

SLEEPING WITH AMAZON

Sometimes it's not who you work with, but who you work for.



(Photo by Uwe Zucchi/picture alliance via Getty Images)

David Gutowski | Longreads | July 2020 | 5 minutes (1,500 words)

“At the end of the day, I have to sleep with myself.” Over the 18 years of publishing my literature and music website *Largehearted Boy*, that has always been my creed. When offered sponsorships and advertising from products I didn’t believe in, that belief guided my advertising (and lifestyle) decisions. When my bed became crowded while working for Amazon Books, insomnia set in.

My world pivoted in the mid-2010s. Then shook. Then reversed on its axis. In 2014, I separated from my wife, got a divorce, and met the love of my life. I left Brooklyn for Manhattan. Website advertising, long in freefall, plummeted even more. In 2016, my personal life disintegrated along with my savings. I attempted suicide and was forced to finally deal with lifelong mental health issues including major depressive disorder and borderline personality disorder. I returned to school in 2018 to finish my undergraduate degree in creative writing. My mental health, at long last, improved, and with it, so did I.

I hadn’t held a job other than publishing my website in 15 years. I was 52. In a previous life, I worked in digital prepress, an industry that has reinvented itself several times since I left. My employers had been newspapers and commercial printers (with a side trip into the election services industry). In those worlds I am an anachronism. My focus turned to my true love, literature. Books can make positive change. I wanted to be a part of that.

Friends and acquaintances emailed job openings. My resume became friendly with LinkedIn and other online job services, which quickly felt like dating sites. Dozens of applications flew out to publishers. I knew I would find the right lover.

In the fall of 2017, I was among the final candidates for two positions — social media manager and associate editor — at different independent publishers. The interview process went well. I was familiar with the publishers and their staff through my website. Industry veterans were eventually hired for both positions.

Though my website opened doors to prospective publishing opportunities, I lacked the pedigree of previous industry experience. Both the [early book reviews](#) and [author playlist series](#) at *Largehearted Boy* have cemented me into the literary landscape, much more so after I moved to New York in 2011. Hosting three reading series has helped. My writer friends and friends in publishing have helped me feel a part of the literary scene.

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That fall I started asking friends at local independent bookstores about openings. Most offered a part-time shift or two a week, but I needed more than that. My girlfriend pointed out a seasonal associate job listing for Amazon Books in midtown, and I half-heartedly replied.

Amazon requested an interview and paperwork. The next evening, my laptop screen was filled with a person, hideously lit by a desk lamp and obviously at home, asking me about my customer-centric experiences. The next interviewer I was passed along to was familiar with my website and spent most of the time talking about the music she had discovered through *Largehearted Boy* instead of interviewing me. A couple of days later, Amazon offered me a job.

Amazon's convenience has always lured me, its morals have always offended me. This has been magnified working in the bookstore for the past year and a half.

I had no expectations of the job, other than being happy to pay my bills and handsell books. I had never worked in retail. My co-workers surprised me with the depth and breadth of their literary interests. Amazon had obviously hired booklovers whose tastes ran from literature to young adult to science fiction to romance and more. Diversity was the rule, not the exception. The staff, especially the store managers, were a lively group of 20-to-60-year-olds.

During slow periods at the bookstore I would discuss movies with Joe, a veritable pop culture repository; crack jokes with Carlos, our resident clown and talented street photographer; or talk politics with Levi, an earnest young man who supported Bernie Sanders to the end.

My training was swift and boring. Safety. Tenets. Slogans. Then I hit the sales floor.

As an old punk, the uniforms — black or orange t-shirts and polos — made me feel like a billboard. It wasn't the cheap poly/cotton blend though. The huge ASK ME ABOUT AUDIBLE and TRY AMAZON PRIME emblazoned on the back made me feel cheap, as if the near minimum wage I was receiving wasn't enough value for the company.

The managers impressed me every day. Working the floor, connecting with staff and customers directly and without pretense, and willing to

do every task in the store if needed. When the restroom toilet backed up, they were the first to volunteer to fix it. If there was a shortage of sales associates on the sales floor, they would quickly jump in. Their experience and dedication to excellence shone through.

My store was in midtown Manhattan, directly across the street from the Empire State Building. The clientele was an eclectic mix of tourists, local workers, and people who lived in the neighborhood. The store is stocked through a combination of algorithm and human curation. Given the location, business books are incredibly popular, as are self-help.

Unsurprisingly, I loved recommending titles. Occasionally we would stock something I loved, like Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita*, and I would thrust it into as many hands as I could. When someone asked for science fiction, I would recommend Octavia Butler. If someone wanted a thriller, I pointed them to *My Sister, the Serial Killer* by Oyinkan Braithwaite. I loved sneaking something literary into the hands of genre readers.

Since most of the books at our location are shelved face out, we stocked relatively few books for a store our size. I was always happy to recommend that customers shop the city's local independent bookstores for titles we didn't have on hand.

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My love for the work surprised me. I looked forward to shelving books, chatting with people at the register, even helping customers with electronic devices. My commute, as well as lunches and breaks were filled with reading, and the actual work was rewarding in small ways. Interacting with customers was almost always a joy, whether offering book suggestions or sharing NYC dining tips to visitors.

The bookstore experience was largely positive, I was surrounded by what I love and people I respected. Mostly. In the year and a half I worked at Amazon Books, more electronic devices and household items found their way onto the sales floor. The repeated admonitions to sell more Amazon devices (ereaders, smart speakers, tablets) grew tiresome, as did the drive for Amazon digital subscriptions at the point of sale. To the corporate middlemen, these metrics helped define the store's success. To us workers, we often felt like door-to-door salesmen trying to add on to a customer's bill after their purchase.

I often lay awake at night, torn between doing something personally rewarding and working for a company that disrespects its employees. I had heard firsthand the anti-union rhetoric from my managers and seen how it treated worker protests at its warehouses. Then Amazon clamped down on its employees' speech about climate change. I would never be proud of working for Amazon.

My friends knew I was working, but I told few that Amazon was my employer. Amazon was my illicit lover.

In my 18 months at Amazon Books, though I have received positive reinforcement from my immediate managers, I have not had an official evaluation. My hourly wage is the same as the new hires I helped train.

A couple of weeks ago I was finally deemed “full-time” after working 32+ hours a week over the past year, making me eligible for disability insurance, among other things. At several points last year I was averaging over 37 hours a week as a part-time employee. Often I was scheduled for five 7 3/4 hour days, but if I was sick or had to take personal paid time off, I could only use four hours of my time per day. If I needed the money, I had to show up.

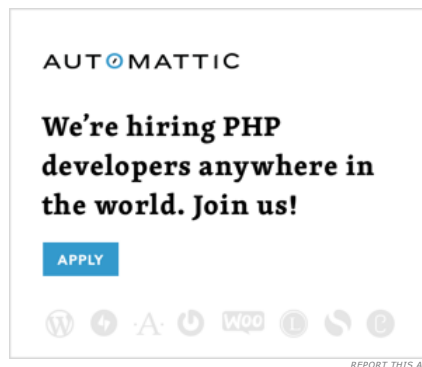
Working for Amazon has made me feel replaceable. I have yet to receive a raise. At first, I thought this was the way retail worked, but several friends have convinced me otherwise.

My friend Chris’s aunt has a saying, “You have to live your life for you.” The COVID-19 lockdown has given me time to assess my life going forward. In this time of introspection I realized that I need to work toward, and for, the things that make life better for all. Making the world a better place, for myself and everyone else, is now my priority.

Will I attend graduate school? Find another job? I still have to work for a living, but I need to stop giving my life to Amazon.

David Gutowski is a writer who lives in New York City and publishes the [Largehearted Boy website](#). His work has appeared in *The Millions*, *The Morning News*, *PBS*, and elsewhere. He is currently looking for a job in publishing or at an independent bookstore.

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