Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting by in America Study Guide

Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting by in America by Barbara Ehrenreich

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

When one is charged a little bit at a time until the expense grows beyond expectations, that is called being "nickel and dimed." In 2001's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, essayist and social critic Barbara Ehrenreich applies this notion to minimum-wage workers. She argues that their spirit and dignity are chipped away by a culture that allows unjust and unlivable working conditions, which results in their becoming a de facto, or actual without being official, servant class. Spurred on by recent welfare reforms and the growing phenomenon of the working poor in the United States, Ehrenreich poses a hypothetical question of daily concern to many Americans: how difficult is it to live on a minimum-wage job? For the lower class, what does it take to match the income one earns to the expenses one must pay?

Rather than simply listen to other people's accounts, Ehrenreich herself assumes the role of a minimum-wage worker. In different states and in several different jobs, she attempts three times to live for one month at minimum wage, giving up her middle-class comforts to experience the overlooked hardships of a large sector of America. While she freely admits that hers is an unusual situation, she stresses it is also a best-case scenario; others face many more difficulties in their daily lives, such as the lack of available transportation. Due to an accessible style and subject matter, *Nickel and Dimed* became a bestseller that helped restart dialogue on the current state of American work, American values, and the consequences of letting a national emergency remain unacknowledged for too long.

Author Biography

Though Barbara Ehrenreich is best known for her 2001 investigation of the working poor, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, her career as a journalist and social critic spans three decades.

Barbara Alexander was born August 26, 1941 in Butte, Montana, the daughter of New Deal Democrats. (The New Deal was legislation presented by President Roosevelt in the wake of the Great Depression. It was based on the idea that the government should intervene to help stabilize the economy.) She earned a bachelor's degree in chemical physics from Reed College in 1964 and a Ph.D. in cell biology at Rockefeller University. While at Rockefeller, she met her first husband, John Ehrenreich, and became involved in both the antiwar movement and the cause for improving health care for low-income families. This led to two collaborations between the Ehrenreichs: *Long March, Short Spring: The Student Uprising at Home and Abroad* (1969) and *The American Health Empire: Power, Profits, and Politics, a Report from the Health Policy Advisory Center* (1971). With Deirdre English, she wrote two more books on health care and one about advice literature, *For Her Own Good: One Hundred Fifty Years of the Experts' Advice on Women* (1978). With husband John, she wrote the influential essay "The Professional-Managerial Class," which explored the importance of having left-leaning, or liberal, middle-class intellectuals work with the traditional left of the lower-income working class. She would return to this topic in 1989's *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, examining the professional-managerial class's retreat from liberalism (political ideal that the purpose of government is to ensure individual liberties) and the growing rift between classes.

As the conservative Reagan era ushered in the 1980s, Ehrenreich maintained a vigorous liberal perspective while breaking into mainstream media, contributing to the *New York Times* since 1983 and writing a regular column for *Time* from 1991 to 1997. Her concerns about feminism, class, and social injustice were expressed in such books as *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (1983), and *Re-making Love: The Feminization of Sex* (1986). In the 1990s, Ehrenreich wrote a fiction novel, *Kipper's Game* (1994), and published two essay collections: *The Worst Years of Our Lives: Irreverent Notes from a Decade of Greed* (1990) and *The Snarling Citizen* (1995). Published in 1997, *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War* was an ambitious, far-ranging look at violence and its role in society.

Ehrenreich married her second husband, Gary Stevenson, in 1983. She has two children from her first marriage. She has served as vice-chair and honorary chair of the Democratic Socialists of America, the largest socialist organization in the United States.

Plot Summary

The successful author, Barbara Ehrenreich, goes out to eat with her famous editor to pitch story ideas. When she says someone should find out how people make ends meet on minimum wage, he hires her to do an investigative piece on the topic. After some initial concern, she decides that she will take the challenge, but she'll go relatively easy on herself. Unlike the real poor, she promises herself she will always have a car and will never go homeless. The author plans to travel to different areas and experience diverse low wage jobs.

Ehrenreich decides to begin her work life in nearby Key West, Florida. It looks like it will be a breeze to find work here because so many jobs are listed in the newspaper. The writer also does some quick calculation and figures she can afford to live in an apartment quite a ways out of town that rents for $600 a month. She applies at many different jobs. Surprisingly, the only business that responds to her application is a restaurant named the Hearthside. The work is physically draining, but the author makes the best of it by making friends with kind waitresses.

The author soon realizes the poor have no special secrets for survival on minimum wage. Most live in miserable overpriced hotels or motels, share rooms with relatives or even live in their cars. They snatch quick fast food meals, because they have no time or place to do cooking. The managers at the Hearthside criticize and pick at her, and adding up her tips, she realizes she must get another job to make ends meet. Ehrenreich does land another job at the Jerry's restaurant chain where she meets a Czech dishwasher who lives in a miserably small apartment with countrymen and must wait for them to go to work so he can use the bed to sleep in. The Hearthside is sticky, the food fatty and the work nonstop.

Ultimately, she can't juggle the two jobs, and when criticized for drinking a little soup during her shift, she quits the Hearthside. One nasty, moody manager at Jerry's makes the long hours even more grueling. The author pops handfuls of aspirin to ease her middle-aged aches and pains. One disaster follows another. The writer finds she can't make enough money for gas, so she has to move to a cheap trailer closer to town. George, the dishwasher is punished for supposedly breaking into a dry storage area, but the writer feels too defeated to defend her friend. When managers holler at her, Ehrenreich simply walks out. After a short backbreaking stint as a housekeeper, the author gives up on Key West.

Her troubles continue in Portland, Maine where she goes, because she hopes to fit in with the many other White low-wage workers there. Housing continues to be a major challenge as she travels to Minnesota to seek work in the business of cleaning. Footnotes indicate maid services are on the rise because so many women now enter the workforce. The author lands a post with The Maids cleaning service and realizes she must also take a job at a rest home to make ends meet. Her orientation at The Maids includes a demeaning psychological test and the viewing of tapes that tell workers they must strap a vacuum cleaner on their backs and to clean at a breakneck

pace and in a shockingly unsanitary way. (The company doesn't want maids to use too much water and suggests they use the same rag in the bathroom as in the kitchen.) In spite of this, Ehrenreich realizes her overworked coworkers at The Maids love and respect the boss and even feel grateful to the owner of the franchise who takes advantage of them. Hearing workers are sick or pregnant, the owner asks them to "work though" their pain. The author yells at the boss when he allows a young pregnant woman to work hard. In the process of trying to cover for Holly, a pregnant young woman with a twisted ankle, the author breaks a fishbowl. Instead of firing her, the boss gives her a raise, because he's afraid she's stirring up the others to ask for easier work schedules or more money. The manager also tries to get her to gossip about the other employees. The author observes the mounds of junk that middle class and upper class people buy only as a status symbol and pay to have cleaned. In addition, she learns that even other minimum wage workers seem to look down on maids as if they are unclean. Things are slightly better at the rest home where she must lug heavy trays of dishes up and down stairs. The management is fair and the mentally unstable elderly people are mostly kind, but the strain of balancing two jobs soon takes its toll. As The Maids withholds her first paycheck, the author can't make it in this town either and has to quit.

Finally, she travels to Minneapolis Minnesota to look for work in retail. This time she tries house-sitting for a friend while she looks for work. Ehrenreich has to take care of a bird in exchange for using the place, and she hates birds. Despite the distraction, she manages to be interviewed at Wal-Mart and a Home Depot type chain store called Menards. Eventually, she passes on the job at Menards. After agreeing to work, she learns that the shift will be illegally long and the pay lower than promised. Wal-Mart requires drug testing, and she has smoked a small quantity of pot, so the author flushes her system with expensive blood purifiers and passes the test. Getting around busy freeways bothers the author, so she searches out an affordable apartment close to work. The only choice is a filthy motel with no door bolt, fan or window security. Ehrenreich becomes a part of the Wal-Mart culture. The store's advertising suggests team spirit, but they make an extreme effort to keep workers from even discussing pay raises. Daily the author scurries around the store replacing mounds of clothing that is flung about by unhappy mothers sick of picking up after everyone else. The writer's coworkers appear to be middle class, but most are actually desperately poor. They are able to keep up appearances by sharing homes with friends or working spouses. Ehrenreich finds herself becoming petty and childish because she is treated like a child by the store hierarchy. Again, she finds she cannot make ends meet.

In a sum up chapter, the author learns that contrary to the common belief, you can't get ahead if you work hard in America. The management keeps the system rolling by humiliation and severe restriction. Housing is the major obstacle for the working poor.

"Introduction: Getting Ready"

"Introduction: Getting Ready" Summary and Analysis

The author, Barbara Ehrenreich, works for the prestigious New Yorker magazine. One day over lunch with a famous editor discussing possible stories to write, she comments that the minimum wage is too low. She thinks someone used to more money should try to live on this pittance. The editor, Lewis Lapham, assigns her the story.

This is not good news for Ehrenreich. Having spent her childhood with middle class struggling people, she does not want to live a life of risk or discomfort. Also, she's older and doesn't want to do hard physical labor or live in an inferior building. Therefore, the author makes some rules for herself on this assignment. She won't rely on her superior education or the skills she normally uses to support herself, but she won't make up a false life to pad her resume, either. She'll take the highest paying minimum wage job she's offered. She won't do anything dangerous or life threatening. She will keep driving a beat up old rent-a-wreck car, although most minimum wage workers have to rely on buses. Finally, if the going gets too rough she'll give up and use her credit cards. Ehrenreich is not going to pretend to be someone else or make up a new name, but she won't mention the PhD she has earned. The author promises to spend a month in each location but to give up completely if it looks as if she will have to go homeless for even one night.

Before starting her assignment, the author is fairly certain that her biggest challenge will be hiding her advanced education, successful background and assignment from coworkers but she soon learns the people around her are unimpressed. During each assignment, it turns out she is not pretending to be a maid, for example, she actually is a maid. She drops her elite attitude and realizes minimum wage workers are truly no less capable or intelligent than she is.

Chapter 1, "Serving in Florida"

Chapter 1, "Serving in Florida" Summary and Analysis

Ehrenreich decides to start her search for work in a town nearby. Key West, Florida is a growing city where she fears being recognized. However, in the end nobody takes notice of her.

Her first task is to look for a place to live. The author is able to find a small one-room apartment for 500 dollars per month, which she figures will suit her budget if she can land a $7 per hour job and lives a very marginal existence. The tiny efficiency apartment is at least 45 minutes away from the heart of the business district where she's likely to get a job.

Ehrenreich puts on neat but somewhat casual clothes, drives into town and begins placing applications at Best Western, the Econo Lodge, Howard Johnson's, the Winn Dixie supermarket and the dozens of places advertising for help in the newspaper. At the grocery store, an interviewer warns her to avoid union organizers, but in most cases the people in charge of hiring don't seem too excited about her application. To Ehrenreich's surprise, none of these many places advertising for workers calls her to interview her or to check her references. Most of them seem to advertise in the paper constantly. They have such high turnover they simply want a pool of cheap labor to chose from at any time. Finally, the author lands a job at a family restaurant called Hearthside. She agrees to work from 2 pm to 10 pm for $2.43 per hour plus tips. These tips must be shared with bus boys and others. A middle-aged waitress named Gail takes Barbara under her wing. Between explaining the procedures for filling bottles and serving food, Gail reveals that she has had to live in a truck and pee into a plastic bottle after the boyfriend she lives with suddenly dies.

The author is surprised to find out how difficult the work is and how compelled she feels to nurture the patrons. She speaks with respect to them and gets to know their personal stories. She lets a sewer repairman spend a few minutes cooling out and drinking ice water each day before asking him to order food. She enjoys the German tourists and marvels at the retired ex cop who covers a tracheotomy hole in his neck to force more smoke into his lungs. She pals around with the older Haitian dishwasher and marvels at spunky waitress Joan and the outrageous, bad tempered Billy the cook who sometimes throws meat against the wall.

However, the author soon realizes that the managers are watching her, pushing her to keep busy at every possible second. Eventually, one manager threatens to take the break room privilege away from the staff, even though this is their only hideout where they can smoke or eat - things they are not allowed to do in front of the customers. One manager, Stu, says drugs have been found, and wants urination testing to begin, but the others believe Stu himself is guilty of using drugs. In addition to the stress of not being trusted and constantly feeling watched, Ehrenreich feels pain and exhaustion each night

when she finishes her shift at 10 or 10:30. She takes extra strength pain relievers constantly, even though in her former life she is a workout buff and always has believed she is in good shape.

The author discovers there are no secret tricks to living on minimum wage. Her coworkers don't know anything she doesn't know. They survive the best they can, eating fast food and living in terrible conditions. Gail has to share a small place with a roommate who sexually harasses her, the better-paid cook can afford a $400 a month trailer, everyone else either shares a tiny place with family or friends or, in the case of one couple pays $60 per night to stay at a motel. Why? As they can't save up the thousand dollars for first and last month's rent, they would need to put together for a down payment on an apartment rental.

Medical care is out of the question for many of the author's coworkers, and most have time and money only for the cheapest of convenience food or food at the restaurant where they work. Like her coworkers, the author learns that her wages and tips together, once shared with bus people really add up to about $5.15 an hour. This doesn't leave enough to pay for her apartment.

The author decides she must take a second job in order to pay for her apartment and escape the watchful eye of Hearthside management. She gets a job at a chain called Jerry's. The food here is huge and calorie crammed. Behind the scenes, floors and tables are sticky with syrup and grease. The place is so busy people have no time to sit in a break room even if they had one. The author tries to hold both jobs, (8am to 2 at Hearthside, 2 to 10 at Jerry's) but the schedule is grueling. When a manager at Hearthside discovers her having a little soup where customers can see her, she is scolded. She's too tired to fight the accusation, and she quits Hearthside.

As a middle-aged woman, all the running, lifting and hauling required at Jerry's gives her severe pain and she starts popping more powerful pain relievers. Even with the occasional yuppie night out with old friends (the friends pay for her dinner), she feels like her old life is becoming something alien to her. The management at Jerry's is more professional than the Hearthside team, but one moody boss and attacks her for talking with the other workers. This abuse makes the author feel inferior, like a food-moving machine rather than a person.

The author most dislikes what she calls "visible Christians," people who wear bold Christian symbols but don't love their neighbors when it comes to waitresses. These types complain constantly, under tip consistently and look at her as if she is a sinner, says Ehrenreich. She befriends other workers and especially enjoys the young Czech dishwasher who has to send one dollar of every five to the guy who helps him get to America. George, as he is named, can't sleep in his apartment at night until another Czech dishwasher leaves the bed empty and goes to work. The moody manager calls this kid by the wrong name wrong, and when Ehrenreich points this out, she is punished with extra work.

Due to the $30 the author has had to spend on a uniform she must wear to work at Jerry's, Ehrenreich can't afford gas money. She needs to move closer to her job. Combining her earnings and the security deposit returned to her from the apartment she is renting plus some emergency money, she is able to get into a tiny trailer nearer to her work. There is no grocery or laundry in the neighborhood where she rents this cramped trailer for $400 a month. In addition, it is far from any grocery store, so she must continue to live on fast food.

At about the same time Jerry's management closes the bar area connected to the restaurant to employees and puts locks on the dry storage area. This they claim is because George, the dishwasher, has stolen something from the locker. With so little of value in dry storage, it's likely that the young man takes some crackers or dry food to stave off his hunger. The author loses her courage and does not come to his defense.

At last, Ehrenreich lands what she describes as her dream job. At $6.10 per hour, she works as a housekeeper in the hotel connected to Jerry's. She asks for front desk work, but the management only allows her to clean up.

A tiny busy woman named Millie fills the author in on her duties. The next day, she's paired with someone named Carlie who is angry that they have 19 rooms to swab down in one short shift. They slog away for four hours without a break making beds and loading a huge heavy industrial vacuum cleaner on and off a cart while listening to soap operas full blast in the rooms. The author is disappointed to discover that even the other staff of the hotel refuses to exchange names with the housekeepers or show respect. Racing out at 3:30 to make it to her restaurant job, Ehrenreich discovers that her uniform is stained, so instead of eating or resting between jobs she has to clean spots. At Jerry's everything has gone haywire. Downing coffee she notices that George looks haggard. Only one cook shows up for work, and the customers pour in. For some reason, they're restless, too. Food is sent back to the kitchen, and Ehrenreich makes mistakes. The manager, Joy, begins hollering at the author over a confused breakfast and one yuppie customer runs in yelling that his food is minutes late. Ehrenreich finds herself simply walking out of the restaurant. Oddly, she feels defeat instead of enraged. She asks the manager of her trailer park to donate her security deposit to Gail. Later it is rumored Stu really is guilty of stealing money to support his crack cocaine habit. What happens to George, she never learns.

What stands out most in this first chapter is the author's shock. Simple low paying jobs are almost impossibly hard. More importantly, she learns that routine criticism has a soul crushing effect, making her feel like a coward.

Chapter 2, "Scrubbing in Maine".

Chapter 2, "Scrubbing in Maine". Summary and Analysis

The author decides next to go to Portland, Maine, because she is White and it will not seem unusual when she looks for menial work here because nearly all the cabbies, waitresses, retail clerks in Maine are White too. She takes a bus to the smallish city and rents a room at Motel 6 until she can get a job and an apartment. She describes the motel as a composite of stains and food residue across a freeway from other fast food joints. Ehrenreich feels like a fugitive, and she becomes obsessed with the few possessions she's brought along. A look at the local free ad magazine reveals very little housing she can afford, and a footnote tells readers that working class people are driven to live in motels because rents are so high all over the country right now. After making a few calls, she discovers the Blue Haven Motel is only $120 per week, and the security deposit is $100. The author snaps up the deal.

Learning from her experience, Ehrenreich splatters the city with resumes. She knows that many companies advertise even when they're fully staffed. She doesn't even pursue office work. She knows that she doesn't have suitable work clothes for a front desk position. Filling out her application at Goodwill is simply weird: nobody makes eye contact. At a Wal-Mart job fair, she has to fill out a long employment test that seems to push her into claiming total honesty and complete unquestioning obedience of rules. She must fill out a similar "Accutrack test" for a job at The Maids, a cleaning service. It's soon clear that Portland wages will also fall between $6 and $7 and everyone is expected to hold multiple jobs. Merry Maids won't even admit the rate they pay. They simply calculate by the week, but the author figures it is between $5 and $6.

Ehrenreich waits it out on pins and needles for employers to call. At last, she hears The Maids will hire her for $6.65 an hour as long as she shows up dependably. The Maids says the work will be easy because "cleaning is in our blood." Naturally, she will need another job. On the same day, she lands a second job as a dietary aid at an elder care facility called the Woodcrest Residential facility. The person who welcomes her to

The author gets up early for her shift at Woodcrest and learns from supervisor Linda that there is a sexually inappropriate manager, but no other real problems or punishments unless a mistake endangers lives. Linda wants the author to think of new job as a dietary aide like waitress work, although few waiters in restaurants have to serve adult with full diapers! Starting out in the Alzheimer's ward, she meets Margarite, Grace and Letty, a diabetic with a sweet tooth who sneaks donuts. Ruthie pours orange juice on the author breakfast and repeatedly jokes that Barbara Ehrenreich should be called Barbara Bush. This is messy but enjoyable, until it's time to wash up and the author has to lug huge trays of dishes to floor level to fit in the machine. It's killing her back.

When an unattractive young cook at the eldercare facility asks her to share a cigarette, she accepts and stops to hear his story. He claims to work out of boredom. Somewhere he says he has gambling money stashed away. Knowing she must get along with this guy, Pete, because he's a cook, she doesn't mention her real life boyfriend. Pete hints at a date and eventually he spends an afternoon with him, uneventfully. The author is in a saintly mood for the rest of the day until one of the tiny patients douses her with milk.

On Saturday night and the author wants something to do, but she has no money, so she decides to go to a religious revival meeting. This is a strange choice for the author and atheist, but she admits to wanting to hear born again Christians speaking in tongues or simply learn what about these meetings attract such big crowds. At the meeting preachers attack the ideas of buying books other than the bible, of the wickedness of the city and constantly remind their listeners about the crucifixion. The author wonders why the other messages of Jesus, such as charity for the poor, are not quoted. She feels as if Jesus is being crucified repeatedly by these preachers just to keep his message out of the minds of the "flock" and to keep them focused on giving money to the church.

On Sunday, the author is finally able to move out of Motel 6 into the Blue Haven motel where the kitchen table is just a few feet from the bathroom and tinfoil salad bar containers are her only utensils. On Monday, she goes to The Maids where she watches a tape that instructs her in the preferred corporate cleaning methods. Ehrenreich is horrified to learn that very little water is used in the cleaning and that rags made unsanitary by use in the bathroom may be reused in the kitchen. To her mind, germs are being pushed around for purely cosmetic reasons, but the methodology is swift. She learns there is a special backpack style vacuum cleaner that supposedly "makes you" into the vacuum. Ted, the owner operator of this franchise looks in on Ehrenreich as she watches these videos.

The workers get free donuts in the morning but have to wear ridiculous uniforms all day and never know who will be on their crew from day to day. On her first workday, Ehrenreich discovers that Ted only allows an hour for a 11/2 bathroom apartment and a little more for very large houses so everyone runs through their chores. Given that The Maids are paid hourly, she can't understand why her coworkers agree to push themselves so hard. Lunch breaks are cut short too. One young girl named Rosalie refuses to eat and grows paler every day. She's obviously ill. A footnote in this section explains that the majority of maids in America are of Anglo decent, despite the stereotype that they are primarily African American or Latino.

Talking with her coworkers, she realizes that most live with friends or relatives and none of them is actually homeless, but each has some kind of extreme economic hardships. Most have trouble coming up with fifty cents for a toll, and together the workers can't put together the two dollars to buy a sponge when one is left behind at the office.

On her first The Maids job, the author meets a prissy woman who tracks her baby's bowl movements with charts. The large home is hot and filled with servants such as nannies and repair people. Soaking in her own sweat the author scrubs the floors on

hands and knees, and Ehrenreich has forgotten to bring kneepads. The woman who owns the house watches her carefully, not out of sympathy but to urge her to do more work. After a week of similar torture, the writer's skin breaks out in weird spots. Ted dismisses this as a latex allergy (not illness or a reaction to harsh chemicals) and tells her to work through the pain. Other workers are just as miserable. Despite the miraculous vacuum cleaner (or because of it) Lori and Pauline's backs are wrecked. Marge has arthritis, and Rosalie has worked so hard as a berry picker in her childhood, her rotator cup is damaged, yet she is still forced to scrub through her pain.

Working in million dollar homes, the author's patience runs out for the customers who ask so much for so little. She herself is in pain, even though Ehrenreich has had years of proper diet and great medical care. How are the others holding up? The thing Ehrenreich hates the most is that she must clean up feces. She goes into a distasteful account of different ways this waste can splash, and how it must be removed. Also, personal hair clogs disgust her. Frequently owners set up cameras to spy on the housekeeping staff, or leave booby traps to be certain these busy workers are doing their jobs. Clearly, the owners disrespect the maids, but the undercover author has her own opinions. To her the size of these homes and the sheer mass of ugly pointless junk is repulsive. It's all such a waste. In many houses, the maids are required to individually dust hundreds of books that the client purchased only for show. The owners are mostly upper middle class people who spend most of their time in the big screen TV room, anyway, not reading books.

In the fall, Ehrenreich finds herself working with a young woman named Holly, who is pale white and obviously sick for some reason. Holly seldom eats lunch. She has to support her husband and an elderly relative on 30 to 50 dollars a week, which the author says is what she spends on food for herself alone. Marge asks Holly if she's pregnant, and when she doesn't reply everyone knows the truth. Now the author wants Holly to eat something or even quit. The work is so hard and the chemicals used are so strong. Ehrenreich resolves to do the work of two people so this poor girl won't have to stress herself and her baby. She's doing heroically until she manages to shatter a glass fish bowl.

At this point, the writer describes a feeling of hopeless invisibility, and a footnote suggests that there are many, many m ore maids in the workforce today than just a few years ago, although much of their labor is "under the radar." Marge and Holly describe how even the low wage waitresses look down on them. The author talks about how difficult it is to be served at restaurants while wearing her uniform, and how many stares she gets when she buys a beer at the grocery store. She imagines others looking at her in her bright, prison clothes outfit. They must think she is poor and shouldn't squander money on alcohol.

Then, Ehrenreich suffers another rude awakening. She will not receive her first week's paycheck, because it's the policy of The Maids to hold it until she quits. In addition, the first week at the Blue Haven is not the $120 she was informed of, but $200 because it's not technically off-season. Strapped for food she starts looking for a government agency to help her out. The first lead is an agency that closes early every day, impossible for

the poor to get to in time. She calls another number from the phone book, 744 HELP, and they scold her. The author makes an appointment to go to a food pantry between 9 and 5 but naturally, she will be working during these hours too. After almost an entire day of research and running around, Ehrenreich finds a place that can give her a few canned goods, but figuring in the cost of the lost work, phone calls and driving, she actually loses over three dollars to get the food.

Ehrenreich learns to enjoy herself with the residents of Woodcrest. She is allowed to make up meals that are not at the menu. It's a little surprising as she has no medical or dietary training. One day she is forced to take up the slack for a missing coworker. She servers two floors of residents, carting heavy dishes from the upstairs to the downstairs repeatedly by herself. When she gets a day off the author goes over the tiny unimportant details of her unimportant jobs. She starts to take the behavior of others to have deeper more important meanings than they actually do. She is becoming petty.

The next day at work at The Maids, Ted tells everyone a theft has happened and a person has been fired. Theft is not the only kind of rebellion she observes. Team leaders like to drive fast and swear about pedestrians, laugh ridiculously and so on. Ehrenreich tries to remain detached, but soon feels her anger rising when she must clean a huge number of trinkets with conservative saying on them. She finds irony in the home of a Zen Buddhist who cautions the maids not to touch his three foot high Buddha statue. (Zen Buddhists are not supposed to care about worldly things, including statues of Buddha.)

Now on the way to the car Holly trips and snaps her ankle in a hole. She insists on continuing to work on one foot. Ehrenreich calls Ted for help, but he refuses to do anything for the girl. The author picks up the vacuum cleaner and attempts to do all of Holly's work, but in her anger at the management has to do the downstairs twice. Back in the car, Holly recovers a bit and asks eagerly about Marge's dinner menu. The author fumes that everybody should quit and get another job, but Marge says that Ted needs them. When the author says Ted can get someone else, both Marge and Holly are hurt. They think the fact that they passed the Accutrack test makes them special.

Ted doesn't' fire Ehrenreich, and he gives Holly a day off. He actually gives the author a slight raise while prodding her for information about who the other complainers might be. She thinks of Ted as a pimp. Why do the others put up with Ted? The author thinks that the job of maid is thankless, and a little praise from Ted goes a long way. In addition, he is their only contact with the world of successful college trained people, so they feel like they need to keep his favor. When she finally reveals she is a writer she asks the other women how they feel about the wealthy people for whom they clean, each woman says she doesn't resent them, only hopes to be like them.

Chapter 3, "Selling in Minnesota,"

Chapter 3, "Selling in Minnesota," Summary and Analysis

For no particular reason, the author next goes to Minneapolis where a tight labor market and few minority workers may make the low wage life livable. Plus, the apartment rents appear to fall around $400 a month. Like many low wage people in a new town, she picks up a Rent a Wreck car and moves in with a friend who will be absent. The one hitch is she has to care for a cockatiel and she is a bit frightened of birds. The author wants factory or retail work this time around. She visits Wal-Mart and fills out a test as before, but this time gets some answers "wrong," (even thought there aren't supposed to be any wrong answers) The manager double checks that she really will follow letters to the rule and will not try to interpret them.

Now a drug test is next. The author admits to readers to having smoked a small amount of pot within six weeks, and this will show up on a drug test, even though cocaine, heroin, LSD and alcohol cannot be tested for over the long run. These more "serious" drugs wash out of the system in just one day. She is worried she will not pass drug testing.

Ehrenreich goes back to the paper to seek jobs where there might not be drug testing. In this way, she comes across a homebuilders' chain called Menards that may pay more. A man named Raymond takes her to the personnel office where she must do another personality test. This one focuses on felonies and drug use. Paul tells her she can have the job if the drug testing works out, and the pay will be over 8 dollars an hour. In only one day, she has taken about six tests and endured face-to-face interviews. She feels drained.

Here the author takes a moment to add a long footnote. This note explains that according to the American civil Liberties Union the expensive process of drug testing does not improve the chances of screening out addicts. In fact, the federal government spends 11.7 million dollars to test 29000 employees. Only 153 drug takers are caught in this way, at an average cost of $77,000 per person. In preparation for the drug test she faces, the author finds and buys a product that is supposed to scrub her blood. She also spends the weekend drinking water.

The housing market turns out to be a challenge in this town. Search services don't call back and the paper lists only one apartment in her range. She goes back to her friend's apartment to think, but the bird sits on her head and pecks at her. Now it occurs to the author that most people probably don't simply pull up stakes and move to a new town with no job and no housing. Or, do they? She consults one woman, the mother of a friend, who has done just that. Caroline tells her story. She leaves her uninvolved husband and the crowded family conditions in New Jersey to come to Florida where she hears rent is better. Caroline's first move it to find a church group, and these people take

her to the Women, Infants and Children office where they help find daycare for the baby and a school for the slightly older child. The little girl has to pick up her baby sister many nights as her mother works late cleaning rooms for one to two dollars each. The author feels great respect for this woman. Caroline offers her some much-needed homemade chicken stew as she leaves.

Tuesday is the drug test day. Ehrenreich has to go to a hospital where she must surrender her purse then walk into a bathroom to take a drug test. Although she eventually passes this test, it annoys the author. The whole process has used up an hour of her time and much of her gas. Not knowing right away how this test will come out, she continues to look for other work. One of the offers is to make $1650 after doing 54 two-hour appointments to sell an air purifier. The company wants motivated people who've been residents for a year but may settle for people who haven't been here that long, the spokesperson, Todd, says. Although the author doesn't say so, it's clear that the product is a scam, but the obvious greed of the company seems like "a breath of fresh air" to Ehrenreich compared with the pretended concern of Wal-Mart. They do not like her attitude and don't hire her.

The author desperately searches for an apartment. Vacancy rate us under one percent and rents are pricy. She hears about some apartments at the Hopkins Park Plaza. She pays them a 20-dollar application fee, even though the rooms are smelly. There is no kitchen in the kind of room she can afford. At last, Ehrenreich settles for a place called Twin Lakes (not its real name.) The windows have no shades, it's stained, dull, and probably dangerous, but at least she won't have to drive the dreaded freeways too far to get to work from this motel. Returning to Menard's the author is handed a tool belt, knife and tape measure before she even realizes that she's hired. There is no discussion of her salary or benefits. An employee named Steve walks her back to the plumbing department and tells her this is where she will work. Another manager, Walt, now says she'll make 10 dollars an hour, although she knows nothing about any of the equipment for sale in the department.

At about the same time Wal-Mart confirms that her drug test is okay. The author no longer wants the job, but decides to go through the Wal-Mart orientation anyway. Here she experiences hours and hours of stories about Sam Walton (the founder) and the Wal-Mart philosophy. There are mounds of paper work to read and highly produced video tape to watch. Employees are to think of themselves as "associates," and managers as "servant leaders." Moments of the videos focus on the dangers of stealing or worse, trying to join a union. Wal-Mart contends that unions take dues money. They also take away your voice, speaking for you and risking your wages at the bargaining table. The author imagines that naive young people may wonder how anyone as evil as a union organizer would be allowed to exist!

"Time theft" is another thing the management discusses. Whenever any employee does something for his or herself instead of for the store, that person is called a "time thief." By this point in the orientation process, most of the new hires are so tired they are barely able to write up their own nametags. The freeway drive home really scares the author. When she gets home, the bird is ripping out its feathers, keeping her up all night.

The next day she calls Menard's to firm up her schedule, only to be told that she will not earn $10 an hour after all and the shift will be for eleven hours. It is illegal to work people over eight hours without paying time and a half, and the author is too tired to argue or to do the work anyway. She decides to go to Wal-Mart instead.

The author puzzles over why she has not firmed up important details about salary earlier and concludes that the whole hiring process is designed to strip workers down and make them agree to anything.

Now, it's time for the author to move out of her friend's apartment, but she can't get into the Twin Lakes apartment yet. She checks into a converted motel named the Clearview Inn, which she says, is possibly the worst in the country. The place stinks, using the phone costs $10, there are window screens where there should be windows, no door bolt or a fan. The normally brave author is actually scared to stay overnight in this rough place. Arriving at Wal-Mart the next day, she is surprised that nobody knows quite what to do with her. Finally it becomes clear that she will work in women's clothing with an ex waitress named Melissa. Melissa is a Christian with a working husband and grown children, some of whom have had major problems during their lives. Ehrenreich thinks she is supposed to greet customers, but nobody else on her shift does this. Her primary work is folding, hanging and shelving rejected clothing. This sounds easier than it proves to be. Not only are many garments similar, but also it is store policy to move the items around every few days to make the shopping experience slightly different. The author moves mounds and mounds of clothes and starts to feel a sense of ownership about the stuff. A short chat with a coworker earns her a scolding by the manager. Upon arriving "home" to the Clearview the author learns that sewage has covered the floor of her room and she must move into another room. She's been leaving her laptop computer in the car to hide it safely, but now it's too hot and she must leave it in the disgusting hotel. There's nothing to do in this depressing apartment and the author develops a nervous tick.

Wal-Mart lengthens her shift and limits her break at about the same time the store gets busy for the summer. At first interested in the many different types of people who shop at the store, the author soon grows to resent them for messing up "her" things. She becomes angry and bitter about how fat the Caucasians are. When she meets a tiny, unhappy shirt folder who works on a ladder who yells at her, the author reflects on how petty and small minded she herself is becoming. The two women argue over the placement of some items and the author is worried she may have annoyed a supervisor. Ehrenreich realizes she's starting to act like an unhappy child.

On the day she expects to move to the better apartment with a little kitchen, the managers tell her this will not be possible until the following week. With a second job, Ehrenreich thinks she can afford to get a room at the Rainbow Motel, but that unit is rented too. She follows many hopeless leads and is about to give up, but a kindly Motel worker encourages her to keep calling other motels in the area. At last, she gives up the search for a place affordable on her salary and checks into the Comfort Inn at a whopping $49.95 per night. This move marks the end for the author in Minneapolis. She has spent $500 and only taken home $42 from Wal-Mart for attending the orientation

session. The employer holds back the first week's pay. Her last ditch-effort to get temporary aid from an organization called the Community Emergency Assistance Program ends when the forgetful aid worker offers her an emergency food package. This is primarily unhealthy candy and snack food.

Happy to be staying in an air-conditioned Comfort Inn motel at last, the author is still exhausted by work. One day, she discovers how to push past the point of thinking and pain to do her job solely by instinct. Still, she is puzzled; what is the point of her job? Why do the shoppers throw things around in such a messy way? Perhaps, she thinks, most of the women are mothers and throwing clothing around is their only relief from picking up after their kids all day.

Ehrenreich says Wal-Mart is a closed system and when one is working there, one forgets there is an outside world. She asks others why they stay in this situation. Isabelle, an upbeat manager, says she lives with a grown daughter who also works, and here pay has increased at Wal-Mart so she is satisfied for now. Melissa seems too weary to start looking for work again. However, when Alyssa is refused a discount on a stained $7 polo shirt she wants to buy from Wal-Mart, she agrees with the author that this place is not worth working for at all. The writer tries to raise the cry for unionism during a store meeting. Another worker, Marlene comes out during the break in the meeting and indicates her support for a union. By coincidence, news soon breaks of massive labor union upheavals in the town at the same time.

The author hates to give up on Minneapolis and makes a last ditch effort to call about a few more apartments, but finds she has to dodge around the store hiding from Howard, a manager, to get in a few free moments to phone anyone. A grown woman hiding behind clothing racks is a ridiculous site. None of the motels is available so she is officially unable to remain in Minneapolis. Ehrenreich tells Melissa she must quit, and Melissa says she will quit too rather than working in the department without her new friend.

On her last break at Wal-Mart, a coworker in the break room starts cheering news on the TV about labor unrest. This makes the author almost cry up with hope.

Closing remarks, "Evaluation"

Closing remarks, "Evaluation" Summary and Analysis

The author takes the last few pages to consider how well she has done as a low-wage worker. First, she has to say that none of these supposedly unskilled jobs comes easy to her. She is able to do all the jobs in the allotted time, but not quickly and not professionally. One serious challenge of the work is finding out the society and social aspects of each new job, whom to trust, what to watch out for. From the bottom of the heap, information about how to succeed in a job is hard to discover and low-wage workers frequently must change jobs and get to understand a completely new corporate culture in a short period.

Second, she learns that low wage workers need to be quick and thorough, but not so good that they set a faster pace or higher standard for the others. Before entering the low wage labor force the author believes she is very physically fit. Once she tries to do the work required, she must be more in touch with her exhaustion and know how to work through it somehow.

What's most important is not how well she works, but how well she survives. In this department, she doesn't do too well. In Key West, she makes $1039 and spends $517 food gas and so on. When she's in her $500 apartment this leaves a few dollars for emergencies like doctor visits. When she has to move to make it to a second job, the rent goes up and she cannot make ends meet.

In Portland, she almost makes a decent living staying in the Blue Haven motel. However, if she had continued there during the busy season the rates would have gone up making it impossible for her to live.

The Minneapolis experience is hard to judge. Possibly, she could have juggled two jobs, one of them being Wal-Mart. Could she have found an affordable apartment? This is a serious matter everywhere, according to the author. Prosperity and stock market success has meant that housing is more expensive. The dilapidated places where the poor generally live are increasingly transformed into expensive new complexes they cannot afford.

The reason so few news stories about the housing crisis for the poor is that the way the government judges the poverty rates is on the amount spent on food for a small family. That rate has not changed in many years because food prices are also held down by the government. On the other hand, housing prices are skyrocketing. Government housing subsidies stopped in the '90s but the cost of housing continues to go up. At the same time, wealthier people who own homes get a sort of housing subsidy and deduct thousands of dollars on their mortgage interest payments. The poor do not get this advantage.

As the stock market and economy pick up, housing becomes more expensive, but wages to the poor do not increase. This is odd, as there is a shortage of low-wage workers. Normally, a shortage of workers creates demand and allows those workers to ask for more money. The author does calculations and determines that low wage workers are getting less financial value for their work at the time the book is published (2001) than they were during the Watergate era decades earlier (91 cents today vs. $1 of value in the 1970s). Reports suggest that the work they do is more productive today, so they probably should be earning more money than before.

The writer believes the reason companies are more willing to offer incentives like free meals instead of paying employees more is because these appear to be gifts and nobody complains if they are suddenly taken away. It's a lot harder to convince workers to take a smaller paycheck if a company runs low on funds.

Now the author turns her focus on the workers themselves. Why don't these people leave the worst jobs forcing the employers to make a better offer? One factor is that the poor have trouble getting around to interviews, to drop off applications or to take drug tests. Changing jobs can cause childcare issues. The poor are not plugged into websites, palm Pilots or even better informed individuals who could possibly tell them about a variety of job opportunities. Finally, businesses and society itself discourage people from comparing their earnings. Some companies illegally fire people who reveal what they make and cause others to ask for raises.

Most important of all, the companies influence their workers with emotional appeals, convincing the workers everybody is striving together for a common goal. Many companies require workers to surrender their privacy (urine tests and purse searches), freedom of speech (talking is time theft) and personal freedom. Test questions about ones personal moods and attitudes also serve to humble the worker.

Even though the law guarantees the right to participate in union activities, it does not technically guarantee the right to talk about forming unions. In this way, the author says, corporations are able to fire workers for talk or gossip and prevent them from forming unions.

Ehrenreich says the effect of all this treatment is to create a dictatorship which convinces the workers they are worthless. She points out studies on monkeys and rats that show when one animal is forced to be subordinate the mood boosting chemicals in its brain decline and the animal becomes so depressed it won't even defend itself in a fight.

This, she believes, is why so many managers are positioned in businesses where few are needed. She thinks these managers function to keep the others in their place. This seems silly since over the months she works, the author never meets a slacker. In fact, it breaks her heart to see how hard many of these people try to do their jobs well. The cruelty exhibited by business owners seems to spring from class and race prejudice and fear of the workers, says the author.

As to solutions, however, Ehrenreich does not believe companies can afford to provide every worker with enough money for childcare, health insurance or housing. She says that most "civilized" nations make some kind of basic healthcare, public transportation, subsidized housing and childcare help available to all. Few middle class and wealthy people bother their heads about the poor, as they don't see the poor very often. Many have moved to suburbs, and young people don't take low wage jobs during high school very often these days. Ehrenreich says both Democrats and Republicans say little about the issue and agree heartily with the welfare reform that has left so many new poor. The 1996 welfare reform act did not insist upon a follow-up study to see how all these new low-wage workers would handle the changes. The author digs through newspapers and magazines to come up with a convincing series of facts proving that extreme poverty is sweeping the nation. When in the 1980s Reagan encourages layoffs, union weakening and downsized during his presidency, the author believes he convinces the American people that those who work hard can make a good living. Her own personal experience proves this is not the case.

The author concludes that we should feel shame for treating others badly and concern that some day they will rise up to revolt against this treatment.

Characters

Barbara Ehrenreich

Gail

George

Holly

Melissa

Caroline

Stu

Benny

B.J.

Joy

Marge

Phillip

Rosia

Sam

Todd

Objects/Places

The Accutrack personality test

This is one of several personality tests given to low wage workers to try to assess their honesty and willingness to obey orders. Questions are personal and prying. Those who pass the test are those least likely to discuss change or improvement in a job and least likely to stand up for themselves. Pathetically, some workers feel pride in having passed the test.

Blue Haven Motel

After moving out of Motel 6, the author is able to move into the Blue Haven motel. The place is relatively clean and private, but so tiny that when she eats she has to close the bathroom door or she feels she's eating on the toilet. Staying here causes her to end her work in Portland. The seasonal rent is higher than she has calculated.

Budgie

This is the author's pet name for a cockatoo whom she must feed and exercise in order to house sit a friend's apartment in Minnesota. The apartment itself is rather small and messy, and the bird needs to be let out of its cage to play every few hours or it squawks incessantly. When she does let the bird out, it likes to climb on her head and peck. The author fears birds.

The Clearview Inn

The author goes so far as to call this the worst motel in the country. It's filthy, because the depressed West Indian wife of the manager does a listless cleaning job. Plumbing is ruined and sewage backs up into rooms. The phone costs $10 to use, there window screens where there should be windows, no bolt on the door or air conditioner or fan. There are no shades, either, so people on the street can see right in when she sleeps or changes. Although she has traveled alone around the world, the author feels most frightened here at the Clearview Inn.

The Hearthside

The Hearthside is a very low-grade restaurant in Key West where the sign brags of serving polish sausage with BBQ sauce. Waitressing at the Hearthside is the first job the author is able to land. The cheesy decorations and family style food don't attract a huge number of dinners, so the work is relatively slow paced, but even during the slow periods, the managers watch the staff ready to scold every moment. There is a small

break room in back, and this is the only place workers are allowed to eat or smoke because for some reason the managers don't want customers to see waitresses at rest. At one point, the managers threaten to take away the break room. Waitresses are also forbidden for using the front door, so they must walk through the kitchen where the bad tempered cook may sometimes be seen throwing steak against the wall.

Jerry's

Jerry's is the made up name for a real-life high-turnover family restaurant chain in Key West. The author describes the restaurant as a sort of hell for fat people. They get exactly what they want - which is exactly what they should not have. The floor and counters in the kitchen are layered in syrup and sugary, fatty goo. Waitresses working at Jerry's make slightly better money than those at the Hearthside, but are tremendously busy and haven't even a few moments to sit down. Big parties of customers enter in demanding moods often forcing wait people to make a ridiculous numbers of trips to the kitchen but leaving small tips, and the author begins to see herself as a sort of human conveyor belt. The management at Jerry's first seems reasonable, but one woman's outrageous mood swings eventually force the author to walk out in the middle of a shift. Near the end of her efforts in Key West, the author gets a housekeeping job at a hotel attached to Jerry's.

Key West, Florida

Key West is the town closest to Barbara's real hometown. For the first few weeks, she is afraid of being recognized, when she works here, but soon realizes she has been sucked up into the underclass instantly. Many tourists come to Key West, so there are jobs, but as in other areas where the author works, affordable housing is a real problem.

The Maids

This housekeeping service seems to be a franchise operation where smaller owner operators buy the rights to do business under the famous name within a particular geographic area. The Maids are forced to wear ridiculous uniforms perhaps to make it easier for homeowners to feel separate or above them. The Maids methods emphasize making things look good, but not actually focusing on germ killing. The company forbids workers to use more than a half a bucket of water to clean the floor, for example, and ask them to use the same rage to rub kitchen and bathroom counters. Most uncaring of all, The Maids forces workers to carry their vacuum cleaners on their backs.

Menards

This chain is a sort of Home Depot in the Midwest. The management seems completely disorganized, hires her for a job in plumbing which she knows nothing about. They never formally offer her a job at all, and seem hazy on what they plan to pay her, though

this may simply be a ploy to get her to sign on for the job. Ultimately, she does not take the job. She learns that the shift is illegally long, and she's too tired to deal with it.

Minneapolis, Minnesota

A large northern town situated on lovely lakes, Minneapolis is where the author travels in early summer. Outside of the city, the land falls away to farmland and rich fields and woodland. This is not the kind of harsh urban landscape one imagines when thinking of minimum wage work. The author believes the citizens' liberal views may mean they provide more resources for poor workers. At first, it appears there are many jobs and that apartments can be had for $400 a month. The reality is that housing is nearly non-existent and that the treatment of minimum wage workers and the social services offered them are as poor as anywhere else in the country.

Portland, Maine

This medium-sized town is populated mostly by people of Anglo Saxon descent, so the author thinks she, a White English speaker, will fit in easily. During a recent trip, the author notices that the business community seems to be desperately short of workers. Various companies hold "job fairs" and advertise for pleasant sounding jobs, but the reality is quite different. Business is doing well, but conditions for low-wage workers are just as grim as in other cities. In addition, prosperity has made the housing market tight. Homes available for minimum wage workers are scarce in Portland, so many of Ehrenreich's coworkers live in motels which are leased inexpensively on the off season for tourists. This turns out to be a financial trap. The low-wage workers can't scrape up enough for a first and last deposit on a regular apartment, but they pay so much for the motels they are unable to save. During the time Ehrenreich visits Portland, the weather is extremely hot and mugging, making her housekeeping work miserable.

Twin Lakes

This pathetic hotel actually goes by a different name that the author does not reveal. She looks forward to moving into the smelly, dirty and possibly dangerous hotel for several weeks. It's closer to her work, and she won't have to drive the freeways.

Wal-Mart

This well-known chain of big box stores is described by the author as a world unto itself. Elaborate training tapes teach new employees that they are important, but the entire structure of the organization, according to the author, undercuts this promise. Employees are asked to contribute ideas and suggestions, but become nearly invisible in the store environment. People are left to figure out what their actual job is, and the requirements seem like a lot of busy work. Talking and socializing are highly discouraged, and punishments come in the form of subtle slights. For years, this

profitable low price chain struggles against union labor, sometimes firing people for discussions that may have been efforts to organize a union.

Woodcrest Residential Facility

This rest home for the elderly comes off as perhaps the least objectionable employment Ehrenreich experiences. The kitchen is on a different floor from the residence so the author must cart heavy trays and glasses up and down stairs. The kitchen is set up in a most un-ergonomic way, so she has to bend down with heavy items repeatedly to fill the dishwasher. On the other hand, the management offers competent workers the opportunity to be creative in what they fix for elderly patients, and the staff seems genuine and caring. Should untrained workers be allowed to cook and fix snacks for people with dietary needs, the author wonders?

Themes

Shame and humiliation keep low-wage workers in their place.

The author admits that she comes from a blue-collar family, so although she's a successful, rather wealthy writer, she does not bring prejudice against people who work with their hands to her assignment. What surprises Ehrenreich is that many people do exhibit a negative attitude toward servers, retailers and especially maids. Frequently those who have just moved up the social and economic ladder themselves are the worst culprits. For example, a housewife who recently worked in a low wage job becomes the harshest boss of the maids she employees. Recently promoted workers strike out at others who rank below them but show sympathy for those above. The owners of miserable, failing motels warn residents not to steal, and housewives who must pick up after their children all day cast clothing around with reckless abandon so that workers must pick it all up. This is probably a way for the recently successful to feel good about themselves, but Ehrenreich sees more to it.

Managers are particularly instructed to deal with employees like children one may not trust. Policy from above allows managers to sit about doing little all day but criticizing and punishing those below them for talking, or resting or failing to follow ridiculous and demeaning rules. Employment tests ask inappropriate questions about attitudes, but ask little about skill sets. Workers are made to wear ridiculous uniforms, submit to purse searches, or most humiliating of all submit to drug tests which statistics show are of little value in catching users. The end result of all this, thinks the author, is to whittle away at the self-esteem of the workers so that they will feel too worthless to ask for better working conditions or more money. Workers who do not believe they are smart or talented, or who regain a little crumb of praise for passing an arbitrary test are easier to manage. If kept on their feet, achy and hungry, they have little energy to search for other jobs. The author herself begins to see her feelings of self worth shrink as her struggles continue. She hopes this book will encourage readers to treat workers with respect and dignity and to support economic aid for the poor.

The idea that hard work pays off is a myth.

From her description, it's easy to believe the author has never worked so hard in her life as she does in these minimum wage jobs. She reminds readers that many who managed to undercut welfare and housing support argued that the welfare system allowed the poor to sit around and do nothing. If these people have to work, goes the argument, they will regain self-respect and learn to handle their money and join the middle class. Yet, the reality is very different. Ehrenreich experiments with many kinds of minimum wage jobs, from healthcare to retail service, to food prep to cleaning, but none offer sufficient wages to support the most basic needs.

The writer reminds us that the minimum wage has been set based on food prices, but these prices have not gone up much in twenty years. Housing has skyrocketed, and repeatedly the author hears that her coworkers are barely able to keep themselves sheltered in crummy hotels and trailers. All the workers the author meets seems to be pushing themselves hard to meet the mental and physical challenges of the work, and most do a better job in their tasks than Ehrenreich does. Most work two jobs, but they still don't have the time or money to get urgently needed health care. The point of all this is that the low-wage worker is not lazy. He or she deserves sympathy and the minimum wage is unrealistically low, because housing and other living expenses outpace what any person can hope to make holding these sorts of jobs. The system is set up in such a way as to make minimum wage employees virtual slaves.

The poor are not stupid or incompetent.

The author appears to be kindly, friendly and not an arrogant human being, but before she begins her investigation, she does assume that she is more intelligent than those who hold minimum wage jobs. After all, she holds a PhD. She has been able to succeed in the highly competitive world of creative writing. Soon, however, Ehrenreich realizes that those with whom she works are often more clever and competent than she is. They work logically and methodically and seem to accomplish more than she does. Even the seemingly easiest jobs require concentration, effort and a strong people sense. Subtle understanding of the way people think is important for most service workers.

Even when coworkers seem to be doing very foolish things, like staying in an expensive motels instead of an apartments, it often turns out that the author find she must do the same thing. For example, she ends up in motels because she can't get ahead enough to save security deposit needed for an apartment. Often the author thinks it's somewhat stupid that her coworkers don't get together to fight authority and demand higher wages, but in time she realizes they are simply too beat down to fight. Health problems and the constant humiliation of cleaning up feces or being told you might be fired for talking with a friend wears away at these workers.

The sad irony is that hardworking, smart people have no special tips or insight for survival. Those who come to the world of work without advantages remain disadvantaged no matter how clever they are.

Employment and Economics

Nickel and Dimed focuses squarely on the workplace of the lower class: minimum-wage jobs that often involve providing service for others. All the other themes in the book spring from concerns about employment—work conditions, management styles of those in charge of low-wage workers, and the problem of minimum-wage work and whether it is possible to survive in modern America at that level of earning. The book also explores the humane side of economics, asking the question, how does one survive on a minimum-wage job in America? The very title of the work suggests that even the

smallest changes in finances can have a debilitating effect for the lower class, whether it is the pay one earns or the cost of everyday living expenses. This is often illustrated in the dollars-and-cents accountings Ehrenreich gives of how much she earns, how much she spends on necessities such as rent and food, and the minor extra expenses she cannot help, such as medicine and painkillers for work-related injuries.

Ehrenreich believes that some basic human needs are not met for lower-class workers, even if they have full-time jobs. The amount earned does not match the actual expenses incurred, most notably in housing. Minimum-wage work makes it difficult to gather the funds for a lease on an apartment, and compromises of various sorts are often made. Throughout *Nickel and Dimed*, Ehrenreich scrambles to find the right balance in her housing: affordable, close to work, and safe. Often, at least one of these criterion ends up being forfeited, as she depends on trailer parks and resident hotels to provide reasonable housing. Further, the extreme measures of screening and surveillance often imposed on workers make just keeping a job a stressful affair and encourage a more compliant workforce. Workers are, thus, not only unsure if their jobs can truly support them, they are also unsure if their jobs will always be there.

Culture Clash

Ehrenreich perceives cultural differences between classes, enough that her forays into lower-class life feel like a different world to her. Within the experiences that encompass lower-class life, she is further concerned about fitting into every workplace of which she is a part, and every workplace is a unique microcosm to which she must adapt. If anything, Ehrenreich's true life as a middle-class writer has made her fit into minimum wage even more alienating, calling up a different set of behaviors and assumptions that she comments upon throughout the book. She understands that being accepted by her co-workers is essential in order to survive, and that a support system within the workplace is one of the tools that make minimum-wage jobs tolerable, if not desirable.

Pain and Suffering

Ehrenreich stresses the physical difficulties in the kind of labor she performs for these experiments. Her health is often in jeopardy, and yet she cannot do everything in her power to heal and become well. She is limited to what she can afford and what she can access after work hours. She often relates how a minor injury that could be nurtured into recovery in her middle-class life can become a major crisis for the lower class, who have fewer options in health care and are more reliant on hourly wages that can be lost if they take time out to recover. This particular point is brought home by Holly of The Maids, whose sickness and injury demand better care than she allows for herself—partly because she cannot afford decent health care, but also because her commitment to her job, misguided as it may be, does not allow her to stop working.

Empathy

Ehrenreich believes that the way to address the issue of the working poor and lower-class survival is to look at the people, not the demographics and statistics. Many minimum-wage jobs are of a service nature, and Ehrenreich implies that lower-class citizens have become a de facto servant class in a nation that claims to treat all its members equally. The purpose behind *Nickel and Dimed* is to illustrate, in vividly human terms, the difficulties and suffering of this overlooked group. However, Ehrenreich's empathy often wears thin as she grows tired of the apparent complacency of her co-workers, even in the face of unjust employment practices. Ehrenreich is alarmed at how basic human dignity is taken away by the working conditions of the lower class. The search of personal possessions, scrutiny through personality tests, and especially drug testing are, in Ehrenreich's mind, all violations of civil rights. She finds a deep, troubling irony that a nation that prides itself on freedom encourages such strong-arm authoritarian tactics on a majority of its citizens. This tension between empathy and exasperation is, arguably, emblematic of the progressive left's relationship with the working class.

Identity and Self

Ehrenreich is troubled by the changes that occur during her experiences leading a working-class life. A middle-class woman who came from a working-class background, she believes that the person she is now is quite different from the person she would have become if her family had remained working class. While working at Wal-Mart, however, she believes that she meets the "original Barb" in herself, "the one who might have ended up working at Wal-Mart for real" if her life had gone differently. Barb, Ehrenreich thinks, is not like the "real" her: "she's meaner and slyer than I am, more cherishing of grudges, and not quite as smart as I'd hoped."

Limitations and Opportunities

Ehrenreich argues that minimum-wage work is the best that many lower-class citizens can hope to achieve in their lives. As a result, there is a clear limit to the lifestyle they can lead and the opportunities that are open to them. Ehrenreich consciously deprives herself of many of the comforts in her life, but she does this only temporarily and out of choice. The people she encounters in the book are not as lucky, often working and living in conditions that have not improved for years and may never improve.

Style

Perspective

The perspective the author chooses is a first person informal one. She talks to the reader as if she is an old friend using language that is clear and seldom using big words. Even the footnotes she includes interpret statistics into common language.

Obviously, the author experiences each job firsthand, but her reports are not like a detailed, hard-hitting news report. Instead, she ignores specifics such as a person's facial features, the time of day an event occurs or the weather. She excludes information that has no relevance to her feelings about the job she is doing. In addition, her reports are general, giving an overview of experiences that actually took months to unfold. In this way, her perspective is personal and introspective.

Ehrenreich's perspective changes slightly from the introductory chapter to the first chapter. Initially, she imagines her biggest problem will be hiding her own intelligence and being accepted as an equal. During her very first job, she instantly changes to a more humble attitude. She really feels equal to - or even inferior to others. Her perspective changes from a high and mighty investigator, to one in awe of the hard life others can and do endure.

Tone

The tone and manner the author chooses shifts between humor, anger and humility. Her shifting moods are clearly reflected by her writing style, really helping readers to feel connected to her experiences. For example, as she enters each new city, the author is full of hope and everything around her is described as fresh and attractive. When she starts looking for a job, the feeling becomes more scattered and confusing. After she begins to work, kindly portraits of her coworkers make readers feel warm and connected to these people. On the other hand, freeway scenes are frightening, even to readers who personally feel no tension when driving. The cruel or thoughtless behavior of managers or companies sends both writer and reader into a fit of repressed anger.

Somehow, the author manages to be funny, too. She talks about the night when she sits alone in her friend's apartment with a "hoodie" on her hair and a bird on top of that, pecking away. She paints a funny picture of herself dodging around Wal-Mart hiding from a manager.

Throughout the humor is kind and respectful. The author never pokes fun at even the most potentially annoying people, such as the boastful young man who hits on her and who claims he is only working because he is bored. This fine writing results in an overall feeling of sympathy for all those caught in the low wage struggle.

Structure

This work is composed like a sort of diary, without actual daily entries, but still recording the feelings and experiences of the author in a linear progression. She does not describe the people she meets in detail unless their physical appearance or behaviors somehow affect the way she will do her job, the choices she makes or the way she feels. For example, she may mention the actions of dishonest manager Stu, without ever describing if he's black or white, tall or short. This carefully edited structure keeps readers focused on the actions of the people rather than the stereotypes they may hold of people who look a certain way or hold a certain job.

The book is written as if from memory and notes. Many months of experience are boiled down into a short 200 plus pages. There are two good reasons for this. First, one gets the impression that the author has had time to think and mull over her experiences and make sound judgments about what has occurred. Secondly, the author can highlight only the most important moments and conversations that stick out in her memory. These tend to be "ah ha" moments where the author realizes something that she has been suspecting or has only had a general feeling about all along.

Each chapter follows a pattern. It begins with hope, then concern, then a bit of confidence and finally a cruel twist of fate that undercuts everything just as the author is getting comfortable with a particular situation. The final summary chapter stays very true to all that she has seen and heard, but also includes a call to action. We (the readers, Americans) need to create a safety net for these hardworking victims of bad public policy.

Episodic Chapters

The structure of *Nickel and Dimed* is straightforward: each of her month-long experiments takes up a single chapter, making each chapter an episode in an extended quest. This helps reinforce the idea that each month-long experience is a distinct world of its own and that all these worlds are separate from the reality of Ehrenreich's normal life. These three main chapters are bookended by two considerably shorter chapters. "Introduction: Getting Ready" explains the genesis, or origin, of the experiment, as well as the rules Ehrenreich applies to her project. In the final chapter, "Analysis," Ehrenreich presents what she learned from all three experiments and proposes changes that could help make life at minimum wage more manageable and humane. The two bookend chapters take place within Ehrenreich's real life as a writer and social critic. "Introduction" involves a meeting with an editor, while "Analysis" describes briefly her return to that life and the sense of dislocation at how her experimental lives have vanished. In this way, the structure of the book is similar to a quest: the action begins with the assumption of a goal (an answer to the question of matching minimum-wage earnings to a minimum-wage lifestyle); the main character—Ehrenreich herself—makes three excursions to alternate worlds as the goal is sought; and the book ends with a return to normalcy as the goal is completed.

Investigative Journalism

Investigative journalists expose injustice through extensive investigation and then propose a remedy to eradicate it. In *Nickel and Dimed*, Ehrenreich sets her sights on the plight of the working poor. Though investigative journalism does not always call for the writer to fully immerse himself or herself into the situation or event he or she is covering, Ehrenreich's first-person experiences bring verisimilitude, or a quality of truth, to the book. She does not pay much heed to journalistic objectivity, in part because she is immersed in her situation, but also because she has clear political beliefs that are at the heart of her career as a social critic and essayist.

Scientific Experiment

Ehrenreich repeatedly frames her investigation as a scientific experiment and, less often, herself as the test subject. This not only emphasizes Ehrenreich's training as a biologist but also provides a necessary distance between herself and her experiences. The distance allows her to write more objectively, but it is also an unstated admission that her experiences are artificially constructed. She acknowledges that she is unable to mimic completely the realities of minimum-wage life, in part by refusing, even for the sake of the experiment, to go without food, a home, or a car. And because it is an experiment, her experiences as a low-wage worker are not a lifestyle, like so many people she encounters, but a research trial with a defined end-date.

At times throughout the book, she carefully categorizes aspects of her lower-class lifestyle or minimum-wage job—often to humorous effect, but also to convey the complexity of her situation and her work assignments. For example, Ehrenreich explains how being a waitress is not simply about serving meals; it is about all the different tasks involved in keeping a restaurant orderly and prepared. If these tasks are not taken care of in a timely manner, serving meals becomes much more difficult when the dinner rush arrives. In this way, she shows that life for the working poor is not a haphazard situation but a set of definable factors that influence one another, often with unforeseen consequences.

Memoir

Ehrenreich is not only the narrator but, in a sense, the protagonist, or main character, of the book. Thus, *Nickel and Dimed* also works as a kind of memoir, an account of a very specific phase in her life. Indeed, Ehrenreich spends the three different months conducting experiments as belonging to the life of another Barbara—the one who would have existed if her parents had never made the transition from lower class to middle class. This Barbara, eventually dubbed Barb after her Wal-Mart name tag, develops concerns and behaviors different from the "real" Barbara she left behind. While it is the "real" Barbara who narrates the novel, we are given many insights into how Barb thinks and feels, often in an embarrassing and self-revelatory manner.

Humor as Criticism

An accomplished essayist, Ehrenreich often makes her best and most accessible points about the difficulties and injustices of her minimum-wage experiences by describing them in a humorous fashion. Often, she uses self-deprecation to describe her difficulties at learning a new job and to deflate her middle-class assumptions. Since she is intent on discovering the larger meaning of her situation, she often employs hyperbole, or exaggeration, and *reductio ad absurdum* (reducing a statement or belief into a logical absurdity) to expose the injustices committed in the workplace. For example, she makes fun of personality tests to highlight how they are phrased to elicit contradictory impulses that best suit a compliant workforce (e.g., having enough initiative to not be lazy but not so much initiative as to be a threat). By focusing on the more amusing aspects of her experiments, Ehrenreich is able to provide respite from the grim truths about lower-class life, making her account of those truths more palatable to a wide audience.

Historical Context

Prosperity in America

Nickel and Dimed was written during a time of great economic prosperity for the United States. This is best exemplified by the Internet boom that resulted in young entrepreneurs becoming overnight millionaires. Whether one is an Internet wizard, rap recording artist, stockbroker, or entrepreneur, the notion of self-initiative leading to unbridled success has never been more evident than in recent decades. Technology has created a wider range of comforts and productivity tools for those who can afford them, while changes in social mores, or attitudes, have made individual independence a more important value than the needs of the community.

This notion of rising through the classes, from lower-class origins to upper-class success, was first made popular in the books of Horatio Alger. These dozens of books, with titles like *Struggling Upward* and *Risen from the Ranks*, published from 1867 through the dawn of the twentieth century, all share the same theme: a poor young man, through virtue and hard work, can become a rich man. Although Alger himself never became a rich man, his books were found in a large number of Victorian homes. He has also been noted as an early influence for many entrepreneurs of the early twentieth century. In addition, the main theme of his books—that through hard work, anyone can succeed in America—has been adopted as a distinctly American ideal.

Welfare Reform Legislation

A national welfare program was instituted as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's Social Security Act in 1935 and has helped support the American poor in the decades since. Ehrenreich was partially inspired to write *Nickel and Dimed* by changes in welfare laws that were passed in 1996. The Personal Responsibility Act more than halved the number of people receiving welfare: in 1996, there were 12.2 million recipients, while in 2001, when the book was published, there were 5.3 million. This would seem to indicate a success in making lower-class workers more self-sufficient, but that is not how critics interpret the results. As Sharon Hays argues in *Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform*

While 84 percent of desperately poor (welfare-eligible) families had received benefits prior to the passage of the Personal Responsibility Act, by 2001 less than half of them did. This means that millions of parents and children in America were living on incomes lower than half the poverty level and not receiving the benefits for which they were technically eligible.

Further, the number of working poor, meaning people who have full-time jobs but still live at or near the poverty line, has grown in recent years as the support of welfare is no longer readily available to assist them.

Corporate Dominance

After an 1886 Supreme Court decision granted corporations many of the rights previously held only by individual citizens, corporations have flourished in the United States. This corporate personhood can provide many business advantages, though critics have long argued that it gives too many rights to corporations. This, as recent corporate scandals attest, can lead to great profit without anyone being personally responsible for how the profit is generated.

As corporations began to dominate American industry, smaller businesses had a difficult time competing in an aggressive marketplace. As more and more small businesses vanished, corporations became ever-present to fill consumer needs. Wal-Mart, the largest retailer and employer in the United States, is a perfect example of this corporate dominance. Indeed, this phenomenon has even been referred to as the *Wal-Marting of America*. Corporate advocates argue that big companies like Wal-Mart provide a consistent, affordable consumer experience that just cannot be matched by small businesses. Critics argue that corporations, driven solely by profit, sacrifice employee well-being for increased earnings. Through their decision-making executives, these same corporations actively resist the federal increase of the minimum wage and explicitly discourage the formation of employee labor unions.

Some communities, including several in California and Illinois, have successfully rallied to bar the opening of Wal-Marts in their area. Wal-Mart has also faced numerous charges of unfair business practices, including the largest class action suit in U.S. history for sexual discrimination of its female workers.

Critical Overview

Nickel and Dimed fits clearly in a tradition of investigative journalism where the writer infiltrates a marginalized group, posing as one of them to find out what life is truly like. The best-known examples of such works are Jack London's *People of the Abyss*, George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*. All are mentioned by various critics when assessing Ehrenreich's book.

Many critics praise Ehrenreich for writing about the plight of the working poor, calling attention to a facet of America that is often overlooked and underrepresented. Joni Scott from the *Humanist* considers the book an "important literary contribution and call to action that I hope is answered." Scott also states that the book "should be required reading for corporate executives and politicians." In *Off Our Backs*, Kya Ogyn notes that the author "succeeds beautifully" in demonstrating that "the problem lies in the system of low-paid work, not in the workers."

Moreover, Ehrenreich does this with an approach and style that make her topic engaging. As Steve Early notes in the *Nation*, "Ehrenreich has long been a rarity on the left—a radical writer with great wit and a highly accessible style." Scott Sherman, writing for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, is among those who see *Nickel and Dimed* as an evolution in Ehrenreich's abilities as a writer:

For Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed* is something of a literary triumph. Her essays, while frequently incisive and hilarious, seem one-dimensional when read in large doses. And while her books are absorbing and original, the writing isn't always stylish. *Nickel and Dimed*, however, shows us a veteran journalist at the very top of her game. The book has a sturdy architecture: four tight, compact chapters in which the prose achieves a perfect balance between wit, anger, melancholy, and rage.

However, some have questioned whether Ehrenreich's work does anything more than state the obvious. As Julia M. Klein writes in the *American Prospect:*

In the end, what has she accomplished? It's no shock that the dollars don't add up; that affordable housing is hard, if not impossible, to find; and that taking a second job is a virtual necessity for many of the working poor. Ehrenreich is too busy scrubbing floors to give us more than a passing glimpse of the people in that world.

Jane Yager, writing in *Dollars & Sense*, raises another issue. Although the book is an effective portrayal of low-wage living, Yager states, "It's hard to figure out what the book aims to accomplish." Beyond making wealthy readers feel bad, "the book offers no specific directives for what the now-properly-chastised affluent reader should do."

Several other criticisms have also been raised. Yager notes that the idea of a well-off woman pretending to be poor "could easily seem self-indulgent and offensive" in much the same way that *Black Like Me* has been criticized. In addition, Yager points out that readers may leave the book with the misguided notion that "if American low-wage

workers are worse off now than they were 30 years ago, this must just be because bosses have become nastier individuals." Also, despite her recognition of Ehrenreich's accomplishments, Ogyn states that "the book contains numerous disdainful comments" about overweight people.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6

Critical Essay #1

Mescallado has studied literature and pop culture, writing extensively on these topics for academic and popular venues. In this essay, Mescallado considers Ehrenreich's book in terms of bridging the gap between the middle and lower class. What looks on the surface to be an attempt to erase class differences actually reinforces them.

For all the compelling claims Barbara Ehrenreich makes in *Nickel and Dimed* about the working poor of America, there is one issue she is oddly quiet about: what can be done to bridge the gap between classes. The book seems to address this with its very premise; deciding to work and live as one of the lower class, Ehrenreich made more of an effort than most middle-class people would even consider. Upon close reading, however, *Nickel and Dimed* often reinforces class tensions instead of erasing them. Class is not only about different degrees of wealth, but also different perspectives and experiences. For all her success as a worker and survivor, Ehrenreich is still a middle-class woman in a lower-class world, and that influences how she tells her story as well as how we read her book.

Nickel and Dimed is a personal book about a public problem; that is a key part of its appeal. Time and again, Ehrenreich mentions the physical pain she suffers as a result of her work. All of us can sympathize when bodies are forced beyond their limits. She writes to great effect about human dignity, something robbed too often by the draconian, or extremely harsh, measures imposed on such workers. We all want to keep our self-respect and have others respect us as well. Unfortunately, even these aspects of life are not understood the same way by different classes. One of her clients at The Maids, a physical trainer, tries to be friendly and suggests that cleaning house is a good workout. Ehrenreich laments that she "can't explain that this form of exercise is totally asymmetrical, brutally repetitive, and as likely to destroy the musculoskeletal structure as to strengthen it."

This encounter highlights the difficulty of crossing class lines, as Ehrenreich describes in her 1989 book, *Fear of Falling*:

Even the middle-class left, where the spirit is most willing, has an uneven record of reaching out across the lines of class. Left and right, we are still locked in by a middle-class culture that is almost wholly insular, self-referential, and in its own way, parochial. We seldom see the "others" except as projections of our own anxieties or instruments of our ambition, and even when seeing them—as victims, "cases," or exemplars of some archaic virtue—seldom hear.

Despite being aware of the problem, Ehrenreich falls into this trap repeatedly in *Nickel and Dimed*. As alarming as the trainer's attitude is, Ehrenreich believes herself unable to say what she thinks, to speak in terms that the woman can understand. It is an opportunity when Ehrenreich can bridge the gap between classes but fails to do so. This reluctance is rooted in part by her own class anxieties, as fear of slippage weighs heavily throughout the book. When she gets hired for her first minimum-wage job and is

told to report the next day, she becomes uneasy: "[S]omething between fear and indignation rises in my chest. I want to say, 'Thank you for your time, sir, but this is just an experiment, you know, not my actual life.'"

Towards the end of her three-city quest for working-class insight, she ponders how different her working-class self is from her professional-managerial class self. She draws a clear distinction between the Barbara of her normal life and the "Barb" of her Wal-Mart assignment: "Take away the career and the higher education, and maybe what you're left with is the original Barb, the one who might have ended up working at Wal-Mart for real." She notes that Barb is like a slightly less-civilized version of herself, "meaner and slyer … and not quite as smart as I hoped."

If there is any ongoing conflict between characters, then, it is the tense standoff between Barb and Barbara. Ehrenreich's experiences are so compelling to herself and her readers that we often do not notice—or at least, we do not find it odd—how she does not hear her co-workers as much as she simply describes her own woes. Thus, what makes *Nickel and Dimed* an engaging read also reduces the urgency of these issues. If this were an account of a truly lower-class person working a permanent minimum-wage job, the story would be different, perhaps even inaccessible to middle-class readers who resist the unvarnished truth about the working poor. Members of the actual working class are disposable in Ehrenreich's narrative: the episodic traveling account means all characters besides Ehrenreich are dropped at the end of a chapter, paving the way for a new cast in the next city. The only one whose personal history earns an extended telling is Carolina in Minnesota, who is not a co-worker but a relative of a friend in Ehrenreich's real life. None of Ehrenreich's work compatriots are described beyond a couple of personality traits and statistic-affirming situations.

For the middle-class readers who have long been her audience, Ehrenreich provides a buffer. She is a spy in the house of drudge, an outsider who manages to work her way in. To sympathize with her during this "scientific experiment"—which in itself is another distancing effect: How many working-class people would describe their lives as ongoing experiments in matching wages to expenses?—is to know that all the hardships will soon enough fade for our heroine, disappearing down "the rabbit hole." Ehrenreich is Alice in low-wage Wonderland, and waking from this dream is as simple as returning to her real life. Like Alice, her adventures through the lower class are odd, amusing, and at times grotesque. This brings to mind Scott Sherman's observation in the *Columbia Journalism Review*:

A striking feature of immersion narratives like London's *People of the Abyss* and Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* is the extent to which compassion and sympathy co-exist uneasily with revulsion and disapproval…. Passages of this sort tell us something about the immutability of class boundaries; but they also stand as examples of reportorial honesty and, in Orwell's case, narrative sophistication.

Ehrenreich often feels outrage at the indignities she must experience, which she sees as the indignities suffered by all workers in her chosen situation. However, this outrage is matched with an unmistakable exasperation about the lack of resistance her co-

workers show against their working situations. Ehrenreich never claims that her co-workers deserved the poor treatment they received, but she often comments at how much of it they tolerate—more than she can, as is proven time and again.

That said, she at least tries to understand the lower-class characters she encounters, to rationalize—if not excuse—their lack of progressive fervor. While she encounters many unlikable co-workers and customers in her account, Ehrenreich often explains the bad behavior or finds a reason to like the person; that is, if the person is lower class. Ehrenreich is considerably less forgiving with the upper- and middle-class homes she cleans for The Maids, exposing the hypocrisy and lack of good taste of various clients. One might wonder why a staunchly working-class hero does not emerge in her narrative—or at least a sympathetic middle-class character besides the princess-in-disguise that is herself.

Consider Ted, the franchise owner of The Maids. Of all the middle-class characters in the novel, he is the least offensive, if still nowhere near heroic. When told there is no key to get into a client's house, his reported response—"Don't do this to me!"—is selfish but not aggressive or mean-spirited. In this book, the lack of malice in any kind of manager is striking. After Holly injures herself on the job, Ehrenreich convinces her to call Ted from the next house. She then insists on speaking to Ted and what follows is an angry tirade by Ehrenreich:

I can't remember the exact words, but I tell him he can't keep putting money above his employees' health and I don't want to hear about "working through it," because this girl is in really bad shape. But he just goes on about "calm down," and meanwhile Holly is hopping around the bathroom, wiping up pubic hairs.

The scene Ehrenreich paints is both amusing and troubling, an excellent example of her gifts as a writer but also of the problems brought about by her aggressively partisan class consciousness. Holly the lower-class worker persists at her job, no matter how humiliating it is or how silly she appears. As the mediator, Ehrenreich vents her anger at the middle-class employer. And Ted, this representative of the middle class, rewards her. She is afraid she will be fired but her co-workers assure her she will not and, indeed, she is not. Instead, he concedes some ground, as Holly is forced to take off the next day—an action Holly considers unjust and which she blames on Ehrenreich's meddling. When Ted later pays extra attention to Ehrenreich, picking her up for a special assignment and giving her a raise, she believes she is being recruited as a stool pigeon. Ted fishes for the names of problem employees, hoping that Erhenreich will supply them now that he has given her a raise: "This must be my cue to name a few names, because this is how Ted operates, my co-workers claim—through snitches and by setting up one woman against another."

Ehrenreich's assumptions are odd, as she is the one who complains about Holly's situation, even "threatening a work stoppage." A kinder interpretation of the situation is that Ted admires her willingness to look out for her co-workers, but does not want grief directed his way. What may be a veiled bribe for Ehrenreich to stop being so abrasive is instead seen as a more malicious ploy, based primarily on "what my co-workers claim."

In effect, Ehrenreich plays into the class tensions, the underlying conflict between worker and employer—more so than the other maids, who profess to admire Ted and seek his approval—instead of trying to mediate the two sides.

Considering the resentment Holly ends up feeling for Ehrenreich, perhaps there is some truth in Ted's statement that "you can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped." Ehrenreich explains in the "Analysis" chapter why the lower class accept low pay, poor working conditions, and legalized violation of civil rights. However, she never addresses how to help those who do not want to be helped. Instead, she fantasizes about a working-class revolt, a day when minimum-wage earners "are bound to tire of getting so little in return and … demand to be paid what they're worth … and we will all be better off for it in the end."

Is Ehrenreich imagining a people's revolution in classic Marxist fashion (Marxism is the political idea that socialism will lead to a classless society), where the proletariat overthrow the ruling class? Or something less grandiose, a general strike that will force legislation that better serves the needs of all workers? If she is considering the less radical revolt, how will this come about? And why assume that everyone will be better off?

As Sherman discovers in his interview with Ehrenreich in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, she places little faith in her book causing any real changes in policy; perhaps her time in the servant-class has made her more sharply aware of the *realpolitik* (politics based on the practical rather than on morals or standards) of the poor. *Nickel and Dimed* opened a dialogue that does not gloss over the difficulties of class tensions—which in itself is a brave, important act. Having experienced the patchier side of the fence, though, Ehrenreich is now grateful to remain on the greener side, to embrace a middle-class perspective even as she works for her progressive beliefs.

Source: Ray Mescallado, Critical Essay on *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, in *Literary Newsmakers for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Sherman analyzes Ehrenreich's complex and often contradictory attitude toward the people she writes about.

A striking feature of immersion narratives like London's *People of the Abyss* and Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* is the extent to which compassion and sympathy co-exist uneasily with revulsion and disapproval. Jack London possessed a deep empathy for the slum dwellers of turn-of-the-century England, but he still allowed himself to describe them as "stupid and heavy, without imagination." Orwell, recalling his stay in a squalid lodging house in the industrial north of England, confessed: "On the day when there was a full chamber-pot under the breakfast table I decided to leave. The place was beginning to depress me." Passages of this sort tell us something about the immutability of class boundaries; but they also stand as examples of reportorial honesty and, in Orwell's case, narrative sophistication.

Nickel and Dimed, too, is streaked with contradictory sentiments. Ehrenreich, for instance, writes with considerable feeling about Gail, a "wiry middle-aged waitress" who can't afford a security deposit for an apartment, so she sleeps in her car. "When I moved out of the trailer park," Ehrenreich writes, in the closing lines of her waitressing chapter, "I gave the key to number 46 to Gail and arranged for my deposit to be transferred to her."

But in many other places, Ehrenreich's compassion degenerates into spite. An Alzheimer's patient who threw milk on Ehrenreich is "a tiny, scabrous old lady with wild white hair who looks like she's been folded into her wheelchair and squished." A woman whose home is cleaned by Ehrenreich's crew is "an alumna of an important women's college, now occupying herself by monitoring her investments and the baby's bowel movements." At Wal-Mart the sight of an obese woman fills Ehrenreich with disgust. "Those of us," she writes, "who work in ladies' are for obvious reasons a pretty lean lot … and we live with the fear of being crushed by some wide-body as she hurtles through the narrow passage from Faded Glory to woman size, lost in fantasies involving svelte Kathie Lee sheaths."

More illuminating, perhaps, is the anger Ehrenreich directs at some of her co-workers, especially the other maids in Maine, who are bereft of class consciousness and self-esteem. Indeed, the docility and fatalism of the working poor is a primary theme of the book: "For the most part," she writes, "my co-workers seem content to occupy their little niche on the sheer cliff face of class inequality." Even when injured on the job, they prefer to talk about recipes instead of retribution. There is a harrowing moment when "Holly," a maid on her crew, falls into a hole and hurts her ankle; Ehrenreich insists that she get an X-ray immediately—and even calls for a "work stoppage"—but all Holly can do is whimper and go back to cleaning bathrooms on her injured ankle.

Holly's passive response to her injury—she is, first and foremost, terrified of losing her job—leaves Ehrenreich in a red-hot fury: "All I can see is this grass fire raging in the

back of my eyes." At the end of the day, on the car ride home, Ehrenreich can think of nothing but the accident, but Holly, still reeling from the pain, "starts up one of those pornographic late-afternoon food conversations she enjoys so much. 'What are you making for dinner tonight, Marge?… Oh, yeah, with tomato sauce?'" Marge, another maid, is previously described as someone "who normally chatters on obliviously about the events in her life ('It was the biggest spider' or 'So she just puts a little mustard right in with the baked beans …')."

These expressions of anger and frustration are the most honest and unsettling portions of *Nickel and Dimed* honest because Ehrenreich—whose original PMC essay envisioned a working class that could "alter society in its totality"—despises blue-collar apathy, superstition, and conservatism; and unsettling because they remind us that the works of our most humane chroniclers of the poor—Jonathan Kozol, Katherine Boo, the late Michael Harrington—possess a generosity of spirit that is not always evident in *Nickel and Dimed*.

Source: Scott Sherman, "Class Warrior: Barbara Ehrenreich's Singular Crusade," in *Columbia Journalism Review*, Vol. 42, No. 4, November-December 2003, p. 34.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Scott posits that Ehrenreich's book is an important literary and social contribution.

Nickel and Dimed exposes the anti-America of flophouses, multiple house sharing, employees sleeping in cars, and the homeless who work forty hours or more weekly. Those who used to be middle class, despite often working two jobs, now endure a daily scramble to prioritize such needs as food, housing, childcare, and health care. One extra expense—like dental work, work uniforms, medication, school supplies, and the like—can "break the camel's back."

So I can't fault Ehrenreich for having stock options and a pension plan while publicly admonishing the excesses of the wealthy. She ponders whether the exurb queens whose houses she and her newfound comrades clean "have any idea of the misery that goes into rendering their homes motel-perfect?" She queries, "Would they be bothered if they did know or would they take a sadistic pride in what they have purchased—boasting to dinner guests for example that their floors are cleaned only with the purest of fresh human tears?"

And regarding the WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) patrons she serves during her Key West server stint, she writes: they "look at us disapprovingly no matter what we do (and they don't tip) as if they were confusing waitressing with Mary Magdalene's original profession." Another poke at hypocrisy comes when Ehrenreich describes how ennui moves her to investigate a Saturday night "tent revival." This passage plunges into a commentary about Jesus being "out there in the dark, gagged and tethered to a tent pole" thereby stifling his message of Christian charity.

Mostly, she delivers a profoundly poignant description of people, such as a hopeful Czech dishwasher living with a crowd of other Czech "dishers." He can't sleep until one of them goes to work, leaving a vacant bed.

On that note, I hear the ghost of social reformer past, Jacob A. Riis, a police reporter who wrote of and extensively photographed the poor in his 1890 book *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*. Riis' words could apply to this century: The gap between the classes in which it surges unseen, unsuspected by the thoughtless is widening day by day. No tardy enactment of law, no political expedient can close it … I know of but one bridge that will carry us over safe, a bridge founded upon justice and built of human hearts.

By the end of *Nickel and Dimed* I felt thankful to Barbara Ehrenreich for this important literary contribution and call to action that I hope is answered. I believe this book should be required reading for corporate executives and politicians. A bumpersticker once read, "He who has the most toys at the end wins." Is this to be our legacy?

Source: Joni Scott, "*Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (Review)," in *Humanist*, Vol. 61, No. 5, September 2001, p. 40.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Klein weighs the ultimate worth of Ehrenreich's book.

In the end, what has she accomplished? It's no shock that the dollars don't add up; that affordable housing is hard, if not impossible, to find; and that taking a second job is a virtual necessity for many of the working poor. Ehrenreich is too busy scrubbing floors to give us more than a passing glimpse of the people in that world. Nor can she really transform herself into just another waitress or maid. She is both a prickly, self-confident woman and the possessor of a righteous, ideologically informed outrage at America's class system that can turn patronizing at times.

Still, *Nickel and Dimed* is a compelling and timely book whose insights sometimes do transcend the obvious. It's important to know, for instance, that low-wage workers, while often taking pride in their jobs, are routinely subjected to an authoritarian regime that ranges from demeaning drug tests to bans on "gossip" with other employees. The result, Ehrenreich argues, is "not just an economy but a culture of extreme inequality." And our most appropriate response, as members of the well-meaning middle-class? Not guilt, she tells us, but shame, for relying on the underpaid labor of others—a habit the living-wage movement is now trying to help us break.

Source: Julia M Klein, "*Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. (Review)," in *American Prospect*, Vol. 12, No. 13, July 30, 2001, p. 43.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay, Ogyn offers some possible insight into the author's intent in writing this book.

I think the actual purpose of Ehrenreich's experiment becomes clear when identifying the intended audience. What we have is a successful, affluent writer addressing members of her own class. Her intent is to tell people who have never experienced it something of what it is like to work at jobs that do not pay enough to live on. Even more importantly, her intent is to say that her experience "is the best-case scenario: a person with every advantage that ethnicity and education, health and motivation can confer attempting, in a time of exuberant prosperity, to survive in the economy's lower depths."

Nickel and Dimed is a needed work—engaging, well-researched and written in a directly personal style. Ehrenreich succeeds beautifully in conveying to her middle-class audience that she is just like them and that since she could not support herself, never mind a family, on the jobs available to her, the problem lies in the system of low-paid work, not in the workers. However, beyond my regret that Ehrenreich was perhaps correct in considering her authoritative, middle-class voice necessary to make this point, I have two problems with this book. One is that, although she writes, "low-wage workers are no more homogeneous in personality or ability than people who write for a living, and no less likely to be funny or bright," she comes to the conclusion that Barb, who works for Wal-Mart, is "meaner and slyer" than Barbara the writer, and "more cherishing of grudges, and not quite as smart as I'd hoped." Although poverty can have a brutalizing effect on some people, there are demonstrably grudge-holders among the rich and powerful who are not very smart.

My second problem lies with Ehrenreich's attitudes toward fat people. The book contains numerous disdainful comments and one very disturbing rant—"we live in fear of being crushed by some wide-body as she hurtles through the narrow passage from Faded Glory to woman size, lost in fantasies involving svelte Kathie Lee sheaths." It is unfortunate that a political writer of her caliber has not only not examined fat hatred, but has contributed to it.

Source: Kya Ogyn, "Can You Live On It?" in *Off Our Backs*, Vol. 35, January-February 2005, p. 44.

Critical Essay #6

In the following essay, Yager attempts to find the Ehrenreich's message and intended audience in Nickled and Dimed.

[Text Not Available]

Source: Jane Yager, "Poverty: A National Emergency," in *Dollars & Sense*, January 2002, p. 42.

Quotes

"I mumble thanks for the advice, feeling like I've just been stripped naked by the crazed enforcer of some ancient sumptuary law: No chatting for you, girl. No fancy service ethic allowed for the serfs. Chatting with customers is for the good looking young college-educated servers in the downtown capriccio and ceviche joints, the kids who can make $70-$100 a night." Chapter 1, page 35

I am given something called the 'Accutrack personality test,' which warns at the beginning that 'Accutrack' has multiple measures which detect attempts to distort or psych out the questionnaire.' Naturally, I 'never' find it hard 'to stop moods of self-pity,' nor do I imagine that others are talking about me behind my back or believe that 'management and employees will always be in conflict because they have totally different sets of goals.'" Chapter 2, page 59

"Yes, the vacuum cleaner actually straps onto your back, a chubby fellow who introduces himself as its inventor explains. He suits up, pulling the straps tight across and under his chest and then says proudly into the camera: 'See, I am the vacuum cleaner.'" Chapter 2 page 74

"So ours is a world of pain—managed by Excedrin and Advil, compensated for with cigarettes and, in one or two cases and then only on weekends, with booze. Do the owners have any idea of the misery that goes into rendering their homes motel-perfect?" Chapter 2, page 89

"Equally draining is the effort to look both perky and compliant at the same time, for half an hour or more at a stretch, because while you need to evince 'initiative,' you don't want to come across as someone who might initiate something like a union organizing drive." Chapter 2, page 127

"Studies show that pre employment testing does not lower absenteeism, accidents or turnover and (at least in the high-tech workplaces studied) actually lowered productivity - presumably due to its negative effect on employee morale. Furthermore, the practice is quite costly. In 1990, the federal government spent $11.7 Million to test 29,000 federal employees. Since only 153 tested positive, the cost of detecting a single drug user was $77,000." Chapter 2, page 128

"Why do employers persist in the practice? Probably in part because of advertising by the roughly $2 billion drug-testing industry, but I suspect that the demeaning effect of testing may also hold some attraction for employers." Chapter 2, page 128

"I have a friend now in Minneapolis, and the odd thing is that she is the original - the woman who uprooted herself and came out somehow on her feet and who did al this in real life with children - while I am the imitation, the pallid, child free pretender." Chapter 2, page 134

"It's very simple, Todd assures us, just a 'matter of taking people who have a very serious problem, though probably not anywhere near as serious as they think it is, and leaving them happy.'" Chapter 2, page 137

"Similarly at Wal-Mart, a co-worker once advised me that although I had a lot to learn, it was also important not to know too much," or at least never to reveal ones full abilities to management because 'the more they think you can do, the more they'll use you and abuse you.'" Evaluation, page 195

"In the rhetorical buildup to welfare reform it was uniformly assumed that a job was the ticket out of poverty and that the only thing holding back welfare recipients was their reluctance to go out and get one. I got one and sometimes more than one, but my track record in the survival department is far less admirable as a jobholder." Evaluation, page 196

"In the early 1960s when the method of calculating poverty was devised food accounted for 24 percent of the average family budget (not 33 percent even then, it should be noted) and housing 29 percent. In 1999, food took up only 16% of the family budget while housing had soared to 37 percent. So the choice of food as the basis for calculating family budgets seems fairly arbitrary today..." Evaluation, page 200.

Adaptations

- *Nickel and Dimed* was adapted as a theatrical stage play in 2002 by playwright Joan Holden. Originally presented in Seattle by director Bartlett Sher and artistic adviser Anna Deavere Smith, it has since been performed by various companies across the nation.

What Do I Read Next?

- *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (2002), edited by Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, is a collection of essays examining injustices regarding low-wage female workers around the world. It includes an essay by Ehrenreich, "Maid to Order," which expands on her study of maid work in *Nickel and Dimed*.
- Ehrenreich's *Fear of Falling* (1989) is a study of the middle class and their retreat from liberalism. It complements *Nickel and Dimed* on a thematic level, considering the tension between social classes from another angle.
- Jack London wrote *The People of the Abyss* (1903) after spending several months investigating slum conditions in London's East End. A work of journalism very similar to *Nickel and Dimed*, it serves as a useful contrast to Ehrenreich's investigative technique and style and is an illuminating historical document of the poor from another time and culture.
- *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), by George Orwell, was written from a similar desire to examine the plight of London's poor at the time. After examining the living conditions of the lower class, Orwell devotes the second half of his book to socialism as an ideal and how it compares to the reality of socialism in his times.
- Along with London and Orwell's works, John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1961) is the book most often compared to *Nickel and Dimed*. It describes how Griffin dyed his skin black and experienced firsthand what it was like to be an African American in the racially segregated South.

Topics for Discussion

Do you agree with the author's premise that it is nearly impossible to live on minimum wage? Why or why not?

The writer's first person narrative helps bring us closer to the subject. However, this "diary" style writing brings up the question of objectivity. Think of three areas in which the author's experience might be very different from those of other minimum wage workers. Discuss why you think her observations might be questionable.

How do you feel about the author's admission that she has smoked marijuana? Why do you think she waited to discuss this until later in the book?

Why does the author choose not to discuss the skin color and facial features of many of her coworkers?

Do you agree with Ehrenreich's belief that America needs a higher minimum wage? How about a social safety net for the poor?

What purpose does humor serve in this book?

Although it talks in depth about a serious issue, is "Nickel and Dimed" fun to read? Why or why not?

This book has gained a great deal of critical acclaim. Why do you think this is so?

If you were (or are) forced to live on minimum wage, what strategies would you use for maintaining a home and decent lifestyle?

The author reveals many theories about why managers are given so much power to intrude on the personal lives of minimum wage employees. How do you feel about these theories?

Imagine if more and more minimum wage workers lose their homes and are unable to feed themselves. In your opinion, will this have any impact on America as a nation?

Which character that Ehrenreich meets touches you or interests you most deeply?

- Compare *Nickel and Dimed* as a work of investigative journalism to another well-known work where the author goes underground to experience the truth of a disenfranchised group, such as Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* or John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*. How does Ehrenreich compare as an investigator in the commitment to getting to the truth? What does each investigator do to become a part of the group? How does assuming this new role change the way each author understands society? In what way does this new role change the understanding of self and identity? Write a three-page report comparing and contrasting these two books.

- Research the history of welfare in the United States from President Roosevelt's Social Security Act of 1935 to the 1996 reform and the present. What are the major landmarks in this history? What changes have occurred, and what brought about those changes? What assumptions seem to underlie welfare in each stage of its history? Based on your research, what future do you see for welfare in America? What role can welfare play in our nation? What role should it play? Create a detailed timeline that not only measures the landmarks in welfare, but notes possible social assumptions and political concerns that informed them.
- How are minimum-wage workers portrayed today? Consider as wide a range of depictions as you can, from news to movies to music to video games. Are there any patterns in terms of race, gender, or work situation? Are there any specific character traits given to minimum-wage workers that set them apart from other people? What communities or settings are they found in and, if a particular example has a plot, what is their role in the story? Create a five-minute presentation of two specific depictions that includes visual aids and, when helpful, plot synopses.
- Pick a group that you would like to investigate by immersing yourself into its world, as Ehrenreich did with minimum-wage workers. How would you go about performing a similar investigation? What would you need to change—or hide—about yourself to be able to immerse into the group? What methods would you employ to get the information? Write a one-page investigation plan that lays out your investigative preparations in detail, along with what you hope to accomplish through your investigation.

Further Study

Bergdahl, Michael, *What I Learned From Sam Walton: How to Compete and Thrive in a Wal-Mart World*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004.

Though oriented to readers of business advice, this book is highly instructive in seeing Ehrenreich's story from a different perspective. In business terms, it discusses the success of Wal-Mart and what Bergdahl feels companies should do to compete against them.

Featherstone, Liza, *Selling Women Short: The Landmark Battle for Workers' Rights at Wal-Mart*, Basic Books, 2004.

Using the landmark Dukes v. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. class action suit as her focus, Featherstone examines the Wal-Mart culture and the inequities allegedly perpetuated within the company toward women and others.

Hays, Sharon, *Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

Combining in-depth arguments with anecdotal stories about actual welfare offices and clients, Hays looks at the impact of welfare reform legislation on women and their families.

Newman, Katherine S., *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City*, Knopf, 1999.

Refuting the idea of an unmotivated and lazy lower class, Newman examines in depth the lives of the urban working poor. She interviews workers who describe the specific difficulties faced when work is hampered by outside concerns such as crime, drug abuse, and poor schooling.

Shulman, Beth, *The Betrayal of Work: How Low-Wage Jobs Fail 30 Million Americans and Their Families*, New Press, 2003.

Using statistics and personal stories, Shulman looks at the lives of workers in low-paying jobs, examining a wide range of occupations and experiences.

Bibliography

Early, Steve, "Prole Like Me," in the *Nation*, Vol. 272, No. 23, June 11, 2001, p. 52.

Ehrenreich, Barbara, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, Metropolitan Books, 2001.

Hays, Sharon, *Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 8.

Klein, Julia, Review of *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, in the *American Prospect*, Vol. 12, No. 13, July 30, 2001, p. 43.

Ogyn, Kya, "Can You Live On It?," in *Off Our Backs*, Vol. 35, Jan-Feb 2005, pp. 44-46.

Scott, Joni, Review of *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, in the *Humanist*, Vol. 61, No. 5, September-October 2001, p. 40.

Sherman, Scott, "Class Warrior: Barbara Ehrenreich's Singular Crusade," in *Columbia Journalism Review*, Vol. 42, No. 4, November-December 2003, pp. 34-42.

Yager, Jane, "Poverty: A National Emergency," in *Dollars & Sense*, January-February 2002, pp. 42-44.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Novels for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331–3535