**Nickel and Dimed** by Barbara Ehrenreich

### Getting Ready

### Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sumptuous</td>
<td>adj. of a size or splendor suggesting great expense, lavish.</td>
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<tr>
<td>neophyte</td>
<td>n. a recent convert, beginner, rookie, novice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>proletariat</td>
<td>n. the class of industrial wage earners.</td>
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<tr>
<td>dither</td>
<td>n. a state of agitation or indecision.</td>
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<tr>
<td>penury</td>
<td>n. extreme want or poverty, destitution.</td>
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<tr>
<td>ineradicable</td>
<td>adj. cannot be uprooted, eradicated, or erased.</td>
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<tr>
<td>wonks</td>
<td>n. experts who focus excessively on details.</td>
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<tr>
<td>autonomous</td>
<td>adj. working independently.</td>
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### Questions for pages 1-10

1. At the outset of undertaking her project, Ehrenreich sets about creating “certain rules and parameters.” What are her rules? What resources does she allow herself that the working poor might not have?

2. What advantages does Ehrenreich start out with that members of the working poor might lack?

3. According to this book, what are some of the things that could “give away” the fact that Ehrenreich is not really a member of the working poor? How does she try to “disguise” her middle-class lifestyle?

4. On page 2, Ehrenreich says, “In my own family, the low-wage way of life had never been many degrees of separation away” and goes on to list the low-wage, working-class jobs that characterized her immediate and extended family. Following Ehrenreich’s example, describe the types of jobs held by you and your family members. Are you working class, lower class, working poor, middle class, or upper class in your family income? Do you identify with any particular economic class? Why or why not?
### Serving in Florida

#### Vocabulary

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<tr>
<td>varicose---</td>
<td>adj. designated blood or lymph vessels that are abnormally dilated, knotted, and tortuous.</td>
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<td>demographic—</td>
<td>adj. relating to study of human populations and their characteristics.</td>
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<td>onerous—</td>
<td>adj. troublesome, burdensome.</td>
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<td>chagrin—n.</td>
<td>a keen feeling of mental unease based upon disappointment.</td>
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<td>covert—adj.</td>
<td>hidden or secret.</td>
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<tr>
<td>agape--n.</td>
<td>a selfless love for others; brotherly love.</td>
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<td>idyll—n.</td>
<td>a tranquil event.</td>
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<tr>
<td>solipsism---</td>
<td>n. philosophical theory that the self is the only thing that can be known and verified.</td>
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<td>improvidence —</td>
<td>n. not providing for the future; rash.</td>
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<tr>
<td>offal---n.</td>
<td>waste parts especially of a butchered animal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>votive---adj.</td>
<td>given or dedicated in fulfillment of a vow or pledge. A votive offering.</td>
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<tr>
<td>mephitic---n.</td>
<td>an offensive smell.</td>
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#### Questions for pages 11-16

1. What kind of community is Key West? (If you don’t know, look it up on the Internet).
2. “In this parallel universe where…I never got through college, I am “baby,” honey,” “blondie,” and, most commonly, “girl.” What point is the author making about education and the types of names that designate her as a female member of the working poor?
3. Why does the author have to rent an efficiency apartment that is forty-five minutes from her place of employment? How does that reflect the realities of resort communities?
4. What are the types of jobs Ehrenreich categorizes as possibilities for her research in Florida?
5. On pp. 13-14, Ehrenreich refers to Winn-Dixie’s “onerous application process.”
Describe this experience. How does it reflect the “corporate point of view”? Do you agree with the author’s point, or are businesses justified in asking such questions in order to screen potential employees?

6. What does Ehrenreich mean when she says that want ads are “the employers’ insurance policy”? What does this suggest about the jobs they advertise?

### Questions for pages 16-29

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<th>Answer</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. On p. 17, the author talks about the touch-screen computer ordering system that she has to master. What other kinds of technology characterize the jobs of the working poor? How might these technologies be barriers to employment?</td>
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<td>2. On p. 19, the author imagines that she is a princess in a fairy tale. Later, when she takes up motel housekeeping, she and her fellow maids listen to soap operas while they work. What other forms of escapism are available to the working poor?</td>
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<td>3. On p. 22, Ehrenreich writes about her resentment of assistant managers, most of whom are pulled out of the ranks of cooks and clerks. She says “everyone knows they have crossed over to the other side, which is crudely put, corporate, as opposed to human.” List three examples of inhumane behavior she experiences at the hands of managers while working in Florida. Why do you think people’s behavior changes when they rise to the management level?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. On p. 23, the manager, Phillip, says that the break room is “not a right… it can be taken away.” Using examples from the text, what other basic rights are no longer rights when you are a low-wage employee?</td>
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<td>5. On p. 27, the author says: “There are no secret economies that nourish the poor; on the contrary, there are a host of special costs.” List some of the examples of the hidden costs of poverty that are described by the author</td>
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### Questions, pages 29 –49

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<tr>
<td>1. In the footnote on p. 33, the author refers to a theory of “management by stress” where workers are “squeezed to extract maximum productivity to the detriment of their health.” List some examples of workplace illness described in this chapter.</td>
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2. What are some examples given that illustrate the way management tries to increase productivity out of hourly wage earners.

3. What are some examples of how customers treat Ehrenreich when she is working as a waitress? Have you ever worked as a waiter/waitress? Provide examples of how you were treated by customers. Did this experience change the way you treat people who wait on you?

4. When the author’s friend, George, is accused of stealing, she cannot find the courage to stick up for him. She states that she is usually “moderately brave, but plenty of brave people shed their courage in POW camps, and maybe something similar goes on in…the low-wage American workplace” (p. 41). Is this a fair comparison? What are the reasons why, at times, we don’t stick up for our fellow workers?


**Scrubbing in Maine**

**Vocabulary**

balefully---adj. harmful or malignant in intent.
postprandial ---adj. following any meal, especially dinner.
Glossolalia---n. the ability to speak in tongues
soterological----n. the theological doctrine of salvation as effected by Christ
oafish----adj. characteristic of a stupid or clumsy person.
petulant ----adj. unreasonably irritable or ill tempered.
*prima facie*----adv. at first sight; before closer inspection.
comportment----n. bearing, deportment, behavior.
tchotche----n. a knickknack.
prurient----adj. obsessively interested in improper matters, especially of a sexual nature.
pummel ----tr. v. to beat.
fecklessness -----n. 1.lLacking purpose or vitality, feeble, ineffective 2. careless, irresponsible.
sanctified ----adj. made holy, dedicated to sacred use; consecrated.
pariah ------n. a social outcast.
banter----n. good-humored, playful conversation.
putative---adj. generally regarded as such; supposed
scabrous---adj. having or covered with scales or small projections and rough to the touch.
penitent---adj. feeling or expressing remorse for one’s misdeeds or sins.
elation---n. the state of being proud or joyful.
wanly---adj. 1. unnaturally pale, as from physical or emotional distress. 2. suggestive or indicative of weariness, illness, or unhappiness.

Questions for pages 52-69

1. Why does the author “choose Maine for its whiteness”? What advantages does this offer her?

2. Why is it so much more difficult to find a job if you are homeless?

3. On p. 57, Ehrenreich states that “Clerical work is ruled out by wardrobe limitations.” What other hourly jobs require a “business” wardrobe that is unavailable to the working poor? Where might one find affordable clothing in our community?

4. On p. 59, the author encounters yet another employer’s “personality test.” She asserts that there is a hidden meaning in such tests: “The real function of these tests…is to convey information not to the employer but to the potential employee, and the information being conveyed is always: You have no secrets from us. We don’t just want your muscles and that portion of your brain that is directly connected to them; we want your innermost self?”

In your opinion, should potential employers have the right to demand that such a test be required of all applicants? How might an employer justify administering such a test?

5. On p. 60, Ehrenreich tries to apply the marketing principle of supply and demand to the wages offered by potential employers: “If the supply (of labor) is low relative to demand, the price should rise, right?” However, she finds that employers in Portland, Maine, as elsewhere, offer $5 to $6 an hour “for what…is heavy labor with a high risk of repetitive-stress injuries.” She then asserts that there is a new version of the law of supply and demand: “jobs are so cheap---as measured by the pay---that a worker is encouraged to take on as many of them as she possibly can.” Why are employers able to get away with offering low wages for these jobs, and still attract employees?

6. On p. 68, Ehrenreich, who is an atheist, is angered by a revival meeting where “Christ crucified rules” and there is no mention of the Sermon on the Mount or of “the living man, the wine-guzzling vagrant and precocious socialist? What does she mean by these different interpretations of Jesus Christ’s significance? How does this relate to the
### Questions for pages 69-86

1. On p. 71, the author describes her Merry Maids uniform. What jobs have you had where you had to wear a uniform? What are the advantages and disadvantages of uniforms? In your opinion, what does a uniform signify?

2. On p. 72, Ehrenreich asserts that one of the advantages of corporate cleaning services is that the homeowners deal only with the middle-class franchise owners, and not with the actual cleaners. As a result, “there are no sticky and possibly guilt-ridden relationships involved.” How would you feel about hiring someone to clean your house? Have you ever done cleaning or janitorial work? If so, describe your experience. Why do you think people who do this essential work are so poorly paid?

3. On p. 72, Ehrenreich points out that independent cleaners can get up to $15 per hour. Why do you think the women who work at Merry Maids choose to stay there for $6 per hour rather than seek independent clearing employment at a higher rate?

4. On p. 74, the author finds the Merry Maids’ training video of a strap-on vacuum cleaner disturbing in its “theme of human/machine merger: when properly strapped on, we too will be vacuum cleaners, constrained only by the cord that attaches us to an electrical outlet, and vacuum cleaners don’t have backaches.” What is she implying with this statement? In what ways are the Merry Maids’ employees treated as if they were machines?

5. How does Ehrenreich characterize the typical cleaning job done by Merry Maids? How does this reflect the company’s attitude toward cleaning and toward its employees?

6. On p. 80, the author describes Maddy’s daycare dilemma and contrasts it with the situation of the owner of a house they clean, who can afford a nanny: “Maybe there’s some secret division of the world’s women into breeders and drones, and those at the maid level are no longer supposed to be reproducing at all.” What is she saying about society’s attitude towards income and childbearing? Do you think people who cannot afford daycare should have children?

7. On p. 85, the author describes one homeowner’s complete lack of sympathy for Ehrenreich, who is on her hands and knees, scrubbing the floor. Why do you think this woman fails to identify with the worker? How does this connect with Ehrenreich’s later assertion that “Many of the owners seem hostile or contemptuous towards us” (p.100)?

### Questions for pages 86-117

1. On pp.86-87, the Merry Maids franchise owner, Ted, blames his workers for any
“lockout” on the part of employers. Why doesn’t he blame the homeowners?

2. On p. 87, the author discusses physical pain and injury and the attitude that one should “work through” pain. She describes laboring jobs where, over the course of a lifetime, people ruin their bodies. Have you ever had a job where you had to continue to work even though you were dealing with a physical injury or were ill? Why did you continue working? What was your boss’s attitude toward your condition?

3. When the author gets angry at a wealthy woman, she internally recites the following rant:

“That’s not your marble bleeding, I want to tell her, it’s the world-wide working class—the people who quarried the marble, wove your Persian rugs until they went blind, harvested the apples in your lovely fall-themed dining room centerpiece, smelted the steel for the nails, drove the trucks, put up this building, and now bend and squat and sweat to clean it.” (p. 90)

How have you benefitted from cheap migrant labor or labor in third-world countries? Do you feel any guilt about this? Why or why not?

4. On p. 93, Ehrenreich raises the specter of management surveillance of employees. Have you ever worked at a job where your efforts were being recorded? How do you feel about this? Why might employers believe that this type of oversight is necessary?

5. On pp.101-103, the author describes the process she goes through in attempting to receive food assistance. How is she treated? What are the obstacles she encounters when trying to get help? How could social service agencies change in order to be more accommodating?

6. On pp.108-9., the author refers to certain religious practices where menial labor is viewed as good for the spirit, “a chance to earn grace through submission and toil.” How does her experience with physical labor support or contradict this point of view?

7. On p. 110, Holly snaps her ankle. How do her fellow workers react to her injury? How does Ted, her employer, react?

8. Many of Ehrenreich's fellow workers rely heavily on family -- for housing and help with childcare, 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?

9. On p. 115, Ted tries to get Ehrenreich to “snitch” on her fellow employees. Why does he think she might do this? What other strategies does he use to turn employees against each other? Why does he do this?

Have you ever been in a situation where you had to choose between management and
your fellow workers? Describe your dilemma. What did you do, and why did you make this choice?

10. Why don’t the Merry Maids employees turn against Ted? Why do they continue to work for such low wages in such poor conditions?

11. Taking care of the elderly, as well as taking care of children, are both low-wage jobs in the U.S. Why do you think this is? Why doesn’t the wage offered reflect the importance of the job?

12. Ehrenreich asserts that “the poor have disappeared from the culture at large, from its political rhetoric and intellectual endeavors as well as from its daily entertainment (p.118).” Why do you think this has happened in our cultural and political forums?