

Commissioner's Book Club: Discussion guide

Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands

by Kate Beaton

Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics—take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out [the Book Club How-to resource](#).

Author Bio

[Kate Beaton](#) was born and raised in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada. After graduating from Mount Allison University with a double degree in History and Anthropology, she moved to Alberta in search of work that would allow her to pay down her student loans. During the years she spent out West, Beaton began creating webcomics under the name Hark! A Vagrant, quickly drawing a substantial following around the world. The collections of her landmark strip Hark! A Vagrant and Step Aside, Pops each spent several months on the New York Times graphic novel bestseller list, as well as appearing on best of the year lists from Time, The Washington Post, Vulture, NPR Books, and winning the Eisner, Ignatz, Harvey, and Doug Wright Awards. She has also published

the picture books *King Baby* and *The Princess and the Pony*. Beaton lives in Cape Breton with her family.¹

Summary

Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands is Kate Beaton's graphic novel memoir about leaving Cape Breton after university and travelling to Alberta's oil sands to pay off her student debt. From 2005 to 2008, Beaton worked at several sites around Fort McMurray, joining generations of Atlantic Canadians who have travelled elsewhere in search of work when adequate or secure employment was unavailable at home. Through illustrated scenes of camp life, industrial work sites, friendships, harassment and loneliness, she documents what it was like to be one of relatively few women in a workforce overwhelmingly made up of men.

The memoir follows Beaton's experiences across different jobs and worksites, as well as the lives of coworkers who had also left families, communities and occupations behind for better-paying work, under the persistent pressures of debt and regional inequality. It includes her experiences of sexual harassment and assault, workplace safety and mental-health concerns, the class and economic pressures that brought many workers north and the environmental and social impacts of the oil sands.

Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

Under the B.C. Human Rights Code, workers have the right to a workplace free from discrimination based on protected characteristics such as sex, gender identity or expression, race, disability and family status. Sexual harassment is recognized as a form of discrimination based on sex, and employers are responsible for addressing discrimination and harassment that occurs in the workplace. You can visit our website to learn more about responsibilities under the Code as an employer.

The book also raises broader questions about workplace health and safety. In B.C., employers have legal responsibilities to provide physically and psychologically healthy and safe workplaces, prevent and respond to bullying and harassment, address known hazards and protect workers from retaliation

¹"Kate Beaton," *Drawn and Quarterly*, accessed September 17, 2026, <https://drawnandquarterly.com/author/kate-beaton/>.

for raising safety concerns. These obligations sit alongside human-rights protections and are especially relevant to the conditions Beaton describes: injury risks, mental-health strain, isolation, harassment and workplace cultures in which workers may feel pressure to tolerate unsafe conditions. This pressure can be compounded by debt, class and broader regional economic inequality, especially when better-paying work is concentrated so far from home or when workers have few realistic and viable alternatives. Economic security can shape how able someone is to leave unsafe work, refuse harmful conditions or take time away from a workplace altogether.

Finally, Ducks connects labour and gender to environmental and Indigenous rights. Resource development can affect air, water, wildlife, food systems and the health of nearby communities, while Indigenous nations may experience those impacts on lands they have stewarded since time immemorial, lands that are central to their culture, livelihood and to exercise their rights. These concerns remain current in the oil sands region: Indigenous communities downstream of development have called for stronger monitoring and research into possible health and environmental effects, including cancer risks, water quality and impacts on traditional food. In B.C., environmental decision-making must consider not only ecological effects, but also social, cultural and health impacts and constitutionally protected Indigenous rights.

Discussion guide questions and prompts

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the book and human rights. The provided prompts are not the only or complete answers, but some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:

1. Leaving home to make a living

Kate's story is part of a long history of migratory labour in Canada. Atlantic Canadians in particular have moved west for generations as fisheries, mines and other regional industries declined, disappeared or were depleted, often by economic, environmental and policy decisions that shaped what kind of work was available at home. What does leaving home for work ask people to give up? Who benefits from migratory labour, and who is most affected by it?

- In Ducks, workers often gained access to wages they could not earn at home, while employers and the oil industry gained a mobile workforce willing to travel long distances for that work. The costs are largely

carried by workers, their families and the communities they leave behind. This could look like separation, isolation, disrupted relationships, mental health impacts and the gradual loss of local skills, labour and community vibrancy. Migratory labour can provide real opportunity, but it can also reflect regional economies that have failed to provide enough stable work for people to remain where they are from.

2. Who gets to choose?

Beaton goes to the oil sands because she has student debt to pay and few realistic ways to clear it quickly. Later, in Victoria, she encounters people her own age who can afford to "figure things out" without the same pressure to earn income. What choices become available when you have money, family support or a financial cushion? What choices disappear when you don't?

- Money creates room to maneuver. It can give people time to look for better work, leave a harmful job, move somewhere new, go back to school or recover from illness. Without that cushion, choices may narrow quickly. For example, people may stay in unsafe or degrading work, take on debt, move away from family or accept conditions they would otherwise refuse. Class shows up, not only in how much people earn, but in how much freedom they have to say no, to leave or to change their circumstances.

3. When sexual harassment becomes the workplace norm

Kate is expected to tolerate comments about her body, unwanted attention, gender stereotypes, sexual propositions and harassment, while being told to "grow thicker skin" when she objects or that she should have known this would happen coming into a predominantly male space. Who is being asked to change in these moments—Kate, or the workplace around her? At what point does harassment stop being a series of individual incidents and become part of the workplace culture, and what can people do to interrupt that culture?

- In *Ducks*, the burden is repeatedly placed on Kate and other women to adapt. She is asked to ignore comments, laugh things off, set firmer boundaries or become less affected by what is happening around her. A workplace culture is shaped not only by the people who harass, but also by coworkers and supervisors who dismiss, excuse or normalize the behaviour. That means those same people can also help shift culture,

interrupting behaviour by taking complaints seriously, challenging inappropriate comments in the moment and making it clear that sexual harassment is a workplace problem to address collectively—not something individual women should be expected to manage on their own.

4. Understanding harm without excusing it

Beaton shows men who harass, demean and assault women, but she also shows men who are lonely, isolated or changed by life in the camps. How do we make sense of both things at once? What might the conditions of camp life help us understand about the men's behaviour without excusing the harm they cause? And what responsibilities do employers have when they know these conditions are harming employees?

- Understanding the conditions around harmful behaviour is not the same as excusing it. One of the strengths of *Ducks* is that it shows the wholeness and messiness of people's lives: men can be lonely, loving, generous, frightened or struggling, and still cause real harm. Isolation, separation from family and community, poor mental health, substance use and a hypermasculine workplace culture may help us understand how harmful behaviour becomes normalized, but they do not erase responsibility and accountability.
- At the same time, extending this line of thinking may impact people in different ways. For people who have experienced sexual harassment or gender-based violence—especially when it is ongoing—being asked to extend empathy or curiosity toward those causing harm can feel like an additional burden. Employers have a responsibility to address the conditions that make harm more likely, rather than leaving workers to contend with both the harm, and the work of understanding it.

5. Public narratives and life in the oil sands

Beaton writes about the gap between life in the oil sands and the simplified versions of Fort McMurray that outsiders often debate through topics such as environmental catastrophe, the economic engine, lawless work camps, good jobs and good money. What do people misunderstand about a place when they only know it through headlines, politics or a caricature? How can we push for change without losing sight of the complexity of the lives and livelihoods tied to that place?

- Beaton argues that people can form strong opinions about the oil sands without knowing much about the people who actually live and work there. Simplified stories may make political arguments easier, but they can also flatten the realities of workers, families and communities whose lives are tied to the industry. In one example, environmental activists disrupt infrastructure to target the oil industry, but the immediate physical work of dealing with that disruption falls to labourers on site, not company executives. Pushing for change might mean first seeking to understand the whole picture: who will be affected, how, and whether our strategies take into account the lives and humanity of people whose livelihoods are dependent on the system we are trying to change.

6. Indigenous rights and the oil sands

Beaton acknowledges that, while she was working in the oil sands, she understood very little about the Indigenous lands and communities around her. Looking back, she describes becoming aware of concerns Indigenous communities had been raising about the effects of extraction, pollution and work camps on nearby First Nations and Métis communities. Beaton described [an interview with Elder Celina Harpe from Fort Mackay First Nation](#) as "a sword that cut through my ignorance and my coddled perception of myself and my participation in an industry that towered over her existence."

What do you make of Beaton's experience of living and working so close to these communities while understanding so little about what they were experiencing? What does Elder Harpe's testimony add to the story of the oil sands?

- Elder Harpe's testimony adds a view of the oil sands from a community living with its effects over generations. She speaks about changes to water, fish, wildlife and traditional foods, concerns about cancer and community health and fear for what future generations will inherit. She also speaks plainly about the lack of care or consideration oil companies demonstrate toward Indigenous Peoples and their health and well-being. Beaton was deeply familiar with the oil sands and still had a significant gap in her understanding and analysis. This can remind us that the on-going unconscious effects of colonization and anti-Indigenous racism inform whose stories we hear and which ones are deemed worthy of a response.