Nickel and Dimed

: On (Not) Getting By in America

by

Barbara Ehrenreich

2001

MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Laurie Lahey

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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 a virtually all-white low-wage workforce. She chooses Minnesota more or less at random; although finally decides to go because she in under the impression that there is an abundance of jobs and homes there.

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.

Phillip - Phillip is a manager at the Hearthside.

Stu - Stu is a cook at the Hearthside.

Joy - Joy is “a plump, blowsy woman in her early thirties”; she is a manager at Jerry’s.

B.J. - B.J. is the other manager at Jerry’s. She is mean and disliked by the employees.

Nina - Nina is “a tattooed twenty-something” waitress at Jerry’s.

Ellen - Ellen is a waitress who once managed a restaurant in Massachusetts but will not try to manage at Jerry’s because she does not like ordering people around.

Lucy - Lucy is in her fifties and easygoing. She is a waitress at Jerry’s.

George - George is a nineteen-year-old Czech dishwasher at Jerry’s who has been in the country for only a week when Ehrenreich meets him.

Millie - Millie is the housekeeping manager.

Carlotta - Carlotta is a “middle-aged African American woman” who trains Ehrenreich in housekeeping.

Linda - Linda is Ehrenreich’s supervisor at the nursing home in Maine. She is “a kindly-looking woman of about thirty.”

Pete - Pete is one of the cooks at the nursing home. He quickly befriends Ehrenreich, taking cigarette breaks with her in his car.
Ted - Ted is Ehrenreich’s boss at Merry Maids; he owns the franchise where Ehrenreich is employed.

Tammy - Tammy is the office manager at Merry Maids.

Liza - Liza is the leader of the one of the teams Ehrenreich cleans with while working at Merry Maids.

Rosalie - Rosalie is a fellow “maid.” She is fresh from high school, and Ehrenreich pesters her about eating healthy food.

Pauline - Pauline is another Merry Maids employee. She owns her own home, but sleeps on the couch because her grown children and grandchildren live with her and fill up the bedrooms.

Maddy - Maddy, who works for Merry Maids, is “a single mom of maybe twenty-seven or so”; she has difficulties with child care.

Holly - Holly is the leader of another team Ehrenreich cleans with while working at Merry Maids.

Roberta - Roberta is a “bustling platinum-haired woman of sixty or so” who works in personnel at Wal-Mart.

Caroline - Caroline is the aunt of Ehrenreich’s friend. Ehrenreich talks with her about what it is really like to live a low-wage lifestyle.

Todd - Todd conducts the group interview at Mountain Air.

Melissa - Melissa works with Ehrenreich in ladies’ wear. She has only been at Wal-Mart for a few weeks longer than Ehrenreich.

Ellie - Ellie is “[g]ray-faced and fiftyish.” She is another Wal-Mart employee.

Howard - Howard is an assistant manager at Wal-Mart. Ehrenreich is not fond of him because he is typical of management.

Rhoda - Rhoda is a “bossy and self-satisfied” Wal-Mart employee.

Isabelle - Isabelle supervises Ehrenreich at Wal-Mart.

**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 health problems. On a particularly rough day, Ehrenreich walks off the job and never returns.

Next, Ehrenreich moves to Maine because of the virtually all-white low-wage workforce. Here, she lives in a cottage and works for a cleaning service during the week and at a nursing home on the weekends. An important
Lesson that Ehrenreich learns in Maine is that there is little assistance for the working poor. She tries to get some sort of assistance and encounters rude people who are willing to do little for her.

The final place Ehrenreich lives is Minnesota. Here she works at Wal-Mart. In Minnesota, Ehrenreich has the most difficulty finding housing. She eventually moves into a hotel, which is much too expensive for her budget—although she has no other safe choices. Ehrenreich comes close to organizing a union at Wal-Mart, but leaves before anything materializes.

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, New York Times, Mother Jones, The Atlantic Monthly, Ms., The New Republic, The Atlantic Monthly, Z Magazine, In These Times,* and *Salon.com.* Ehrenreich has also taught a graduate writing seminar at The University of California Berkeley. In addition to essays, Ehrenreich has written fiction and non-fiction books.

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)
*Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (with Deirdre English) (1972)
*Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness* (with Deirdre English) (1973)
*For Her Own Good: 100 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (with Deirdre English) (1978)
*Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (1989)
*The Mean Season* (with Fred Block, Richard A. Cloward, and Frances Fox Piven) (1987)
*The Worst Years of Our Lives: Irreverent Notes from a Decade of Greed* (1990)
*Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By In America* (2001)
*Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream* (2005)

**Fiction:**
*Kipper’s Game* (1994)

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 cheating the system by having more children to receive more money, or not working as hard as they could.

In 1996 President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act of 1996. This welfare reform bill changed many aspects of welfare. One important change was the time limit imposed on welfare recipients—someone could only collect welfare for five years. The AFDC was replaced by “Temporary Assistance for Needy Families” (TANF) and supplemented with the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which attempts to reduce or even eliminate taxes paid by low-income workers.

**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 first-hand information. While ethnography seeks to evaluate human cultures, investigative journalism may describe broader phenomena that do not necessarily center on human beings.

It is important to note the differences between non-fiction writing such as *Nickel and Dimed* and novels. A novel is a fictional narrative in which literary elements such as exposition, rising action, climax, denouement, and characterization are essential elements. *Nickel and Dimed* is an account of true events and does not contain the same literary elements. However, the reader should be aware that there are fictive elements to many non-fiction works, because the author must re-create scenes and decide how he or she wants to frame the data.

**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 health insurance, you end up with significant and costly health problems. After two weeks, Ehrenreich realizes she will have to get a second job.

Ehrenreich picks up a second waitressing job at Jerry’s. Jerry’s is a disaster: the kitchen is a mess, the bathroom in inadequately equipped, and there is no break room because there are no breaks. Ehrenreich is unable to work at both the Hearthside and Jerry’s, so she quits the Hearthside because she will be able to make more money at Jerry’s.
Ehrenreich decides to move closer to Key West to save gas money. She moves into a small and uncomfortable trailer in a trailer park. At Jerry’s, Ehrenreich experiences the numerous problems that arise between employees and the workplace. The bar becomes off-limits because a waitress becomes impaired. Another time, a Dishwasher is accused of stealing.

After a month of waitressing, Ehrenreich gets a housekeeping job in a hotel. At the job she makes $6.10 an hour, but only lasts for one day. Ehrenreich spends her day with Carlie, who is responsible for training her. As they move from room to room, they watch soap operas on television. That afternoon at Jerry’s, Ehrenreich has a particularly awful day. She has four tables with some demanding customers; she is tired and sleep deprived. When Joy yells at her, Ehrenreich decides to leave. She does not quit or ask permission; she just leaves. Ehrenreich turns her trailer over to Gail and says goodbye to Key West.

Notes
In this chapter, Ehrenreich begins to experience first-hand what it is like to live on low wages. Although she is not “really” a low-wage worker, she realizes there is not much difference between someone who is pretending to live as a waitress and someone who is waitressing. She experiences exhaustion and the aches and pains that come with being on her feet all day long. She becomes a first-hand witness to those whose lives truly are desperate because of their financial situations.

Ehrenreich is engaging in ethnographic research for this book, which, in loose terms, means she is undertaking fieldwork in order to make observations about human cultures, or human activities. Anthropology, the discipline perhaps most familiar with ethnography, raises questions about the “participant-observer.” The participant-observer is someone who is part of a community while simultaneously attempting to observe the community. There are various problems that might arise from this situation, including losing scientific (or academic) objectivity. The reader should consider that Ehrenreich seems to become personally invested in some of people she is observing. One might consider how her role as participant-observer affects her evaluation of those she meets, particularly the management versus non-management.

CHAPTER 2
Summary
Ehrenreich moves to Maine next because of the large number of white, English-speaking people in the low-wage work-force, where she notes there is an abundance of work available. Ehrenreich begins her stay in a Motel 6, which becomes her base from which to seek employment and more-permanent housing. Ehrenreich learns about housing in Old Orchard Beach for $65 a week. However, when she sees the deplorable, probably illegal living conditions, she decides to pass. After numerous disappointing attempts to secure housing, Ehrenreich finds a cottage for $120 a week and decides to take it. She realizes if she spent more time looking she may have found something cheaper, but she could not afford to continue paying $59 a night for a hotel room.

Ehrenreich applies for many jobs in warehouse and nursing-home work, manufacturing, and even at Goodwill. She encounters more “opinion surveys,” which try to gauge her potential as an employee. She is surprised to learn that jobs in Portland do not pay any better than in Key West. She finds this startling because logic holds that if the supply of labor is low relative to demand, wages should rise. Yet, this is not the case. Ehrenreich gets a job at “Merry Maids,” a house-cleaning service, for $6.65 an hour. She also gets a weekend job at a nursing home for $7 an hour.

Ehrenreich finds that serving the nursing-home patients their meals is easy compared with waitressing in Key West. The worst part is cleaning up after the meals, which involves physically demanding labor. For entertainment, Ehrenreich spends a Saturday night at Deliverance church at a tent revival.

When Ehrenreich is finally able to move into her cottage, she notes that it is smaller than she remembers. However, she is a minority in the Blue Haven community because she lives alone. Most people are crowded
into the tiny cottages with various family members. During her first day at the maid service, Ehrenreich is subjected to various videos which instruct her in the Merry Maid cleaning methods and rules. She learns, by overhearing, that the maid service charges its customers $25 an hour, although it only pays its employees $6.65 an hour. The average independent cleaning person in the area makes $15 an hour.

The maid work is grueling. The women often clean the homes of wealthy families who have little regard for the back-breaking work the women undertake—only once is Ehrenreich offered a drink. Furthermore, the company demands that women embrace ridiculous cleaning methods, which are not always conducive to cleaning well. For example, they use only three rags throughout the whole house. Ehrenreich does not understand why she must clean floors on her hands and knees when a mop would do the same thing. She also realizes that the 3:30 quitting time she was promised is a myth. She usually does not return to the office until 4:30 or 5:00.

Soon after beginning the maid service job, Ehrenreich gets a terrible rash all over her body. Ehrenreich wonders how Ted will react to her rash, since his motto is “working through it” when it comes to illness. Ted tells her that she must be allergic to the latex gloves and that she will be fine to work. Ehrenreich is so tormented by her rash that she breaks the rules and phones a dermatologist from Key West who calls in a prescription for her.

Ehrenreich considers her ability to keep up physically with the other maids who are much younger than she. She realizes that this says less about her than it does about them: she has had a lifetime of healthy eating, good medical care, and exercise. Ehrenreich describes how she has never hired a cleaning service because she finds the idea repugnant. She does not want to have the type of relationship with another human being. She describes, in detail, the many disgusting things she encounters cleaning other people’s homes.

In the fall, Ehrenreich is continuously assigned to Holly’s team. Holly is visibly unwell; she is pale and thin. Ehrenreich suggests that she and Marge, the other woman on the team, take the more demanding tasks on a day when Holly looks particularly ill; Marge does not readily agree. Holly refuses her offer. Holly confides that she thinks she’s pregnant. She has been very weak and did not want to go to work, but her husband made her come. Later, at another house, Ehrenreich drops a pot onto a fishbowl—sending fish, shattered glass, and marbles in every direction. Surprisingly, no one, not even Ted, gets mad.

Ehrenreich continues to glean more lessons about what it’s like to be poor in America. She notices that people in public (grocery stores, convenience stores) are usually repulsed by her when she is dirty from maid work. Ehrenreich encounters a temporary financial setback due to the money she had to pay for her rash medicine and a higher rent than expected for the first week because it was still tourist season. She decides to see what services are available for the poor. Ehrenreich learns that many of the services are only available during working hours, which is not helpful to the working poor. When she finally is able to get assistance, the people she deals with are suspicious and condescending. She obtains a voucher for groceries; though she can only choose from a very limited supply.

One day while cleaning a home, Holly hurts her ankle. Ehrenreich tells Holly that she can’t work on the ankle, but all Holly will do is call Ted. Ehrenreich listens as Holly apologizes to Ted. Ehrenreich takes the phone from Holly and tells Ted that she does not like the way he treats his employees; Ted only tells her to calm down. Holly continues to clean. On the car ride back to the office, Ehrenreich is surprised to learn that the women are not aware of the abundance of jobs available in the area. Ehrenreich inadvertently insults them when she mentions that anyone could pass the test they needed to take to join Merry Maids. She realizes that perhaps possessing the literacy to complete the test is an achievement for some.

Ehrenreich is astounded when Ted does not fire her, but gives her a raise. He apologetically tries to explain that he is not a bad guy. Meanwhile, Pauline sadly tells Ehrenreich that it is her last day, after two years. She is upset that Ted did not say anything about it to her. Ehrenreich wonders why Ted’s approval means so much to the women. On the last day, Ehrenreich “outs” herself as a Ph.D. writing a book. She asks the women how they
feel working in rich people’s homes while they barely make enough to survive. One woman says it motivates her to work hard. Another says she does not want that kind of stuff anyhow.

**Notes**
In this chapter Ehrenreich experiences low-wage work in a community that is virtually all-white and English-speaking. She is most surprised to learn that even though there are an abundance of jobs, the wages are the same as in Key West, where fewer jobs are available. Moreover, she is shocked that the women she meets do not realize how easily they could find other employment.

Yet, Ehrenreich makes the important observation that switching jobs is not always feasible in the low-wage world. Many people pay their rent weekly; many jobs hold the first week’s pay; many of the workers she meets have many other people depending on them. An advantage to Ehrenreich’s first-hand experience in the workforce is that she learns how grueling and exhausting the work can be. It is possible that people are simply too tired to look elsewhere for more gainful employment.

Ehrenreich also realizes that much of the assistance available to the poor is controlled by agencies that assume people with low incomes do not work. When she finally is able to find assistance, she is treated unkindly. When she ventures out after work, Ehrenreich also learns how the poor are looked down upon in public places.

The reader should be careful to note that while Ehrenreich is recounting information that did take place, she is still reconstructing what happened. Because she did not record the things people said to her she cannot be expected to remember exactly what they said, verbatim. Thus, anytime she presents dialogue it is her version of the conversation and is subject to her memory, her biases, and her agenda. Moreover, Ehrenreich cannot recount everything that happened to her in every place she went. Therefore, she must decide what she thinks is important to tell the reader. Although this book is not a novel (a work of fiction) it is constructed. The reader should pay attention to how Ehrenreich describes the people she meets, what words she places in their mouths, what she chooses to tell us, and what she might possibly be leaving out.

**CHAPTER 3**

**Summary**
Ehrenreich chooses Minnesota at whim. After some internet-based research, she is convinced that there will be a comfortable correspondence between rent and wages. Upon arriving in the Twin Cities area, Ehrenreich goes to a friend’s apartment, where she will stay for a few days until she is settled. Her friend is out of town; Ehrenreich is in charge of caring for the friend’s bird.

Ehrenreich wants a new profession while in Minnesota. She thinks she would like retail or factory work. After applying to various Wal-Marts as a divorced housewife re-entering the work force, Ehrenreich realizes that she is unlikely to get hired based on her application alone. From a pay phone in the front of a Wal-Mart, she phones personnel and speaks with Roberta, who tells her that she can offer her a job right as soon as she takes a "survey." Roberta tells Ehrenreich that she has gotten three answers wrong and they must discuss them further. Ehrenreich is able to account for her answers but is worried about the drug test she must take because of a recent "chemical indiscretion."

Next, Ehrenreich applies for employment at Menard’s housewares store. Here, she must take another personality test. After a brief interview, she is told that if she passes the drug test, she can work in plumbing at $8.50 an hour. That weekend, Ehrenreich buys some detox products from GNC in preparation for her impending drug test. That weekend Ehrenreich meets her friend’s aunt, Caroline, a woman who really is living a low-wage life. Caroline, who is barely scraping by, is officially middle-class because she and her husband make close to $40,000 a year. Caroline tells Ehrenreich her story, which involves numerous moves with children in tow. Caroline says she always found a church first because people there will help you find the
services you need as well as a job. Many times, Caroline was homeless; other times she became very ill. When Ehrenreich has to leave, Caroline gives her homemade chicken stew to take with her.

When Ehrenreich goes for her drug test, she thinks about all the time that applying for a job requires. One must complete an application, an interview, and a drug test. The drug test alone takes almost two hours. With high gas prices and the cost of a babysitter for someone with children, finding a job is expensive. Ehrenreich continues the job hunt. She goes for a group interview at an environmental consulting firm, where she is relieved to hear nothing about making people’s lives better (unlike at Wal-Mart, where managers urge employees to think of themselves as humanitarians). However, there is no job for her at Mountain Air after all. Ehrenreich finally finds an apartment at the Clearview Inn; the housing market was much more expensive that she anticipated.

Ehrenreich is called back to Menard’s for orientation. She feels a little overwhelmed in the plumbing department; however, she is shocked to learn that her salary will be $10 an hour. She also goes to Wal-Mart’s orientation, which is scheduled to take 8 hours. Ehrenreich can hardly absorb all the information they give her, and her mind wanders during orientation. Ehrenreich is feeling sleep-deprived and trying to decide if she will work at both stores, or just at Menard’s because of the higher wages. She calls Menard’s to confirm the time she must go in and is told that she will not be making $10 an hour as she was promised. She is angry that they want her to work eleven hours without time and a half. At Wal-Mart, she will only be making $7 an hour, but she decides not to take the job at Menard’s.

Ehrenreich’s room at the Clearview is on the first floor, to her dismay. She thinks the $245 per week rent is too high, and notes that it is more than she will make after taxes at Wal-Mart. However, she hopes to find a weekend job, which should cover the difference. Once she is settled in her room, Ehrenreich becomes nervous about her safety in this new place. She is right off the highway with a curtain that you can see through from the outside. One day she comes home from work to learn she is required to switch rooms because of a sewage problem.

Ehrenreich is placed in ladies’ wear at Wal-Mart and works with Melissa, who is also new. Much of the job involves memorizing the outline of the store so she knows where to return clothes. However, Ehrenreich soon learns that the layout is subject to change. She develops an odd habit of picking at her clothing; although she consciously tries to stop. When Ehrenreich’s shift changes from 10:00 until 6:00 to 2:00 until 11:00, she wonders how she can strategically place her fifteen minute breaks, which will feel much more urgent. Meanwhile, Ehrenreich gets better at her job, but begins to hate the customers.

Ehrenreich moves out of the Clearview and attempts to move into Hopkins Park Plaza. However, the management tells her she has misunderstood and her room will not be ready until next week. She realizes she would not have been able to live there for very long anyhow on her Wal-Mart wages. She wanted to get a second job, but has no control over her Wal-Mart hours, so she is unable to do so. Ehrenreich calls numerous places, but they are all either full or too far away. Finally, she ends up at a hotel. She feels defeated. She attempts to find help from a charitable agency, but comes away with only a box full of fairly useless items, including candy, cookies, and a canned ham.

Ehrenreich feels much better sleeping in the hotel. She stops picking at her clothing. At work, she reaches new levels of speediness and begins to feel better about the customers. She wonders why anyone puts up with the wages they are paid at Wal-Mart. Ehrenreich decides to urge her fellow employees to unionize. She meets new people and discusses her ideas. Some people plan to work somewhere else or return to school. Others share her spirit, but seem unwilling to put the effort into organizing. Then 1,450 local hotel and restaurant employees go on strike. Ehrenreich quits the next day, but she notices some employees pay attention to the local strike. She believes if she had stayed a little longer, she might have been able to help organize a union.
Notes
This chapter focuses on three important aspects of being a low-wage worker, which Ehrenreich has not yet addressed: the costly application process, the perhaps class-ist drug test, and the importance of unionizing.

Ehrenreich realizes that the application process requires a lot of time. It takes her hours to drive to numerous places filling out the actual applications. She spends two hours for one drug test. Moreover, there is the wait period in between filling out the applications, meeting for an interview, taking the drug test, and then waiting for the results. She notes that in addition to the cost of one’s time, there is gas money to consider as well as the price of a babysitter if someone has children.

Ehrenreich takes issue with the drug test. She notes that the only drug which is truly detectable after a reasonable amount of time is marijuana. She thinks this drug is perhaps the most innocuous of those for which potential employees are tested, and thinks the test is an unreasonable predictor for the reliability of future employees.

Finally, and most important to Ehrenreich in this chapter, is the issue of unions. Ehrenreich comes from a proud tradition of unionization, and although she was not interested in helping others unionize during the 1960s, issues of fair employment remain important to her. She frequently wonders why employees put up with unfair working conditions throughout this book. However, this is the first time she considers actively organizing her colleagues.

Ehrenreich realizes in this chapter that low-wage employment for single women with children is not sufficient. As a single woman with no children, Ehrenreich would not have been able to continue her lifestyle without a second job or a husband. Her experiment ends in Minnesota, and it seems that she has effectively answered her initial question of whether or not single women with children would be able to survive without Welfare.

Evaluation
Summary
In this last section, Ehrenreich evaluates her performance as a low-wage employee and her success at obtaining food and shelter. Overall, she thinks she did well as a worker and insists that no job is truly “unskilled.” She gives herself a B or B+. When she turns to the discussion of food and housing, Ehrenreich notes that the poor cannot compete with the rich on the housing market. While food is relatively inflation-proof, the cost of housing has sky-rocketed. Meanwhile, wages have not increased based on demand—at least not in a way that adequately accommodates life’s basic necessities.

Ehrenreich notes that there are vital problems with the way government determines who is in poverty as well as the way in which the public sector aids these people. Ehrenreich argues that the laws of economics do not always apply to low-wage workers because they often are restricted geographically, are fraught with the anxiety of entering a new job environment, and do not have ample information available to them.

Ehrenreich considers why low-wage employees do not stick up for themselves, and can only offer observations. In her experiences she noticed workers were kept in line by the power of management, the requirement for employees to surrender their self-respect, as well as a variety of methods designed to directly control employees. Ehrenreich states that The Economic Policy Institute deemed that a “living wage” for a parent and two children is $30,000 and year, or $14 an hour. This is a bare-bones estimate, which does not allow the family money for entertainment or even nutritionally-balanced meals. However, Ehrenreich notes that many employees are making well below this hourly rate; many companies are not able to pay more.

Ehrenreich notes that politicians do very little about the conditions of low-wage workers because Democrats do not want to find flaws in a period of prosperity and Republicans are glad to be rid of “welfare-as-we-know-it.” Ehrenreich points out that we actually know very little about what has happened to former welfare-recipients.
since 1996 because welfare reform legislation failed to establish a way to monitor people’s post-welfare conditions. Ehrenreich says that poverty is hard to grasp since it is typically associated with unemployment; thus, when employment is up people assume poverty is down. However, if one reads the newspapers, even in a time of high employment, there is evidence of poverty in articles that discuss shortages in food banks (despite a high-level of donations), or overcrowded shelters.

Ehrenreich ends by saying that she believes someday low-wage workers will tire of their lifestyles. They will demand higher wages; they will strike.

**Notes**

In this final chapter, Ehrenreich provides an overall analysis of her project and draws together the observations she has made throughout the book. Essentially, she finds she did a good job, but that the low-wage lifestyle is unfair and impractical. She is convinced that low-wage workers will not put up with these conditions for much longer.

This chapter was written before the period of economic prosperity in the 1990s came to an end. Ehrenreich notes that Democrats did not want to discuss welfare because they did not want to find flaws in the economic bliss they took credit for creating. However, she fails to note that Democrats and Republicans are strangely tied together in the history of welfare. Welfare was instituted by the Nixon administration, which was Republican. The *Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act of 1996* (the source of this welfare reform) was signed into law by a Democratic president (Clinton) and the phrase she quotes and associated with the Republicans (“welfare-as-we-know-it”) was most-famously stated by Clinton in a State of the Union Address. Interestingly, in the 2004 election the concept of a “living wage” became a central issue.

Ehrenreich does a great job of showing the necessity of reforming low-wage employment and that single mothers would have a very difficult time raising children on the wages available to them. However, Ehrenreich’s arguments might be more convincing if she did a more thorough job of addressing the benefits (and drawbacks) of the Earned Income Tax Credit, if she considered what five years of welfare assistance would mean in a low-wage household as well as how social programs such as Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) may (or may not) help with the burden of raising children.

**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 as undertaken herself, to prove that it would be virtually impossible for a single mother and her children to survive on a low-wage salary with no additional aid. She frames her experience with secondary literature, statistics, and newspaper articles. Therefore, Ehrenreich makes the assumption that her personal experience is a valid way of estimating what a low-wage lifestyle is like. She assumes that in framing her experience with other literature, she will bolster her argument.

Ehrenreich could have presented her evidence topically; for example, she could have discussed each of the single mothers she met along the way, each housing experience she had, each manager she met. However, she presents her evidence chronologically. She probably does this because it better develops her narrative style—she recounts her journey as a story. Ehrenreich also could have presented herself as a scholar who was writing a book and conducted interviews. However, her story becomes more provocative if she goes undercover. She is
also able to present a more vibrant narrative if she can populate the story with her own impressions, aches and pains, and difficulties.

**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
- **Insurrection** - revolt against authority or organized government
- **Loathsome** - offensive, arousing disgust
- **Altruistic** - selfless, concerned with the wellbeing of others
- **Interject** - to insert between other elements
- **Infraction** - a violation
- **Glossolalia** - a meaningless speech
- **Regress** - to move backward, literally or figuratively
- **Metronomic** - unvarying, mechanical rhythm
- **Decorum** - propriety, appropriate behavior

**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).

3.) “You don’t know an eye-opener from a traditional?”

Joy yells this at Ehrenreich in Chapter 1 after she returns food orders to the kitchen (p 48).

4.) “See how she’s working around the vase? That’s an accident waiting to happen.”

Ted says this to Ehrenreich in Chapter 2 while she is watching training videos for Merry Maids (p 74).

5.) “I get dizzy sometimes.”

Rosalie says this to Ehrenreich in Chapter 2 when asked about her poor eating habits (p 78).

6.) “I come from a stubborn family.”

Holly says this to Ehrenreich in Chapter 2 when Ehrenreich tells her to rest her hurt ankle (p 111).
7.) “All I can think of is like, wow, I’d like to have this stuff some day.”

This is Colleen’s answer when Ehrenreich asks how she feels about cleaning rich people’s homes in Chapter 2 (p 118).

8.) “Discretion, very good!”

Roberta says this to Ehrenreich in Chapter 3 when Ehrenreich explains why she got an answer wrong on the personality test for Wal-Mart (p 124).

9.) “Always find a church.”

Caroline says this to Ehrenreich in Chapter 3 when asked how she has survived on low-wages (p 132).

10.) “Well, it’s a job.”

This is Melissa’s answer in Chapter 3 when Ehrenreich asks why she works at Wal-Mart (p 179).

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?”
3. “You don’t know an eye-opener from a traditional?”
4. “See how she’s working around the vase? That’s an accident waiting to happen.”
5. “I get dizzy sometimes.”
6. “I come from a stubborn family.”
7. “All I can think of is like, wow, I’d like to have this stuff some day.”
8. “Discretion, very good!”
9. “Always find a church.”
10. “Well, it’s a job.”

A. Holly says this to Ehrenreich in Chapter 2 when Ehrenreich tells her to rest her hurt ankle (p 111).
B. Joy yells this at Ehrenreich in Chapter 1 after she returns food orders to the kitchen (p 48).
C. Ted says this to Ehrenreich in Chapter 2 while she is watching training videos for Merry Maids (p 74).
D. Roberta says this to Ehrenreich in Chapter 3 when Ehrenreich explains why she got an answer wrong on the personality test for Wal-Mart (p 124).
E. This is Melissa’s answer in Chapter 3 when Ehrenreich asks why she works at Wal-Mart (p 179).
F. Rosalie says this to Ehrenreich in Chapter 2 when asked about her poor eating habits (p 78).
G. Caroline says this to Ehrenreich in Chapter 3 when asked how she has survived on low-wages (p 132).
H. Gail makes this statement in Chapter 1 about management (p 22).
I. This is Colleen’s answer when Ehrenreich asks how she feels about cleaning rich people’s homes in Chapter 2 (p 118).
J. Carlie asks Ehrenreich this question in Chapter 1 after a maintenance worker tells her that his name is Peter Pan (p 44).

Memorable Quotes Answer Key

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 wages
C. To prove that welfare is unnecessary

3. What does Ehrenreich begin to do before every shift?
A. Drink a glass of wine
B. Run five miles
C. Take four ibuprofens

4. What do Ehrenreich and Carlie watch on TV while they clean hotel rooms?
A. Soap operas
B. Game shows
C. Spanish-language television

5. What does Ehrenreich do with her trailer when she leaves Key West?
A. Gives the key and deposit to Gail
B. Installs new locks so the landlord has trouble getting in
C. Paints it red

6. Why does Ehrenreich pick Maine?
A. Because her mother lives there
B. That’s where she went to college and she has friends there still
C. There is a virtually all-white low-wage workforce

7. What does Ehrenreich do for entertainment one night in Maine?
A. She enters a karaoke contest
B. She goes to a tent revival
C. She plays pool at a local bar

8. What ailment does Ehrenreich develop in Maine?
A. Walking pneumonia
B. A rash
C. A broken leg

9. What is Ehrenreich’s task at her friend’s apartment?
A. Washing floors
B. Caring for the bird
C. Walking the dog

10. What does Caroline give Ehrenreich?
A. A job
B. A place to stay
C. Chicken soup

11. What part of the application process is Ehrenreich worried about?
A. Passing the drug test
B. Using her real Social Security Number on the application
C. Finding money to pay for gas to get to the orientations

12. What group does Ehrenreich try to form at Wal-Mart?
A. An intramural sports club
B. A union
C. A book-of-the-month club

13. What score does Ehrenreich give herself as a worker?
A. B/B+
B. A/A-
C. F

14. The cost of what has sky-rocketed within recent years?
A. Clothing
B. Food
C. Housing

15. What does Ehrenreich think low-wage workers will do eventually?
A. Quit their jobs and stay home
B. Strike
C. March on Washington for better welfare policy

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?
2. 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?
3. What problems do you think Ehrenreich will encounter? Do you think she will be successful?

Chapter 1
1. Is Ehrenreich confirming or disproving your expectations for her performance on the job?
2. What biases do you think Ehrenreich brings to the low-wage world? Do they affect her evaluation of her experiences?
3. Do you think Gail will be able to continue living in the trailer that Ehrenreich gives her? What problems might Gail face in the future?

Chapter 2
1. What is the advantage of working for Merry Maid if you are only paid $6.65 an hour and independent house cleaners are paid $15 an hour? What difficulties might someone encounter if she decided to work independently? Why do you think the other women stay with the maid service for so long? Why don’t they demand higher wages?
2. Do you think the other women that work at Merry Maids have the same reaction as Ehrenreich to how they are treated when they go to the grocery store after work?
3. Does Ehrenreich treat her characters fairly in their depictions? Does she allot them a fair sense of agency? Consider Holly, for example. Ehrenreich portrays Holly as frail and victimized by her husband’s uncaring demeanor. She is also victimized by Ted. Do you think Ehrenreich renders a simplified version of what is potentially a much more complex Holly?

Chapter 3
1. Who is Ehrenreich’s intended audience? What clues about her writing style, characterizations, or assertions lead you to make this conclusion? How might a low-wage worker read this book differently than a white-collar worker or a college student?

2. Ehrenreich tells us that Caroline and her family are officially middle-class. Middle-class has been, historically, a value-laden term. What does it mean to be middle-class in America?

3. Ehrenreich critiques the drug-test aspect of the job application process. Do you think this test discriminates based on class? Do you think it is a necessary component for employment?

Topics for Take-Home Essays

Introduction
1. Ehrenreich notes that welfare reform was about to place 4 million women into the low-wage workforce. Construct an argument in favor of welfare reform. Construct an argument against welfare reform.

2. Consider the actions of college students in the 1960s who believed they could organize the working class. What was the impetus of their actions? Were they successful? Are students today as radical? Why do you think they are or why do you think they are not?

3. How could you use the perilous position of low-wage workers, particularly women with children, as an argument against the theory of Tickle-Down Economics? Is their a way you could use their position as an argument that supports the theory of Trickle-Down Economics?

Chapter 1
1. Consider the potential drawbacks to Ehrenreich’s role as participant-observer. Are there any advantages to this type of role? Is she really a participant-observer if she continues to think of herself as a researcher? How might her research be different if she maintained her true identity and interviewed the people she met instead of pretending to be one of them?

2. Examine the role of gender in the low-wage world. What advantages or disadvantages to women face in the jobs Ehrenreich encounters? How do you think her situation would have been different if she were a single mother with three children? What if she were married with no children?

3. Can you think of a literary correlation to Ehrenreich’s real-life events (historical or contemporary)? How does fiction treat this situation differently than an ethnographic investigation? Do you think the plight of the low-wage worker is more effectively portrayed through non-fiction or fiction? Are there any potentially fictive elements of Ehrenreich’s retelling?

Chapter 2
1. While this work is presented as non-fiction, there are some fictive elements to it. Ehrenreich did not carry a tape-recorder with her at all times, so she must reconstruct the conversations she has. Moreover, she must decide which events to write about and which to keep out. How is Ehrenreich presenting her experience? What might her biases be? What might her agenda be?

2. Recall Lori, the woman from the end of the chapter who said that she does not mind working in the homes of the rich because it motivates her to work harder. If she continues to “work hard” as a maid, will she ever be able to reach the financial success of those whose homes she cleans? Think about how the potential “working hard” has changed since the emergence of a deindustrialized economy and the rise of the service sector. How have opportunities and economic rewards changed for semi-skilled laborers in the past thirty years?

3. Ehrenreich is surprised to learn that jobs in Maine pay the same as jobs in Key West. She finds this startling because logic holds that if the supply of labor is low relative to demand, wages should rise. Yet,
this is not the case. Consider what other factors affect local economies and explain why Ehrenreich’s discovery is or is not surprising.

Chapter 3

1. If Ehrenreich really were a real-life low-wage worker, would she be eligible for any tax breaks? How might this change her situation?

2. Ehrenreich mentions all the men that fought for the ten hour day and then the eight hour day. When did labor unions arise? What were the issues with which they were concerned? Do any of the same issues exist for workers today? Do unions serve the same functions as they did originally?

3. Ehrenreich believes that had she stayed at Wal-Mart she would have been able to organize a union. Examine the history of unionization at Wal-Marts. Have any been unionized? How might people’s lives improve as Wal-Mart employees if they are part of a union? How might their lives stay the same?

COMMENT ON THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

The study of literature is not like the study of math or science, or even history. While those disciplines are based largely upon fact, the study of literature is based upon interpretation and analysis. There are no clear-cut answers in literature, outside of the factual information about an author's life and the basic information about setting and characterization in a piece of literature. The rest is a highly subjective reading of what an author has written; each person brings a different set of values and a different background to the reading. As a result, no two people see the piece of literature in exactly the same light, and few critics agree on everything about a book or an author.

In this set of Literature Notes, we have tried to give an objective literary analysis based upon the information actually found in the novel, book, or play. In the end, however, it is an individual interpretation, but one that we feel can be readily supported by the information that is presented in the guide. In your course of literature study, you or your professor/teacher may come up with a different interpretation of the mood or the theme or the conflict. Your interpretation, if it can be logically supported with information contained within the piece of literature, is just as correct as ours; so is the interpretation of your teacher or professor.

Literature is simply not a black or white situation; instead, there are many gray areas that are open to varying analyses. Your task is to come up with your own analysis that you can logically defend. Hopefully, these booknotes will help you to accomplish that goal.

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