**Title: Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America**

**Author: Barbara Ehrenreich**



**Summary of Book**

**(Note to Curriculum Guide Writer:** *Capture the summary from the author’s website. Either source the summary or rewrite. Make certain to always provide credit. The summary only needs to be one or two paragraphs)*

Our sharpest and most original social critic goes "undercover" as an unskilled worker to reveal the dark side of American prosperity.

Millions of Americans work full time, year round, for poverty-level wages. In 1998, Barbara Ehrenreich decided to join them. She was inspired in part by the rhetoric surrounding welfare reform, which promised that a job -- any job -- can be the ticket to a better life. But how does anyone survive, let alone prosper, on $6 an hour? To find out, Ehrenreich left her home, took the cheapest lodgings she could find, and accepted whatever jobs she was offered. Moving from Florida to Maine to Minnesota, she worked as a waitress, a hotel maid, a cleaning woman, a nursing-home aide, and a Wal-Mart sales clerk. She lived in trailer parks and crumbling residential motels. Very quickly, she discovered that no job is truly "unskilled," that even the lowliest occupations require exhausting mental and muscular effort. She also learned that one job is not enough; you need at least two if you int to live indoors.

Nickel and Dimed reveals low-rent America in all its tenacity, anxiety, and surprising generosity -- a land of Big Boxes, fast food, and a thousand desperate stratagems for survival. Read it for the smoldering clarity of Ehrenreich's perspective and for a rare view of how "prosperity" looks from the bottom. You will never see anything -- from a motel bathroom to a restaurant meal -- in quite the same way again. ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

**About the Author**

**(Note to Curriculum Guide Writer:** *Capture the author background from the author’s website. Either source the summary or rewrite. Make certain to always provide credit. The author summary only needs to be one or two paragraphs)*

“I was born in Butte, Montana, in 1941, when Butte was still a bustling, brawling, blue collar mining town. My father was a miner, as was my mother’s father. Through hard work and chutzpah, my father managed to get a degree from the Butte School of Mines and thus embark on the career that took us from Butte to Pittsburgh PA, New York, various places in Massachusetts and finally Los Angeles. We moved so often that I can hardly claim any geographical roots — except for Butte, which is today a sadly under-populated, woefully polluted, EPA superfund site, thanks to the mining companies.

By the time I was in my mid-teens my family had achieved middle class status and I was able to go to Reed College in Portland, Oregon. I started out majoring in chemistry but after a couple of years decided I would only get to the bottom of things with physics. I did well enough to get into grad school at Rockefeller University in  theoretical physics. But within a year I realized I was gravely under-prepared and switched to molecular biology, and from that to cell biology.

With the birth of my first child in 1970, I underwent a political, as well as a personal, transformation. Bit by bit, I got involved with what we then called the “women’s health movement,” advocating for better health care for women and greater access to health information than we had at that time. This new concern led to the “underground bestseller,” a little pamphlet called *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, co-authored by my friend Deirdre English.

A couple of years later I made the rash decision to quit my teaching job at the State University of NY, Old Westbury and become a full-time writer. Financially rough times followed. My big break was a feature story for *Ms.* magazine on the myth that feminism causes heart disease. It became a cover story, and more assignments followed. In the eighties I had columns in *Ms.* and *Mother Jones*, and was beginning to break into some more “mainstream” publications.

My work life settled into three tracks: (1) Journalism, generally essays and opinion pieces, mostly on themes related to social injustice and inequality (2) Book-length projects on subjects, often historical, which did not make any money but fascinated me and give my life some intellectual continuity. (3) Activism on such issues as health care, peace, women’s rights, and economic justice.  I have never seen a conflict between journalism and activism: As a journalist, I search for the truth. But as a moral person, I am also obliged to do something about it.

One of my major projects as a journalist now is the Economic Hardship Reporting Project, which I instigated in 2011. We promote cutting edge journalism about poverty by recruiting journalists (very often poor themselves), helping them define their projects, and raising money to pay them for their work.” (http://barbaraehrenreich.com/barbara-ehrenreich-bio/)

**Discussion Questions**

**(Note to Curriculum Guide Writer:** *As you read through the book, think of appropriate/applicable questions. Keep in mind that the questions should be directed to a 9th/10th grade reading level. Try to avoid yes-or-no questions without requiring further elaboration from students, e.g., how, why)*

**Title:**

**(Note to Curriculum Guide Writer:**  *If the title is self-evident, a question(s) regarding the title may not be necessary or applicable)*

What does the title, *Nickel and Dimed* mean to you? Why do you think Ehrenreich decided on this title for her book?

**Context:**

**(Note to Curriculum Guide Writer:** *You do not need to have questions in every section. This section is just a guideline to ensure comparability with the other curriculum guides)*

What are the three rules that the author sets for herself at the beginning of the book? Does she ever break them? If so, when and why does she do so?

What are your thoughts and ideas behind the current pay wages? Do you think that minimum wage should be $15 an hour? How do you think we should calculate our living wages?

What were your beliefs on poverty and prosperity before and after reading Nickel and Dimed?

What are your thoughts on how people treat servers, cleaners, sales people before and after reading the book? Did anything change? If so, what changed?

Ehrenreich’s research took place between 1998-2000 when our economy was much better than it is today. What do you think her experience would be like if she were to do this same experiment? What ways would it be different? What was might it be the same?

What are Ehrenreich’s thoughts on the poverty level in this country? What are the problems associated with poverty level? How might decreasing our poverty level benefit our society? How might this relate to low-wage American workers and their use of cigarettes, drugs and alcohol?

Ehrenreich discusses the importance of nutrition throughout the book. Why is that? What is her concern?

**Structure/ Narrative:**

**(Note to Curriculum Guide Writer:** *You do not need to have questions in every section. This section is just a guideline to ensure comparability with the other curriculum guides)*

**Character:**

**(Note to Curriculum Guide Writer:** *You do not need to have questions in every section. This section is just a guideline to ensure comparability with the other curriculum guides)*

**Content/ Plot:**

**(Note to Curriculum Guide Writer:** *You do not need to have questions in every section. This section is just a guideline to ensure comparability with the other curriculum guides)*

While waiting tables at Jerry’s, Barbara becomes friends with George. Why doesn’t she do anything when she learns from the assistant manager that he’s thought of as a thief?

Housing costs are the greatest obstacle for low-wage workers. What needs to be done so that we can rectify this situation? Do you believe that there are realistic solutions to solving this problem?

The author is a white, middle class woman. Do you think that her experience would have been different if she were a person of color or a single parent? How might her story been different?

Why might a low-wage worker be reluctant to form a labor organization? How do you think people should lobby for better working conditions?

How did Ehrenreich’s coworkers react when she shared that she was an undercover writer?

How can American companies make the work place safer and more efficient without treating their employees like suspects? How does the treatment from the managers affect employee morale? How can managers make things better for their employees? Share some practices that you think might work.

When Ehrenreich is working as a maid, the motto was not to clean the house, but to make it look like it was cleaned. Why did they do this?

What connections would you make between maids and minorities in the United States? What about maids and poverty?

Many workers in America that work low-wage jobs like Walmart, receive little to no benefits. This includes over-time pay, no retirement funds, no health insurance etc. What are your thoughts behind this? Would you want a job working for a place like that? How might giving employees the opportunity to have these benefits increase worker morale?

Why does Ehrenreich make the attempt to plant the seed that Walmart employees could use a union? What are her motivations and goals behind this idea?

**10 General Questions for any book**

1. How did you feel about the book?  What was the experience of reading it like for you?
2. What do you think the author was trying to accomplish with this novel?
3. Who was your favorite character? What did you appreciate about him/her?
4. Sometimes when we read we relate to a particular character.  Did you find anyone you related to in this book?  Why?   If you didn't, is there value in reading about people very different from ourselves?
5. Consider the main character: what does he or she believe in? What is he or she willing to fight for?
6. At the end of the book, do you feel hope for the characters?
7. Are any of the events in the book relevant to your own life?
8. Was the story credible? The characters credible?
9. What is the favorite book you've ever read, why?
10. What is your favorite Book -to- movie?  Why?  What were the differences between book and movie?  What did you like better in which version?

**Enrichment Ideas for Discussion**

**(Note to Curriculum Guide Writer:** *Capture enrichment ideas for facilitators to use during an ABG session, such as small group activities; accountable “talks”; games; role play; or props)*

Review this link on poverty rates in San Diego from 2014 and discuss the statistics with the students: <http://www.nusinstitute.org/assets/resources/pageResources/NUSIPR_Concentrated_Poverty_Brief.pdf>

**Enrichment Ideas for Teachers**

**(Note to Curriculum Guide Writer:** *Capture enrichment ideas for teachers to implement book into language arts curriculum, such as writing or art projects; lessons; historical relevance; or vocabulary)*

Ehrenreich learned that she could live off of $7 per hour. Give students the budget of $7 per hour, full-time, which is $1120 a month before taxes get taken out. Have them create a monthly budget as to where they would live, and how they would spend their money.

Have students read this NYT article on low-wages and getting out of poverty: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/17/business/economy/low-wage-workers-finding-its-easier-to-fall-into-poverty-and-harder-to-get-out.html?_r=0>

**Vocabulary Section:**

**(Note to Curriculum Guide Writer:** *Provide vocabulary that may be challenging for students in this section for teachers to review with their students)*

**Purpose:** The purpose of the ***Read Think Write Pair Share*** document is to help Words Alive volunteers increase high-level thinking and student participation with the classroom.

Directions:

Use the **Learning Targets** and **Success Criteria** to select a passage from the book.

Give students 7-10 minutes to sit quietly to read the passage and write down their thoughts.

**TIPS for using this activity:**

1. Read the questions out loud to get students thinking about the activity sheet they’re about to complete.
2. Read the passage out loud in the group.
3. Encourage students to use their books to pull evidence to support their ideas.
4. Give students 7-10 minutes to write down their ideas.
5. Break-down in small groups to discuss their answers. Assign a volunteer to each group.
6. Use different passages with different learning targets and questions. Have each group with the same learning target discuss their ideas and solutions and report out to the entire group.
7. Create separate sheets, based on the number of learning targets, for all students to complete. When reporting out to the entire group, allow students to who have not already spoken to share. The purpose of the activity is to get as many students to speak and voice their opinion. Having them write down their ideas give the students an opportunity to have something to share with the class

**Learning Target:** To develop from social injustices to learn higher purpose.

**Success Criteria:** Students will use Nickel and Dimed as a way to discuss how low-wage jobs impact our society.

**Read the following quote from *Nickel and Dimed*:**

“It was uniformly assumed that a job was the ticket of poverty.”

**After some thought, please write down your ideas about the passage you just read. Here are the questions that we would like you to answer:**

1. What do you think of the statement after having read *Nickel and Dimed*? Does that apply today?
2. What can we do to get out of poverty?

***Note: Please be prepared to share your written thoughts and ideas with the class.***

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