



Nickel and Dimed

by Barbara Ehrenreich

Reviewed by Brooke Quinlan

About This Book:

“How does anyone live on the wages available to the unskilled?” In her book, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, Barbara Ehrenreich reports on the conditions and perspectives of the working poor. She accomplishes this by what she deems “the old fashioned kind of journalism”. That is, Ehrenreich put aside her Ph.D. in Biology and pursued jobs available for unskilled laborers as well as living accommodations available to the poor. The book recounts Ehrenreich’s travails as she serves as a waitress, hotel maid, house cleaner, nursing-home attendant and Wal-Mart employee. Ehrenreich’s work reveals that low-income jobs often provide barely enough to sustain the individual, let alone a family. Furthermore, regarding housing, poor individuals often pay more for less due to a lack of capital for down payments and/or credit history.

Self-proclaimed as unusually fit for her age, Ehrenreich, nonetheless, found the low-income jobs physically and mentally demanding. She writes, “The trick lies in figuring out how to budget your energy so there’ll be some left over for the next day.” The problem is compounded for individuals working two or more jobs. Ehrenreich, in her fifties, found that it would be impossible, despite her health, to maintain two physically demanding jobs for any substantial period of time. Throughout the book she marvels at what life would be like if she weren’t just playing journalist, but rather at the end of a grueling day’s work had to come home to clean a house, do the laundry, play with kids, etc. For her, there wouldn’t be enough time or enough energy to take on the task of family life.

Ehrenreich’s work took her from Florida to Maine to Minnesota. In each place she sought out the cheapest forms of accommodation: trailer parks, motels and low-income housing. Depending on where she lived (which was determined by safety and other pre-determined standards), she found it would take a job and a half or two jobs just to maintain the bills and sustain any semblance of living standards. At the end of one month, allowing for a meager food allowance and rent, she was left with only \$22. With so little ‘extra’ income there was no money available if car trouble or medical emergencies were to arise.

Getting by is hard, getting ahead near impossible. Ehrenreich observes that attaining a higher paying job, even if numerous ones are available, is not as simple as one might think. Many factors come into play. She notes, “Low-wage people who don’t have cars are often dependent on a relative who is willing to drop them off and pick them up again each day, sometimes on a route that includes the babysitter’s house or the child care center.” She further muses that many workers often choose to remain with ‘the devil they know’ rather than play with one they don’t. That is, finding your niche in any job is hard. It takes awhile before you know who you can trust, to cultivate friendships, and to acquire the necessary skills for the job. Even if one has the means to switch jobs, anxiety and fear of the unknown may hinder the decision to seek out a new vocation. The potential to work one’s way up through the ranks of an organization was also found to be discouraging. Ehrenreich writes, “there are

few and no rewards for heroic performance.” Coworkers of hers, though hardworking themselves, advised her to keep any talents hidden from management as they would only be exploited, resulting in more hardship than personal gain.

During her research, Ehrenreich witnesses numerous practices which she finds questionable. Drug tests she relates to unreasonable searches while personality tests she finds to be invasions of privacy. Regardless of these and other dubious infractions by management, the low-income workers are largely unmotivated to stand up for their rights, to demand better wages or working conditions. This she attributes to management manipulation and corporate philosophies. Here, she notes the use of ‘team’ or ‘associate’ terminology to evoke a false sense of community, one that is working towards common goals. Ehrenreich finds that these practices are often simply ploys to create a more amenable workplace based on corporate loyalty.

Ehrenreich sums up her findings, “Something is wrong, very wrong, when a single person in good health, a person who in addition possesses a working car, can barely support herself by the sweat of her brow. You don’t need a degree in economics to see that wages are too low and rents too high.” Against the commonly held beliefs surrounding the poor, she argues that poverty *is not* a consequence of unemployment. Even in America, a willing and working individual can fall victim to poverty’s stronghold. She offers that her work, and the plight of the poor, should not instill a sense of guilt, because guilt is not enough. Rather, the upper classes should feel shamed into action.

Despite the many negative circumstances she observes, Ehrenreich finds many positive characteristics within the working class; the most significant, pride. Though working for minimal wages, these workers take pride in what they do, often desiring to go beyond management’s desire to serve the customer. Though the labor is menial, they find meaning in what they do. Ehrenreich argues that those whom the poor serve should also reflect on the poor’s role in society. She writes, “The ‘working poor,’ as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else.”

Why We Recommend This Book:

This was an enjoyable book to read. It was humorous and insightful to what poverty can be like. Though she set out to be somewhat 'scientific' the book is more narrative-driven than informative. The book is not written from a faith-perspective, and therefore does not address specific actions for the church.