

# The Docks Book Review

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## Containing Multitudes

By MARC LEVINSON

Container ports are inhuman places. Ships a quarter-mile long line the piers. Cranes 300 feet high pierce the sky, their steel legs far enough apart to straddle a highway. Stacks of metal boxes, each box 40 feet long and 8 or 9 feet high, tower over the transporters scurrying through storage lots. Making money in container shipping requires scale; on the waterfront, scale is everywhere.

In "The Docks," Bill Sharpsteen succeeds in finding humanity amid that inhuman setting. His subject, the Port of Los Angeles, may seem prosaic. But this tangle of waterways, wharves and highways is one of the most important economic hubs on the planet. Last year, Los Angeles and the adjacent Port of Long Beach transferred the equivalent of seven million truck-size containers from ships to trucks and trains and back again. Half of those boxes held imports destined for U.S. factories and retail stores. One quarter held exports. The rest were empties headed back to Asia, a side effect of a U.S. merchandise trade imbalance that, excluding oil, topped \$370 billion.



Container ships of the Evergreen Line docked at the Port of Los Angeles.

Alamy

Mr. Sharpsteen, a journalist and photographer, helps us comprehend this vast way station in the global supply chain by introducing us to some of the people who make the docks run. His portraits yield a colorful picture of life around the port, but he also uses these personal stories as a way of introducing many of the complex economic and environmental matters that have the potential to ease or impede globalization.

One of the people we meet is Anthony Branch, a port trucker. Mr. Branch apparently doesn't earn much money, but he finds self-employment, despite its uncertainties, preferable to his former life as a company employee. Not that "independent" truckers who dray containers to and from warehouses near the port are all that independent. In Los Angeles, at least, most are

tied to one or another company that leases trucks to its drivers and finds loads for them. In "The Docks" we see how the port's "clean truck" program, while good at curbing diesel emissions, works against owner-operators who cannot afford to buy and maintain the latest trucks.

And we experience the sheer wastefulness of a system that leaves the drivers to wait, hour upon hour, outside the port gates: They are paid by the trip, not the clock, so no one else much cares if they wait all day. Late one afternoon when Mr. Sharpsteen meets with Mr. Branch, trucks are lined up for two miles. A few days earlier, the driver says, he spent more than five hours waiting for a load.

If there is one thing that the general public knows about shipping containers, it's that they pose security threats as low-tech nuclear-weapon delivery systems. Even a relatively small "dirty bomb" that causes no devastation but spreads radiation throughout the port would put the nation's economy in a stranglehold, Mr. Sharpsteen notes.

Yet the task of prevention seems overwhelming, given the gargantuan scale of the port and the sheer number of containers flowing through it.

The author takes us on patrol by land and sea, and along the way he exposes the hollowness of the costly government response. By regulation, all truck drivers must have a federal security credential to enter a port—but the guards at the gates and the roving U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers like Weihang Huang are at ground level, unable to peer into the trucks' cabs and see who might be hiding inside. The Coast Guard prowls the shipping channels looking for threats—Mr. Sharpsteen goes out on patrol with four "Coasties" on a utility boat armed with a .60-caliber machine gun—but no one has had the will to evict the commercial marinas that bring yachts within a few yards of container ships tied up at the wharves.

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### **The Docks**

*By Bill Sharpsteen*  
California, 310 pages, \$27.50

In a chapter called "The Union," Mr. Sharpsteen introduces us to union men who see clerks' jobs threatened by the sorts of automation—scanners, global positioning systems—that are commonplace in other parts of the economy. In "The Shipper," we meet a woman so fearful of betraying a trade secret that she

won't even disclose what her company imports. A chapter about female dock workers—below the level of Geraldine Knatz, the executive director of the Port of Los Angeles—includes a visit with Connie Chaney, a mailman's daughter who in 1984 was among the 350 women selected in a lottery to work at the port after a discrimination lawsuit cleared the way. These characters and many others march memorably through "The Docks." Mr. Sharpsteen is a good enough journalist to know how to use their stories to make bigger points while avoiding the lamentation for the raffish old days that so frequently appears in books about the maritime trade.

His approach has its limits. By focusing exclusively on Los Angeles, he gives us little sense of the extent to which the handful of ship lines that dominate the container industry play off one port against another, endlessly threatening to up and move unless local officials provide a deeper channel, a higher bridge, a longer wharf. A more serious omission: A discussion of why the Port of Los Angeles is much less efficient than the best-run ports overseas. Mr. Sharpsteen implies that the inefficiency has to do with the reluctance of port employers to antagonize the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, which represents dock workers. There is undoubtedly something to this, but surely the story goes deeper than that.

Even an inefficient port, though, is a fascinating place—and one that few Americans have a chance to see up close because of modern security constraints. "The Docks" provides an engrossing tour of the place where your easy chair, your children's toys and the shirt on your back most likely came ashore.

—Mr. Levinson is author of "The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger."

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