

# Waldman, A. (2024) *Help Wanted*. Norton.

Review by **RS Deeren**

My most recent trip to Target was meant to be a quick errand. I needed a fluorescent lightbulb and, as most in-and-out trips to Target become, I was drawn to the clearance aisles and the seasonal set-ups that appear overnight, as if Santa's helpers swept away Halloween and Thanksgiving to make room for faux wood reindeer and glittery sleighs. Of course, I know this work is done by the [typically] unseen and [usually] underpaid Target employees who scour the store before it opens, making sure every day starts fresh. I envy those pre-customer hours. As a former cook, I thrived in early morning prep-work routine, before my knife's rhythm was interrupted by a pushy diner whose well-done steak was too well-done.

This trip, however, was disorienting. Pallets filled with cardboard boxes and stacks of shrink-wrapped cases of dry goods and shoes crowded each aisle. Employees not in the typical red top and khakis weaved through customers, unsheathing boxcutters as they unloaded box after box. What was most disorienting about this bustle, though, was the one-to-one recreation of a scene from Adelle Waldman's newest novel, *Help Wanted*. I wasn't questioning why this work hadn't been done before the store opened. I wasn't confused as to why these employees weren't in the standard Target outfit. In her novel, Waldman explains how this chaos is actually a planned penny-pinching scheme hatched by corporate suits to cut down on both the number of employees *and* the number of employee hours.

In the world of *Help Wanted*, Team Movement comes in every morning at 4am to unload the day's truck under the probing eye and equally inept guidance of their Executive Manager, Meredith. The team, when Meredith doesn't insert herself into their rhythm, operates smoothly. They unload the day's truck, sort merchandise, and stock shelves all before the front doors open. However, Town Square Corporate found that if Movement's hours were to start at 8, when customers arrive, stores could "bring in fewer Sales staff... reduce labor costs," and have workers untrained in customer service do not only their warehouse jobs, but the job of front-facing staff. Like most corporate needling, the plan lacked foresight beyond the bottom line and threatened the livelihoods of most part-time employees.

*Help Wanted* is a triumph on many fronts, but this scene hits the working-class beats for those familiar with wage labor: earnest employees looking for solid ground; petty middle managers jockeying for position on the corporate ladder; company brass making sweeping decisions from 30,000 feet.

With *Help Wanted*, Adelle Waldman gives readers what only the best working-class novels can: working people with their own voices, their own desires, their own ideas of what a good life can be. Set in the fictional big box store of Town Square, *Help Wanted* follows the members of Team Movement—the store's backroom warehouse workers—as they plot a way to rid themselves of their ineffectual manager, Meredith. A revolving cast of wage-laborers share their lives, personal desires, and employment hopes as Movement's plan takes shape. Some on Movement want Meredith fired while others believe getting her positioned to take over as the new store manager

would get her out of the warehouse while also leaving the door open for their own possible promotions. Meanwhile, outgoing Store Manager Big Will is caught between his loyalty to his employees, Town Square's cost-cutting VPs, and the growing suspicion that his early championing of Meredith might cost him his own promotion.

Set almost completely inside Town Square, Waldman uses humor to underscore the monotony and precarity of part-time work. Waldman's character work in this novel is one of its many strengths. Part-time wage-earners navigate not only the physically-demanding and monotonous tasks of unloading an entire semi-truck within an hour, but also the months-long decrease in hours, the mental and emotional toll of their home lives, and the constant drone of a boss who can't do the very labor she demands of her employees.

Boisterous Milo, Movement's sole "thrower," practices his comedy as he unloads the day's truck in orders that tell a story: pallets of food followed by packages of toilet paper. "What comes in—food—followed by what comes out." Too-cool-for-school Nicole just wants to punch in, work hard, and punch out after an early run-in with Meredith leaves her mental capacity questioned. She's determined to see Meredith fired. When it's Nicole's time to speak to the company executives, she states, "don't count your chickens. I can't wait for my interview. I'm going to sink her." Suave Diego laments a lack of hours while also positioning himself in the eyes of his female coworkers. Barely literate Ruby is the all-seeing team member who sees Town Square will only care about Town Square. Meek but practical Raymond tries to live down Meredith's accusations of his supposed drunkenness. Group Manager Little Will wants to make everyone happy, while ladder-climbing Val eyes Little Will's job. Hovering over them is Meredith, in full makeup, dressed in business casual more fitting for a saleroom floor than a warehouse. She's quick to micromanage but her inexperience causes her to bumble her way through work that the rest of Movement makes look like a dance routine. Anyone who has worked wage labor will appreciate the humor—or maybe just the familiar angst—of having to sidestep a manager who is incapable of doing the job.

Thematically, Waldman's depiction of the working class is never voyeuristic. She refuses to position Team Movement as caricatures to be gawked at by middle-class readers. These are earnest characters; even if readers don't root for all of them, they can understand their motivations. This is a hallmark of any great fiction. Additionally, Waldman writes with the care needed to not turn Team Movement into a working-class monolith. As the plan to rid themselves of Meredith evolves, breaks in Movement's ranks begin to form and ulterior motives come out. Ambitious Val points out the power vacuum any one of them could fill, stating, "If Meredith gets promoted, so does Little Will. And voilà, his job opens up. As far as who gets it, it could be anyone—any one of us." Is Val spearheading this plan for the betterment of the group, or to leapfrog her coworkers on the middle management ladder? Is Milo going to sabotage the plan simply because he feels disrespected? Is Nicole's resentment toward her boss going to alert Meredith to the plan? Waldman's skillful use of dramatic irony illuminates the nuances of these characters and shows how they are just as real as any of her readers.

Waldman, who was at one time a part-time warehouse employee much like those on Movement, has crafted a book with such humor and insight into the lives she represents and the broader social and economic forces they work under. This is perhaps the truest aspect of *Help Wanted*, that despite

their labor, their expertise, and their teamwork, Movement is still at the whim of the bottom line. As each individual finds some level of success, readers learn of looming systemic threats: store closures, reduced hours, automation. A reader not versed in the culture of the working class may find this a bitter pill, but the Nicoles, Vals, Diegos, and Milos of *Help Wanted* know what they can control: when to enjoy a second cigarette, and when to get on with the job. A brilliant sophomore novel.

**Reviewer Bio:**

**RS Deeren's** debut collection of short stories, *Enough to Lose*, is the winner of a 2024 Michigan Notable Book Award and a 2024 Midwest Book Silver Award. His research interests include contemporary fiction, US working-class studies, and rural-urban dynamics. His fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have appeared in periodicals including *The Great Lakes Review*, *Joyland*, *Midwestern Gothic*, and more. He's an assistant professor and coordinator of creative writing at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee.