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Nickel and Dimed

:On (Not) Getting By in America

by

Barbara Ehrenreich

2001



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Laurie Lahey

<http://monkeynote.stores.yahoo.net/index.html>

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

During the course of this investigation Ehrenreich visits three places: Florida, Maine, and Minnesota. She begins her research in Florida because it is close to home. She goes to Maine because there is.....

CHARACTER LIST

Barbara Ehrenreich - Ehrenreich is the author of this work. She attempts to find out if single mothers could make ends meet with low-wage jobs and no Welfare assistance.

Lewis Lapham - Lapham is the editor of *Harper's*, with whom Ehrenreich develops the idea for her investigation.

Gail - Gail is the “middle-aged wiry waitress” from the Hearthside; she is responsible for training Ehrenreich.

Billy - Billy is a cook at the Hearthside. He has a temper and is frequently mean to the female servers.

Lionel - Lionel is the Haitian busboy at the Hearthside.

Timmy - Timmy is the fourteen-year-old white busboy at the Hearthside.

Joan - Joan is the “svelte fortyish hostess” at the Hearthside.....

Many additional characters are outlined in the complete study guide.

SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The author Barbara Ehrenreich wonders if single mothers, who due to recent Welfare reform, whom depend solely on what they can make at low-wage jobs, will be able to survive financially. To answer this question, she decides to survive on low wages in three cities in America.

In the first city, Key West, Ehrenreich works at two different restaurants and as a house keeper in a hotel. She lives in an efficiency and then a trailer park. In Key West, Ehrenreich first learns that there are hidden costs to being poor. She notes that if you cannot afford the security deposit for an apartment, you are forced to live in a hotel—which is ultimately more costly. If you have only a room, you cannot save money by cooking nutritious, cheap food. If you have no health insurance, you end up with significant and costly.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Barbara Ehrenreich was born on August 26, 1941 and is best described as a social critic. She did her undergraduate work at Reed College and then went on to receive the Ph.D. in Biology from The Rockefeller University in New York City. However, instead of pursuing a career in biology, Ehrenreich began a writing career focused on social change. She has written for such publications as *Time*, *The Progressive*,.....

Ehrenreich's works include:

Non-Fiction:

The Uptake, Storage, and Intracellular Hydrolysis of Carbohydrates by Macrophages (with Zanvil Cohn) (1969)

Long March, Short Spring the Student Uprising at Home and Abroad (1969)

The American Health Empire: Power, Profits, and Politics (1971)

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The impetus for this book is the welfare reform that took place in the 1990s. Before welfare reform, welfare money was distributed by a program called “Aid to Families with Dependent Children” (AFDC). However, during the 1980s and the 1990s, this program received much criticism for too freely distributing money to those who did not really need it. Some people believed that many welfare recipients were.....

GENRE

Nickel and Dimed is a non-fiction work that can be described as an ethnography or investigative journalism. “Ethnography” is a scholarly term for the anthropological study of human cultures. Ethnographies are based on fieldwork, in which the ethnographer collects data through first-hand experience.

A less-scholarly way of describing this research is as investigative journalism. When a journalist undertakes this type of a project, he or she typically works undercover gathering

CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND NOTES

Introduction

Summary

Ehrenreich tells the reader that she developed the idea for this book over an expensive lunch with the editor of *Harper's*, Lewis Lapham. Ehrenreich wondered how unskilled workers survive on such meager incomes; particularly, she was interested in how the 4 million women who were about to be booted into the labor market by welfare reform were going to make it at \$6 or \$7 an hour. Ehrenreich was not thrilled about undertaking the task herself. She remembers that even in the 1960s, when her fellow college students sought jobs in factories to organize the working class, she was not interested. Ehrenreich has witnessed various loved ones pull themselves out of the misery that can be associated with low-wage work. Ehrenreich decides to consider the project a scientific experiment, as she has a Ph.D. in biology. She learns that in 1998, 30% of the workforce worked for \$8 an hour or less. She cannot imagine how these people survive, and wants to uncover their tricks.

Ehrenreich decides on some rules for her experiment:

1. she can not fall back on any skills derived from her education or usual work
2. she has to take the highest-paying job she is offered and do her best to keep it;
3. she has to take the cheapest accommodations she can find, with a reasonable consideration for safety and privacy.

Ehrenreich says that while she tried to stick to the rules, at some point she broke them all. She decides to present herself as a drastically stripped-down version of who she really is: a divorced homemaker reentering the workforce after many years. Regarding education, she says that she had three years of college at her real-life alma mater.

She also gives herself limits to what she is willing to endure:

1. she will always have a car
2. she will never allow herself to be homeless
3. she will never go hungry.

Ehrenreich realizes that she will never *really* experience poverty, since this is only an experiment for her. Moreover, she has the advantage over many low-wage workers in that she is a native English speaker and she owns a car. Her aim is simply to see if she can match income to expenses as the poor try to do every day.

Notes

The introduction to this book begins on an ironic note—while eating at an over-priced restaurant, Ehrenreich considers how women entering the workforce due to welfare reform are going to make it at the dangerously low-wages available to them. Ehrenreich proposes an old-fashioned journalistic approach to answering the question. This notion of investigative journalism is certainly not new, but it is not typical of academics. A relatively recent example of this type of writing is Tony Horowitz's *Confederates in the Attic* (1998), in which Horowitz experiences what it is like to be a Civil War re-enactor along with visiting many places important to the War in order to uncover its legacy. However, Horowitz is an experienced journalist who has undertaken this sort of task before.

From the outset, Ehrenreich admits that she will never truly know what it is like to be impoverished and makes it clear that she is only trying to learn if she can match her income to her expenses. In making this statement, Ehrenreich avoids any potential criticism regarding authenticity.

CHAPTER 1

Summary

Ehrenreich begins her experiment in Key West, Florida, where she finds an efficiency apartment for \$500 a month. As Ehrenreich applies for numerous jobs, she learns about the low-wage-job application process. These applications involve many multiple-choice questions and a urine test. When she does not hear back from any of the jobs after three days, she begrudgingly applies for a waitressing position. Ehrenreich is hired by the "Hearthside," which, like the names of those she meets along the way, has been changed. Ehrenreich will work at the Hearthside for two weeks from 2:00 in the evening until 10:00 at night for \$2.43 an hour, plus tips. Gail trains Ehrenreich on the ins and outs of waitressing; Ehrenreich feels supremely incapable and incompetent. Ehrenreich gets to know some of the regular customers and feels compelled to do the best job possible. Ehrenreich bonds with her coworkers and comes to like many of them.

During her time in the restaurant business, Ehrenreich comes to despise management. She finds that while she must constantly be working, doing anything at all but sitting still, her supervisors are able to sit for hours on end. Managers and assistant managers are to make sure the restaurant makes money; they frequently lack compassion for their employees and for customers. Ehrenreich's other complaint about the restaurant business is that the pay is not financially viable. She offers a survey of each of the non-management employees and shows how they are barely able to survive on their incomes and how most of them will not be able to continue financially for very long.

Ehrenreich uncovers the special costs that the poor encounter. She notes that if you cannot afford the security deposit for an apartment, you are forced to live in a hotel—which is ultimately more costly. If you have only a room, you cannot save money by cooking nutritious, cheap food. If you have no

STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

When examining a piece of non-fiction writing, the reader should always be concerned with methodology. An author's methodology is the way he or she constructs the argument. This includes the sources the author uses as well as the way he or she presents the argument—what evidence the writer includes and the order in which the evidence is presented. The main reason for evaluating methodology is to consider the author's methodological assumptions and to decide for oneself if the argument is convincing.

Barbara Ehrenreich has decided to include three case studies, which she has undertaken herself, to prove that it would be virtually impossible for a single mother and her children to survive on a.....

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS

Title: *Nickel and Dimed*

Author: Barbara Ehrenreich

Date Published: 2001

Genre: Non-Fiction

VOCABULARY

Svelte- slim, slender; graceful outline

Transgression- violation of a rule or law

Rebuke- to reprimand.....

QUOTATIONS - MEMORABLE QUOTES

1.) "They don't cut you no slack. You give and you give, and they take."

Gail makes this statement in Chapter 1 about management (p 22).

2.) "That was no kind of answer. Why did he have to be funny like that?"

Carlie asks Ehrenreich this question in Chapter 1 after a maintenance worker tells her that his name is Peter Pan (p 44).....

Memorable Quotes Quiz

1. "They don't cut you no slack. You give and you give, and they take."
2. "That was no kind of answer. Why did he have to be funny like that?".....

Memorable Quotes Answer Key

1. H 2. J 3. B 4. C 5. F 6. A 7. I 8. D 9. G 10. E

STUDY QUESTIONS - MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUIZ

1. The impetus for Ehrenreich's investigation is:
 - A. She feels guilty for never joining her classmates in the 1960s who helped organize workers
 - B. The 4 million women about to enter the workforce due to welfare reform
 - C. She needs to write a dissertation to get her Ph.D.
2. What is the aim of Ehrenreich's investigation?
 - A. To see if she can match her income to her expenses as a low-wage worker
 - B. To understand the fear and anxiety of single mothers who work for low wagesTo prove that welfare is unnecessary

ANSWER KEY

1.) B 2.) A 3.) C 4.) A 5.) A 6.) C 7.) B 8.) B 9.) B 10.) C 11.) A 12.) B 13.) A 14.) C 15.) B

ESSAY QUESTIONS - BOOK REPORT TOPICS

Topics for Class Discussion/ In-Class Writing

Introduction

1. Think of another type of "old-fashioned" journalistic project such as this, in which the journalist personally investigates his or her topic. What are the advantages to this type of journalism? What are the disadvantages?

What do you think about the parameters Ehrenreich sets? Do you think someone with her background will really be able to make it in the low-wage world? Would she have been better off interviewing women who really live this lifestyle?.....

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