

A maid bears witness

Stephanie Land's memoir reveals the intimacy and power of a housecleaner's labor.

by [Valerie Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [March 13, 2019](#) issue

In Review



Maid

Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive

By Stephanie Land

Hachette

Stephanie Land's memoir is a dispatch from the front line of the struggle for a living wage. It demonstrates that when your take-home pay is six dollars an hour, no math works. Rent plus groceries will always exceed income. As a young single mother who leaves a violent boyfriend, Land begins cleaning houses to support herself and her daughter: "My job offered no sick pay, no vacation days, no foreseeable increase in wage, yet through it all, still I begged to work more."

Her description of cleaning houses is as precise as the labor is punishing. Turning the minutiae of underpaid domestic work—sponges and rags, pink mildew and dog hair, pay stubs and WIC coupons—into a gripping tale requires a particular kind of narrative talent, and Land has it. She also demonstrates a surprising empathy for those she could easily resent: her clients. When she discovers stashes of sleep aids and anxiety meds in their houses, Land muses, "Maybe the stress of keeping up a two-story house, a bad marriage, and maintaining the illusion of grandeur overwhelmed their systems in similar ways to how poverty did mine."

Readers accustomed to the supportive network of a church may wish Land would attach herself to one. Along with her parents' relative financial security, the "shroud of religion" gave her and her brother a sense of safety in her early years, but faith is something she has left behind. Land recalls her youth group witnessing on the street and handing out gifts at Christmas—efforts, she says, that were well-intentioned but that made "poor people into caricatures—anonymous paper angels on a tree." Now that she's the one who would receive a church's works of mercy, she realizes that there is no way "to put 'health care' or 'childcare' on a list."

And health care and child care are precisely what she needs, along with a living wage, reliable transportation, a regular work schedule, and affordable housing free of the mold that makes her daughter sick. Eventually, after a car accident nearly decimates the shaky financial formula on which her survival depends, Land ekes out a spot at a better daycare for her daughter, a better apartment, and a scholarship designed for survivors of domestic violence. At the end of the book Land moves to a hip college town and presumably lands a book deal.

Two decades ago Barbara Ehrenreich famously documented the plight of low-wage workers in *Nickel and Dimed*, and now she champions the work of writers like Land

and Sarah Smarsh, whose exquisitely rendered memoir *Heartland* chronicles growing up poor, white, and female in Kansas. Land was discovered by the Economic Hardship Reporting Project, founded by Ehrenreich, which helps working-class writers produce journalistic accounts of income inequality.

Projects like Land's and Smarsh's hang on the writer's presumed ability to relate to readers. Yet the writer's narration of her ultimate triumph over poverty can prop up the very myth of meritocracy it decries. She has worked so hard and overcome so much! White middle-class readers like me can undergo in these pages a cathartic championing of someone who looks like us and writes like us, someone who *could* be us had some shard of fate flown a different direction. Land has experienced the nightmare of poverty—the one-paycheck-or-divorce-away specter that haunts the middle class—and has lived to tell about it.

Poverty memoirs like *Maid* can crop a photograph so tightly around a subject that you'd never guess the size or color of the crowd that surrounds her. For many black women, "domestic worker" has been not a temporary and escapable job title but a generational identity. For example, historian Isabel Wilkerson writes in *The Warmth of Other Suns* that in the 1950s her mother, walking through a wealthy white neighborhood while dressed in heels and professional clothing, was summoned by a white woman: "Say, girl, could you come up here and clean my bathroom?"

Land should not be held responsible for the limits of her chosen genre. Still, readers longing for a multiplicity of surviving-minimum-wage stories might seek out a book like *Tales of Two Americas*, a 2017 anthology edited by John Freeman that contains 36 writers' essays about income inequality. The wide-angle lens of that volume captures the crowd.

The most vivid sections of Land's book are the ones in which she narrates the intimacy, invisibility, and ironic authority of a maid's labor. One might imagine the power dynamic between maid and client to be clearly skewed in favor of the clients, who have enough money to pay someone else to scrub their toilets. Land rarely met the people whose houses she cleaned, since she worked for agencies. But by dusting and vacuuming the most intimate spaces of a life—bedside table, medicine cabinet, back corner of the bottom cupboard—the cleaner learns a lot about the cleaned. "I became a witness," Land writes. "I'd see them, even if they weren't home, by the imprints left in their beds and tissues on the nightstand. I'd know them in a way few people did, or maybe ever would."

In that sense, Land dons something akin to the stole of a priest, or at least the sweater of a therapist. “Though many did not know that I existed, my clients began to feel like family members or friends that I worried about, wondered about, cared for from a distance.” She names the houses that she cleans—the Sad House, the Cigarette Lady’s House, the Chef’s House—to honor, in a way, the inhabitants’ vices and virtues. “The vulnerability I was exposed to somehow relieved me of my own,” Land writes. “Maybe they just had longer hallways and bigger closets to hide the things that scared them.”

Land’s own loneliness and that of her clients runs like an aquifer under her memoir. There is a sense of anomie in these pages, and of the perishability of human connection. Her optimism about moving at the end of the book may be simply one more dislocation. As Land explores her new city, she is smitten with the vendors selling T-shirts at a festival and the throngs of customers at a farmers’ market. “This could be our home,” she writes. “These people could be our family. I was sure of it.”

When real family and community are absent from your life, you begin to see them everywhere. Hairstylists, ride-share drivers, baristas: in an era of alienation and consumption, service personnel become secular clergy, proffering human connection and belonging. For many living in an age of loneliness, encounters with maids and bartenders and vendors offer not only vacuumed carpets and craft beer and T-shirts. As *Maid* testifies, they offer the chance, albeit fleeting, to know and be known.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Underpaid.”