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Dorothy Sue Cobble Interview

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Bucknell: Occupied

Jennifer Thomson, interviewer (JT)
Dorothy Sue Cobble, interviewee (DC)

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JT: This afternoon I'm talking with Dorothy Sue Cobble, a professor at Rutgers University in both the department of Labor Studies and Employee Relations as well as the department of History. She specializes in the historical and contemporary study of war, social movements, and social policy in the United States and globally.

DC: Thanks.

JT: Thanks for coming. So today, I thought we could start off by talking about feminism, or maybe we could accurately say feminisms and labor struggles in the 20th century. And your new book is entitled Feminism Unfinished: A Short Surprising History of American Women's Movements. So why is feminism unfinished?

DC: Um. We were really pleased when we realized that one of the central themes of the book was that feminism is always being recreated, and different generations really create their own visions of what they want and what they need. And so calling the book Feminism Unfinished really connects to that notion that there were feminism movements in the past and there will be different kinds of feminism movements in the future. I grew up in the 50s and 60s and was very influenced by the women's movement in the late 60s and 70s. But I think the feminism at that moment really emphasized different things, and had different concerns than say the feminisms of the 21st century.

JT: And what's so surprising about American women's movements?

DC: Well I think one of the things that's very surprising is that they were broad movements that really involved a wide swath of women. And that oftentimes the history of feminism is written way too narrowly.

JT: MmHm.

DC: And so we miss a lot of the action. My own chapter in the book takes the story for the half-century after suffragettes won in 1920. And usually that period is told as a sort of low moment in the history of feminism and women's progress. And I think the surprise in that chapter is that when you broaden the struggles and you include working class women and women of color who did not organize just for other women, they organized in mixed gender groups, they organized alongside men. There issues certainly had to do with things that concerned them as women, but they were also concerned with broader changes that would affect the men in their family and the society at large. So you know, you think of the post-war period--50s and 60s--and it's a moment of enormous power for the Civil Rights movement. And that's a movement that included many women who were feminists. [SOUND] And the same... we could talk about the Labor movement, too. And those

movements made some really fundamental changes that benefitted women. And I wanted to include that in my history of women's struggles for freedom and equality.

JT: How would you define feminism?

[SOUND]

DC: My own definition of feminism has to do with recognition that there are disadvantages that women suffer as a sex. And a commitment to end those disadvantages.

JT: MmHm.

DC: It doesn't mean that you think that the disadvantages that face women because of their sex are always the most important. And that a movement that tries to address the needs of women will always focus just on the disadvantages due to sex.

JT: MmHm.

DC: Women are just as diverse as men and they have a range of problems. Some have to do with discrimination on the basis of sex.

JT: MmHm.

DC: But women who are migrants or women of color or low-income women or [INAUDIBLE] women with multiple low-paying jobs... there are different kinds of movements that they would want to be involved with. I would call the women in the Labor movement--that I've written so much about--feminists because they wanted to address multiple structures of inequality.

JT: MmHm.

DC: They were very clear that they faced problems as women. And their sense of women's disadvantage was not always shared by the culture at large. They argued that there should be childcare.

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

DC: That women are never going to have equal opportunities in the workplace unless they have social support and recognition of the value of the work in the home. But that wasn't the only issue that they wanted addressed.

JT: So I'd like to talk about an anecdote that you used to open a book that you wrote in 2004 entitled The Other Women's Movement. And so you open it with a conversation about this sort of stereo-typical figure of the soccer mom. Right? Which, any of us who were around in the 1990s -- unlike our students -- but other listeners will remember. Became sort of this stereotypical figure in the American imagination. So you write about the soccer mom in the context of the 1996 Presidential election, and so I would actually like to read a short passage and then get into the

issues here. So you write that "it was the vote of soccer moms that Bill Clinton had to win if he were to ensure his reelection. Only much later did it become apparent that these women had been mislabeled. They were not soccer moms at all, indeed as one observer wryly noted, 'Waitress moms might be the better catchphrase.' The majority of American women didn't drive new SUVs, live in the affluent outer suburbs or spend their afternoon chauffeuring their kids around. Rather they owned aging mini-vans, worked long hours for low-pay and jerry-rigged their childcare through neighbors, relatives, and friends." So can you talk a little bit about the significance of the soccer mom as an idea, and the ways in which it brings up some of these larger issues that you've been interested in in your work.

DC: You know, as a woman who writes a lot about women's movements and Labor movements, I think one of the defining phrases that was important in graduate school was this notion of gendering Labor history.

JT: MmHm.

DC: Of making sure that we see the world work through the lens of gender. But I think all too often, what we miss is the class differences, and in some ways, I think we still need to class Women's History. So all too often, I think we write the history of women, really through the lens of the experience of middle-class women. So the soccer mom is one example of that.

JT: MmHm.

DC: And our narratives are really built around what happened in the lives of middle-class women. You know, one example would be this notion of women first came into the workforce in World War II, and this was.

JT: Hm.

DC: And this was a great opportunity for them, they took on jobs that men had had, and then they were pushed out after the war--

JT: MmHm.

DC: --and they had to go back to being housewives. And that story is true, but it's only true for a small slice of women. Most of the women who had jobs in World War II had jobs before and most of the women went back into the workforce after the war. Not in the high-paying blue collar jobs they had--with benefits,

JT: MmHm.

DC: and job protection

JT: MmHm.

DC: But into low-paying service jobs. And in some ways, that's the era of the working mom. That's when the working mom era starts.

JT: MmHm.

DC: But often we don't recognize that until much later. Until that kind of, the women I write about in the 50s called it the double day.

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

DC: Having to spend a day making in the wage world, but then also in family work. And that sort of conflict of work and family really doesn't become part of the general discussion until it's the reality for middle-class and upper middle-class women.

JT: MmHm.

DC: When it becomes this issue of careers versus home. But for many women, I would say the majority of women, that's been a struggle for over a half century. But we just don't date it.

JT: MmHm. And how was it exactly that in this particular example, the Clinton campaign's belief about what women cared about, how did that end up sort of backfiring on them?

DC: Well, I think the Democratic Party, for a long time has not paid the kind of attention that it needs to, to the issues of low income workers. It has disappeared class in a way.

JT: MmHm.

DC: And there's been a lot written about the defection of blue-collar men to the Republicans, the so-called

[CROSSTALK]

JT: Reagan Democrats

DC: Reagan Democrats

JT: Soon to be what Trump is referring to as Trump Democrats, right?

DC: Right. But I actually find that it's been incredible that the Labor movement and many blue-collar workers, particularly women, have remained loyal to the Democratic Party when in fact, the Democratic Party has not really made their issues a priority.

JT: MmHm.

DC: Economic inequality is now certainly part of what politicians are discussing, but in some ways, they were pulled in, they went kicking and screaming into that dialogue.

JT: Yeah.

DC: It took enormous amount of pressure, not just from groups like Occupy.

JT: MmHm.

DC: But other movements -- the Fight for 15. You know, those movements have transformed the conversation, and the politicians are behind, they're not out in front.

JT: So when is it that you... when do you find in the history of the 20th century that the Democratic party stopped paying attention to class?

DC: You know, I wouldn't say there's a one moment where... all of a sudden we went from black to white, but you could see a gradual shift. Certainly. The Great Society even in the 60s, certainly we were falling away at that point.

JT: MmHm.

DC: From many of the reforms of the New Deal, which I believe put the imbalance of class power and economic inequality at the center

JT: MmHm.

DC: of their concerns. We made some progress on those issues in the 60s. One of the things I'll mention tonight the generation of what we could call New Deal feminists

JT: MmHm.

DC: were responsible for passing the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 which is the first time we as a nation said the government does have the right to say to a business 'No, you have to pay a living wage.' It wasn't exactly a living wage when the law passed, I think it was 20 cents an hour [LAUGHS] but it was an important principle.

JT: MmHm.

DC: that the government could actually tell an employer what wage they could not go below

JT: MmHm.

DC: a certain wage. They had to have a wage floor. And that law was expanded and improved. It was not a law that covered the majority of workers when it was passed in 1938.

JT: MmHm. [CROSSTALK] am I correct in believing that it only actually covered about 20 percent of workers?

DC: I don't know if it's that low.

JT: MmHm.

DC: But it does not cover the majority of wage earners until 1966. So it took decades for the law just to cover the majority.

JT: MmHm.

DC: And in some ways, we've gone backwards since then. Because many employers have redefined the people who work for them as independent contractors.

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

DC: And so people that are not considered technically employees by the definition of the law would not be covered.

JT: Right.

DC: But we continue to make some advances on minimum wage, but for example we haven't raised the minimum wage nationally for twenty years. It's been a long time. And I know there's some activity here in Pennsylvania.

JT: MmHm.

DC: On Monday, the governor passed an executive order, actually raising the wage for state employees.

JT: MmHm.

DC: And people who have jobs with government contracts. He raised the wage by three dollars so it will move up to ten. I think Pennsylvania has one... is on the low end of the state minimum wage.

JT: Yeah. Definitely.

DC: But his proposal to raise minimum wage to ten dollars for all of workers in Pennsylvania has been held up by the Republicans.

JT: I'm surprised. I mean, he... Obviously he had to do that with an executive order because they've blocked him on every sort of budgetary conversation so far since he's gotten into office.

DC: Yeah.

JT: So I'd like to delve a little bit into this question of narrative that you've brought up. In particular what you've referred to an Equal Rights teleology, right? To the ways in which we tend to think about or historicize the women's movement. So, as you've talked about before, this story

oftentimes locates the beginning of so-called Modern feminism in the 1960s with let's say the National Organization of Women being founded, and locates the battles around issues like the Equal Rights Amendment or the attempt to get equal pay for equal work.

DC: MmHm.

JT: And I think this is certainly a dominant narrative that many of our listeners will be familiar with. So what are the chief problems with that narrative? I know we've talked, certainly, it erases many groups of women, but can you just sort of reflect on the costs of reiterating this narrative?

DC: Yeah... you know you' mentioned two things --

JT: MmHm.

DC: Equal Rights and equal pay. And actually those two areas were pursued by different groups--

JT: OK.

DC: of workers. So if we take the so-called Equal Rights' goal, we would all agree that... or many of us would agree that women deserve to have the same rights as men.

JT: MmHm.

DC: And I think one of the debates are that women should have Equal Rights to men. But one of the debates was "how do we go about making that real?" And after suffrage in 1920, the women's movement really split into two wings.

JT: MmHm.

DC: And one group focused almost primarily on achieving legal equality.

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

DC: With men, and they also defined equality in a somewhat narrow way. So it meant having the same treatment.

JT: OK.

DC: As men. That was what equality was defined as.

JT: MmHm.

DC: And there are other definitions of equality. One could talk about laws that allow for equal opportunity, but don't necessarily treat people exactly the same. A famous case was a law that was on the books in California that said women who are pregnant--

JT: MmHm.

DC: actually have the right to take leave and return to their job.

JT: OK.

DC: This was a law that only gave that right to women. It's called the Cal-Fed case because the bank of Cal-Fed sued and said this is discriminatory.

JT: ...to men.

DC: ...to men...

JT: And when was this?

DC: This was in the 70s.

JT: OK.

DC: And again, feminists divided on this. Many women said well we would like a law that gives both men and women leave for family reasons and the right to return to their job.

JT: MmHm.

DC: But in fact, we don't want to do away with this current job, right? Because it is only women who are forced to choose.

JT: MmHm.

DC: Men can have families and not leave their jobs.

JT: Right.

DC: Only women are forced to choose. So in some ways to create real equality, you sometimes have to treat men and women differently. That was an argument throughout the 20th century. The national women's party was the primary group that proposed the ERA, and they had as I said, a very narrow definition of equality. One of the debates at that point was over minimum wage.

JT: MmHm.

DC: It was hoped by many of the group that I would call the social justice feminists that they would be able to convince the national women's party to support fair labor standards. Laws that would set minimum wages for women. And the idea was that you set them for women, and eventually you would be able to set them for both men and women, which did happen in 1938. But in 1923, the Supreme Court actually outlawed even actually minimum wage setting for women. And the two

wings of the feminist movement were furious at each other. The National Women's Party celebrated this as a victory for women. That women should have the same freedom of contract

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

DC: that men had. The social justice feminists said freedom is something, whose freedom. Freedom for employers may not be the same thing as freedom for workers. And this is a false freedom to say that we can now work for slave wages.

JT: MmHm.

DC: So the movement really split at that point over the protective laws. And that continued for the next half-century. The social justice women also argued that just focusing on legal changes was not enough.

JT: MmHm.

DC: That you really, really had to address issues of civil rights, of economic inequality, of migrant rights. There were disadvantages that women faced that weren't just from their sex or that wouldn't just be addressed through changing the law. So many of the women that I write about believed that you needed to have collective voice at work. You needed to have a collective voice as a consumer.

JT: MmHm.

DC: That corporations were organized, they were powerful. That individual employees were in some cases, able to negotiate good deals based on their own education and market power as individuals, but that wasn't true for the majority and they needed collective representation.

JT: MmHm.

DC: So one of the primary campaigns that the social justice feminists were involved with was to achieve freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, the right to organize and bargain. And that was achieved, at least partially at the federal level and the New Deal.

JT: Now did women -- women organizing in the workplace -- did they organize their own unions or did they join co-ed unions?

DC: They did both.

JT: MmHm.

DC: One thing that I was really surprised about in writing my second book, I was doing research in Detroit at Wayne State.

JT: MmHm.

DC: ...looking at the records of the United Auto Workers, and I was thinking while I'm writing about wage-earning women, and those would be the women that would join a union, but it turns out that there was this huge collection of women's auxiliaries.

JT: OK.

DC: And I thought well that's just the wives, you know. But I'll look at that. And it turned out that many of these women were also wage-earners. They were the working moms and working mothers that... I was talking about earlier in the 40s and 50s. But they decided that in fact they needed a separate space to talk to other women about the problems that they faced in particular as women. And they went back and forth between market work and family work. But their primary identity was with other women, and so they maintained their membership in the women's auxiliary.

JT: And so what relationship did the auxiliary have with the union itself?

DC: Well, gradually, the women began to participate in both.

JT: MmHm.

DC: And so the women would go to the meetings with men and they were full-fledged voting members. The women's auxiliary did not have the same kind of formal power.

JT: MmHm.

DC: But it was recognized as an organization that had to be listened to. And... I think the whole question of power between men and women is something that we can't just assume is always one way.

JT: MmHm.

DC: And I think it's true that much of the emphasis, say in the 1960s and 70s movement, was about the inequality between men and women, particularly in the home, where you had professional men and college-educated women who were not pursuing careers.

JT: Right.

DC: ...outside the home. And I think there was quite a gap there in terms of power. But that arrangement is an arrangement that was particular to a certain class. And if you look at working class families, where men's wages are not so great.

JT: MmHm.

DC: They may have long periods of unemployment, where the contribution of women, even when they're not making wages, to the kind of functioning of the household economy.

JT: MmHm.

DC: is still very great. There's greater economic equality, and I think that the power differential there can be less. So I think in some ways the auto workers, the auxiliary had a respected role. It also played an enormous role in the organizing of the union. People may be familiar with how the auto workers were founded in the 1937 Flint sit-down.

JT: MmHm.

DC: Which was this small group of people that wasn't violent. They just sat down. [CROSSTALK] it was passive resistance in many ways, and it was incredibly effective.

JT: MmHm.

DC: But the Detroit police, and also the General Motors police at that time had a huge army of private guards. Tear-gassed the plants, and it was the women's auxiliary that was outside picketing that threw the tear gas back [CROSSTALK] that broke the windows to let the tear gas out.

JT: MmHm.

DC: They were incredibly important in the founding of it. So they had a respected place.

JT: So, I mean, given this very rich history of activism, is it even useful to talk about feminism as though it came in waves [LAUGHS] We have this sort of first wave, second wave, and now I guess we're sort of in the third or fourth wave depending on who you ask.

DC: Right.

JT: I mean, is that an even useful way to think about things?

DC: I think the wave metaphor which is the primary metaphor which is the primary metaphor that's used in women's history can obscure a lot. As I mentioned earlier, the first wave purportedly ended with suffrage.

JT: MmHm.

DC: And the second wave doesn't start until the late 60s. So you've got about fifty years there.

[LAUGHS]

[CROSSTALK]

JT: Where women aren't doing anything apparently [LAUGHS]

DC: According to the wave story.

JT: Yeah.

DC: There's very little activism. And I think that does not do justice to that half-century.

JT: MmHm.

DC: It really only recognizes certain kinds of activism.

JT: Yeah. So as we're talking here, in different ways, some of these themes have been highlighted in the current Presidential primary season. Right? And I mean, for obvious reasons, many of these issues are being refracted through the campaign of Hillary Clinton both in terms of her own history, but also in terms of arguments that she's been making campaign promises she's been making, as well as what's considered to be her alarming lack of support amongst particularly young women. As this campaign has ground on for the length that it does in this country, are there ways that you've seen issues that you've studied come to the fore?

DC: Yeah... I think that the gap in terms of the age gap.

JT: MmHm.

DC: in terms of support for Hillary is really interesting. The millennial generation is much to the left of what we could call the Baby Boomer generation, and that's borne out by the support--who supports Bernie Sanders.

JT: MmHm.

DC: And so why would we be surprised that that's true for women as well as men.

JT: Right. So you're here on campus tonight to talk. And I'll read here from your talk description cause it will be much more eloquent than I would paraphrase it. To talk about the hidden history of economic justice feminism in the United States as well as about how American women organized internationally to secure peace, achieve economic security and further women's and human rights. So we've been talking exclusively about the United States, can you talk a little bit about the international or global dimensions of your research?

DC: One of the things that really interested me in writing this book I'm in the middle of, is the ways in which we also still tell the story of the American women's movement as a very... as a national movement. As a movement that happened within these borders of the nation.

JT: MmHm.

DC: And one of the things that I was struck by, I guess the first thing that I saw that really seemed to challenge that, was I had written a lot about the so-called President's commission on the status of women.

JT: Right.

DC: Which was in many people's minds a huge turning point, sort of not unlike the publication of the Feminine Mystique. The commission on the status of women also published its report in 1963 at the same time. And I've written about that, and I was trying to understand it as a document in its time that was actually very broad and progressive. And what I didn't understand was that many of the women who were key to securing that agreement and getting that commission set up had also been involved in the U.N.

JT: MmHm.

DC: and the U.N. commission on the status of women.

JT: OK.

DC: Which happened, 20 years before. And then I started looking back at the women I'd written about, and realizing that in fact they had not stayed within national borders.

JT: MmHm.

DC: That they were very much connected to the world and to global

JT: MmHm.

DC: to the global economy. And that... I haven't quite figured it all out yet, but I think in some ways, the Baby Boomer generation was more inward. Perhaps because of the Vietnam War, there was a kind of isolationism.

JT: MmHm.

DC: Perhaps because of such distrust of American power. But if you look at the periods that I'm writing about right now, from World War I up to the 60s, those generations were very much shaped by the global depression and by world wars.

JT: MmHm.

DC: And they crossed national boundaries to try to connect with other like-minded people to forge a transnational politics.

JT: MmHm.

DC: And may of the people that I'm writing about were very concerned to try to set not just wage floor nationally, but a global wage floor.

JT: MmHm.

DC: So that movement really takes off after World War I, and it's not surprising. Wars really do get people thinking about global politics.

JT: MmHm.

DC: So after World War I with the peace treaty, the first international body, the ILO [International Labour Organization] was set up to think about what to do, how to regulate labor standards world-wide. And that body also took on issues that were very directly related to women, such as paid maternity leave, and health services, and also child labor issues. But women did not have any voting rights in the ILO at its founding convention.

JT: MmHm.

DC: So it was 41 nations and all the representatives were men. It's a tripartite body, so they had representatives from workers, employers, and states. And they were to debate issues not just like the minimum wage, but also maternity leave and other kinds of issues. So women decided primarily women who had been involved in labor parties. In the Socialist party, many working-class women, but also their allies. In the U.S. the primary organization was the women's trade union league.

JT: OK.

DC: Which was a cross class group. They decided, well we'll hold our own convention. The ILO was to meet in Washington D.C. and they decided to hold their own meeting. Women from 300-400 women came from 14 different nations.

JT: Wow.

DC: From Asia, from Europe, from Latin America, and they passed their own resolutions, and that--in my mind--became a kind of organizing vision for how to address problems of the global economy that was really looked to for the next half-century.

JT: MmHm. So it's interesting that you say some of the women active in these organizations were coming from the Socialist party. Was there anti-capitalist bent to the organizing going on here, was it still operating within a capitalist framework, how were they disposed towards the actual form of the economy itself?

DC: I think our political labels.

JT: MmHm.

DC: Don't work very well. I think most economies are actually a mix of capitalist and socialist, and many of my women thought of themselves as socialists. They called themselves socialist. They thought of themselves as democratic socialists.

JT: MmHm.

DC: But they wanted to socialize capitalism or make it better.

JT: MmHm. MmHm

DC: They didn't want to do away with private property or the market. And they also were very clear and there's some very moving memoirs that some of them wrote about the need to adopt methods that were not violent to bring social change.

JT: MmHm.

DC: With the Bolshevik revolution, those issues were really brought front and center. And there were other nations as well that went through violent upheavals to bring changes to the politics and to the economy. But the women that I'm looking at were real clear at a certain point that they still believed [LAUGHS] in parliamentary democracy.

JT: MmHm.

DC: They believed it wouldn't work unless people organized and had power and unless there were grassroots movements that made sure the laws were passed and enforced. But they wanted change through politics, not through war.

JT: Yeah.

DC: And wanted their slogans, which I just laughed when I came across it. One of the famous slogans from the 60s was Make Love, Not War. But in the 20s, the women I'm writing about said "Make Law Not War" [LAUGHS]. It's not quite as exciting, but that was their vision.

JT: MmHm.

DC: That we need alternatives. You know, the Great War... in Britain, one in three young men between the ages of 18 and 22 died. We know the kind of devastation that happened after World War I and the genocidal horrors of World War II.

JT: MmHm.

DC: So those were very shaping--

JT: Yeah.

DC: events for the women of those generations.

JT: So I know we're running a little short on time, but I have one last question for you, which is why

is it that in the United States we don't have federally mandated childcare centers or maternity or family leave, right? What's the historical accounting on that? [LAUGHS]

DC: It's the perfect storm, right? So many things that happened. There were certainly a movement pushing for those kinds of changes. As we know the childcare law that did pass in 1971 was vetoed by Nixon, and that, I guess, was the closest that we've come to that. And now there's a movement, I think, that is really building up some fire and speed to think about childcare as a... to think about extending--

JT: MmHm.

DC: kindergarten backwards.

JT: Right, right. To the pre-K.

DC: So in some ways, we really are beginning to address this issue, but from a little bit different angle. On the one hand, we're gonna go back, have pre-K.

JT: MmHm.

DC: So there's that movement, and you know there's some states that universal pre-K is here.

JT: Right, like New York, I think, right?

DC: Yeah. Yeah. On the other end, there's a growing movement at the state level, and also laws proposed for paid leave.

JT: MmHm.

DC: For childbirth and family. And it's also leave that would allow you to care for a sick family member and elder care.

JT: MmHm.

DC: So, people who particularly [SOUND] women who, and men as well who are working in very rigid jobs where there's not much flexibility at all--

JT: MmHm.

DC: Often do have to face this thing well should I let my child stay home sick... or you know, I go to work, or do I just not show up and lose my job? So there is a movement to require employers to have paid sick leave. Many municipalities and New Jersey, I think New Jersey is the state where most cities have passed that kind of law.

JT: MmHm.

DC: So not unlike what happened in the Progressive era, there's a lot of these experiments with policy proceeding at the state level, and we think it will go to the federal.

JT: MmHm.

DC: But if you think comparatively or if you think about how the US stacks up against other nations, we don't do so well.

JT: Right.

DC: In this area at all. Now, one could say, well you have to think about the welfare state, not just as the public welfare, but you have to think about the benefits that people have through employment.

JT: MmHm.

DC: Cause we have this kind of mixed welfare. So for often professional employees, the benefits aren't that different, because many companies do have leave programs.

JT: MmHm.

DC: And things like that. So we don't look so exceptional, if you just think about professional employees--

JT: Yeah.

DC: but if you think about the society as a whole--

JT: Right.

DC: we are a global outlier in this area, for sure.

JT: Yeah. Well, I appreciate you coming for the interview, it's really been a pleasure talking.

DC: Well, thanks, I enjoyed it.