

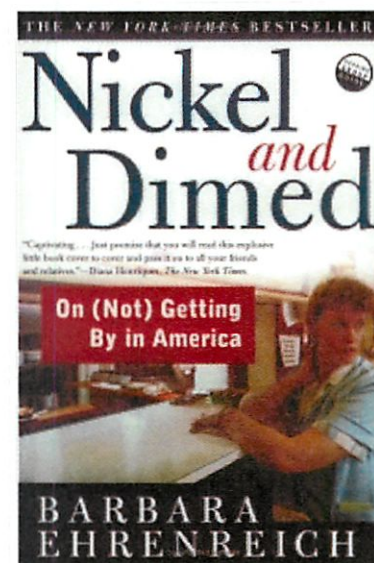
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# Nickel and Dimed Book Report

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Macro Economics Nickel and Dimed (Amazon



Book Cover

([http://www.amazon.com/Nickel-Dimed-Not-Getting-America/dp/0805063897/sr=8-1/qid=1168395927/ref=pd\\_bbs\\_](http://www.amazon.com/Nickel-Dimed-Not-Getting-America/dp/0805063897/sr=8-1/qid=1168395927/ref=pd_bbs_)) Book Report

## Contents

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- 2 My Review
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## Summary

*Nickel and Dimed* is about a well-off author, Barbara Ehrenreich, and her experience when she sets aside her college education, white collar job, and joins the ranks of workers living near minimum wage. During her experiment, she struggles to just get by; becoming ever more hopeless toward the end. She jumps from job to job, always searching the want ads for opportunities, and avoiding the wrath of the management. She points out the problem of the poor, without enough money upfront, they are stuck paying much higher amounts for housing and enormous rates on credit cards to live paycheck to paycheck. In addition, firms are only interested in hiring drug-free people good at following orders, and ones which don't steal company time. No skills are required other than following directions. Affordable housing is very, very hard to come by she finds. Overall, her experiences were less the positive.

## My Review

Nickel and Dimed scared me into making sure I get a good education, and a good, well paying, white collar job. In addition, I will never look at a service person the same way again. They go through so much, and make so little. Even buying a uniform for their next job puts them weeks behind in savings. These people seem to live in a different country than us, both because of their standard of living, and how much we hear about them. Next time, I will definitely support raising the minimum wage. In addition, tips are a large part of wages for servers; I should remember that as I start eating out without my family.

Overall, I enjoyed reading the book a lot. When I first read it I could not put it down. I read all of it in one day. I seem to enjoy books like this, giving a view inside American society, and how it works. The book is very well written and describes her experiences almost perfectly, without becoming repetitive. I appreciate the facts she intersperses with her story. Overall, I would highly recommend that other read the book in order to gain the same insight which I did.

## Connection

Nickel and Dimed is about the income inequality which exists in the American economy. The book talks about "market" conditions do not mirror real life. Economics assumes that people will have all of the ideas they need to make a smart choice. But the wage taboo prevents wages from being discussed. Help wanted ads are always posted, and almost all don't offer hard numbers. Job searches take time, which can be better spent working. So the actual plight of the poor differs from textbook assumptions and models. This book tells the important human cost of low wages, which is missing in most textbooks.

## Reviews

in re: [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1374/is\\_5\\_61/ai\\_78966516](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1374/is_5_61/ai_78966516)

The review I read from *The Humorist* starts out not liking the book, but ends up enjoying the book very much. The reviewer even goes as far as to say, "this book should be required reading for corporate executives and politicians." I agree. The people who make the decisions about welfare programs and the entry-level wages so be aware just how far those wages go in today's society. They should realize how they are barely paying subsistent wages and should have a little humanity before they protest minimum wage increases. And the politicians should understand that minimum wages do matter to some people; they should pass increases regardless of the protests. Political should also realize how real welfare cuts hit home with a large part of America.

## Sources

- Enrenreich, Barbara. *Nickel and Dimed*. New York: Henry Holt, 2001.
- Scott, Joni. "Nickel and Dimed: On Getting By in America - Not - Review." *The Humanist*. Sept 2001. Looksmart 9 Jan 2007 <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1374/is\\_5\\_61/ai\\_78966516](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1374/is_5_61/ai_78966516)>.

## Cut

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She sets out on her journey telling the difference between her and a real "wage slave:" She pays for a car with her credit card, is healthier than most who worked hard all of their lives, and has the security of knowing that if she can't make it, or at the end of the experiment, a large house and a well-paying job awaited her.

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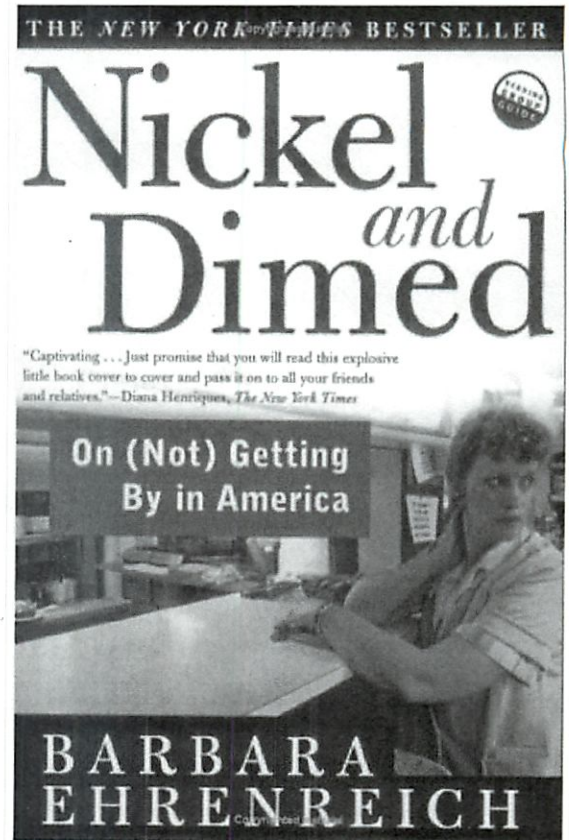
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## Summary

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It talks about how life becomes hard, living with minimum wage, a subject economists can't understand. This book puts faces behind the numbers and explains how impossible it is to live near minimum wage.

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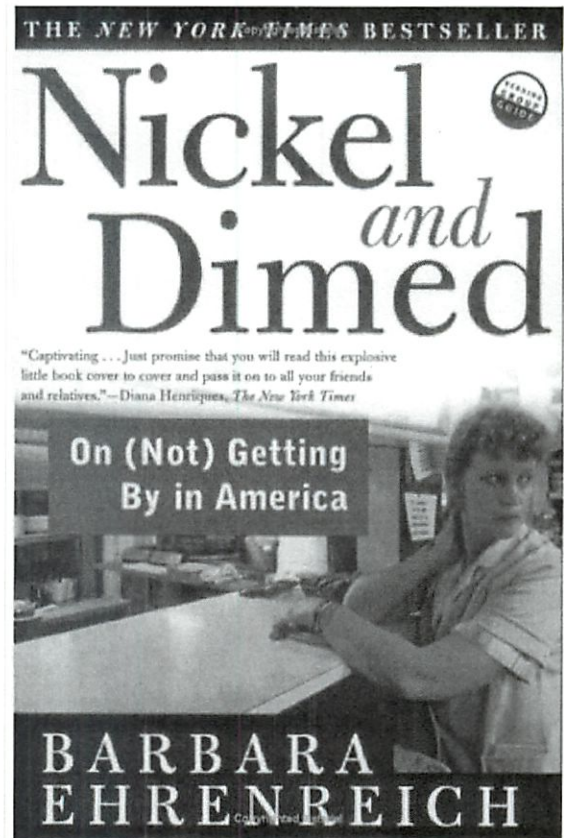


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## Nickel and Dimed: On Getting By in America - Not - Review

Joni Scott

Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America by Barbara Ehrenreich (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2001); 256 pp.; \$23.00 cloth.

At the risk of being stoned, I have to say that it seems to have taken an atheist to do a Christian's job. Barbara Ehrenreich's "princess pretends to be a pauper" tale journeys to where 30 percent of the U.S. population earns eight dollars per hour while Citigroup CEO Sanford Weill munches on corporate profits to the tune of a \$224,870,103 per year salary. Nickel and Dimed is an American anti-fairy tale, infused with emotionally charged imagery, raw authenticity, and mordant wit.

The author's sojourn begins with a twinkle in her publisher's eye over haute cuisine. The publisher is struck by the revelation that a sacrificial journalist must bravely go out into the fields to live among the lowly for the gut wrenching facts! (At this point my eyes roll involuntarily and I imagine Don Ameche in the film Trading Places.)

So despite middle-age reluctance, Ehrenreich roils up her sleeves and embarks on a social science experiment (writing that, after all, she does have a biology degree). As one who has long lived the life she explores only on a short-term basis, I bristle when, with cool and clinical objectivity she writes, "You can think all you want but sooner or later you have to get to the bench and plunge into the everyday chaos of nature where surprises lurk in the most mundane measurements." Apes and chimpanzees pop into my head and then I read, "The only way to find out was to get out there and get my hands dirty." I cringe but keep an open mind.

Bravely sliding down a mock socioeconomic slide, Ehrenreich descends from a six-figure salary as a lecturer and writer to hourly squalor--the American Dream in reverse. I'm glad she acknowledges that her scientific variables misrepresent the norm and that she is protected by an economic trampoline. Many don't have the luxury of start-up money, car, white skin, good health, the ability to speak English, or three years of college to help her secure employment.

Thankfully, my indignant grunts cease as she pens her respect for those enduring the daily maelstrom of low-wage life. She empathically exhorts, "I was only visiting a world that others inhabit full time," stating that the educated classes need to know the poor are bright and anyone who "thinks otherwise ought to broaden their circle of friends." State by state Ehrenreich scrubs, serves, and even feeds residents in an Alzheimer ward without complaint. I can almost hear a collective cheer from the "caste culture" when, on a brief excursion home, she expresses annoyance that relatives and friends were like "a distant race of people with exotic concerns and far too much time on their hands."

Ehrenreich unveils the fallout of corporate greed much as Michael Moore did in Roger and Me (1989) and she examines how corporations often strip employees of their dignity. Random locker searches and drug testing occur despite what she routinely observes to be honest, hard working co-workers. Forced "mandatory gentility" leads to robotic, inauthentic behavior. As one employee laments, "They talk about having spirit, but they don't give us any reason to have any spirit."

Withholding first paychecks--a common corporate practice--can devastate new employees who must front money for extra costs such as work clothing. Banal corporate quizzes with no-brainer questions like "Are you an honest person?" and supervisors who warn, "A break room is not a right, it can be taken away," reduce adults to the status of school children.

Nickel and Dimed exposes the anti-America of flophouses, multiple house sharing, employees sleeping in cars, and the homeless who work forty hours or more weekly. Those who used to be middle class, despite often working two jobs, now endure a daily scramble to prioritize such needs as food, housing, childcare, and health care. One extra expense--like dental work, work uniforms, medication, school supplies, and the like--can "break the camel's back."

So I can't fault Ehrenreich for having stock options and a pension plan while publicly admonishing the excesses of the wealthy. She ponders whether the exurb queens whose houses she and her newfound comrades clean "have any idea of the misery that goes into rendering their homes motel-perfect?" She queries, "Would they be bothered if they did know or would they take a sadistic pride in what they have purchased--boasting to dinner guests for example that their floors are cleaned only with the purest of fresh human tears?"

And regarding the WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) patrons she serves during her Key West server stint, she writes: they "look at us disapprovingly no matter what we do (and they don't tip) as if they were confusing waitressing with Mary Magdalene's original profession." Another poke at hypocrisy comes when Ehrenreich describes how ennui moves her to investigate a Saturday night "tent revival." This passage plunges into a commentary about Jesus being "out there in the dark, gagged and tethered to a tent pole" thereby stifling his message of Christian charity.

Mostly, she delivers a profoundly poignant description of people, such as a hopeful Czech dishwasher living with a crowd of other Czech "dishers." He can't sleep until one of them goes to work, leaving a vacant bed.

On that note, I hear the ghost of social reformer past, Jacob A. Riis, a police reporter who wrote of and extensively photographed the poor in his 1890 book *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*. Riis' words could apply to this century:

The gap between the classes in which it surges unseen, unsuspected by the thoughtless is widening day by day. No tardy enactment of law, no political expedient can close it.... I know of but one bridge that will carry us over safe, a bridge founded upon justice and built of human hearts.

By the end of *Nickel and Dimed* I felt thankful to Barbara Ehrenreich for this important literary contribution and call to action that I hope is answered. I believe this book should be required reading for corporate executives and politicians. A bumpersticker once read, "He who has the most toys at the end wins." Is this to be our legacy?

Joni Scott is associate director of the Pro Choice League ([Prochoiceleague.com](http://Prochoiceleague.com)) in Huntington, New York, and is currently helping write the life story of Bill Baird.

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### **BOOK REPORT/ FILM REVIEW**

**DIRECTIONS:** Read the approved book or watch the recommended film and answer the following questions in not more than two pages. Be sure to include a copy of the reviews consulted with complete bibliographical citation.

- I. **Complete, correct bibliographical citation for the book or film.**  
(HINT: Use the worksheet available in the library or Writers Inc.)
- II. **Summarize the book or film. Be concise; write not more than a paragraph.**
- III. **Relate the book or film to the course.**
- IV. **What do the reviewers think of the book or film?**
  - A. Quote from the review in your report; explain your quotation and why it is significant.
  - B. Use the worksheet to provide a complete, correct bibliographical citation for your review.
  - C. Staple a copy of your review to your report.
- V. **What do you think of the book or film?**
  - A. What is your objective opinion?
    1. Is the book or film historically and culturally accurate? Explain.
    2. Did the book or film teach you something that you did not know? What?
  - B. What is your subjective opinion?
    1. Was the book or film enjoyable? Why?
    2. Would you recommend it to others? Why?



