

# Getting by

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [August 1, 2001](#) issue

*Nickel and Dimed*. By Barbara Ehrenreich. Metropolitan Books, 221pp., \$23.00.

For those who remember waiting tables in college but who have never had to support a family on those wages, Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* sounds a wake-up call. America has forgotten about the working poor. Since the end of "welfare as we know it," the media have avoided the story of the many Americans who piece together two and three part-time jobs, working for six or seven dollars per hour in the restaurants and chain stores that dot our highways.

In a remarkable piece of investigative reporting, Ehrenreich went undercover with the working poor in Florida, Maine and Minnesota. In her book we learn that the fresh-faced Wal-Mart employee who unloads our carts may well be sleeping in a car. America's service economy may be all dressed up, but it has no place to go at night.

Finding housing was the greatest challenge for the author, who spent three months in the highest-paying unskilled work she could find, which included waiting tables, cleaning hotels and homes and working at Wal-Mart. Living in cabins and a trailer park while constantly searching for that mythical affordable efficiency apartment, she also ended up overspending at the ubiquitous weekly motels that provide housing for so many of the working poor.

Ehrenreich admits up front that she is no martyr. She kept an ATM card for emergencies, visited a doctor for a medical problem, kept a rent-a-wreck car at all times and refused to sleep in it. As it turns out, this put her way ahead of a number of her co-workers. With self-deprecating humor, she assures us that she enjoys a glass of red wine with her hamburger and that she is no ascetic, and with those assurances she gently lures us into her adventure. Ehrenreich's refusal to be pious about her own efforts is the book's greatest strength. It is the people she meets along the way who stand out as heroes, and they are allowed to be as flawed as the rest of us.

Her search begins in a restaurant in Key West, close to her comfortable real-life home. Here we are introduced to Stu, the restaurant manager, who limits the number of croutons per salad to six. Stu turns out to be the first of the many young white male managers Ehrenreich finds at every workplace where older women work for low wages and the "benefit" of "mother's hours."

Presenting herself as a mother in her late 50s entering the working world for the first time, Ehrenreich undergoes countless drug tests, a few of which she admits she ought not to pass. Because the drug tests take time and getting to them uses up valuable gasoline, they limit worker mobility. Why leave Wal-Mart for Kmart if you have to lose working hours, not to mention go through detox again? She marvels at workers' loss of privacy and discovers that the purse searches waitresses undergo, without warning, are entirely legal. Organizing a union becomes impossible when one is forbidden to communicate with one's co-workers.

At most of her job interviews Ehrenreich takes "personality tests" that seem designed to weed out anyone with a backbone. Potential employees know that "disagree" is the only correct answer to the statement "management and employees will always be in conflict because they have different sets of goals."

Ehrenreich is known for her sharp, humorous critique of American capitalism and middle-class life. The child of a father who climbed out of the mines of Butte, Montana, "to the suburbs of the Northeast, ascending from boilermakers to martinis before booze beat out ambition," Ehrenreich is a professional journalist and lecturer, with a Ph.D. under her belt. She is the perfect translator between worlds.

In the double-speak of low-wage working life, workers become "associates," customers become "guests" and talking among co-workers is called "time theft." Yet it is the workers whose time is stolen in the monotony of shelving T-shirts or cleaning the toilets of the rich, all for a wage that leaves one maid dividing a bag of chips between lunch and dinner and feeling faint all day.

Ehrenreich, who admits to years of weight training and aerobics, recalls conversations in which professionals criticized the poor for their obesity and fast-food diets. But without a kitchen or even a refrigerator, Ehrenreich eats cold cuts out of a grocery bag in her motel room. She finds herself bringing home a box of Kentucky Fried Chicken and losing herself in TV sitcoms in which no one makes less than \$15 an hour. When she asks for help at a social welfare agency she is sent

home with a box of food filled with empty calories, from Rice Krispies treats to bags of candy.

Helping agencies do not seem to help the author very much. When she shows up, she is greeted by compassionate but exhausted people who generally are too tired to follow the details of her story and send her out on dead-end housing searches. Ehrenreich would argue that a living wage, subsidized day care and universal health insurance would do the working poor a lot more good than faith-based initiatives.

Ehrenreich mentions one example of a woman who always joins a church right away when she is in a new place because she finds real support there. But for the most part she waxes cynical, as in this cutting description of a church service: "But Jesus makes his appearance here only as a corpse; the living man, the wine-guzzling vagrant and precocious socialist, is never once mentioned, nor anything he ever had to say. Christ crucified rules, and it may be that the true business of modern Christianity is to crucify him again and again so that he can never get a word out of his mouth." She leaves the service "half expecting to find Jesus out there in the dark, gagged and tethered to a tent pole."

Followers of Jesus ought to object to that as the only description of the church. Yet most Christians would admit that we speak about the gap between the rich and the poor a lot less than Jesus does. Ehrenreich argues that most of us simply don't see the truly poor anymore. Once middle-class young people worked at stores and restaurants. Today they spend their summers in pre-professional internships or summer school. The Democrats and Republicans who joined forces to cut welfare are reluctant to draw attention to the hard lives of people like those in *Nickel and Dimed*.

Jesus had a habit of being distracted by the poor, pulled away from his journey to tend to their needs. Perhaps Ehrenreich's book will pull a few of us over to the side of the road to pay attention to the working poor, or prompt a few of us to hear Jesus speak. The story of the rich young fool comes to mind.