

# Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

## Nickel and Dimed by Barbara Ehrenreich

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- Ehrenreich chose to put herself in the position of the working poor in this experiment. Would it have been better for her to have chronicled an actual “nickel and dimed” worker? Why or why not?
- The author made a point of leaving her past job experience and education off her résumés in order to fairly reenact the role of a woman of poverty. What were intangible aspects that you believe she could not leave behind in her old life?
- Which of the jobs did you find to be the most demeaning?
- What advantages and disadvantages did the author incur due to her choice of locations?
- Some years have passed since this experiment. What kind of changes might we find among those workers?
  - even less affordable housing
  - outsourcing of factory jobs forcing those workers into the service industries
  - more illegal immigrants in competition for these jobs
  - Barb Ehrenreich’s letter
  - What about persons of color or males...would the outcome differ?
- Did it surprise you that waitresses, etc. get paid only \$2.50 per hour? Do you think that most restaurant employees know that between salary and tips they should be earning \$5.15 per hour since managers never mentioned this fact to Ehrenreich when she was hired?
- Have you become more aware of workers in these jobs? Have you changed your own behavior toward these workers?
  - Will you tip more now?
  - Pick up the clothes in the dressing rooms?
  - Clean the toilet?
- In what ways were there differences in attitude toward Ehrenreich from management vs. coworkers?
  - Management more suspicious
  - Coworkers more generous
- Has this book changed your own attitude toward welfare reform?
- The waitress Gail says that she swore never to work for a corporation because “They don’t cut you no slack. You give, and you give, and they take.” Is this a valid perception on her part? How did the Wal-Mart experience fulfill or negate this idea?
- If companies were to make workers and management more equal partners, would this work?
- Barbara Ehrenreich is a known socialist and atheist. Did her views color this experiment?
- As bleak as these conditions are, just how do these workers survive?
  - Work two jobs
  - Share housing
  - Live with family
  - Work through the pain
- What do you think happened to George the Czechoslovakian dishwasher?



**Skokie Public Library**

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- Have any of you employed a cleaning service? If so, what do you think of the cleaning techniques of the housecleaners?
- Discuss the concept of cleaning floors on hands and knees to make customer feel they are doing a better job, to make the customer feel superior, getting their money's worth. (p. 83-4)
- Do employees tend to “Dummy down” rather than alienate or outshine fellow workers?
- What is behind the power of Ted?
  - Father figure?
  - Trying to gain his respect...trying not to be thought of as a shirker?
  - Pleasing the boss?
- How do the expectations placed on management to achieve results filter down to the employees' shoulders?
  - In almost all three jobs you could say the workers underwent “Management by Stress.” They couldn't sit down, had to work through pain, couldn't chat to each other, etc.
  - In these days of leaner meaner companies, has this become the norm?
  - Is there a universal lack of trust between management and employees?
- Should employees expect to lose many of their civil liberties in the workplace?
  - Pre-employment tests
  - Can't use profanity
  - No right to chat (mentioned in the housekeeping job and Wal-Mart)
- The author was not convinced about the psychological testing that larger corporate employers administer to perspective employees. What do you think the employers are attempting to find out with these tests? Do the tests seem to be a reasonable solution in hiring?
- Are employment tests valid...can most people cheat or fool them? What did you think of her attitude toward the drug testing?
- Are the poor invisible?
  - Almost 1/5th of the homeless are employed part or full time
  - We think these are all married women with a supportive husband
  - We don't want to see them
  - We live in gated communities or buildings
  - We don't ride the buses
- Why do they continue in some of these jobs? (no choice?)
- What do you think of the Wal-Mart Credo? 1. Respect for the individual. 2. Exceeding customer's expectations and 3. Strive for Excellence. What does this cost employees and taxpayers?
- Could the working poor live in Skokie? Just what can be done about the lack of affordable housing?
- In what ways can an employee steal time from their employers?
- Why did Barbara react so adversely to the “intruder” in her department at Wal-Mart? (p. 167-8)
- Ehrenreich became swept up in the plight of the employees to the complete detriment of management. Her vision of management may be too radical. To judge for ourselves, let's list some pros and cons of both employees and management and see what conclusions we reach.
- Had Ehrenreich made up her mind before beginning this experiment? If so, does that detract from her findings?
- Have you ever been homeless, unemployed, without health insurance or held down two jobs? What is the lowest-paying job you ever held and what kind of help, if any, did you need to improve your situation?