

Joyce Carol Oates, Roxane Gay and more tackle the modern workplace in Xerox anthology

'Speaking of Work' is a short-story collection created with 92nd Street Y

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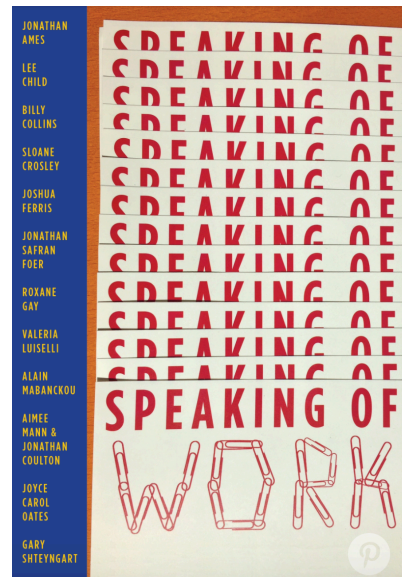
Authors including Joyce Carol Oates, Lee Child, Roxane Gay, and Jonathan Safran Foer have found a surprising new partner in publishing: Xerox.

The 111-year-old technology company that brought photocopying to the masses is behind the new e-book *Speaking of Work*, a collection of writings in which high-profile authors grapple with their sometimes poignant, sometimes funny conceptions of the modern workplace. The project was completed in association with Y&R, Xerox's agency partner, and the

92nd Street Y, New York's longstanding cultural institution, which will [hold a reading](#) this Friday.

It's the latest example of a global corporation commissioning work from authors. A few years ago, Chipotle enlisted the likes of [Toni Morrison](#) and [George Saunders](#) to contribute work for the restaurant chain's bags and cups, while Amtrak recently launched a residency for writers to work as they travel an itinerary of their choice. Xerox's compiling of 14 stories from authors is in support of its "Set the Page Free" campaign, a literacy initiative that promotes a range of the company's new technologies and also benefits 92Y.

The authors were enticed by the involvement of 92Y — many were brought into the project personally by Unterberg Poetry Center director Bernard Schwartz — and undeterred by the idea of a sponsor being associated with their work. In fact, many see real potential in the new trend. Gay, the best-selling author of *Hunger*,



told EW, “I think anytime a corporation sponsors writers in this way it’s a very good thing, because there are so few sponsors for the arts now.”



Jack Reacher author Child echoed the sentiment, adding that he’s been taken aback by the amount of quality promotion he’s received for his contribution. “Certainly the scale, ambition, and techniques of the promotion are something that is not [generally] available to book writers,” he said. “We operate in a much lower-budget world. It was fun to see a massive international corporation just tackling this thing in a way that was a bit like a steamroller, whereas typically in book promotion you feel like you’re emptying a

swimming pool with a teaspoon.”

Gay contributed an evocative story about an architect who has an affair with an employee. She used Xerox’s “modern workplace” template as a chance to write something more lighthearted than her usual fare — “Much of what I write is so depressing,” she noted — and clarified that the company’s involvement was minimal. Child, too, took the opportunity to work outside his comfort zone, telling a historical story set in Greenwich Village about a workplace ban.

Other authors featured in *Speaking of Work* embraced the partnership by bringing technology into their writing process: Gary Shteyngart, who tells the humorous story of his first job, used a Xerox voice-activated printer while scribing his essay.



Xerox has made *Speaking of Work* available for free and is currently promoting the book on the front page of its website. The company also staged photo shoots and [filmed videos](#) with the authors in their own workspaces, which are available on a [special website](#).

Several authors explained to EW that they were compelled to join the project due to the involvement of 92Y, but Xerox’s resources and allowance for creative freedom were a big reason the book came together as it did. “[Xerox] certainly brings with them a lot of expertise and a lot of ambition, and frankly a lot of money,” Child said. “It’s a massive corporation that does things in a massive way.”

Yet for some, it’s merely the opportunity to write (and, yes, have that financial backing) that explains their participation. National Book Award winner Oates knew very little of Xerox’s association — “I’m not a very technologically gifted person,” she cracked — but still used the company’s provided template to explore her own experiences as a teacher. Her story, “The Happy Place,” is fictitious but drawn from her own conception of the workplace. (“It’s totally positive,” she said — lest the story’s title wasn’t clear in that regard.)

Like many authors, Oates was inspired by Xerox’s project idea. She firmly said there was “no association” between the company’s sponsorship and her work, and argued that such corporate support of creative writing perhaps ought to be seen as something of a standard. “It’s sort of like a playhouse

putting on a production of *Hamlet* that happens to be partly sponsored by Xerox,” she said. “I’m really just a writer. I really focus my concentrations on my work. I wasn’t really aware [of Xerox’s presence]. I just use a laptop.”

You can read the entirety of *Speaking of Work*, which also features work by Aimee Mann, Billy Collins, and many others, [on the project’s website](#).