

Nickel and dimed: on (not) getting by in america

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Barbara Ehrenreich's, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, is a book that strives to change the way America perceives its working poor. Achieving the American Dream can be difficult, if not impossible for many people with stumbling blocks and obstacles along the way as portrayed in *Nickel and Dimed*, due to the cost of living in contrast to the wage of low or middle class earners. *Nickel and Dimed* is essentially a journal of the time spent by the author, with her identity and PhD concealed, working in order to discover whether she could support a basic life style from earning minimum wage.

This book shows how things such as stress in the work place, lack of proper benefits, cost of housing and how what was merely an experiment for Ehrenreich, is a real detriment for many others. In her experiment Ehrenreich finds cheap housing and works various minimum wage jobs paying between \$6-\$7 an hour all while assessing her findings. In working as a waitress in Florida, a maid in Maine, and a sales clerk in Minnesota, Ehrenreich soon discovers that even the "lowliest" of occupations require exhausting and strenuous efforts rewarded by a wage that barely covers living expenses and everyday costs.

As a native resident to Florida, Ehrenreich doesn't venture far from home to begin research. She quickly realizes the harsh variation from her comfortable middle-class lifestyle and her new predicament. She finds work waiting tables at two restaurants and as a housekeeper working only once a week at a hotel. She experiences the invisibility of many low-wage workers when her face "goes unnoticed" in her native town(11). Similarly, her name is not

usually used; when people want her attention, they use generic female condescending terms such as "blondie" or "baby" (12).

Ehrenreich soon discovers that this must be the suppressive behavior received by many low-wage workers. She goes on to describe working for insensitive and arrogant managers who feed from the power of their higher positions. From her own experience, Ehrenreich learns that her work and time are not valued the same way theirs is. She and her fellow workers experience humiliation, disrespect, and indignities as managers control workers by having them spend time on unnecessary tasks, do not allow them to talk to each other, and do not trust them within the workplace. She observes how her fellow co-workers often avoid talking of money issues.

They do not have enough money to lead a somewhat normal life, none the less a recreational one. They merely shun topics of conversation relating to movies or shopping or even housing situations. "It's hard to get my co-workers talking about their living situations, because housing is the principle source of disruption in their lives. " "This job shows no sign of being financially viable" (25). Before luckily finding a residence in a trailer park, Ehrenreich makes the discovery that, "unless I want to start using my car as a residence, I have to find a second or alternative job" (28).

She learns that if this were her actual life, she could not make ends meet on one job alone. After moving out of the trailer park, she chooses to migrate to Maine. With the majority of the people being white, she suspected that it would be easier for her to assimilate into the working poor. She becomes a dietary aid at a nearby Residential Facility and also a maid for a large corporation. With her days starting at around 4:45 am and her

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unexceptional pay, her days are filled with no more than work and little sleep. Unable to find cheap enough housing, she has to lodge in nearby hotels that end up being overpriced and many times unacceptable.

During her employment at The Maids, Ehrenreich soon becomes taken advantage of when her breaks are even taken from her. " In my interview I has been promised a thirty-minute lunch break, but this turns out to be a five-minute pit stop at a convenience store" (77). With such an inadequate amount of nourishment, many of the other employees found it hard to carry out a nine hour day full of strenuous activity. Many of these minimum wage jobs do not include proper benefits such as healthcare. During her work here, many of Ehrenreich's fellow co-workers are hurt on the job, yet are disregarded by the boss.

With help from Ehrenreich, one employee was actually able to go home after hurting her ankle on the job. " Ted sent me home" as if this were some arbitrary injustice" (114). Although sent home, any compensation for this injury would be not be given. Many of the employees receive inadequate treatment and are taken advantage of by Ted, their boss. Referred to as " pimp" by Ehrenreich because of his foul personality, total disregard for his employees and his main concern being profit . The question as to why these women stick around a job like this baffled Ehrenreich. She realizes that many of these women seek approval from Ted. My coworkers neediness... stems from chronic deprivation" (117). Always being " reamed out" (116) in turn manipulates these poor women into thinking they're worth the wages they make. Television does not help either. " It is easy for a fast-foodworker or a nurse's aide to conclude that she is an anomaly-the only one" (117) when TV

is filled with sitcoms and dramas depicting people and their abundance of money. " The poor have disappeared, not only from its political rhetoric but also its intellectual endeavors" (118). Ehrenreich also experiences much discrimination while working at the maids service.

While in a local store, she goes unacknowledged due to the green and yellow uniform representing " prison clothes on a fugitive" (100). People automatically assume your position in life is to cater to others, putting you at the bottom of the barrel. While working two jobs, Ehrenreich still resorts to resource centers which offer free meals to those who are eligible. This proves that there may be help for the hardworking poor, yet you better be determined and ready to search for such assistance. On her last trip, Ehrenreich ventures to Minnesota. It was almost impossible for her to find an affordable residence.

Even with the help of an Apartment Search, no explanation or further help was given to Ehrenreich. She was merely told that she should be aware of an affordable housing " crisis. " There needs to be further assistance in helping the working poor find affordable residencies. Research states that in the last few years we have seen a steady decline in the number of affordable apartments nationwide. She lands a job at a nearby Wal-Mart and Menards. She soon discovers how hard these employees work for their money and how dedicated they are. With an initial pay of \$7 an hour and the lure that in two years it might be raised to \$7. 5, the options are not optimistic. During this job, no one is allowed to be caught talking to one another, or " stealing time. "

Ehrenreich is surprised to see hard-working women of mature years " dodging behind a clothing rack to avoid a twenty-six-year-old management twerp" (181). Many bosses in these kinds of jobs, love to hold power over others and feed off the authority. In one instance an employee was denied the use of her discount in order to buy a clearance t-shirt with a stain on it. Ehrenreich goes on to explain that " you know you're not paid enough when you can't afford to buy a clearance Wal-Mart shirt with a stain on it" (181).

Employees are also not receiving pay for overtime hours they are pressured to work. This along with the inadequate health insurance gives Ehrenreich the idea to start a union. The union idea eventually falls through the cracks due to lack of enthusiasm from fellow coworkers. After experiencing many low -wage jobs, Ehrenreich comes to the conclusion that " nothing happens, or rather the same thing always happens, which amounts, day after day, to nothing" (186). What is the point of working so hard when " you don't make enough to save" (191) let alone to have any luxuries? This book has changed definitely changed the way I feel about the poor.

The stereotype that the poor are poor because they are lazy is not completely untrue. Obviously many of these women whom Ehrenreich worked with held two jobs or more and were still financially unstable. That also goes along with the myth that if you work hard you will succeed. These are the hardest working individuals, yet still remain poor. As long as the rich are a part of the market and economy, the poor will never benefit. When it comes to the common understanding that a job will be the ticket out of poverty and the only thing holding back the welfare recipient is their unwillingness to go out and get one is very misleading.

Ehrenreich held two jobs in several instances and could only afford to wear second hand clothing. She also had to visit the resource center to receive free meals. Even though this project was hard for Ehrenreich, it is harder to imagine the lives of most women who not only work as hard as Ehrenreich did, but also have to go home and chase around toddlers and raise a family. I don't believe we give enough credit to the working poor. I agree with Ehrenreich when she states that " something is wrong when a person in good health who owns a car can barely support herself by the sweat of her brow" (199).

I always wondered why workers who were not getting paid enough never looked for other job opportunities. I am aware now that this along with many other issues are beyond their control. The poorer people are the more constrained their mobility is. Usually relying on someone else to pick you up and drop you off pretty much limits you to one place of employment. This book has changed my thinking in so many ways, mostly that the problems that limit their progression are out of their reach. The government needs to step in and provide for more assistance and aids to help the situation. Just based on the difficulty Ehrenreich had when trying to locate food shelter that would feed her disappointed me greatly. It is unbelievable that it is expected from a poor person, who has limited money and resources, to do that much work in order to find food or even shelter, let alone proper daycare. Everyone should read this book in order to grasp the harsh realities of the working poor. Ehrenreich, Barbara. Nickel and Dimed On (Not) Getting By In America. 1st edition. New York, NY: Holt Paperbacks, 2002. 1-193. Print. (Ehrenreich 1-193)