

Rivethead: Tales from the Assembly Line Study Guide

**Rivethead: Tales from the Assembly Line by Ben
Hamper**

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Plot Summary

Rivethead: Tales from the Assembly Line by Bernard Egan "Ben" Hamper III, is a work of non-fiction. The book details the life of an average kid in Flint, Michigan who was pre-destined to end up working as a shoprat in one of the ten auto factory plants in the region. No one ever sets out to be a "shoprat;" it just seems to happen that way.

Hamper's father, Bernard, slaved in the factory until the man could stand it no longer. Everyone in Hamper's family and extended family had put in their time at the factories. Bernard Hamper I answered the call in 1930. The man spent the next forty years watching as the automobile industry changed and evolved. The grandfather retired, which was against the original plan and died from cancer at age 52. It had been exactly one week since the former worker had received his first pension check.

Hamper goes on to relay the auto-related careers of most of his family, dating back to his great-grandfather. Hamper surmises that the lineage would have spread back even farther if Henry Ford would have invented his contraption a little sooner.

Hamper's childhood is not easy. While all the other kids had fathers that were totally committed to their chosen auto factories, Hamper II had little to no ambition except to find the next bar. This put Mrs. Hamper and Ben into unique positions. Mrs. Hamper worked two jobs while Ben became the man of the house, helping to raise his six younger brothers and sisters.

Hamper became a proud underachiever in school. Despite lectures about behavioral issues and terrible report cards, Hamper III continued to slack off on work - even when it was obvious he was capable of doing better. The parents tried to explain that it was expensive to send him to Catholic school, and it was important for him to get a good education. Not everyone was expected to go to work in the factories, and it was clear that Hamper III's parents wanted something more for him. It seemed ridiculous to Hamper that his underachieving father would dare to give such lectures.

Hamper ended up barely graduating just in time to marry his pregnant girlfriend. The marriage disintegrated quickly with Hamper's heavy drinking and intermittent employment. Hamper finally got a job at GM's Truck and Bus Line, first in the Cab Shop and eventually, on the Rivet Line. The majority of the book details the experiences and exploits at the factory. Hamper introduces many unusual characters. The factory's motto might have been the old adage, "You don't have to be crazy to work here but it helps."

Lay offs and restlessness led Hamper to trying his hand at writing again. At first it seemed futile. Hamper met Michael Moore, founder of the Flint Voice, when he submitted a record review. The association led to the birth of Impressions of a Rivethead and Hamper's subsequent success. In the end, Hamper leaves the factory life due to an acute anxiety disorder. It would not stop the author, however, from recounting the 11 years he worked as a GM shoprat.



Prologue, chapters 1-2

Prologue, chapters 1-2 Summary and Analysis

Rivethead: Tales from the Assembly Line by Ben Hamper begins with a prologue detailing the presence of Dead Rock Stars in a General Motors factory in Flint, Michigan. The term Dead Rock Stars is capitalized to show the importance of the group of legendary musicians and to give them the reverence they deserve. These heroes of the rivetheads include Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and Brian Jones. Unfortunately, stereos operated by electricity were against company policy, and if the line wanted to hear songs they'd heard a million times before, the stereo, owned by a lineman named Hogjaw, has to be camouflaged.

Although the music of the Dead Rock Stars was preferred by the majority of the line, not everyone was as appreciative as the author. Hamper makes repeated comments about the fact that management believed any stereo or unauthorized equipment would cost billions of dollars in electricity, thereby depleting any profit the company may have made that year. As for management, they remained content to leave the men in the company of the Dead Rock Stars as long as the stereo remained hidden.

In chapter 1, Hamper talks about the first time he ever stepped inside the General Motors Fisher Body plant, where his father worked on the second shift. It was Family Night. The loved ones of the workers could get a firsthand view of what the linemen tolerated on a daily basis. Hamper recalls the scene. "The noise was very close to intolerable. The heat was one complete bastard. Little wonder that the old man's socks always smelled like liverwurst bleached for a week in the desert sun." (Chapter 1 page 1)

Hamper recalls watching his father work and considered the repetition of the job worse than death. Little seven-year-old Ben just knew he would never have to face the same drudgery because he was going to grow up to be an ambulance driver. To be an ambulance driver was to possess a free pass to every accident and "gorefest" the world could offer. It was the coolest job ever, and Ben wanted it.

Hamper's father, Bernard, slaved in the factory until the man could stand it no more. It may have been a day, a week or a month before Bernard took off to find the nearest pub. With seven children at home, it was more than slightly irresponsible for Bernard to take off and return to a favorite bar or spot on the lumpy couch. Fortunately, there were ten auto plants in Flint in those days and even beggars could be choosers. Bernard had also tried his hand at other occupations from mechanic to salesman to landscaper but none took.

Everyone in Hamper's family and extended family had put in their time at the factories. Bernard Hamper I answered the call in 1930. The man spent the next forty years watching as the automobile industry changed and evolved. The grandfather retired



which was against the original plan and died from cancer at age 52. It had been exactly one week since the former worker had received his first pension check. Hamper goes on to relay the auto-related careers of most of his family, dating back to his great-grandfather. Hamper surmises that the lineage would have spread back even farther if Henry Ford would have invented his contraption a little sooner.

Hamper I, much like Hamper II, had a great love for booze. Hamper I managed to keep it in perspective and ended up retiring from General Motors a wealthy man. The same cannot be said of Hamper II.

In order to make up for Hamper II's lack of ambition, Mrs. Hamper worked two jobs. This was not easy considering that the couple had seven children. But the Hampers were strict Catholics and strict Catholics do not believe in birth control. It didn't take them long to realize that Hamper II was not Ward Cleaver. While the fathers of Ben's friends were obedient and went to work every day, Hamper II seemed to have no real plan and was more interested in his own wants and needs as opposed to those of the company or his family. Still, Hamper III's friends liked going to the Hamper house because their fathers only ever complained about mundane things. Hamper II was basically crazy and erratic. It made for good entertainment, even when the man went on a racist bent.

At one point Hamper decided that he no longer wanted to be an ambulance driver. The problem was that the teenage Hamper didn't know what he wanted to do with his life. The author describes the neighborhood that was basically created to house families of GM workers. By and large the neighborhood was blue collar and Catholic. The houses were cookie-cutter and most, if not all, of the children went to a Catholic school.

Hamper became a proud underachiever in school. Despite lectures about behavioral issues and terrible report cards, Hamper III continued to slack off on work - even when it was obvious that he was capable of doing better. The parents tried to explain that it was expensive to send him to Catholic school and that it was important for him to get a good education. Not everyone was expected to go to work in the factories, and it was clear that Hamper III's parents wanted something more for him. Ben was much more interested in partying and having a good time.

Chapter 2 begins with a description of Flint. Hamper states: "Flint, Michigan. The Vehicle City. Greaseball Mecca. The birthplace of thud-rockers Grand Funk Railroad, game show geek Bob Eubanks and a hobby shop called General Motors." (Chapter 2, page 15)

By the time Hamper was ready to go to junior high school. There was an announcement that all the local Catholic schools were going to consolidate. The new school would be called Luke Powers High School. The name seemed utterly ridiculous to Hamper who facetiously wondered just who Luke Powers was and how he possibly could have skipped over the man during his readings of the Bible. After all, what was wrong with using a Saint's name the way they always did?



About this time Hamper's life took a turn for the better. The author's grades improved dramatically, and on more than one occasion the boy made the honor roll. The reason for this was not so much that Hamper had a change of heart; it was just that he had nothing better to do than to study. Because his mother was working two jobs and his father was never around, Hamper was in charge of taking care of the six younger children in the evening. After the kids went to bed Hamper studied.

Unfortunately, Hamper's behavior changed when he entered high school. Hamper cut classes and spent time doing as many different kinds of drugs as he could find. Hamper had been writing poetry and began to gain notoriety for his talent. Hamper even gave up that outlet in favor of parties. Hamper II left one night without a word. It was rumored that he went to Florida to live with some floozy and apparently gave no thought to his wife and seven children.

Hamper met with the high school vocational counselor, who was at a complete loss as to what Hamper could do with his life or even what he was capable of doing. Hamper's academic career had gone from bad to worse, and it seemed that no one knew what to do with him. The author talks about his first serious girlfriend, Joanie, for whom he wrote sappy love poetry. Joanie would often go over to the Hamper house to help Hamper III with the children, and afterwards the couple would make love on the living room floor.

Hamper II returned six months later, with no real explanation. The author was disheartened and it was obvious that all the work the family had done to pull itself together was ruined. Hamper found out from his guidance counselor that he did not have enough credits to graduate. On top of that Hamper had been caught rolling a joint on one of the teacher's desks and was expelled. Hamper made a deal with the principal to become a narc, even though that had absolutely no intention of keeping the promise. Somehow, Hamper magically received enough credits to graduate.

Joanie was in her junior year of high school when she discovered she was pregnant. Joanie already had enough credits to graduate, so she stayed home during her senior year. God forbid that a pregnant girl should walk the hallowed halls of Luke Powers High.

Hamper II left again. This time Hamper's mother decided to file for a divorce. At the same time Joanie found out she was pregnant, Hamper's mother learned that she was expecting her eighth child. Being a good Catholic boy, Hamper married Joanie. The couple lived hand to mouth in a small apartment while Hamper took painting jobs. The author was still adamant about avoiding factory work. Joanie gave birth to a redheaded baby girl named Sonya. While Joanie worked, Hamper drank and spent a great deal of time with Glenn, the couple's next-door neighbor. The men would get together and drink a lot of beer and use drugs. Hamper's marriage began to fall apart. It was the mid-1970s and all of the sudden Flint, Michigan found itself smack dab in the middle of a nasty recession.



chapters 3-4

chapters 3-4 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 3 details the author's realization he would have to get a job at General Motors. It seemed that Hamper had known since the 10th grade that he would eventually end up a shoprat like his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather.

Even though the author accepted the decision, the recession made it extremely difficult for Hamper to get a job. Hamper routinely went to GM and ignored the sign on the door that said the company was not accepting job applications. The ploy did not work. Applications became as valuable as Willy Wonka's golden ticket. Every lead fell through. While Hamper waited to be hired, he took on various jobs. It became more and more obvious that Hamper was becoming just like his father with the booze, except that Hamper III came home at night.

Hamper's friend Denny got hired at GM two months after he applied for a job. Hamper had managed to get his hands on a job application that was hand delivered to management by one of GM's other workers. Hamper assumed that a two-month waiting period was normal and waited. Eventually, GM did call the author, surprisingly on Saturday. Hamper took it as a sure sign that the recession was beginning to lift. When Hamper got to the factory he learned that all new hires had to take a drug test. While it was no big deal for Hamper, it obviously was a big deal to a man named Roy. Hamper allowed himself to be persuaded to fill Roy's vial with urine. Hamper couldn't help wondering if his past history of childhood hepatitis would show up in the test. Apparently it did not.

The workers were taken from department to department and assigned along the way. Of all the places Hamper did not want to work the Cab Shop, ranked number one. According to GM long timers, on a scale of 1 to 10 the Cab Shop, ranked -6. Alas, the Cab Shop would be Hamper's new home. The factory was actually GM's Truck and Bus line, the largest factory of its kind in the world.

Hamper picks up the job easily enough, but the repetitious work was maddening at times. "The one thing that was impossible to escape was the monotony of our new jobs. Every minute, every hour, every truck and every movement was a plodding replica of one that had gone before." (Chapter 3, page 41)

The reader is introduced to several of Hamper's co-workers, including Brown, a foreman; Gary the welder, Bud the big redhead; Dan-o the prankster; and Bob-a-Lou with his crew cut, big belly, and aversion to cussing. It wasn't long before Hamper discovered that Brown was a drunk and often spent a good part of his shift swilling beer in the back. It kept Brown out of the workers' hair and they often supplied the brew.



Roy, the druggie, finally cracked up one day. It seemed to that he might have been okay at first, but soon it was obvious he was not. Roy found and captured a mouse and builds a mouse house and spends every possible second staring in the windows of the house, claiming that the mouse was mocking him. Roy went away.

Chapter 4 begins in 1977. The factory is back on its feet. Hamper says: "During the summer and fall of 1977, the truck plant was hummin' six days a week, nine hours per shift. All of this overtime added up to one gorgeous stream of income." (Chapter 4, page 44) People were ready to buy cars and trucks again. Hamper and other workers were called into a "State of the Factory" meeting, which was mostly rhetoric plus a lecture on absenteeism. There was also a technical presentation which basically everyone ignored.

The highlights in Hamper's stories continue to be his co-workers. "I met all kinds of bizarre individuals during my first year at GM Truck and Bus, characters who would prove to be constants throughout my factory tenure. Dementia and derangement were rampant traits" (Chapter 4, page 48). The practical jokes were constant, which provided relief from the monotony, at least for a little while. One person mentioned as being quite ornery was Franklin. Franklin was always hostile and did not exhibit any kind of prejudice—he was mean to everyone. Franklin did seem to lighten up some when he started to drink. That was not a good idea, particularly when Franklin did it on the job or came in drunk from lunch.

The author recounts Bud's departure from GM to open a grocery store; the arrival of Dale the farmer; and tales of Lightin' and Same-O. The double up scheme was working great for Hamper and Denny and the two were able to take long lunches and not have their noses to the grindstones every minute of the day. One afternoon, when the friends returned from lunch, bosses and repair techs were standing around the equipment. There was going to be a change in production, and it was not going to be good for the workers. The new parts to be added at irregular intervals were air conditioning clamps. Hamper concludes that the bosses wanted to mess up the workers' double up system. The work was harder and it wasn't long before the reprieve from the recession was over. People began to get laid off. The end of the chapter finds Hamper noting the old start time at the factory as he typed out a manuscript.



chapters 5-8

chapters 5-8 Summary and Analysis

In chapter 5, Hamper begins by saying that 1979 was not a good year for Flint. "My beleaguered hometown was like some banged-up middleweight resting its rump on the ropes, covering up its soft belly, hoping only to last out the round" (Chapter 5, page 68).

According to Hamper, the tune of prosperity had turned into a funeral dirge. Flint wasn't the only place affected, but the region did show the highest unemployment rate. The situation for the factory workers became strange. One was not required to work; however, that also meant no job security. The biggest issue for Hamper regarding the layoff was the fact that he had to deal with the Unemployment Line. Other states allowed the unemployed to file by mail. The Michigan Employment Security Commission (MESC) required the person's appearance. Hamper believes that it is a sadistic conspiracy.

Hamper details the interior of the office, the ambiance, and conversation he wanted to have with the MESC employee. The conversation would not be so humorous if spoken aloud. Hamper has many theories about the MESC, particularly the mini-Auschwitz that must be in the back. It is the only explanation for the reason people go back there but never return.

In chapter 8, Hamper meets a new co-worker. The new worker, Janice, would replace Hamper's neighbor. This was fine with Hamper since the guy was an idiot. Janice caught on quickly and she and Hamper became fast friends. As the only woman on the rivet line, Janice put up with a lot of leering and unwanted advances. The men did not care that Janice was married with a little boy. Eventually, the men would give up and go away. Naturally, the friendship between Janice and Hamper raised eyebrows and caused the workers to make crude comments and ask lewd questions. Janice took it in stride, but it made Hamper angry. Hamper and Janice began to rely heavily on one another at work and Janice often read Rivethead as it was being written.

Steel finally left the rivet line. Hamper tried to stop him to no avail. Steel was replaced by Jerry, Hamper's new beer chum and a new character known as the Polish Sex God. A big to do was made when Louise Mandrell ordered a Suburban. Hamper did not think anyone ever actually bought the things. Although the workers never knew which truck would be sold to the popular fiddle player, the ideal of the custom Suburban became a sort of Holy Grail.

During one shift, Howie Makem reappeared. Hamper was thrilled and many of the newer hires were just confused. There was something wrong with Howie and erratic behavior spurred the idea in Hamper to steal one of Howie's cat heads, paint the eyes red, and scrawl the word "Quota" on the forehead. Joining Howie Makem, Quality Cat would be Howie Rakem, Quantity Cat. Unfortunately, the cat head was kept under lock



and key and the plan was scrapped. The powers at be in the factory installed giant electronic message boards that spouted all kinds of propaganda, birthday wishes and redundant statements. Hamper details how the boards affected people, particularly Dougie.

Hamper received a call that let him know Roger Smith was being interviewed. Smith, who had always refused to go bowling with the crew, announced the closing of many of GM's plants. There was a great deal of rhetoric and political speak that boiled down to this: relocate with Pontiac or stick it out in Michigan and be out of a job. Hamper did not want to relocate; instead, the author chose to stay in Michigan. At the last minute, Hamper changed his mind and signed the transfer papers. Hamper quickly learned that he made more money by collecting unemployment than he could with the usual paycheck. By this time, Hamper shared a house with his brother Bob. Hamper told Bob that the group of shoprats would have to get together to celebrate.

The layoff lasted for nine months. Eventually, Hamper was called back to work and reassigned. Hamper had a good partner and soon, their old doubling up pattern is set back into place. Shortly after the men started, Hamper and his partner managed to squeeze out 45 minutes in free time. There was a second layoff and once again, Hamper was unemployed. The author whiled away nights at the Rusty Nail, a local bar that became Mecca for shoprats. The only problem with being unemployed is that the days are also free. Hamper decided to return to the hobby of writing.

Hamper had seen the Flint Voice on occasion and did not give it much thought. It appeared to be an underground liberal rag. Hamper began to read the Flint Voice and noticed that the paper didn't have a good music reviewer. Hamper wrote an article and submitted it to Michael Moore. Moore was impressed. Michael Moore is silver tongued and always looking for ways to raise funds for the paper. Moore always had ideas on how things could be done, regardless of how unlikely they were. One of Moore's biggest and best ideas was to get a famous performer to play at a fundraising show. Moore picked Harry Chapin. Harry Chapin was an extremely popular figure. The singer/songwriter had captured worldwide attention with "Cat's in the Cradle." Moore was unsuccessful in getting to Harry Chapin until he was able to sneak backstage after a concert. Moore finally met Chapin who agreed to play at a benefit. Chapin ended up playing for 11 benefits and became a fixture around the Voice.

One day in 1981 Moore finally called Hamper into the offices at the Voice. Just before Hamper got to the offices, he learned that Harry Chapin had been killed in a car accident. Hamper went home and got drunk. Hamper and Moore finally did meet. Moore wanted Hamper to write feature articles. Hamper objected, claiming to know nothing about politics or the goings on in the world. Hamper only knew two things: factory work and music.

Hamper was recalled to GM once again. Although factory work was not the place Hamper wanted to be, it offered the comfort of familiarity. Hamper soon learned he would not return to the Cab Shop. Instead, Hamper and several others were placed on



the rivet line. Despite Hamper's efforts to get off the line, the worker remains stuck with the rivetheads.

Chapter 6 begins with Hamper raising hell about the fact that there were too many pieces, many of which would be held for stock. This time the ruckus worked and Hamper's line slowed a bit, and the extra work was assigned elsewhere. Hamper says: "This allowed me a little free time in between jobs - just enough to surface for air and wink at the madness" (Chapter 6, page 92).

The biggest difference in the job at the rivet line compared to the one in the Cab Shop was that Hamper never ceased to move. The job was fast paced and basically had Hamper chained to his work station. Hamper only spoke to one person on the line - his work neighbor Hank. Hamper describes the man. "He was an old coot whose voice sounded like gravel being churned against broken glass. He smoked two packs of Chesterfields each shift" (Chapter 6, page 93). Hamper goes on to say: "Everything was punctuated with a hack or coughin' spasm or a lung cookie flung toward the aisle. He'd apologize and light up another"(Chapter 6, page 93).

Hank was also a sort of Bible thumper that often asked Hamper if he "knew" Christ. Hamper told Hank that the two had been cellmates for years. In order to pass the time, Hamper imagined that work on the rivet line was an Olympic event. The author goes through the scenario.

After a year of working the rivet line, Hamper met a kindred spirit. Hamper had wanted to meet the man and used his first cover story at Voice to do so. The man's name was Dave Steel. Steel was also a loner and had many of the same personal issues and ideas as Hamper. "We both held contempt for the majority of the human race. We hated our jobs and our bosses and our union reps. We hated Miss America and sunlight and Christmas" (Chapter 6, page 98). The men laughed and commiserated with one another. Hamper and Steel formed their own clique and were soon inseparable. Hamper shares several stories about the factory and how each was discussed by the author and Steel.

Hamper, Steel and Moore went to a Toughman Contest - a free-for-all match during which two men fight each other without the benefit of training and apparently for absolutely no reason. Hamper details how Moore kept calling him a journalist, a title Hamper rejected. The author constantly reminded Moore that he was shoprat, nothing more. Moore refused to hear it.

Upon Hamper's return to work, he learned about a transfer to the Axle Line. Hamper did not want to leave the rivet line and objected. The objection fell on deaf ears for a time. Eventually, Hamper returned to the rivet line.

Hamper continued to write for the Flint Voice. One rather comical comment about a local bar had Hamper and Moore facing a judge due to a libel lawsuit filed by the bar. Each man was ordered to pay \$10,000. The lawsuit was dropped when the bar owner moved to Alaska.



One of the highlights of the rivethead experience regarded Howie Makem. Makem was GM's answer to the new focus on producing quality products. The company had toyed with several ideas until they decided that what the company needed was a mascot. Makem would become that mascot, in the form of Quality Cat. Makem often made rounds in the factory, wearing a full cat costume and a shirt with a giant Q on it. Although the entire factory thought it was ridiculous, it seemed to help. Makem became a cult figure. When Hamper told Moore about Makem, Moore laughed until he cried. Hamper refused to interview Makem despite Moore's badgering on the subject. Then one day, Makem just vanished. After some investigation, it was learned that Makem was laid off. There was no greater travesty. In the end, the reward of Makem's presence was replaced by a drinking glass with a picture of Quality Cat on it.

In Chapter 7 Hamper is laid off yet again. This lay off lasted almost a year, which made no sense to Hamper in a political sense. Hamper was called back yet again, just when things were at their bleakest. The call back had to do with a new contract with the Pentagon. Hamper did not care why he was recalled, just that there was a job to be done. What Hamper did not know was that the re-hiring was approved by Roger Smith, CEO. Smith had told his secretary to make the call and to tell the Rivethead to leave his notebooks at home. Apparently everyone was familiar with Hamper's alter ego, Rivethead. Hamper found out he was to be sent to the body assembly line, a dangerous area that involved grueling slave labor. Hamper managed to get the general foreman to send him back to the rivet line, much to Dave's amazement. Jackson attempted to make life hell for Hamper and Steel. Fortunately, he failed to do so in reassigning Hamper. Steel was not so lucky.

To fend off boredom, Hamper and Steel began to plot out a movie about the shoprats. The film would be a violent documentary in which many people would get their comeuppance. The best was saved for Henry Jackson. Every night, Hamper would write in his notebooks. No one in the shop, except for Steel, knew about Rivethead. Hamper surmised that the shoprats would not be happy to know that their lives were being recorded for 60,000 readers of the newly-renamed Michigan Voice.

The shoe dropped when Hamper finally gave in and wrote a scathing article about deer hunting. Somehow that article got the attention of everyone in the shop. The worst part was that the main character in the tale was Poison, a large co-worker with a bad redneck temper. It would not bode well for Hamper. Moore's later suggestion that Poison become a regular character in Rivethead was not taken well by the author.

Hamper discusses how every GM plant faces a tavern. Many of the workers were known to be big drinkers. One night, Hamper ran into a friend of Steel's who wanted nothing more than to expose the fact that GM had installed a barbed wire fence around the compound. The problem was that the barbs faced inward. Steel's friend insisted that Hamper write about how the company wanted to keep them all in, not prevent outsiders from pilfering from the company coffers.



chapters 9-10, Epilogue

chapters 9-10, Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Chapter 9 begins with Hamper being called by a reporter for the Wall Street Journal. The reporter had read one of Hamper's columns in Harper's and wanted to interview the Rivethead for a piece on blue collar workers. Hamper was shocked by the attention of the reporter and was even more shocked when the reporter wanted to fly into Flint to meet with Rivethead and to tour the factory. GM was not terribly accommodating and gave the reporter a major run around regarding the visit. Eventually, the reporter was granted access, followed by a chaperon. It was obvious that none of the big wigs had ever read Hamper's column. In the end, many people who had never read the column had a lot to say about it. Hamper steered the reporter to people who actually knew about what they were talking.

The Wall Street Journal piece led up to a meeting with Joel Bernstein of 60 Minutes. The entire situation was completely bizarre to Hamper. The interview was confrontational and stilted after Bernstein announced that the show would not produce an anti-GM piece. Hamper wondered if the man even read the Wall Street Journal article. In the end, the whole deal went nowhere. People came out of the woodwork to speak with Hamper. Even Hamper II called from Florida. The calls did little but annoy Hamper. Bernstein had been right when he said that Hamper was not capable of conversation.

Jerry and Janice moved on to the Pontiac plant. Hamper took it hard but at least he still had Steel. At one point, Hamper and Steel worked on their soundtrack for the rock opera based on the life and times of a shoprat. Songs included the shoprat anthem, "Rat Like Me," "Mussolini Chews Red Man," "He's a Suck-Ass," and "Banana Sticker Republic." The men had a band that disbanded but continued to work on their "shopera" from the point of view of the average man. The work wasn't good but Hamper believes that the music would stand up longer than Springsteen could last on the rivet line.

In Chapter 10, everything changed. Moore accepted a job at Mother Jones and the Michigan Voice disbanded. Moore wanted to take on Hamper as a paid writer, which was a shock to the author. Offers began to come in for Rivethead. During Moore's last night in Flint, he wanted to visit the rivet line. Donning the appropriate disguise, Moore toured the line and even shot a few rivets. The only downside to the evening was that Dougie, the revered steering gear man, was in rehab.

Something strange began to happen on the rivet line. Men began to get injured and fight. Gino was released as the foreman with the excuse that he was too close to the workers. The new foreman was a strict, by-the-book Attila the Hun. The employees were told that the following things were banned: stereos, drinking on the job, coming to work drunk, fighting, Rivet Hockey, Dumpster Ball, and every other thing that gave the workers even the slightest bit of joy. The new foreman did not last long as quality



suddenly fell rapidly and production all but stopped. The next two foremen had the same fate.

Hamper enjoyed increasing notoriety, often with the help of Moore who had taken on his friend as a regular columnist. Moore was in Michigan quite a lot and in the end, it may have been one of the reasons he was fired. The executives at Mother Jones said it was because Moore refused to run a piece condemning the actions of the Sandinistas. Everyone else believed it was because Moore ran Rivethead and other articles by Hamper. The man in charge thought the latest one was nothing but tasteless bathroom humor. Hamper received a letter from Mother Jones praising his work and asking him to stay on as a writer. Hamper was loyal to Moore and refused. The Detroit Press picked up Rivethead to rave reviews.

One day at work, Hamper suffered from a major panic attack. The author was scared witless, thinking he was having a stroke or heart attack. After many different medications and refusals to attend a mental health facility, Hamper thought he could go back to work. He could not. During this time, Hamper married and was also diagnosed with agoraphobia. After intermittent bouts of sick leave, Hamper transferred to the Pontiac plant. On April 7, 1988, Hamper's panic attacks returned and the author walked out the factory door for the last time.

The Epilogue details an outing with Hamper's panic and anxiety group at a local mini-golf course. Hamper has replaced Rivet Hockey with mini-golf and yet no one can understand why it is not just a game.



Characters

Ben Hamper

Bernard "Ben" Egan Hamper III (1956 -) is a former factory worker at General Motors, a newspaper columnist, best-selling author, and radio talk show host.

As a child Hamper wanted absolutely nothing to do with working in an automotive factory. Hamper's father, along with the majority of family members on both sides, spent many years working on the factory line. Hamper thought nothing could be more boring and senseless. The heat, the noise and the repetition of the job seemed excruciating to Hamper. As a child Hamper wanted to become an ambulance driver. To be an ambulance driver was to possess a free pass to every accident and gorefest the world could offer. It was the coolest job ever and Ben wanted it. Alas, it was not to be.

Hamper married young and eventually gave in to working at GM Truck and Bus as a riveter. Hamper worked at GM for 11 years. Hamper recorded the details of events and people, even if it was only as a mental exercise at first. "I met all kinds of bizarre individuals during my first year at GM Truck and Bus, characters who would prove to be constants throughout my factory tenure. Dementia and derangement were rampant traits" (Chapter 4, page 48).

During this time, Hamper began to write a newspaper column titled "Impressions of a Rivethead." The column was published regularly in the Flint Voice, giving Hamper some notoriety. When the Flint Voice became the Michigan Voice, Hamper's career really took off. Editor and friend Michael Moore left his job as editor for the Flint voice in 1986, to accept a top position at Mother Jones, a well-known liberal political magazine. Moore moved to California and attempted to take Hamper with him as feature writer. Hamper was featured on Moore's first issue at the magazine shortly before Moore was fired. Hamper and Moore continue to be friends and have worked on many projects together.

Michael Moore

Michael Moore (1954 -) is an American author, Academy Award-winning filmmaker, playwright, director, and liberal political commentator. Moore, well known for his outspoken manner and relentless haranguing of people and organizations that abuse the system, was recently voted as one of the "World's 100 Most Influential People" by Time Magazine.

Moore started out as the founder and editor of the Flint Voice, an alternative newspaper in Moore's hometown of Flint, Michigan. Moore developed a friendship with Ben Hamper and hired him as a columnist for the Voice. Hamper began to run his now-famous column "Impressions of a Rivethead." Moore left the Flint Voice in 1986 after being offered a top position at Mother Jones, a well known liberal political magazine. Moore moved to California to take the job, which lasted only four months. There was some



controversy around Moore's dismissal and Moore eventually settled a lawsuit against the company for wrongful termination.

Moore's break out film, "Roger & Me" detailed the closing of GM plants in Flint. Since that time, Moore has gone on to create several documentaries such as "Bowling for Columbine," "Sicko," and "Fahrenheit 9/11." Moore had a cameo role in his own spoof titled "Canadian Bacon," a satire and the only one of Moore's films that was not a documentary.

In addition to writing for and starring in various projects, Moore is also known for founding the Traverse City Film Festival in Traverse City, Michigan. Moore also wrote the foreward for this book.

Henry Ford

Henry Ford (1863 - 1947) founded Ford Motor Company and is often referred to as the "father of modern assembly lines."

Bernard Egan Hamper II

Bernard Hamper is Ben Hamper's father.

Hogjaw

Hogjaw is the factory worker in charge of supplying the stereo for Hamper's department at GM Truck & Bus.

Doug

Doug aka steering gear man is the subject of many of Hamper's columns.

Bob-a-Lou

Bob-a-Lou is a fellow worker at GM.

Joanie Hamper

Joanie Hamper is the author's ex-wife and mother of their daughter.

Glenn

Glenn lives next door to Ben and Joanie and has a similar lifestyle.



Dave Steel

Dave Steel is a longtime friend and former co-worker at General Motors.

Janice

Janice was Hamper's co-worker, confidante and best friend.

Henry Jackson

Henry Jackson was a foreman that everyone hated because he was intolerable and mean.



Objects/Places

Flint, Michigan

Flint, Michigan is the hometown of Ben Hamper and Michael Moore. As Hamper describes it: "Flint, Michigan. The Vehicle City. Greaseball Mecca. The birthplace of thud-rockers Grand Funk Railroad, game show geek Bob Eubanks and a hobby shop called General Motors" (Chapter 2, page 15).

Flint is located in Genesee County, Michigan, next to the Flint River. The region is believed to have belonged to the Ojibwa tribe. In 1819, a fur trader set up the first post in the region and often acted as a liaison between the Ojibwas and the United States government.

Flint is probably best known for General Motors, which was established in 1908. According to Hamper, General Motors created a culture all its own. The neighborhood where Hamper grew up, located on the outskirts of Flint, was basically a GM town. The majority of the people were blue collar "shoprats" with a long lineage tied to the automotive industry. As it is detailed in the book, Flint was hit extremely hard in the 1970s due to a recession.

Michael Moore, also a Flint native, created the documentary *Roger & Me*. The film detailed the closing of several General Motors plants in Flint and how its people were affected.

General Motors

General Motors (GM) was founded in 1908 by William C. Durant. Durant was already in the transportation business with carriages, and although the man did not particularly like automobiles, he began to develop a plan to tap into the market.

The history of GM can be somewhat confusing since it was the conglomeration of 15 different companies, including Buick and Cadillac. Durant also founded Chevrolet with partner Louis Chevrolet. All these major car companies were started in Flint, although GM eventually relocated to Detroit.

General Motors became the life's blood for the workers of Flint. The company has had many ups and downs since its inception, particularly during the recession of the 1970s and present. The impact of the recession took a definite toll on the people in Flint, particularly when the company began to close plants.

In *Rivethhead*, Hamper explores his family's ties to GM and the other motor companies. Bernard Hamper II worked at GM many times over the years and although it certainly wasn't his plan, Ben also went to work at GM's Truck and Bus factory. The job at GM was a blessing and a curse for Ben. The work was excruciatingly repetitive, loud, and



dirty. Crazy people worked there, according to Hamper. Hamper began to write a column based on his experiences as a "rivethead," which eventually led to penning this book.

Ford Motor Company

Ford Motor Company was founded by legendary automaker Henry Ford. The company is known as one of "The Big Three" car manufacturers in the United States.

Mother Jones

Mother Jones is a liberal political magazine based in California. Michael Moore worked there for a short time.

Flint Voice

The Flint Voice was a liberal newspaper founded and edited by Michael Moore until 1986. The paper was renamed to the Michigan Voice but eventually closed.

Department 07, Blazer/Suburban Line

Department 07, Blazer/Suburban line is where Hamper worked at the GM Truck and Bus plant.

St. Michael's High School

St. Michael's High School is Ben Hamper's alma mater.

Roger and Me

Roger & Me is Michael Moore's first smash hit in the documentary genre. The movie details the closing of General Motors plants in Michigan.

San Francisco, California

San Francisco, California is the home to Mother Jones magazine.

Buick

Buick was one of the ten major car factories in Flint, Michigan.



Themes

General Motors Factory Work

In chapter 1, Hamper talks about the first time he ever stepped inside the General Motors Fisher Body plant, where his father worked on the second shift. It was Family Night. The loved ones of the workers could get a firsthand view of what the linemen tolerated on a daily basis. Hamper recalls the scene. "The noise was very close to intolerable. The heat was one complete bastard. Little wonder that the old man's socks always smelled like liverwurst bleached for a week in the desert sun" (Chapter 1 page 1).

Hamper recalls watching his father work and considered the repetition of the job worse than death. Little seven-year-old Ben just knew he would never have to face the same drudgery because he was going to grow up to be an ambulance driver.

Hamper's father, Bernard, slaved in the factory until the man could stand it no more. Everyone in Hamper's family and extended family had put in their time at the factories. Bernard Hamper I answered the call in 1930. The man spent the next forty years watching as the automobile industry changed and evolved. The grandfather retired which was against the original plan and died from cancer at age 52. It had been exactly one week since the former worker had received his first pension check.

Hamper goes on to relay the auto-related careers of most of his family, dating back to his great-grandfather. Hamper surmises that the lineage would have spread back even farther if Henry Ford would have invented his contraption a little sooner.

Alcohol

Hamper I, much like Hamper II, had a great love for booze. Hamper I managed to keep it in perspective and ended up retiring from General Motors a wealthy man. The same cannot be said of Hamper II. Hamper II was an irresponsible man who preferred to find the next party and the next bottle rather than work or take care of his wife and seven children.

When Hamper III entered high school a whole new persona emerged. Hamper embraced the role of the underachiever who doesn't have a care in the world. Hamper cut classes and spent time drinking and doing as many different kinds of drugs as he could find. Hamper had been writing poetry and began to gain notoriety for his talent. Hamper even gave up that outlet in favor of parties.

It wasn't long before Hamper took on the habits of his father. Hamper stayed with the company but began a torrid love affair with booze. While Joanie worked, Hamper drank. Hamper spent a great deal of time with Glenn, the couple's next-door neighbor. The men would get together and drink a lot of beer and use drugs.



There was almost always alcohol present in the factory, as well. Hamper's foreman, Brown, was a drunk as were several others. It seemed that alcohol might actually benefit Franklin's demeanor until the man took it too far.

Monotony

One of the biggest issues for factory workers is monotony. It takes a certain type of personality to be able to repeat the same action hour after hour, day after day, year after year. Hamper recalls the first time he ever watched his father work. The seven-year-old boy thought the constant repetition of the job had to be worse than death. Years later, Hamper would have the opportunity to experience that monotony for himself when he took a job at GM Truck and Bus.

The repetitious work was maddening at times. "The one thing that was impossible to escape was the monotony of our new jobs. Every minute, every hour, every truck and every movement was a plodding replica of one that had gone before" (Chapter 3, page 41). In order to break up the day Dan-O, the prankster, always had something up his sleeve. Practical jokes abounded and yet the work always got done. The crew developed a system of "doubling up" to break the monotony, a sort of job-sharing agreement. The workers loved it, and all was well until the bosses decided to end it and force the workers to return to their old monotonous ways.

Style

Perspective

Bernard "Ben" Hamper (1956 -) is a former factory worker at General Motors, a newspaper columnist, best-selling author, and radio talk show host.

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Hamper began to decline in his studies, married young, and eventually gave in to working at GM Truck and Bus as a riveter. Hamper worked at GM for 11 years. Hamper recorded the details of events and people, even if it was only as a mental exercise at first. "I met all kinds of bizarre individuals during my first year at GM Truck and Bus, characters who would prove to be constants throughout my factory tenure. Dementia and derangement were rampant traits" (Chapter 4, page 48).

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Tone

The tone used in Rivethead: Tales from the Assembly Line by Ben Hamper is definitely partisan and biased. The book is written in the first person point of view through the eyes of the author.

Hamper talks about the first time he ever stepped inside the General Motors Fisher Body plant, where his father worked on the second shift. It was Family Night. The loved ones of the workers could get a firsthand view of what the linemen tolerated on a daily basis. Hamper recalls the scene. "The noise was very close to intolerable. The heat was one complete bastard. Little wonder that the old man's socks always smelled like liverwurst bleached for a week in the desert sun" (Chapter 1 page 1).



Hamper recalls watching his father work and considered the repetition of the job worse than death. Even though Hamper claimed that he would never become a shoprat, it is exactly what happened. Hamper has many unusual and comical experiences during the 11 years at General Motors. The characters are vivid enough to be caricatures, although they are not.

There are serious tones throughout the book, including Hamper's failed relationships with his father and first wife, as well as the horrible onset of panic attacks and agoraphobia. Overall, Hamper infuses the work with a great deal of humor and sarcasm, making it an entertaining and informative read, even for those that have never set foot inside a factory.

Structure

Rivthead: Tales from the Assembly Line by Ben Hamper is a work of non-fiction. The book is comprised of 234 pages, broken down into a Prologue, ten chapters, and an Epilogue. The shortest chapter, the epilogue, is 11 pages in length; the longest chapter is 31 pages in length. The average number of pages per chapter is 22.

The Prologue starts right in the middle of Hamper's career at General Motors Truck and Bus division and details the presence of Dead Rock Stars in the factory in Flint, Michigan. The Dead Rock Stars are a group of legendary musicians and to give them the reverence they deserve. These heroes of the rivetheads include Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and Brian Jones. Unfortunately, stereos operated by electricity were against company policy, and if the line wanted to hear songs they'd heard a million times before, the stereo has to be camouflaged.

Hamper makes repeated comments about the fact that the management believed any stereo or unauthorized equipment would cost billions of dollars in electricity, thereby depleting any profit the company may have made that year. As for management, they remained content to leave the men in the company of the Dead Rock Stars as long as the stereo remained hidden. The Prologue sets the tone for the rest of the book and the general attitude of the shoprats.

Chapters 1-10 are mostly chronological, beginning with Hamper's first foray into a GM factory at age seven. The book runs through Hamper's trouble in school, marriages, friendships, blue collar life and life as a shop rat. Also included is Hamper's friendship and working relationship with Michael Moore. At the end, Hamper leaves the factory due to health issues.

The Epilogue finds Hamper playing mini-golf, assigning the same importance to the game as the horseplay at the factory.



Quotes

"The noise was very close to intolerable. The heat was one complete bastard. Little wonder that the old man's socks always smelled like liverwurst bleached for a week in the desert sun." (Chapter 1 page 1)

"Right from the outset, when the call went out for shoprats, my ancestors responded in almost Pavlovian obedience." (Chapter 1, page 5)

"By the age of 10, I realized that my old man was not soon to be confused with Ward Cleaver." (Chapter 1, page 8)

"As my father-in-law saw it, there was only one antidote to our marital woes: finding me gainful employment." (Chapter 3, page 26)

"I was assigned to the Cab Shop, an area more commonly known to its inhabitants as the Jungle." (Chapter 3, page 33)

"It took some doing, but within two or three days I was an accomplished spot welder." (Chapter 3, page 39)

"The one thing that was impossible to escape was the monotony of our new jobs. Every minute, every hour, every truck and every movement was a plodding replica of one that had gone before." (Chapter 3, page 41)

"During the summer and fall of 1977, the truck plant was hummin' six days a week, nine hours per shift. All of this overtime added up to one gorgeous stream of income." (Chapter 4, page 44)

"I met all kinds of bizarre individuals during my first year at GM Truck and Bus, characters who would prove to be constants throughout my factory tenure. Dementia and derangement were rampant traits." (Chapter 4, page 48)

"My beleaguered hometown was like some banged-up middleweight resting its rump on the ropes, covering up its soft belly, hoping only to last out the round." (Chapter 5, page 68)

"It was fairly ridiculous how much money we were being awarded for not going to work." (Chapter 5, page 73)

"Now he was gone and the myth had been destroyed. The steering gear man proved to be as fallible as the next joker." (Chapter 7, page 134)

"The contract with the Pentagon, combined with the sudden rebound in truck sales, enabled more shoprats to be recalled from indefinite layoff." (Chapter 8, page 143)



"By the summer of '86, things were really beginning to unravel on several fronts."
(Chapter 10, page 199)

"Craziness pervaded. Not only did I have this sudden invitation from my editor to take the Rivethead to a national forum, but I was being tapped on the shoulder by other unlikely sources." (Chapter 10, page 203)

Topics for Discussion

How do you think Mrs. Hamper managed to make ends meet considering Mr. Hamper's incessant aversion to work and frequent disappearances?

What might have happened if the management at the General Motors factory had banned the Dead Rock Stars? How do you think Hamper, Hogjaw and the others would react?

How do you think the story would have changed if Hamper had stayed married? Would the marriage have affected Hamper's writing career? Explain.

How might things have been different if Moore had not gone to California to work at Mother Jones? What if Moore had not been terminated?

Early in the book, Hamper shares his religious upbringing as a strict Catholic. Catholics do not believe in birth control or divorce. Why do you think Hamper's mother decided to divorce Hamper II if it was against her religion?

Hamper III swore up and down that he would not become like his father. Yet, Hamper begins to drink heavily, do drugs, and basically goes down hill as he reaches adulthood. Do you think the downward slide was due to nurture or nature? Explain.

Examine the situation between Michael Moore, Mother Jones, and Hamper. What happened? Was the issue resolved? If so, how?

Explain Hamper's feelings and reactions when he goes back to visit the GM Truck and Bus plant.