

Boa Constrictor in the Back Seat Only: Women Driving Taxis

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'Marcham and Eg: D & D; who's top on the 218? Double O, the Ache & Pain for Mrs Jones: they're taking pictures on the parkway; Beaches, not too far; one-six, 2121 VP, #237; five-six, A & A parcel desk; who's calling? No, *second* floor; it's dead, eh? OK two-six, Danforth Carpets for you-know-who, remember the Globe; Anybody at the BP? Two-two, one double cream to the office.'

If you didn't understand the preceding paragraph, you're in the same camp with most new drivers, but, then, you're not dependent on the radio for your livelihood. The radio is the one constant in a driver's life, an ever-present drone or an ominous silence, your only contact with the company you 'work for', and the *route to orders*. The man (usually) on the other end is the dispatcher, and his feelings about the driver will heavily influence a day's pay—if you get a day's pay. Most drivers play to the dispatcher; most women will not be given that opportunity, at least until they become 'regulars'.

Most cab drivers and virtually all women drivers are not 'regulars' but marginals—part-time cabbies who rent cabs by the shift, for which they pay either a flat rate or a percentage of their earnings. As a marginal I made as little as six dollars in twelve hours, and as much as \$125.¹ Few women own and operate their own cabs because to be independent drivers they must license themselves and their vehicles. Licences are expensive and difficult to obtain, and involve long waiting lists. Companies appear to have less trouble obtaining licences, so most women work for large taxi fleets. Women, however, are almost totally absent from the ranks of dispatchers, company managers, and fleet owners.

The cab world is a strange one indeed—equal parts freedom and bondage, variety and monotony. The hours are long, twelve hours in a normal shift, and may be worked in blazing heat or bitter cold and snow. The worse the weather, the better the business, although that does not necessarily translate into more take-home pay.

Intricately organized to give the appearance of free trade, the cab industry is actually dominated by large companies; as a beginning driver, you almost invariably work for one. They may not, however, have any record of your existence (so if you want to establish a credit rating, choose another occupa-

tion). Given the state of the industry, once you're behind the wheel, it's your own brains and intuition, your own accuracy and guts—stirred with a liberal mixture of luck and a little help from your friend the dispatcher—that will produce the day's bank.

A woman driver is still considered a novelty, although a hand-out from a private 'cab course' states that over fifty women are driving in Toronto alone. You are greeted with barely disguised scorn and derision by everyone from city officials (who grant the licences) and company people (dispatchers, owners, fellow-drivers, and mechanics) to your own friends.

If you survive the short hazing which the city fathers describe as a licensing course, the battle is almost over because, prejudice aside, drivers are needed and women *are* hired. In the course you learn the rules and how to operate radios and meters, the addresses of major hotels and hospitals, how to fold a wheelchair and deliver a baby. In short, all of the things that you will have no immediate use for. I was the only woman in my class, a training ritual made memorable by the men who threw up in the waste basket during the childbirth movie. Subjected to heavy informal pressure to drop out, told explicitly that women could never make it, hassled by the sexist instructors . . . I passed.

However, only other drivers can teach you what you really need to know. For this reason, women, who are frozen out of the informal patterns of gossip on the posts, can expect to be more confused and make less money than their male colleagues during the learning period. In my experience, women (and men too) were recruited for driving by their male friends and spouses. These men provide the informal training, although they often 'protect' women from knowing the dirtier tricks of the trade.² By listening to other drivers, you learn how to 'scoop' (take an order that is not yours—the assigned driver will then find it 'dead'); 'book far' (cheat when reporting your location); 'book off the post' (another method of lying about your location); and 'double run' (take a parcel and a customer simultaneously). Cab drivers create their own talk to describe their work and relieve the tedium. The terms change from month to month and from company to company. Women tend to be excluded, although sexist jokes are ever-popular. You cannot learn the 'talk' right solely from the radio, since most radios are tuned to trans-

mit only the dispatcher's voice, providing no communication between drivers. When you prove you can 'take it like a man' (a combination of skill and ability to withstand sexist remarks) you are accepted. If you fail, you are told to make 'a pickup at the rear of Captain John's' which in Toronto means go jump in the lake.

Driving is a different experience for women and men.³ Although the normal cab shift involves runs to the bus station, the shopping centre, the liquor store, and the day-to-day business of the carless (the poor) and the carfree (the rich), drivers do see the seamier side of the city. The seams exposed tend to vary depending on the sex of the driver. I never drove prostitutes on their rounds; never was asked about a 'good time'; never sold booze from my trunk—seemingly daily occurrences for my male co-driver. However, my contacts with women in crisis were depressingly frequent. My heart went out to the battered women—I saw a lot of them—the women who had been raped, the women with mistreated children. As a driver there is little you can do for such women unless they want to talk or have a shoulder to cry on. And you do get a few wet shoulders in the business. To my knowledge, the addresses and phone numbers of rape-crisis centres, women's houses and hostels, and feminist support services are not routinely provided to cabbies. They should be in the compulsory course.

Customers differ in their responses to the woman driver. Some couldn't care less if you are a baboon. Older men are suspicious, younger men are curious, older women love you, and younger women often seem disappointed. Tips vary accordingly. Most men have pressing matters to attend to and leave you with the obligatory 'What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?' (which they find compellingly funny and original). 'Earning money' is *not* an acceptable, though obvious, answer to this question. All ages and sexes were soothed to hear that I was 'earning money for college'—translation: she's not a 'real' driver. Momentary and occasional lapses in sex roles are forgiven readily as long as you are not 'serious'. Only one fare—a man—ever refused to get into my cab when I stopped.

Cab driving has its entertaining side. Drivers generate more stories than any other group I know except housewives. They follow the lines of the classic, 'There I was with the pot roast burning, the doorbell ringing, the baby screaming. . . ' format and are used to make the mundane and ordinary interesting. This practice is addictive! ('And there I was with his pet Boa Constrictor on the back seat when he says, "Just deliver him to the vet, OK? . . . "'). The human variety in customers is endless and provides most of the fuel for this pursuit when linked to the vagaries of weather, luck, and circumstance. Once I drove a bridesmaid's hat—just the hat—all the way across town and got it on her head at the church door. They forgot to tip. That's luck; they almost forgot to pay!

Whatever goes wrong the answer is always 'Call a taxi.'

The life of a cabbie is not for the faint of heart (heart attacks are, contrary to rumour, much more frequent than 'attacks'). Cab driving is demanding, dirty, nerve-wracking, but not as dangerous as it is often depicted. I'm sorry to disappoint readers by not providing the horror tales of my night shifts, but the truth is that I was never 'allowed' to drive the night shift. It's cooler, less hassle, less traffic-jam-prone, and you earn more . . . all the reasons why my (male) co-driver wanted to 'protect' me from those shifts. The company said that it was not permitted. That is untrue, but women are often given self-serving and false information to 'protect' them.

A major disadvantage of the occupation is its tendency to ruin your pristine driving record, mussing it up with infractions that are both unavoidable when driving twelve hours a day, and expensive when you pay your personal automobile insurance. It's an occupational hazard the new driver should count on.

Well, why drive? Would you rather make coffee?

Footnotes

- 1 This article is written from the perspective of a 'marginal' worker in the industry, and therefore many details about the organization of companies are omitted. It is important to note that the experiences of regular, full-time drivers and owner-drivers differ in some details from those reported here. Taxi driving also varies by location. This article describes Toronto, a large metropolitan area; the conditions in Peterborough, Ont., a medium sized city, were different. For example, in that city drivers were paid by the hour and more women drove there, relative to the total number of drivers in the city, than in Toronto.
- 2 Women in the Toronto area should know about the course in 'effective cab driving' offered by a male-female team which explicitly deals with the problems of women drivers. (\$20 for two sessions, telephone 653-2929 for Charles Butler or Sarie Jenkins). This is not an endorsement as I have not taken this course, but those lacking informal support networks might want to give it a try.
- 3 Another perspective on women driving is found in 'Woman Driver' by 'a woman cabbie' (Helen Potrebenco) in *Women's Work: A Selection of Articles by Working Women*, (Vancouver: Working Women's Association, 1972). The booklet is a reprint of articles originally included in the *Pedestal*, 1970-2. I'm uncertain if it is still available, but give the following address as a start: Press Gang Publishers, 603 Powell St., Vancouver, V6A 1H2.



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