even. Essential reading.' —**CAUSETTE**



About the authors

Joseph Ponthus (1978–2021) worked for over ten years as a social worker and special needs teacher in the suburbs of Paris. He was co-author of *Nous ... La Cité* (*The Suburbs Are Ours*) and his masterpiece *À la ligne* (*On the Line*) was published in France in 2019 to great acclaim. It won several literary prizes, including the Grand Prix RTL/Lire and the Prix Régine Deforges, and became a major bestseller.



Stephanie Smee left a career in law to work as a literary translator. Recent translations include Hannelore Cayre's *The Inheritors* and *The Godmother* (winner of the CWA Crime Fiction in Translation Dagger award); Françoise Frenkel's rediscovered World War II memoir, *No Place to Lay One's Head* (winner of the JQ–Wingate Prize); and Pascal Janovjak's *The Rome Zoo*.



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Discussion Points

1. Throughout the book, Ponthus uses almost no punctuation – the only breaks in the flow of words being line returns, capitals and section breaks: ‘I write like I think when I’m on my production line / Mind wandering alone determined / I write like I work / On the production line / Return / New line’. Discuss how this style affected you as readers.

2. Why do you think Ponthus chose to write in this pared-down free-verse style rather than documentary prose? Do you think the latter would have been as effective? Why / why not?

3. Ponthus calls work on a production line ‘modern slavery’. Having read his book, do you agree with this description, and why? Are there any other contemporary jobs that you would describe this way?

4. Ponthus aims not to write about ‘the grimness of the factory / Rather its paradoxical beauty’. Do you feel he is successful in this?

5. For Ponthus, literature plays a double role in adjusting to and coping with life ‘on the line’. As well as writing about his experiences, he frequently interprets them via the works of French and other literary greats, such as Hugo and Apollinaire, Homer and Shakespeare. For example, ‘Tomorrow / “Oh! Vessels of the Danaïdes” / To quote Apollinaire / Bottomless wells of forty-odd tonnes of prawns’; and, quoting Thierry Metz: ‘His book / Towards the end / Which sums up / More or less / My work at the factory / “At some point it’ll be over. Voilà. / That’s all one can say. / Here.”’ Can you think of any time in your own life when you’ve turned to literature to help you understand a situation, event or person?

6. ‘The factory’ takes on a central role in Ponthus’s life, quickly becoming ‘My factory’, ‘my Mediterranean across which I’ll / map the perilous routes of my Odyssey’. Why do you think Ponthus identifies with the factory in this way?

7. After working on various fish-processing lines for several months, Ponthus finds a month’s work as a ‘boss’ in the social-work sector for which he was trained. Discuss how he rates both the work and the colleagues in this role against those on the production line.

8. Ponthus ranks the various fish-processing roles against each other: assigned to ‘crumbed fish’ (based on a thick sauce poured into a mould), ‘I no longer get to feel superior about working with / real fish’. Prawns seem to be acceptable; whelks, however, are ‘The most bloody pointless shellfish in the world’. Later, assigned to the abattoir, he sees this as ‘perhaps the end point the paradigm the summa’ of the food processing industry. Yet, although horrified by the blood and slaughter, ‘at least I have work again ... / That’s the main thing’. Could you face working in an abattoir if no other work was available? If not, do you think it’s OK to expect others to do this work?

9. Ponthus compares the horrors and the physical demands and dangers of the abattoir to war: ‘It’s all much of a muchness / ... / The blood the blood the blood / I’m advancing now / I’ve moved on from pork to beef / Almost at the front line’. He repeatedly references French poet Apollinaire’s writings from the trenches of the First World War. How – if at all – do you think Ponthus’s analogy fits?

10. Ponthus muses on what his puppy, Pok Pok, asking [what] ‘would you make of it if I were to tell you exactly / what goes on at the abattoir / Would you look at me differently / ... see me as an agent of the banality of evil’. Yet his workmates are ‘Patient and resolute’, ‘good guys’; even the ‘slaughterers’ ‘... look no worse nor better than me’, and ‘Perhaps / ... / Some of them too have a dog they love’. Ponthus reveals how our choices as consumers dictate the need for unpleasant tasks to be carried out by people no different from ourselves, and suffering to be inflicted on animals. Do you think that reading this book will affect your consumer choices and decisions? If yes, how?