

# On (not) getting by in america

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



Imagination and research are the two important tools for a successful writing assignment. Research can be academic as well as practical. If the author/authoress is willing to live through the life of the subject matter of the book, and possesses the writing skill, chances are that it becomes a great book. The 'suffering' of women in any segment of the society is always something special—discrimination on the basis of gender (sex) as they call it! The modern materialistic civilization, the industrial and internet revolutions have thrown up innovative subjects for a writer. Some comforts and luxuries apart, the total effect of this civilization on the inner world of an individual is devastating.

The standard of living has improved at the cost of standard of life. In the present book, Barbara lives through several self-created miserable and tricky situations, just to know what does it mean to live under such trials and tribulations! It was not necessary for her to put her personal comforts at stake. She is highly qualified and the adage, 'curry for the night is worry for the morning, and tomorrow's bread is not assured from today's labor,' is not applicable to her. Like a true seeker, she decided to get at the truth of the issue, by experiencing it. So, this is the book written by an ex-waitress in Florida, cleaning woman and a nursing home assistant in Maine, the one possessing the Wal-Mart experience, the humiliation of the urine test and what not!

Barbara's jobs hunt.... Getting Ready. So, her experiments with the truth of job-hunting and eventually getting it begin. What happened after a series of rejections, which had nothing to do with her merit for the post applied for as

such is a revelation! She writes, “ My next stop is Winn-Dixie, the supermarket, which turns out to have a particularly onerous application process, featuring a twenty minute “ interview” by computer since, apparently, no human on the premises is deemed capable of representing the corporate point of view.

Do I have anything, such as child care problems, that might make it hard for me to get to work on time? Do I think safety on the job is the responsibility of management? Then popping up cunningly out of the blue: How many dollars' worth of stolen goods have I purchased in the last year? Would I turn in a fellow employee if I caught him stealing? Finally, “ Are you an honest person?”(p. 13, 14)

Ehrenreich has absolute command over the scenes and situations she creates for her and her writing style takes you to the spot of confrontation. The description is so realistic. You feel, as if you are part of the drama. The story is interesting from the beginning to the end, without intermission. One feels sorry about the working conditions and the environment, and the humiliation that one suffers at the foul-mouthed, arrogant bosses. When one thinks that a worker has to spend his entire service life in such uncertain, difficult conditions—it is mind-boggling! And the fact remains that millions are undergoing such onerous ordeal. Suffering has become the badge affixed on them!

The book contains 6 crisp chapters, Introduction: Getting Ready, Serving in Florida, Scrubbing in Maine, Selling in Minnesota, Evaluation and A Reader's

Guide: In the final evaluation, she experiences the academician in her come to give opinion and judgment. She brings the issues like class conflict and power dynamics. She has come out with some startling revelations.

According to her no job is truly " unskilled" Some of the jobs she did had tremendous physical demands, and could damage to health if performed continuously. Her heroic performances had no corresponding rewards, which mean exploitation of labor is the common practice. She writes, " then trick lies in figuring out how to budget your energy so there'll be some left over for the next day"(p. 195). She also comes to the conclusion that multiple jobs is the actual necessity as one can no survive with the returns of one job.

She has no hesitation in saying that the labor class of the lower rungs, whether men or women, are constantly suspected for one reason or the other. The employment tests and questionnaires contained strange enquiries. Her behavior was monitored in Wal-Mart under repressive surveillance by the designated staff both men and women and they were looking for theft, drug abuse, sloth and the like in her.

She describes the different hurdles she had to cross to make both the ends meet, and issues related to luxury were out of question. She found out by experience how, necessity is the mother of invention. There are two options to meet the situation. Either cut down your expenditure, or spend more and also increase your income. When increment was not possible due to so many constraints, some came out with innovative ideas. She saw some co-workers

sleeping in cars, to avoid huge rents, and some report for duty, ignoring their suffering due to back pain, arthritis, etc.

She studies both the stands: The labor force which believes that the Management is the permanent enemy and the Unions should be at permanent war with it! And the Management that thinks innovatively to subvert the well-meaning labor laws passed for the welfare of the workers. She cites an example, when minimum wages were increased, management increased her workload, though it cut her working hours—the net result was that her paycheck showed the same figure.

She made sincere efforts to live on the wages she got—without using her skills as PhD, lecturer or as an author. She makes the observation of an economist and socialist when she says, “ Something is wrong, very wrong, when a single person in good health, a person who in addition possesses a working car, can barely support herself by the sweat of her brow. You don't need a degree in economics to see that wages are too low and rents too high.” (p. 199).

She marvels at the strange working of American democracy. She clearly sees the dictatorship in the workplaces as for workers. Working poor have no other alternative but to submit to the systematic disempowerment on one pretext or other by the Management. “ Someday ... they are bound to tire of getting so little in return and to demand to be paid what they're worth. There'll be a lot of anger when that day comes, and strikes and disruption” (p. 221).

## **Conclusion**

As for the evaluation part of her book, her observations demand attention. As earlier said, what she has written is the experienced research. Her findings are lessons for the economist, the sociologist, the politician, the management and for the union leaders. Solutions to various problems can be worked out. What is required is an attitude of sacrifice and compassion for the sake of the welfare of the needy. That is achievable by the genuine change in the thought process of concerned individuals. When the thought process changes, the action process will also change, hopefully for the better!

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