

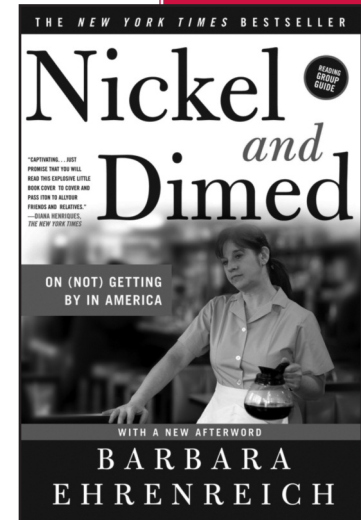
# Nickel and Dimed

On (Not) Getting By in America

by Barbara Ehrenreich

“Valuable and illuminating . . . We have Ehrenreich to thank for bringing us the news of America’s working poor so clearly and directly, and conveying with it a deep outrage.”

—Dorothy Gallagher, *The New York Times Book Review*



256 pages • ISBN 978-0-312-62668-6

Winner of  
the Los Angeles  
Times Book  
Prize



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## TO THE TEACHER

Millions of Americans work full-time for poverty-level wages. Journalist Barbara Ehrenreich decided to join them. *Nickel and Dimed* is the revealing, compelling, and widely acclaimed result of that decision—a book that has already become a masterpiece of undercover reportage, and a portrait-of-the-working-poor classic that is showing up in classrooms throughout the nation.

How does anyone survive, let alone prosper, on \$6 an hour? To find out, Ehrenreich takes low-wage jobs in Florida, then in Maine, and finally in Minnesota, working as a waitress, a hotel maid, a cleaning woman, a nursing home aide, and a Wal-Mart salesperson. She lives in trailer parks and crumbling motels; she eats fast or cheap food, since she can’t afford a stove, refrigerator, or cookware. She also learns that one job is not enough; you need at least two if you plan to live indoors. And healthcare is a luxury she cannot afford.

This is that rare book that reveals a harsh reality without resorting to sentiment, that speaks the plain truth without being preachy or complex. *Nickel and Dimed* is an absolute must for anyone who wants to see what “prosperity” looks like from the bottom, or who suspects that the “American dream” is becoming a fantasy.

“A superb and frightening look into the lives of hard-working Americans . . . Policymakers should be forced to read the last ten pages of Ehrenreich’s book, in which she concludes that affordable rent, food, and health care should be among the chief measurements of a healthy economy, not simply high productivity and employment.”—Tamara Straus, *San Francisco Chronicle*

“There is much to be learned from *Nickel and Dimed*. It opens a window into the daily lives of the invisible workforce that fuels the service economy, and endows the men and women who populate it with the honor that is often lacking on the job . . . In the grand tradition of the muckraking journalist, [Ehrenreich] goes undercover for nearly a year [to give us] an insider’s view of the worst jobs (other than agricultural labor) the ‘new economy’ has to offer.”—Katherine Newman, *The Washington Post Book World*

“A close observer and astute analyzer of American life . . . Ehrenreich vividly describes her experiences living in isolated trailers and dilapidated motels while working as a nursing-home aide, a Wal-Mart ‘sales associate,’ a cleaning woman, a waitress, and a hotel maid in three states: Florida, Maine, and Minnesota. Her narrative is candid, often moving, and very revealing . . . [A] compelling sketch of [poverty’s] reality and pervasiveness.”—Jack Forman, *Library Journal*

“This book is thoroughly enjoyable, written with an affable, up-your-nose brio throughout. Ehrenreich is a superb and relaxed stylist, and she has a tremendous sense of rueful humor.”—Stephen Metcalf, *Los Angeles Times*

“Captivating . . . Just promise that you will read this explosive little book cover to cover and pass it on to all your friends and relatives.”—Diana Henriques, *The New York Times*

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This teacher’s guide consists of three sections: Reading and Understanding the Book, Questions and Exercises for the Class, and Terms and Phrases to Define. The first section will help students follow along with *Nickel and Dimed*; the second will aid in their exploration of, and reflection on, this book both as individuals and as a group; and the third will sharpen their comprehension of Ehrenreich’s work by way of vocabulary-building. The guide then concludes with a brief section on Suggestions for Further Study.

1. Near the outset, Ehrenreich (speaking of her own sister) employs the term “wage slave.” What does she mean by this?
2. What are the three rules the author sets for herself at the beginning of *Nickel and Dimed*? Does she ever break them? If so, when and why, in your view, does she do so?

3. Early on, the author tells us that she has a Ph.D. in biology. How, if at all, does this figure into the narrative? What does Ehrenreich's scientific training bring to the "old-fashioned journalism" of this book?
4. Why does Ehrenreich assert in her Introduction that "a story about waiting for buses would not be very interesting to read"? What are the context and rationale for this remark? And given as much, do you agree?
5. Early in Chapter One, Ehrenreich notes that, in terms of low-wage work, "the want ads are not a reliable measure of the actual jobs available at any particular time." Explain why this is so.
6. At one point, Ehrenreich details the living conditions of her fellow workers at the Hearthside. Reviewing these arrangements, explain how each set-up compares with the author's own "\$500 efficiency" quarters.
7. Waiting tables at Jerry's, the author meets a young dishwasher named George. Who is he? What is his story? Why do he and Ehrenreich befriend one another? And why does she not "intervene" when she learns from an assistant manager that George is thought to be a thief?
8. On her first—and last—day of housekeeping in Key West, Ehrenreich is met by a manager who addresses her as "babe" and gives her "a pamphlet emphasizing the need for a positive attitude." When and where else, throughout the book, does the author encounter cheap talk or hollow slogans in her endeavors as a low-wage worker? What purposes might such empty language serve? Why is it so prevalent?
9. In an extended footnote in Chapter Two, Ehrenreich explains how "the point" of the housecleaning service where she is employed "is not so much to clean as to create the appearance of having been cleaned." Why is this? Why the deceit? Why does The Maids outfit not clean its clients' homes properly?
10. "The hands-and-knees approach is a definite selling point for corporate cleaning services like The Maids," the author writes. Explain why this "old-fashioned way" of housecleaning is thus appealing. Why does it seem to, as Ehrenreich puts it, "gratify the consumers of maid services"?
11. Buying groceries with a voucher at a Shop-n-Save in Maine, Ehrenreich notes of the checkout woman ringing up her purchases: "I attempt to thank her, but she was looking the other way at nothing in particular." What might such body language mean? Why, if at all, is it telling?
12. Looking back on Chapter Two as a whole, what connections would you make between maids and minorities in the United States? What about between maids and poverty, and maids and "invisibility"? Refer to the text itself when making your links.

13. Who is Budgie? Why does Ehrenreich tell us to let Budgie “be a stand-in”? Also, would it be accurate to say that the author’s efforts to find a safe and affordable place to live were least successful in Minnesota? Explain why or why not.
14. Paraphrase the brief “story within a story” represented by the character called Caroline. What is Caroline’s tale? Why does Ehrenreich get in touch with this person, and what does she learn from her?
15. As her stint at Wal-Mart winds down, the author mentions to several of her colleagues that they “could use a union here”—only, as she herself readily admits, she is “not a union organizer anymore than [she is] Wal-Mart ‘management material.’” So why, then, is she making efforts at unionizing? What has led her to these efforts? What are her reasons, grievances, motivations, and goals?
16. At the outset of her Evaluation chapter, the author seems to arrive at a new understanding of the phrase “unskilled labor.” Explain this new understanding. Do you agree with it? Why or why not?
17. Describe the problems that Ehrenreich has with how the “poverty level” is calculated in this country. Is she correct on this score, in your view? Explain. Also, how does one’s understanding of the poverty level—Ehrenreich’s or anyone else’s—relate to food costs, and to the author’s assertion that our “wages are too low and rents too high.”
18. What is the “money taboo”—and why and how does it function, as Ehrenreich puts it, “most effectively among the lowest-paid people”?
19. Why does Ehrenreich refer to low-wage workers, at the close of her book, as “the major philanthropists of our society”?

**QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES  
FOR THE CLASS**

1. In the Introduction to *Nickel and Dimed*, the author writes: “Unlike many low-wage workers, I have the further advantages of being white and a native English speaker.” As a class, explore whether, why, and how these two facets of Ehrenreich’s identity were, in fact, advantageous over the full duration of her study.
2. Near the beginning of this book, Ehrenreich compares the restaurant-tipping habits of Americans and Europeans. Near the end, she notes that, while “most civilized nations compensate for inadequacy of wages by providing relatively generous public services,” the U.S. “leaves its citizens to fend for themselves.” What, in Ehrenreich’s view, could America learn from other countries about how to better treat its low-wage workers?

3. The action of *Nickel and Dimed* unfolds in three American communities, as found in three different states: Florida, Maine, and Minnesota. What about your own community? How would *Nickel and Dimed* be different—or similar—if it included the area you call home? On your own, or as part of a group, do some research—via newspapers and magazines, TV news broadcasts, and the Internet—in order to formulate your answer.

4. Ehrenreich often speaks of dietary matters, of nutrition, of food as fuel. Why does she keep doing so? What did reading this book tell you about how we eat and how we work in America? And what about the correlations that may or may not exist between low-wage American workers and their use of cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol?

5. In her chapter “Selling in Minnesota,” Ehrenreich asserts: “Wherever you look, there is no alternative to the megascale corporate order, from which every form of local creativity and initiative has been abolished by distant home offices.” Talk about whether this is true in your own experience. If not, why not? If so, where and when have you seen evidence to support this claim? Try to use your own examples and impressions here—not Ehrenreich’s.

6. Describing the food at a Florida restaurant where she works, Ehrenreich calls it “your basic Ohio cuisine with a tropical twist.” Later, wondering what living in Maine might be like, she says, “Maybe . . . when you give white people a whole state to themselves, they treat one another real nice.” Still later, she writes that certain clothes on sale at her Minnesota Wal-Mart are “seemingly aimed at pudgy fourth-grade teachers with important barbecues to attend.” Discuss the biting humor—the sharp and sometimes even mocking wit—appearing throughout this book. How, if at all, does such levity make Ehrenreich’s arguments more effective? And were there instances where you thought her wisecracks went too far—or fell flat? Explain.

7. “Let’s look at the record,” writes Ehrenreich in her Evaluation. What does this record tell us? Where was she most successful in her experiment, and where was she least? Do you agree with the author when she says, after going over her record, “All right, I made mistakes”? Explain why or why not. What could she have done differently, and what would you—in her shoes—have done differently? Explain.

8. Throughout *Nickel and Dimed* the author makes complaints about “management.” Summarize the many problems that Ehrenreich has with managers, looking especially at the book’s Wal-Mart passages and the breakdown of “workplace authoritarianism” in the Evaluation chapter.

9. Explain why Ehrenreich believes that personality surveys and drug tests are both categorically unfair to low-wage workers. Look back over the full range of her low-wage experiences when crafting your answer.

10. More than once in these pages, we encounter the severe bodily and psychological harm that hard work at low pay can cause—the physical damage as well as the threats of what Ehrenreich calls, after an especially trying shift at her nursing home job, “repetitive injury of the spirit.” Prepare a short report on the health risks of low-wage work, based on Ehrenreich’s study and on your own findings in various media reports.

11. One of the strengths of this book must be its cast of characters—the real people who live and work in the real world Ehrenreich is reporting on, those workers with whom she toils, relates, confers, cries, argues, and so on. In a short essay, identify and discuss a certain individual (or two) from this book by whom you were particularly touched. In your essay, explain your choice(s).

12. A few times in *Nickel and Dimed*, the author refers to the “Sermon on the Mount,” which appears in the biblical book of Matthew. Ehrenreich refers to this sermon not as a religious tract but as a work of a political philosophy, as a treatise on social or economic revolution. What is this sermon about? What does it say or claim? (Do some research, if you are unsure.) Finally, explain why Ehrenreich thinks this sermon now applies to America’s low-wage workers in particular.

13. In a way, this book can read as a reaction to—or a hands-on test of—the “welfare reform” legislation enacted in the U.S. in the 1990s. “In the rhetorical buildup to welfare reform,” Ehrenreich writes, “it was uniformly assumed that a job was the ticket out of poverty.” As a class, conduct a detailed conversation about *Nickel and Dimed* as a point-by-point examination of this very assumption.

14. This book is, of course, more than a report on, and exposé of, “(not) getting by in America”—it is also a detailed critique. To this end, the bulk of its criticism might well be directed at the Wal-Mart empire. Is this appropriate, in your view? Explain. Given that Wal-Mart is far and away the world’s largest company, is it right to expect the retail megachain to be all the more fair and respectful of its employees? Explain.

15. *Nickel and Dimed* takes place during a so-called economic boom in American history, the period of “peace and prosperity” (as many people called it then, and still call it now) that was the late 1990s. However, the book is largely about poverty, about the poor—and not simply the helplessly destitute, but rather the poor who are employed full-time. Near the outset of her study, Ehrenreich tells us that “there are no secret economies that nourish the poor; on the contrary, there are a host of special costs.” Near the end, in sum, she tells us that poverty is an experience of “acute distress”—a nonstop “state of emergency.” Finish your exploration of the book by talking about what it taught you on the subject of poverty in America. Not just about what it costs to “get by” but about how people living in poverty make ends meet—how they, in Ehrenreich’s language, “[try] to match income to expenses.”

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

### TERMS AND PHRASES TO DEFINE

penury (p. 7)	pallid (p. 134)
homogeneous (p. 8)	allopathic (p. 134)
surfeit (p. 14)	unctuous (p. 137)
agape (p. 20)	aphasic (p. 142)
solipsism (p. 26)	“time theft” (p. 146)
“bev” (p. 37)	angstrom (p. 147)
mephitic (p. 46)	apotheosis (p. 157)
entropy (p. 48)	Sisyphus (p. 165)
postprandial (p. 63)	adjutant (p. 165)
glossolalia (p. 67)	mite (p. 168)
soteriological (p. 68)	hortatory (p. 178)
cineast (p. 75)	abatement (p. 178)
basal (p. 78)	Big Box (p. 178)
prima facie evidence (p. 78)	apps (p. 180)
tchotchke (p. 82)	“economic man” (p. 206)
penitent (p. 84)	obeisance (p. 212)
encomiums (p. 109)	“disappearing poor” (p. 216)
untouchables (p. 117)	“social contract” (p. 220)
deciduous (p. 121)	“working poor” (p. 221)
WIC (p. 132)	

## OTHER RESOURCES

For more information on *Nickel and Dimed*, including answers to students’ most frequently asked questions, please visit <http://www.barbaraehrenreich.com>.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Barbara Ehrenreich is the author of several other books, including *Bait and Switch*, *The Worst Years of Our Lives*, *Fear of Falling*, and *Blood Rites*, and, most recently, *Dancing in the Streets*. She lives near Key West, Florida.

Scott Pitcock, who wrote this teacher’s guide, is an editor and writer based in Tulsa, Oklahoma.



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**NAVY SEAL DOGS, Michael Ritland\***  
**NICKEL AND DIMED, Barbara Ehrenreich**  
**NIGHT, Elie Wiesel**  
**THE NIGHT THOREAU SPENT IN JAIL, Lawrence & Lee\***  
**THE ODYSSEY, trans., Robert Fitzgerald**  
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**STONEWALL'S GOLD, Robert J. Mrazek\***  
**THIS I BELIEVE, Allison & Gediman, editors**  
**UPSTATE, Kalisha Buckhanon\***  
**WE JUST WANT TO LIVE HERE, Rifa'i & Ainbinder\***  
**WIT, Margaret Edson\***  
**A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER, Michael Dorris**

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