



## Packinghouse Daughter

By Cheri Register  
ISBN: 9780060936846

### Introduction

In 1959, the normally quiet town of Albert Lea, Minnesota, jumped into the headlines. A sometimes violent strike at the local meatpacking plant made national news broadcasts, making Cheri Register -- then just fourteen years old -- realize that the excitement she'd always assumed existed only in larger, distant cities, was suddenly on her doorstep. The strike divided her hometown yet left her with lifelong loyalties to those who labor, whether well-paid American electricians or indentured children stitching soccer balls in a third-world country. In *Packinghouse Daughter*, Register blends personal memory as the daughter of a striking worker, oral history interviews, and historical research into what is both a private and public memoir, a chronicle of loss of innocence for a town and for a young girl. Years after Register graduated with honors from the University of Chicago and attained the white-collar lifestyle her parents dreamed of for her, she still closely guards her loyalties to the working-class community she left behind. Register's memoir combines the story of the divisive strike at Albert Lea with a portrait of small-town America in the 1950s, the author's discovery of her own rich family history in the area,

and meditations on the dignity of those friends, family, and neighbors who did the essential but awful work of processing cattle and pigs into more familiar cuts of meat. In the process, she brings character and passion to the subject of social class, a topic of conversation that most Americans avoid. And she paints a tender portrait of those who, like herself, "have felt alien, caught between the blue-collar values of the communities we left behind and our new status as the 'rich people' we used to scoff at." **Discussion Questions**

1. Before you began *Packinghouse Daughter*, what was your opinion about the work done by laborers in meatpacking plants like Wilson & Co.? Did reading this book change your point of view?
2. "I read 'Ph.D.' as 'Packinghouse Daughter.'... I walk the line between a feisty fidelity to the people of my childhood and a refined repugnance for the work they do." [pg. 10] Why do you think the author chooses to view her academic achievements in terms of her working-class upbringing? How do these forces come into conflict in her memoir?
3. The author refers to Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, the famous 1906 novel that chronicles the conditions of a Chicago slaughterhouse, and says that she once aspired to be a "muckraker," or a critic who spurs social reform. Do you think *Packinghouse Daughter* succeeds in raising concern about the fate of blue collar communities as industries relocate in quest of cheap labor?
4. What techniques of memoir does the author employ in evoking the social milieu of the 1950's in *Packinghouse Daughter*? Are there any elements that you find unusually effective or poignant?
5. Were you surprised by Governor Freeman's decision to close the Wilson plant to deter violence? What role do you think the government should play in labor disputes?
6. In what way is *Packinghouse Daughter* a book about class consciousness? What signs does the author interpret as indicators of class? Have notions of class shaped your allegiances, your work, or the way you see the world?

**About the Author:** 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. Her work on this memoir 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. *Packinghouse Daughter* has won a Minnesota Book Award and an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. Register's 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 non-fiction, Register now teaches writing at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, where she lives.