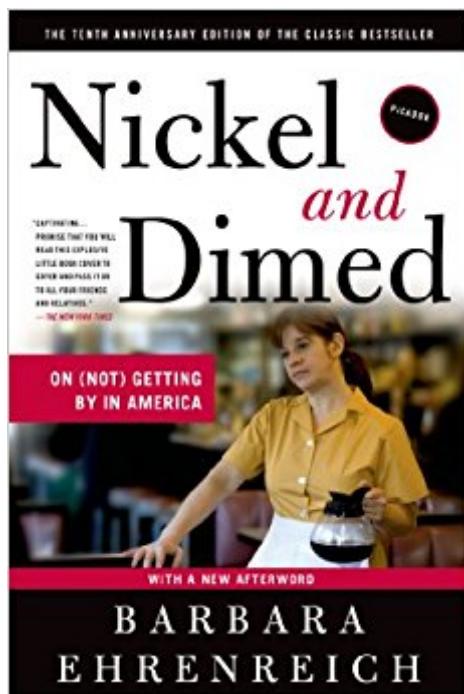


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# Nickel And Dimed: On (Not) Getting By In America



## **Synopsis**

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.

## **Book Information**

Series: With a New Afterword

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Picador; 10th Anniversary ed. edition (August 2, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0312626681

ISBN-13: 978-0312626686

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 16.1 x 207 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 1,857 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,206 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #1 inÃ  Books > Business & Money > Economics > Labor & Industrial Relations #1 inÃ  Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Labor & Industrial Relations #2 inÃ  Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Political Economy

## **Customer Reviews**

Essayist and cultural critic Barbara Ehrenreich has always specialized in turning received wisdom

on its head with intelligence, clarity, and verve. With some 12 million women being pushed into the labor market by welfare reform, she decided to do some good old-fashioned journalism and find out just how they were going to survive on the wages of the unskilled--at \$6 to \$7 an hour, only half of what is considered a living wage. So she did what millions of Americans do, she looked for a job and a place to live, worked that job, and tried to make ends meet. As a waitress in Florida, where her name is suddenly transposed to "girl," trailer trash becomes a demographic category to aspire to with rent at \$675 per month. In Maine, where she ends up working as both a cleaning woman and a nursing home assistant, she must first fill out endless pre-employment tests with trick questions such as "Some people work better when they're a little bit high." In Minnesota, she works at Wal-Mart under the repressive surveillance of men and women whose job it is to monitor her behavior for signs of sloth, theft, drug abuse, or worse. She even gets to experience the humiliation of the urine test. So, do the poor have survival strategies unknown to the middle class? And did Ehrenreich feel the "bracing psychological effects of getting out of the house, as promised by the wonks who brought us welfare reform?" Nah. Even in her best-case scenario, with all the advantages of education, health, a car, and money for first month's rent, she has to work two jobs, seven days a week, and still almost winds up in a shelter. As Ehrenreich points out with her potent combination of humor and outrage, the laws of supply and demand have been reversed. Rental prices skyrocket, but wages never rise. Rather, jobs are so cheap as measured by the pay that workers are encouraged to take as many as they can. Behind those trademark Wal-Mart vests, it turns out, are the borderline homeless. With her characteristic wry wit and her unabashedly liberal bent, Ehrenreich brings the invisible poor out of hiding and, in the process, the world they inhabit--where civil liberties are often ignored and hard work fails to live up to its reputation as the ticket out of poverty. --Lesley Reed --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In contrast to recent books by Michael Lewis and Dinesh D'Souza that explore the lives and psyches of the New Economy's millionaires, Ehrenreich (*Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, etc.) turns her gimlet eye on the view from the workforce's bottom rung. Determined to find out how anyone could make ends meet on \$7 an hour, she left behind her middle class life as a journalist except for \$1000 in start-up funds, a car and her laptop computer to try to sustain herself as a low-skilled worker for a month at a time. In 1999 and 2000, Ehrenreich worked as a waitress in Key West, Fla., as a cleaning woman and a nursing home aide in Portland, Maine, and in a Wal-Mart in Minneapolis, Minn. During the application process, she faced routine drug tests and

spurious "personality tests

On the one hand this work is as ground breaking as it is bleak. On the other hand it feels a bit artificial, that is, the situations she puts herself in. However, I don't see how she could have avoided that.

I read this book in almost one sitting. I worked my way through college doing many of the same jobs as "Barb" but I always knew it was just a way to get by and my eye was on the bigger goal of getting out of school. Her look at these jobs from a more mature vantage point gave me a real cause to pause and think. The mark of a good book is the way ideas and thoughts keep coming back to you in odd moments and they are directly related to what you just took in from the author. I found myself discussing the book with my lunch buddies, my husband and even my boss. The gentle way she presented the problems faced by the working poor didn't preach, just teach. I found myself in a national chain variety store buying cat treats yesterday and I almost put them back thinking that the lady ringing me out would look at this as a waste of money as she probably is making due on a small budget. Being a childless woman in a world that makes kids the golden calf I fully understood the comments of her co-workers while they cleaned for or served a meal to the "client". Longing can come from any everyday situation, a running shoe display as seen from the low angel of a wheel chair, a cart full of kids back to school supplies passing a lady who's childless, or a holiday spent in an empty house. But this book brings us back to the all too often hidden longings of thousands of people for simple things like a safe place to live, a hot dinner, and a chance to rest a sore back. I'll keep this book to read again and again. I'll also go from tipping 15% to 20% and be even nicer to the folks that stand behind counters. I never had a maid, for many of the same reasons bought out in the book, but if I ever need household help I will not be the boss, just the very thankful person being helped.

I read it at a time when I spent about \$0.50 each day for all my meals and looked often into trash and yard sales for everything I need. I felt even then that others had it so much harder.

This is well done but it still leaves me a little uncomfortable. Ehrenreich always had a safety net. She could choose to pull the plug on the product anytime and go home to her lovely upper middle class existence and privilege whenever she wanted. Because of this, she really can't identify with the panic that comes from being truthfully in this position. Her sticking it out means nothing.

Although written in 2002, this book has a lot to say at this time. As questions are being currently raised about a living wage and upping the minimum wage, not much has changed since 2002. As I am about to hit retirement and live on a much smaller salary than I do presently - about minimum wage. It certainly means tightening ones belt and then some

This book is very interesting overall and I'd say worth reading. It starts out with what I thought would be a very minimal bias, which is necessary on the author's part or she wouldn't even know to ask the question, but it does show a pretty liberal bent which either living through the experience created or enhanced, or was repressed in the beginning chapters to keep less liberal types reading. Anyway, I think the points made are the same. Today in 2014 the issue is more on the radar of the average citizen than ever but the dynamics have changed greatly. Other than a very few boom times WW2 and maybe the early to mid 50's the problems discussed here seem to be the "baseline" of existence. The default human condition is poverty. Circumstances of birth and location can change that obviously but I'm just saying. The big issue is opportunity cannot be forced on anyone whether receiving or the folks being asked to pay more, give more and accept more of the burden to make the opportunity available. Anyway.....it's worth reading. The most tedious part is the evaluation at the end but even that is worth a slightly focused skim. We can after reading, go back about our business I guess.

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