

Discussion of *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich
Galesburg Public Library Tuesday Book Club
October 2006

1. Were your perceptions of blue-collar Americans transformed or reinforced by *Nickel and Dimed*? Have your notions of poverty and prosperity changed since reading the book? What about your own treatment of waiters, maids, and sales-people?
2. Have you ever been homeless, unemployed, without health insurance, or held down two jobs? What is the lowest-paying job you ever held and what kind of help – if any – did you need to improve your situation?
3. How does managers' scrutiny -- "time theft" crackdowns and drug testing -- affect workers' morale? How can American companies make the workplace environment safe and efficient without treating employees like suspected criminals?
4. How do booming national and international chains – restaurants, hotels, retail outlets, cleaning services, and elder-care facilities – affect the treatment and aspirations of low-wage workers? Consider how market competition and the push for profits drive the nickel-and-diming of America's lowest-paid.
5. Minimum wage workers often report feeling invisible. Where do you encounter minimum wage workers? What sorts of services do they provide? Have you ever worked in a low-wage job? If so, what was your experience?
6. Ehrenreich concluded that had her working life been spent in a Wal-Mart-like environment, she would have emerged a different person – meaner, pettier, "Barb" instead of "Barbara." How would your personality change if you were placed in working conditions very different from the ones you are in now?
7. Housing costs pose the greatest obstacle for low-wage workers. Why does our society seem to resist rectifying this situation? Do you believe that there are realistic solutions to the lack of affordable housing?
8. What parts of her experiences really struck you?
9. While working for The Maids, Ehrenreich hears Ted claim that he's "not a bad guy . . . and cares a lot about his girls." How do the assumptions of supervisors such as Ted affect their employees? How does Ted compare to Ehrenreich's other bosses? To yours?
10. Ehrenreich is white and middle class. She asserts that her experience would have been radically different had she been a person of color or a single parent. Do you think discrimination shaped Ehrenreich's story? In what ways?
11. Ehrenreich found that she could not survive on \$7.00 per hour – not if she wanted to live indoors. Consider how her experiment would have played out in your community: limiting yourself to \$7.00 per hour earnings, create a hypothetical monthly budget for your part of the country.

12. Ehrenreich experienced remarkable goodwill, generosity, and solidarity among her colleagues. Does this surprise you? How do you think your own colleagues measure up?
13. Why do you think low-wage workers are reluctant to form labor organizations as Ehrenreich discovered at Wal-Mart? How do you think employees should lobby to improve working conditions?
14. Many campus and advocacy groups are currently involved in struggles for a “living wage.” How do you think a living wage should be calculated?
15. Were you surprised by the casual reactions of Ehrenreich’s coworkers when she revealed herself as an undercover writer? Were you surprised that she wasn’t suspected of being “different” or out-of-place despite her graduate-level education and usually comfortable lifestyle?
16. The workers in *Nickel and Dimed* receive almost no benefits – no overtime pay, no retirement funds, and no health insurance. Is this fair? Do you think an increase in salary would redress the lack of benefits, or is this a completely separate problem?
17. Many of Ehrenreich’s colleagues relied heavily on family – for housing and help with child-care, by sharing appliances and dividing up the cooking, shopping, and cleaning. Do you think Americans make excessive demands on the family unit rather than calling for the government to help those in need?
18. *Nickel and Dimed* takes place in 1998-2000, a time of unprecedented prosperity in America. Do you think Ehrenreich’s experience would be different in today’s economy? How so?
19. After reading *Nickel and Dimed*, do you think that having a job – any job – is better than no job at all? Did this book make you feel angry? Better informed? Relieved that someone has finally described your experience? Galvanized to do something?
20. Most of the low-income workers Ehrenreich encounters are women. Is there a connection between “women’s work” and low wages? Explain some of the social and historical reasons for this situation.
21. The Poverty Guideline is issued each year by the Department of Health and Human Services. In 2004, HHS found that for a family of four to live above the poverty line, they had to earn \$18,850. Describe life in your hometown for a family of four living just above the poverty line. Where would they live? Work? What would they eat? What daily challenges would they face?
22. “It is common, among the nonpoor,” writes Ehrenreich, “to think of poverty as a sustainable condition. They are ‘always with us.’ What is harder for the nonpoor to see is poverty as acute distress,” due to poor nutrition, homelessness and lack of affordable housing, injuries, and little to no health insurance. Ehrenreich argues that far from being sustainable, poverty is a “state of emergency.” Do you agree?