

BOOK REVIEW

Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By In America (2001). Ehrenreich, B. New York: Metropolitan Books. 221 pages. ISBN 0-8050-6388-9. \$23.00 (hard cover).

Review by Desirae M. Domenico

Barbara Ehrenreich holds a Ph.D. in biology and is the author of several books including *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (1990) and *The Mean Season: The Attack On the Welfare State* (1987). She frequently contributes articles to *Time*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. In her latest book, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001), Ehrenreich demonstrates her commitment to understanding America's underclass workforce.

Ehrenreich's book examines how the millions of people who fill America's least attractive jobs, such as waitresses and housecleaners, manage to live on their meager salaries. She finds most of these jobs are physically and mentally exhausting. Employers overwork employees in return for low wages, few benefits, and minimal health care coverage. She notes that it is not uncommon for many Americans trapped in the low-wage workforce to juggle two or three jobs to make ends meet. In addition, each low-wage job advertised that no special skills were necessary. However, she discovers that each of these jobs requires some level of skill. For example, Ehrenreich had to learn how to operate the backpack vacuum cleaner while working as a maid and how to use touch-screen computers to correctly place orders while waitressing in Florida.

Ehrenreich's book contains five sections. In Section One, "Introduction: Getting Ready," she recalls discussing with editor Lewis Lapham how people live on wages earned from unskilled jobs. Ehrenreich conceded the best way to find out was to become one of the millions of employees in the low-wage labor force. Six jobs and three cities later, she compiled sufficient material to write *Nickel and Dimed*.

The goal of Ehrenreich's experiment was to relocate to a city, find a low-wage job and cheap housing, while attempting to match income to expenses for one month. The project began in spring, 1998 and concluded in the summer of 2000. Ehrenreich chose cities based on employment opportunities and the availability of affordable apartments. She established essential ground rules for the project: 1- skills gained from her education could not be used in her job search; 2- take the highest paying job offered; and, 3- live in the cheapest accommodations available. On occasion Ehrenreich bent each rule. In Florida, for example, she used her foreign language skills to greet German tourists with "Guten morgen" (good morning).

Ehrenreich reminds readers that she cannot fully experience the world of the low-wage worker because she possesses such securities as a house, a bank account, medical insurance, and good health. These luxuries are incomprehensible to the average low-wage worker. In addition, Ehrenreich only lives in each city for one month, giving her a limited view of a world that many middle- and upper class workers cannot fathom.

Section Two, "Serving in Florida," introduces readers into America's world of least attractive jobs. Ehrenreich begins her project in Key West. After finding sufficient housing she faces the grueling job application process. Applying for jobs such as a hotel cleaning lady and supermarket clerk, Ehrenreich finally settles on a waitressing job with starting pay of \$2.43 per hour plus tips. As she becomes acquainted with her co-workers, Ehrenreich is shocked to learn

that many rent rooms nightly at hotels, live with several people in small apartments, or live in their cars. The lack of health care coverage further hampers these working people.

Ehrenreich quickly comes to the harsh realization that a second job is necessary in order to afford the rent payment. She accepts a second job as a hotel cleaning lady. Working two strenuous jobs with little sleep proves to be overwhelming, and this challenge lasts only one day. Exhausted, broke, and unable to afford rent, Ehrenreich closes this chapter of the project and sets her sights on the next city.

Ehrenreich travels up the coast to Portland, Maine for Section Three, “Scrubbing In Maine”. She finds employment as a housemaid during the week, and on weekends she works as a nursing home aide. The low maid service pay of \$5.00-\$6.00 an hour for such heavy labor appalls Ehrenreich. She explains in detail the strenuous physical work of scrubbing floors on her hands and knees and vacuuming with the cleaner strapped to her back. Several of the cleaning ladies she meets suffer from various ailments, including backaches and arthritis. Unfortunately, their problems go untreated as none of them can afford medical insurance. The nursing home job is less strenuous, and Ehrenreich works steadily. Thinking she can afford another month’s rent, a health issue that must be treated depletes her monetary funds. After four weeks of work, she departs Portland.

In Section Four, “Selling in Minnesota,” readers find Ehrenreich in Minneapolis. This city is the final destination for her project. The unavailability of affordable apartments in Minneapolis stuns Ehrenreich, who is fortunate to be staying at a friend’s apartment. Ehrenreich is eager for a job switch and decides to work as a salesclerk in the women’s department of Wal-Mart. She learns the tricks of organizing the clothes by size, color, and brand, and occupies her spare time cleaning up the fitting rooms. She actively seeks a second job, but to no avail, and realizes once more that her Wal-Mart salary is not sufficient. Bored and irritated with this repetitive job, and almost out of money, Ehrenreich quits Wal-Mart and bids farewell to the city of Minneapolis.

In the last section of the book, “Evaluation,” Ehrenreich reflects on her stint as a low-wage worker. She rates her performance as average- being capable of doing the work, learning the skills, and mastering the social interactions with people at each job site. Some days were great successes, such as finishing her cleaning tasks ahead of time, thus allowing her to assist the other women. Other days were complete disasters, such as the fiasco at a Florida restaurant where she quits in the middle of a shift. Still, Ehrenreich is proud of the fact that she kept up physically with her significantly younger co-workers. On the flip side, Ehrenreich was never able to match income to expenses in any city, although she came close in Portland. She credits this only to the fact that she worked two jobs seven days a week and was provided with free meals on the weekends. Her summation of the experience is simple: wages are too low and rent is too high.

Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* sheds new light on America’s working poor. Her aim is to paint a true picture of what life is like in this world that so many people inhabit. Using her straightforward style of writing, Ehrenreich’s book flows from chapter to chapter and is an easy read. Readers can appreciate her candidness as she learns more and more about the unskilled labor force. She states, “But I am realizing that, ...one job will never be enough.... jobs are so cheap- as measured by the pay- that a worker is encouraged to take on as many of them as she possibly can” (p. 60). Trickling throughout her narrative are bits of humor, interspersed with Ehrenreich’s vivid descriptions, some of which cause readers to cringe. For example, she writes of her job at a Florida restaurant, “...sinks everywhere are clogged with scraps of lettuce,

decomposing lemon wedge, water-logged toasts crusts...Put your hand down on any counter and you risk being stuck to it by the film of ancient syrup spills” (p. 30).

Ehrenreich cites various examples to provide support for her work. Referring to her Florida co-workers living in a car, Ehrenreich surmises, “I could find no statistics on the number of employed people living in cars or vans, but according to the National Coalition for the Homeless...nearly one-fifth of all homeless people...are employed in full-or part-time jobs” (p. 26). Evidence to support her claim that unskilled workers cannot make ends meet is presented in a footnote stating, “In 1996 the number of persons holding two or more jobs averaged 7.8 million...” (p. 45). Included throughout Ehrenreich’s book are various facts gathered from the Fair Labor Standards Act, American Civil Liberties Union, and the National Labor Committee Education Fund.

Although Ehrenreich works tirelessly to provide readers with an accurate image of America’s working poor, one visible weakness that frequently appears throughout the book is the reminder she can and will escape these hardships. She has the luxury of returning to her real life at any time, acknowledging, “When I sit down one morning in my real home to pay bills... I am dazzled by the two- and three-figure sums owed to outfits like Club Body Tech and Amazon.com” (p. 34). Such realizations further separate her from the working class she strives to fit into.

Nickel and Dimed accurately provides readers with a picture of what it is like to live and work in the low-income sector of society. However, Ehrenreich’s claim that the people who work these jobs cannot survive is difficult to accept, for everyday millions of Americans do survive. Somehow they manage to find housing and feed themselves and their families. It is not an easy task, but these people get by as best as they know how. Although Ehrenreich stresses the need for change as far as the unskilled jobs and workers are concerned, sadly she offers no real solution to this problem.

Evaluation

I think Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* affords readers an image of how low-wage workers never get ahead on their meager salaries. However, her perceptions might be somewhat distorted since she only worked at each job for less than one month. I agree that these workers face numerous challenges when trying to support themselves and their families. Perhaps readers would benefit more if Ehrenreich focused on some of the people she actually met while on the job, such as the Florida hostess who lived in her van, or the cleaning woman who could only afford a small bag of Doritos for lunch.

I believe *Nickel and Dimed* is a valuable reference book for Family and Consumer Sciences teachers. It is crucial that teachers recognize the hardships and struggles associated with the low-wage workforce. By understanding the low-wage sector, FCS teachers can stress to students the importance of developing positive job skills to take into the workforce. Hopefully, the training FCS teachers provide will produce marketable students who can bypass the unskilled labor force for better paying jobs upon graduation.

Overall, I enjoyed reading *Nickel and Dimed*. The layout of the book was easy to follow and it allowed me to view a world about which I had no prior knowledge. Barbara Ehrenreich captured my attention from the introduction and held it until the last page. Her witty and clever writing style tweaked my interest in the plight of America’s poor and I plan to stay abreast of her future publications.

About the Author

Desirae Domenico is a graduate student at The University of Georgia where she received her bachelors and masters. She is pursuing a doctorate degree in Occupational Studies. For two years, she taught Family and Consumer Sciences at Pebblebrook High School in Cobb County, Georgia.