

Nickel And Dimed Study Guide Answers

Nickel and Dimed by Barbara Ehrenreich

Study Guide

Introduction

1. Near the outset, Ehrenreich (speaking of her own sister) employs the term “wage slave.” What does she mean by this?
2. What are the three rules the author sets for herself at the beginning of *Nickel and Dimed*? Does she ever break them? If so, when and why, in your view, does she do so?
3. Early on, the author tells us that she has a Ph.D. in biology. How, if at all, does this figure into the narrative? What does Ehrenreich’s scientific training bring to the “old-fashioned journalism” of this book?
4. Why does Ehrenreich assert in her Introduction that “a story about waiting for buses would not be very interesting to read”? What are the context and rationale for this remark? And given as much, do you agree?

Chapter 1

5. Early in Chapter One, Ehrenreich notes that, in terms of low-wage work, “the want ads are not a reliable measure of the actual jobs available at any particular time.” Explain why this is so.
6. At one point, Ehrenreich details the living conditions of her fellow workers at the Hearthside. Reviewing these arrangements, explain how each set-up compares with the author’s own “\$500 efficiency” quarters.
7. Waiting tables at Jerry’s, the author meets a young dishwasher named George. Who is he? What is his story? Why do he and Ehrenreich befriend one another? And why does she not “intervene” when she learns from an assistant manager that George is thought to be a thief?
8. On her first—and last—day of housekeeping in Key West, Ehrenreich is met by a manager who addresses her as “babe” and gives her “a pamphlet emphasizing the need for a positive attitude.” When and where else, throughout the book, does the author encounter cheap talk or hollow slogans in her endeavors as a low-wage worker? What purposes might such empty language serve? Why is it so prevalent?

Chapter 2

9. In an extended footnote in Chapter Two, Ehrenreich explains how “the point” of the housecleaning service where she is employed “is not so much to clean as to create the appearance of having been cleaned.” Why is this? Why the deceit? Why does The Maids outfit not clean its clients’ homes properly?
10. “The hands-and-knees approach is a definite selling point for corporate cleaning services like The Maids,” the author writes. Explain why this “old fashioned way” of housecleaning is thus appealing. Why does it seem to, as Ehrenreich puts it, “gratify the consumers of maid services”?
11. Buying groceries with a voucher at a Shop-n-Save in Maine, Ehrenreich notes of the checkout woman ringing up her purchases: “I attempt to thank her, but she was looking the other way at nothing in particular.” What might such body language mean? Why, if at all, is it telling?
12. Looking back on Chapter Two as a whole, what connections would you make between maids and minorities in the United States? What about between maids and poverty, and maids and “invisibility”? Refer to the text itself when making your links.

Nickel and Dimed Study Guide Answers

Barbara Ehrenreich’s “Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America” is a groundbreaking work that explores the realities of low-wage work in the United States. The book serves as both a personal narrative and a sociological exploration of the challenges faced by the working poor. This study guide aims to provide comprehensive answers to common questions and themes found in the book, which can serve as a resource for students, educators, and readers interested in understanding the nuances of Ehrenreich’s findings.

Overview of the Book

“Nickel and Dimed” is divided into three main parts, each representing different locations where Ehrenreich worked:

1. Key West, Florida
2. Minneapolis, Minnesota
3. Portland, Maine

In each location, Ehrenreich takes on various low-wage jobs, including waitressing, cleaning, and working in retail, while striving to make ends meet on minimum wage. Her experiences reveal the struggles and indignities faced by those earning subsistence wages in America.

Key Themes

Understanding the themes in “Nickel and Dimed” is crucial to grasp the broader implications of the low-wage work environment in America.

1. The Struggle for Survival

Ehrenreich illustrates the daily challenges faced by low-wage workers, including:

- Financial Instability: Workers often cannot afford basic necessities like housing, health care, and food.
- Health Risks: Many low-wage jobs expose workers to unsafe conditions without health benefits.
- Time Constraints: The demanding schedules leave little room for additional employment or education.

2. The Illusion of the American Dream

Ehrenreich argues that the American Dream is often unattainable for those in low-wage positions. Key points include:

- Systemic Barriers: Discrimination, lack of access to education, and inadequate support systems hinder social mobility.
- Wage Stagnation: Despite the rising cost of living, wages for low-skilled jobs have not kept pace.

3. Class and Social Inequality

The book highlights the social divisions and stigma associated with low-wage work. It examines:

- Perceptions of the Working Poor: Society often views low-wage workers as lazy or unmotivated, ignoring the systemic issues at play.
- Cultural Capital: The lack of social connections can limit opportunities for advancement.

Character Analysis

Ehrenreich adopts a first-person narrative style, making her the central character of the story. Here are her main traits:

- Determined: She is committed to understanding the plight of low-wage workers by immersing herself in their world.
- Empathetic: Through her experiences, she develops a deeper understanding of the struggles faced by those around her.
- Critical Thinker: Ehrenreich analyzes her experiences and the societal structures that contribute to poverty.

Key Questions and Answers

This section addresses common questions about the book, providing insights into its content and themes.

1. What motivated Ehrenreich to write “Nickel and Dimed”?

Ehrenreich was motivated by a desire to uncover the realities of low-wage work in America. She wanted to challenge the perceptions that low-wage workers are lazy or unskilled and to highlight the systemic issues contributing to their struggles.

2. How does Ehrenreich's background influence her perspective?

Ehrenreich comes from a background of moderate privilege, which provides her with a unique perspective. Her education and experience as a journalist allow her to critically analyze the conditions she encounters, while also

understanding the stark contrast between her previous life and the lives of low-wage workers.

3. What are some key challenges Ehrenreich faced while working low-wage jobs?

Some challenges include:

- Physical Exhaustion: Many jobs are physically demanding, leading to fatigue and health issues.
- Financial Constraints: Ehrenreich often struggled to pay for basic necessities, such as rent and groceries.
- Lack of Benefits: Many of her jobs did not provide health insurance or paid time off, exacerbating her financial difficulties.

4. How does Ehrenreich's experience in each city differ?

- Key West: The tourist economy led to seasonal employment and high living costs, making it difficult to find stable work.
- Minneapolis: Ehrenreich found more competitive wages but faced challenges with job availability and work conditions.
- Portland: The cost of living was high, and Ehrenreich struggled to find adequate housing, reflecting the broader issue of affordability in urban areas.

Critical Reception

"Nickel and Dimed" received widespread acclaim for its honest portrayal of low-wage work. Critics praised Ehrenreich's ability to blend personal narrative with sociological analysis, making complex issues accessible to a broad audience. The book has sparked significant discussion about labor rights, economic inequality, and the social safety net.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Barbara Ehrenreich's "Nickel and Dimed" serves as an essential examination of the realities of low-wage work in America. Through her firsthand experiences, Ehrenreich challenges readers to confront the systemic issues that perpetuate poverty and inequality. The study guide answers provided here help illuminate the book's key themes, character insights, and critical questions, encouraging a deeper understanding of the struggles faced

by millions of Americans. As the conversation about labor rights and social justice continues, "Nickel and Dimed" remains a vital resource for anyone seeking to understand the complexities of work and poverty in contemporary society.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the primary purpose of Barbara Ehrenreich's 'Nickel and Dimed'?

The primary purpose of 'Nickel and Dimed' is to expose the struggles of low-wage workers in America and to highlight the challenges they face in trying to survive on minimum wage.

What methodology did Ehrenreich use in her research for 'Nickel and Dimed'?

Ehrenreich employed a participant observation methodology, where she took on low-wage jobs herself to understand the realities of working in poverty.

What are some of the key themes explored in 'Nickel and Dimed'?

Key themes include the dignity of work, the impact of economic policies on the working class, the struggle for survival in a capitalist society, and the systemic issues that perpetuate poverty.

How does 'Nickel and Dimed' illustrate the difficulties of finding affordable housing?

Ehrenreich discusses her experiences with the high costs of housing and how low-wage workers often struggle to find safe and affordable places to live, often leading to unstable living conditions.

What was the outcome of Ehrenreich's experiences working in low-wage jobs?

Ehrenreich found that, despite working multiple jobs, it was nearly impossible to make ends meet, highlighting the inadequacy of minimum wage and the struggles of low-wage workers.

How does 'Nickel and Dimed' contribute to the conversation about minimum wage laws?

The book serves as a powerful critique of minimum wage laws, arguing that they are insufficient for supporting a living wage, and calls for a reevaluation of how society compensates its workers.

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