

About the Book

Millions of Americans work full-time, year-round, for poverty-level wages. Barbara Ehrenreich decided to join them, inspired in part by the rhetoric surrounding welfare reform, which promised that any job equals a better life. But how can anyone survive, let alone prosper, on six to seven dollars an hour? To find out, Ehrenreich moved from Florida to Maine to Minnesota, working as a waitress, hotel maid, house cleaner, nursing home aide, and Wal-Mart salesperson. "Nickel and Dimed" reveals low-wage America in all its tenacity, anxiety and surprising generosity—a land of "big box" stores, fast food and a thousand desperate stratagems for survival. Acclaimed for its insight, humor and passion, this book is changing the way America perceives its working poor.

This book is most suitable for adults and young adults.

About Author Barbara Ehrenreich

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2003.

Awards:

National Magazine award, 1980; Ford Foundation award for Humanistic Perspectives on Contemporary Issues, 1981; Guggenheim fellowship, 1987; Christopher Award and *Los Angeles Times* Book Award in current interest category, both 2002, both for "Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America."

Personal Information:

Family: Born August 26, 1941, in Butte, MT; daughter of Ben Howes and Isabelle Oxley (Isely) Alexander; married John Ehrenreich, August 6, 1966 (marriage ended); married Gary Stevenson, December 10, 1983; children: (first marriage) Rosa, Benjamin. Education: Reed College, B.A., 1963; Rockefeller University, Ph.D., 1968. Politics: "Socialist and feminist." Addresses: Agent: c/o Author Mail, Henry Holt & Co., Inc., 115 West 18th St., New York, NY 10011.

Career:

Health Policy Advisory Center, New York, NY, staff member, 1969-71; State University of New York College at Old Westbury, assistant professor of health sciences, 1971-74; writer, 1974-;

- Seven Days magazine, editor, 1974--;
- Mother Jones magazine, columnist, 1986-89;
- Time magazine, essayist, 1990;
- Guardian, London, England, columnist, 1992--. New York Institute for the Humanities, associate fellow, 1980--; Institute for Policy Studies, fellow, 1982--. Co-chair, Democratic Socialists of America, 1983--.

Writings

- (With husband, John Ehrenreich) Long March, "Short Spring: The Student Uprising at Home and Abroad," Monthly Review Press (New York, NY), 1969.
- (With John Ehrenreich) "The American Health Empire: Power, Profits, and Politics: A Report from the Health Policy Advisory Center," Random House (New York, NY), 1970.
- (With Deirdre English) "Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers," Feminist Press (Old Westbury, NY), 1972.

Writings Continued

- (With Deirdre English) “Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness,” Feminist Press, 1973.
- (With Deirdre English) “For Her Own Good: One Hundred Fifty Years of the Experts' Advice to Women,” Doubleday (New York, NY), 1978.
- “The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment,” Doubleday (New York, NY), 1983.
- (With Annette Fuentes) “Women in the Global Factory” (pamphlet), South End Press (Boston, MA), 1983.
- (Coauthor) “Poverty in the American Dream: Women & Children First,” Institute for New Communications, South End Press (Boston, MA), 1983.
- (With Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs) “Re-making Love: The Feminization of Sex,” Anchor Press/Doubleday (New York, NY), 1986.
- (With Fred Block, Richard Cloward, and Frances Fox Piven) “The Mean Season: An Attack on the Welfare State,” Pantheon (New York, NY), 1987.
- “Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class,” Pantheon (New York, NY), 1989.
- “The Worst Years of Our Lives: Irreverent Notes from a Decade of Greed,” Pantheon, 1990.
- “Kipper's Game,” Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1993.
- “The Snarling Citizen: Essays,” Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1995.
- “Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War,” Metropolitan Books (New York, NY), 1997.
- “Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America,” Holt (New York, NY), 2001.
- “Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy,” Metropolitan Books (New York, NY), 2003.
- Contributor to magazines, including *Radical America*, *Nation*, *Esquire*, *Vogue*, *New Republic*, and *New York Times Magazine*. Contributing editor, *Ms.*, 1981--., and *Mother Jones*, 1988--.

Media Adaptations

“Wage Slaves: Not Getting by in America,” a segment of the A&E series *Investigative Reports*, was based in part on “Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America” and aired August 26, 2002.

Sidelights

An outspoken feminist and socialist party leader, Barbara Ehrenreich crusades for social justice in her books. Although many of her early works were shaped by her formal scientific training--she earned a Ph.D. in biology--her later works have moved beyond health care concerns to the plight of women and the poor. In addition to her numerous nonfiction books, Ehrenreich is widely known for her weekly columns in *Time* and the *Guardian*.

Early in her career, while working for the Health Policy Advisory Center, Ehrenreich published a scathing critique of the American health “empire,” exposing its inefficiency, inhumanity, and self-serving policies. Then, turning from the population in general to women in particular, Ehrenreich and her coauthor Deirdre English unveiled the male domination of the female health care system in “Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness” and “For Her Own Good: One Hundred Fifty Years of the Experts' Advice to Women.” In a controversial work, “The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment,” Ehrenreich takes on the whole male establishment, challenging the assumption that feminism is at the root of America's domestic upheaval.

Sidelights Continued

In June 1998 Ehrenreich embarked on what was to become perhaps her best-known project. “I leave behind everything that normally soothes the ego and sustains the body—home, career, companion, reputation, ATM card—,” as she explained in a 1999 Harper's article, “and plunge into the low-wage workforce.” Following up on such previous studies as “Fear of Falling,” Ehrenreich spent two years living the life of the American working class, and what she discovered turned into the bestselling 2001 expose, “Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America.”

A successful, affluent, Ph.D. candidate, the author created a new persona—Barbara Ehrenreich, divorced homemaker with some housekeeping experience—and set off on a tour of the country attempting to sustain herself at what are commonly called “entry-level” jobs. In Ehrenreich's case, that meant waiting tables and cleaning hotel rooms in Key West, Florida; working at a nursing home in Portland, Maine; and becoming a Wal-Mart “associate” in Minneapolis. As she pointed out, Ehrenreich herself was not too far removed from the working class: her father was a copper miner, her husband a warehouse worker, and her sister an employee in the kind of low-wage jobs the author now was sampling. Nor did she harbor any illusions about her temporary status among the working class: “My aim is nothing so mistily subjective as to ‘experience poverty’ or find out how it ‘really feels’ to be a long-term low-wage worker,” she asserted in Harper's. “And with all my real-life assets—bank account, IRA, health insurance, multiroom home—waiting indulgently in the background, I am, of course, thoroughly insulated from the terrors that afflict the genuinely poor.”

As the author related in the Harper's piece that was expanded into “Nickel and Dimed,” “My first task is to find a place to live. I figure that if I can earn \$7 an hour—which, from the want ads, seems doable—I can afford to spend \$500 [per month] on rent.” In affluent Key West, that amount might finance “flopouses and trailer homes,” the latter of which featured “no air-conditioning, no screens, no fans, no television and, by way of diversion, only the challenge of evading the landlord's Doberman pinscher.” But even that rent was \$675 per month—out of Ehrenreich's reach. “It is a shock to realize that ‘trailer trash’ has become, for me, a demographic category to aspire to.”

Though she equipped herself with three essentials for her study—a car, a laptop computer, and \$1,300 startup funds—Ehrenreich quickly learned that earning money for the basics of life came much harder in the service sector. She discovered a booming trade in Key West's “hospitality industry” and noted that her demographic—white, female, English-speaking—gave her an advantage at hiring time. She initially dismissed such options as desk-clerking (too much standing), waitressing (too much walking), and telemarketing (wrong personality type). That left Ehrenreich to fill out applications at hotels, supermarkets, inns and guest-houses. But her phone seldom rang. To the author's surprise, she learned that the larger chains often run continual help-wanted ads, even when no jobs were open, to build a candidate safety net against the constant turnover in the service field.

Ehrenreich finally landed at a small chain-hotel's restaurant, as a server. She doled out drinks, made salads and desserts, and tended to “side work,” which she defines as “sweeping, scrubbing, slicing, refilling, and restocking.” The break room, servers were informed by management, was not a right, but a privilege. Her wage came to \$5.15 per hour, not including tips that dried up with the summer heat. Ehrenreich realized she could not afford her \$500 efficiency apartment and must find a second job.

Sidelights Continued

She took a job at “Jerry’s,” her alias for a large, well-known family restaurant chain. If anything, the conditions were even worse: “The break room typifies the whole situation: there is none, because there are no breaks at Jerry’s. For six to eight hours in a row, you never sit except to pee.” She later landed what she considered a dream job of housekeeping in a hotel: stripping beds, scrubbing bathrooms and handling giant vacuum cleaners on four-hour, no-break shifts. A month working in Key West netted Ehrenreich approximately \$1,040; after expenses she was left with \$22, and had no health insurance.

“How former welfare recipients and single mothers will (and do) survive in the low-wage workforce, I cannot imagine,” Ehrenreich wrote. This comment is a running theme of “Nickel and Dimed,” as the jobs the author described are typical of those taken by the some twelve-million women who are the objects of welfare reform, “workfare,” or other such governmental policies. To Salon reviewer Laura Miller, “one of the sly pleasures of ‘Nickel and Dimed’ is the way it dances on the line between straightforward social protest and an edgier acknowledgment of inconvenient truths.”

Other critical reaction to Ehrenreich’s book ranged from skeptical to admiring. In the former camp was Julia Klein, whose question in “American Prospect” was, “In the end, what has [Ehrenreich] accomplished? It’s no shock that the dollars don’t add up; that affordable housing is hard, if not impossible, to find; and that taking a second job is a virtual necessity for many of the working poor.” After labeling the author “a prickly, self-confident woman and the possessor of a righteous, ideologically informed outrage at America’s class system that can turn patronizing at times,” Klein went on to acknowledge that “Nickel and Dimed” is still “a compelling and timely book whose insights sometimes do transcend the obvious.” Similarly, Humanist contributor Joni Scott mentioned an early reluctance to read the memoirs of an affluent person living temporarily as poor, but found that Ehrenreich’s work is “an important literary contribution and a call to action that I hope is answered. I believe this book should be required reading for corporate executives and politicians.” “This book opens one’s eyes very wide indeed,” declared a reviewer for M2 Best Books. And in the view of Bob Hulteen of Sojourners, “Definitional books come around about once a decade. Such books so describe the reality of the age in simple terms that the impact is felt from after-dinner conversations to federal policy discussions.” “Nickel and Dimed,” he added, “will likely join this pantheon.”

Books Like “Nickel and Dimed”

“The Working Poor: Invisible in America”

Shipler, David K.

Shipler is informed and impassioned about the plight of the surprisingly diverse and numerous Americans who work but still walk the official poverty line. This conundrum is complex and rife with interlocking problems, including dead-end jobs that offer little or no healthcare benefits and depressing home and workplace environments.

“The Betrayal of Work: How Low-Wage Jobs Fail 30 Million Americans and Their Families”

Shulman, Beth

Following in the footsteps of Barbara Ehrenreich’s bestselling “Nickel and Dimed,” Shulman spent several years traveling across the country talking to those living on low wages. In writing “The Betrayal of Work,” she provides the fullest portrait of America’s working poor.

“Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal”

Schlosser, Eric

Schlosser’s incisive history of the development of American fast food indicts the industry for some shocking crimes against humanity, including systematically destroying the American diet and landscape, and undermining our values and our economy. The first part of the book details the postwar ascendance of fast food from Southern California, assessing the impact on people in the West in general. The second half looks at the product itself: where it is manufactured (in a handful of enormous factories), what goes into it (chemicals, feces) and who is responsible (monopolistic corporate executives).

Books With A Different Viewpoint

“Danger in the Comfort Zone: From Boardroom to Mailroom—How to Break the Entitlement Habit That’s Killing American Business”

Bardwick, Judith M

Since the original publication of this important and controversial book, it has stirred up business thinkers everywhere. Now the landmark work has been updated and expanded (with five all-new chapters) to meet today’s continuing challenges to the nation’s productivity and morale. “This book offers timely solutions to America’s national crisis.”

“The Wal-Mart Decade: How a Generation of Leaders Turned Sam Walton’s Legacy Into the World’s Number One Company”

Slater, Robert

Slater, a highly respected business journalist and author, was granted unprecedented access to the company while writing “The Wal-Mart Decade.” He takes readers deep into the inner circle, where the big decisions are made about strategy and operations.

“No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs”

Ross, Andrew

“No-Collar” is the first book to place the much-fêted New Economy workplace in the context of industrial history and the struggle to win a humane work environment. From Horatio Alger to the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, Americans have extolled the virtues of hard work as a source of meaning and identity as well as livelihood.

“Altering Fate : Why the Past Does Not Predict the Future”

Lewis, Michael

This provocative book persuasively argues that childhood experiences neither determine who we later become nor limit what we can do. What enables us to survive—and sets us free from our pasts—is our adaptability to change, shaped by the uniquely human attributes of consciousness, will, and desire.