The title of the book *Every Twelve Seconds* refers to the frequency with which cattle are killed at a Midwestern slaughterhouse that the author worked at for five months as an undercover ethnographer. While this striking statistic speaks to the efficiency of industrialized slaughter, it also helps explain why even those who work on the “kill floor” can remain as detached from the brutal reality of meat production as customers who purchase shrink-wrapped ground chuck at the supermarket. Maintaining such a fantastic killing rate requires a complex division of labor and a lightning quick assembly line, which means that workers have no time to contemplate the cow as an animal, let alone consider their own role in the transformation of a sentient creature into a commodity. For instance, Pachirat’s first job in the slaughterhouse was cleaning and hanging livers. As a never-ending line of these reddish-brown organs descended to his work station, Pachirat struggled to establish a rhythm that would enable him to not fall behind: clear the bloodied hooks of flesh, dip the rag in cleaning fluid, and wring the rag; clear the bloodied hooks of flesh, dip the rag, and wring it (p. 119).

As the days on the liver line stretched into weeks and months, the repetitiveness, mundanity, and rapidity of the task, and the practical problem of moving the livers along without slowing down the procession of cows through the slaughterhouse, makes “the reality that the work of the slaughterhouse centers around killing evaporate into a routinized, almost hallucinatory blur” (p. 138). The phenomenological experience of the job resembles any other mindless assembly-line task. Since each worker participates in only a small part of the slaughter and dismemberment process and must perform at breakneck speed, they—like the rest of society—experience the killing required to turn flesh into food “at a distance.”
Pachirat describes the various jobs in the slaughterhouse with more detail and gore than I would venture here. But these evocative accounts, he points out, "are not merely incidental to or illustrative of a more important theoretical argument…. They are the argument" (p. 19). My students would agree. I have taught this book in my “Animals and Society” class where many of the students are well aware of the horrors of factory farming and take for granted Michael Pollan’s (2006) thesis that if abattoirs had glass walls so that the public had to bear witness to industrialized slaughter, we would demand its cessation. But what about the people who actually work there? Surely, my students thought before reading this book, only sociopaths or sadists could actually do the job. However, Pachirat’s hard-won thick description of the slaughterhouse convinced them of the book’s most compelling conclusion: that the logic of sequestration that allows society to eat meat unproblematically is replicated inside of the slaughterhouse. Even the 120 employees who handle the cattle on the so-called killing floor do not experience their job as killing. They stave off cognitive dissonance by pathologizing the “knocker”—the sole employee who shoots a mechanical bolt through the heads of cows. He is the killer; and you have to be crazy to do that job. Moreover, his “dirty” work is cordoned off from the view of everyone else on the kill floor. (It should also be noted that, since this is low-paying, precarious labor, the requisite characteristic of employees is that they are desperate for work—not “crazy”; many are undocumented immigrants.)

Pachirat illustrates how the meat production system itself compels callousness, if not cruelty. For example, those who corral the live cattle into the chutes come to rely on electric prods—which they routinely stick into the cows’ anuses—not because the cows will not move along without them but because they do not move at the pace required by management. Pachirat, who at first refused to employ the electric prods, is eventually compelled to use them to avoid conflict with his co-workers and supervisors (who warn him to keep the line “tight”). Equally disturbingly, the assembly-line model all but guarantees contamination—in spite of the fact that a USDA inspector literally looms overhead of all the operations. Quality-control (QC) workers have an average of 22.5 seconds to look at each of the 120 equipment areas on the kill floor during their inspections, which means that “a large chunk of kidney…. or a pool of blood, grease, or hydraulic oil might be lurking in a corner” (p. 178) and that specks of fecal matter, black grease, or rail dust that cling to carcasses routinely go undetected even when a QC employee is looking directly at them.

Given this reality, QC is reduced to a shallow performance whose goal is merely to keep the USDA inspector at bay. When he is promoted to a QC