



Discussion Questions for *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream* by Barbara Ehrenreich

About the Book

In 1998, journalist Barbara Ehrenreich became a waitress, a maid, and a low level sales clerk while researching *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. Selling close to one million copies, *Nickel and Dimed* exposed the truth about the demise of a living wage, health insurance, and other presumed rewards for American workers. In *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream*, she goes undercover once again, this time to explore the grim results of corporate downsizing. Immersed in the world of the white-collar unemployed, she joins the ranks of those who seem to have done everything right—finished college, gained professional experience, honed an impressive resume—yet cannot land a steady job in corporate America. Written with hilarious candor, impeccable research, and clear-eyed respect for the faces behind the statistics, *Bait and Switch* exposes the untold cruelties of today’s economy.

About This Guide

Provocative and frank, *Bait and Switch* explores a plight that has no doubt affected you or someone in your community. Barbara Ehrenreich’s first-hand account of a grueling white-collar job search spurs compelling questions for all readers, no matter what stage their careers have reached. We hope that the following topics will enhance your reading group’s discussion of this important book. For information about other great selections for reading groups, visit us at www.henryholt.com.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss your own career path. How has corporate downsizing, reorganizing or outsourcing affected your life?
2. Ehrenreich recalls her father’s experience climbing the corporate ladder in the 50s and 60s. He was loyal to his company, and it in turn was loyal to him. Would this be a reasonable expectation today? How have corporations changed in the way they treat their employees over the last generation?
3. Ehrenreich includes an eye-opening discussion of the personality tests, including the much-touted Myers-Briggs test, that are administered throughout corporate America. Were you surprised to discover how unscientific these tests are? Have you ever undergone similar testing? Do you question, as Ehrenreich does, whether you even possess a fixed “personality”? What various personality traits are you called upon to exhibit every day as a worker, parent, or spouse?

4. Throughout her job search, Ehrenreich is struck by the constant advice to adopt a “positive attitude” no matter what you’re going through as an unemployed person. Do you think this is a good psychological strategy? Or do we pay a price for constantly concealing anger and sadness under a happy face?
5. How has the Internet influenced the job search process? In Ehrenreich’s case, was it a blessing or a curse?
6. Ehrenreich describes most of her fellow job seekers as passive and seemingly beaten down – even more so than the blue collar workers she met while researching her earlier book Nickel and Dimed. Do you think this passivity was a result of unemployment or do you see something similar among white collar corporate job-holders you know? In our experience, does the corporate culture foster innovation and independent thinking or conformity and obedience?
7. In chapter three, “Surviving Boot Camp,” Ehrenreich’s coach insists that we only have ourselves to blame for whatever happens to us in life. How widespread do you think this idea is in our culture? Would you call it “victim blaming” or a correct assessment of one’s personal responsibility? What do you think is the effect of this idea on people struggling with unemployment?
8. At one point, Ehrenreich makes a bid for a job with a company allegedly involved in abusive interrogations of detainees in Iraq. Have you ever considered a job-- or faced an assignment at work -- that went against your own ethical convictions? How did you handle the situation?
9. Chapter five, “Networking with the Lord,” describes the evangelical Christian groups Ehrenreich stumbled onto in her quest for employment. Was she right to be critical of their proselytizing? What role, if any, should religion play in a secular workplace?
10. Discuss the gender and racial dimensions of job searching. Do you think Ehrenreich’s experience would have been different if she had been male, or a person of color?
11. Did the coaches hired by Ehrenreich do anything worthwhile for her? What accounts for the popularity of career coaches, despite the fact that they are unregulated, aren’t required to have any particular credentials, and charge a fee that is not contingent on the client’s bona fide success in finding a job? Have we all become too dependent on dubious “experts” to tell us how to live our lives?
12. Discuss the book’s title. What are college-educated young American being lured into? If a college education – even in a business major – no longer offers occupational security, how should young people think about their careers?
13. Some of the people Ehrenreich quotes –both scholars and job seekers – assert that achievement no longer guarantees success in the corporate world. In fact, if achievement leads to a higher salary, you may be a tempting target for a lay-off. What does it do to us psychologically when good work is no longer rewarded, and may even be punished?

14. Ehrenreich reports that, in a psychological sense, this project was far more challenging than the work she did for Nickel and Dimed. At least in the blue collar world, the expectations were straightforward: you do the work and you get paid, however inadequately. But in the white collar corporate world, factors like “likeability” seem to outweigh performance. Do you feel the pressure to fit in and be likeable in your job, and what kind of burden does this create for you?
15. The only job offers the author reeled in were independent-contractor sales positions, offering no benefits or security. In fact, benefits such as health insurance have been disappearing for everyone. Have you seen this trend in your own life and how have you tried to make do?
16. Ehrenreich finds the corporate culture shot through with what she terms irrational, even delusional, forms of thinking. Do you agree? And what does it say about the future of our economy if this is true?
17. What were your thoughts as you finished reading *Bait and Switch*? Is there any action you can take to reverse the trend toward greater job insecurity? Do you predict that legislation will ever be passed limiting a corporation’s ability to lay people off at will or outsource jobs overseas? Can the compensation gap between CEOs and other employees keep expanding indefinitely?

About the Author

Barbara Ehrenreich is the author of thirteen books, including the *New York Times* bestsellers *Nickel and Dimed* and *The Worst Years of Our Lives*, as well as *Blood Rites* and *Fear of Falling*, which was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award. A frequent contributor to *Harper’s Magazine* and *The Nation*, she has been a columnist for *The New York Times* and *Time*. She lives in Virginia.