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—STUDS TERKEL

# PACKINGHOUSE DAUGHTER

— A MEMOIR —

CHERI REGISTER



WINNER OF THE  
AMERICAN  
BOOK AWARD

# PACKINGHOUSE DAUGHTER

*A Memoir*

CHERI REGISTER



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Praise for

## PACKINGHOUSE DAUGHTER

"Her razor-sharp prose makes this as fine a book about class in America as I've read."

—Paul Ingram,  
Prairie Lights (Iowa City, Iowa)

"Register forsakes the security of easy romanticism and nostalgia. . . . She gives us a more complicated (and more honest and identifiable) story of class division, of workers who find dignity in work and ask for nothing more than respect and fairness in return."

—Erik Peterson, *Labor World* (Duluth, Minn.)

"*Packinghouse Daughter* is a meticulous, well-told labor narrative. It's also an authentic, heartfelt record of a way of life."

—Jodi Vander Molen, *The Progressive*

"A riveting collage of oral history, biography, and historical documents, as well as childhood memories, filtered through her adult consciousness."

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"A big, good-tempered, rich, personal and public memoir . . . Cheri Register's storytelling style is second to none."

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"With *Packinghouse Daughter* Register honors both the family—and the town—that raised her. . . . [An] eminently readable volume."

—Linda Brazill, *Capital Times* (Madison, Wis.)

"By avoiding the sentimental tone typical of memoir, [Register] has succeeded in producing an unapologetic examination of blue-collar values."

—Claire Adamsick, *City Pages* (Minneapolis)



Photograph by Maria De Jong

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### *About the Author*

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CHERI REGISTER often tells people her University of Chicago Ph.D. really stands for “Packinghouse Daughter.” The opening chapter of *Packinghouse Daughter* was cited as a Notable Essay in *Best American Essays 1996*. Other excerpts have appeared in *Hungry Mind Review*, *University of Chicago Magazine*, and the book *Is Academic Feminism Dead?* Her work on this memoir has earned a Jerome Travel and Study Grant, a Minnesota State Arts Board Fellowship, and grants from the Loft Literary Center and the Minnesota Historical Society. Her other books include *The Chronic Illness Experience: Embracing the Imperfect Life* (formerly titled *Living with Chronic Illness: Days of Patience and Passion*) and “Are Those Kids Yours?”: *American Families with Children Adopted from Other Countries*. She has published many essays in magazines, literary journals, and anthologies, and is known for her early work in feminist literary criticism and Scandinavian literature. A writer of creative nonfiction, Register now teaches writing at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, where she also lives.

*For Mom and Dad*

The one irrevocable limitation is that  
we cannot go back to where we were.  
We must face the new horizons.

PEARL S. BUCK  
quoted on the cover of the  
1963 commencement program,  
Albert Lea High School

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# PACKINGHOUSE DAUGHTER



## Prologue: The Blue Workshirt

The early evening train pulled into Albert Lea with brakes squealing and slowed to a crawl alongside the Wilson & Co. meatpacking plant. The lamps at the corners of the parking lot cast the packinghouse itself in shadow, reminding me of a prison-break scene in some movie I had otherwise forgotten—a Hollywood movie, not one of the foreign films I now preferred. As we crossed the channel where I used to watch for giant goldfish while Mom waited in the car for Dad to get off work, I could see the depot glowing up ahead. My folks—the word “parents,” like “my father,” still sounded haughty to me—were standing outside, shivering in the December cold and wearing the self-conscious smiles that hold back tears. I knew my dad had already made the rounds to tell everyone whom he was expecting: his youngest daughter, that smart girl who won all the scholarships, the one who got her picture in *Wilson Certified News*. She was coming home, on break from the University of Chicago.

I stepped off the train looking like something you might pull out of a cocoon that had cracked open mid-metamorphosis. My hair was growing out of the bubble-do still fashionable at Albert Lea High School, but it was not yet long enough to pull back in a barrette at the nape of my neck. Living in a dormitory full of New Yorkers had put an edge of affectation on my southern Minnesota corn-belt speech, and I was wearing dangly clip-on earrings while I worked up the courage to get my ears pierced. I had an errand to complete over the holidays: buy a blue workshirt—one I could knot at the waist above the new jeans that I wore rolled in a wide cuff halfway up my calf, usually over leather sandals.

I hadn't expected the University of Chicago to require a fashion statement. I had already created an identity for myself, in high school, that needed no uniform: Girl Intellectual. I had thought myself well suited for the Life of the Mind that the brochures and catalogs promised. By the end of fall quarter, though, I learned that I would have to dress more deliberately. Manhattan-style sophistication was beyond my capacity, so I opted for quick identification. The workshirt would ally me with the campus radicals, who used fashion to decry fashion. The serviceable blue denim of workshirt and jeans was a political statement, a mark of allegiance with the workers of the world. I could be comfortable in that, I thought. Getting the workshirt in Albert Lea would be less trouble than shopping in Chicago. I figured I could buy one from my dad's sister Vivian at Montgomery Wards.

My dad was the focus of another vacation project. A packinghouse millwright who had always trusted the union and Hubert Humphrey's Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (DFL), he was, I knew, just waiting to be awakened to a broader vision. Hadn't he taught me that rich people aren't happy, that

Republicans will do you in for money, that “we . . . the little guys . . . the ordinary working people” are little and ordinary precisely because we are too moral to do what it takes to get rich? I had come home eager to discuss with him the socialist ideas that were beginning to satisfy my longings for a just and responsible life.

My first week in college, I had met a boy named Len—short for Lenin, my dormmates guessed—who was a real socialist and not just toying with the label. He had joined the Young People’s Socialist League in high school, and he pedaled his bicycle around Hyde Park, the university neighborhood, nearly every night, going from meeting to demonstration to party. I rode on his handlebars, wondering whether I was to be a girlfriend or a comrade or the unthinkable both-at-once. One night we squeezed into the backseat of a Volkswagen bug in front of the Student Peace Union office and drove the expressways to O’Hare Airport, where we met Madame Nhu, the powerful sister-in-law of President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam, as she disembarked from her plane. “Down with Diem!” we chanted. “Diem or democracy!” It was October 1963. Within a week, Diem had been assassinated and the escalating war in Vietnam had become a political issue on campus. With a teenager’s grandiosity, I felt personally responsible.

Three weeks later, John F. Kennedy was assassinated. That night I sat on the floor of the dorm hallway with a string of other young women in a spontaneous vigil. My friendship with Len was strained a little by my guilt at having betrayed my Democratic heritage. I had dared to question the efficacy of President Kennedy’s liberalism and now he was dead and I was in mourning. Nevertheless, as I left campus for home in December, Len entrusted me with his treasured collection of socialist literature: a green net shopping bag full of classic

Marxist documents and pamphlets by Hal Draper and Harvey Swados. I promised to show them to my dad.

I don't remember now whether I got Dad to look at any of the pamphlets that I pulled out of the bag and arrayed on the living-room coffee table. When I try to remember, I can only imagine the gold rims on his teeth flashing at my naïveté. But I will never forget what happened with the blue workshirt.

One late afternoon after Christmas, I met Dad in the kitchen as he came in from work. He was still jingling the car keys in his hand.

"Is it okay if I drive uptown?" I asked. "I need to go to Wards and buy a workshirt."

He peered at me through his glasses, one bushy eyebrow raised. "A workshirt?"

"Yeah. I want one to take back to school."

"Just a regular workshirt?"

"Uh-huh," I nodded. "A blue one, you know. People wear those at UC. They have them at Wards, don't they?"

"Aw, save your money," he said. "I can get you a workshirt if you want one."

There was a smirk at the corner of his mouth, but it appeared so often, prompted by so much in life, that I thought nothing of it. I went back to my spot behind the drop-leaf dining table at the end of the living room and huddled in front of the heat register with *The Brothers Karamazov*, trusting that my errand would get done.

The next afternoon I was too engrossed to jump up at the sound of the car in the driveway. It could have been Dmitri Karamazov's footsteps in the kitchen, for all the attention I was paying. Dad's voice roused me.

"Got a present for you," he said.

He was standing in the doorway with a piece of clothing

rolled under his arm. Light blue mottled with white—there was no mistaking what it was. He held it out toward me, still rolled, and I felt the cotton as I reached to take it. It was soft to the touch, not so stiff that it would stand out among my classmates' shirts as one newly acquired. Just as I grabbed for it, Dad's eyes squinted shut the way they do when he is struggling to contain laughter or tears, and he let the shirt unfurl in front of me. It was stained with hog blood.

My memory stops there. I can't say what happened next. I don't know if my mother cried, "Gordon! Get that smelly thing out of here," as I imagine she would have. I don't remember Dad rolling the shirt back up again and laying it on the breezeway table until the next morning, when he could tuck it back in his locker at the plant. If I took it, I didn't pack it with the rest of my clothes.

All I know for certain is that at this moment I realized I had truly left home. I would never have to take a job on the sliced bacon line, which was women's work in the meatpacking industry, nor would I live in dread of a phone call telling me that my husband was on his way to the hospital in an ambulance, having been hit in the head with a carcass or wounded by an errant blade sharp enough to sever joints and slice through bone. But neither could I leave home behind me entirely. When I wore the clean, blue workshirt that I ended up buying anyway, I did not feel like the girls from the Long Island suburbs who swished by me in the cafeteria line, looking chic in theirs. They had never seen a workshirt put to its intended use.

Like many of my peers, I struggled to get to the simple truth at the core of complex social issues, but everything I saw was refracted through a bloodstain that would not allow simplicity. I often felt as though I were invisible and watching from the sidelines as privileged white suburban kids playacted at being



less fortunate than they were. When students occupied the administration building to protest the University of Chicago's complicity in submitting grade point rankings to the selective service (local draft boards drew from the bottom of the rankings to fill their quotas), I stayed outside, wondering how the nurse's aides who had cared for me as a patient in the University hospital were getting by without their paychecks. Yet, when the speakers at rallies on the administration building steps spoke in the name of the working class, I said nothing to identify myself. Playacting or not, the issues were critical. One of the few laborers' kids I had gotten to know dropped out in our junior year and was immediately drafted. His name is inscribed on The Wall in Washington, D.C.

If I count up the meetings I attended, the protests I marched in, the feminist position papers I wrote, I have sound enough credentials to qualify as a sixties activist. And the diploma on my bookcase confirms that Girl Intellectual simultaneously mastered the Life of the Mind. Yet I read "Ph.D." as "Packinghouse Daughter." I find that I still experience the world as a working-class kid away from home. I walk the line between a feisty fidelity to the people of my childhood and a refined repugnance for the work they had to do. And I can't recall the politically charged days of my young adulthood without also remembering my ambivalence, the dark blotch of reality on my sky blue illusions.