Nickel & Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America Study Guide

Introduction: Getting Ready (pp. 1-10)

1. Near the outset, Ehrenreich (speaking of her own sister) employs the term “wage slave.” What does she mean by this?

2. What are the three rules the author sets for herself at the beginning of Nickel and Dimed? Does she ever break them? If so, when and why, in your view, does she do so?

3. Early on, the author tells us that she has a Ph.D. in biology. How, if at all, does this figure into the narrative? What does Ehrenreich’s scientific training bring to the “old-fashioned journalism” of this book?

4. Why does Ehrenreich assert in her Introduction that “a story about waiting for buses would not be very interesting to read”? What are the context and rationale for this remark? And given as much, do you agree?

5. What are three pre-conceptions, questions, thoughts, or observations you have before reading the rest of the book (based on her introduction)?

6. List the guidelines Ehrenreich established for herself in the experiment: what she would and what she wouldn’t do (for example, having a vehicle, but not going hungry). How realistic are these goals for people working below a minimum wage? Explain your viewpoint. What guidelines would you establish for yourself if you were to do this experiment? Why would those guidelines be important for you to observe?

Chapter 1: Serving in Florida (pp. 11-49)

7. Early in Chapter One, Ehrenreich notes that, in terms of low-wage work, “the want ads are not a reliable measure of the actual jobs available at any particular time.” Explain why this is so.

8. At one point, Ehrenreich details the living conditions of her fellow workers at the Hearthside. Reviewing these arrangements, explain how each set-up compares with the author’s own “$500 efficiency” quarters.

9. Waiting tables at Jerry’s, the author meets a young dishwasher named George. Who is he? What is his story? Why do he and Ehrenreich befriend one another? And why does she not “intervene” when she learns from an assistant manager that George is thought to be a thief?

10. On her first—and last—day of housekeeping in Key West, Ehrenreich is met by a manager who addresses her as “babe” and gives her “a pamphlet emphasizing the need for a positive attitude.” When and where else, throughout the book, does the author encounter cheap talk or hollow slogans in her endeavors as a low-wage worker? What purposes might such empty language serve? Why is it so prevalent?

11. In an extended footnote in Chapter Two, Ehrenreich explains how “the point” of the housecleaning service where she is employed “is not so much to clean as to create the appearance of having been cleaned.” Why is this? Why the deceit? Why does The Maids outfit not clean its clients’ homes properly?

12. Have you had a job similar to the author’s jobs in Key West (waiting tables, housekeeping) where you’ve had problems with unreasonable bosses, like Stu and Joy? Write a brief explanation of a job you’ve had, and describe how it was similar, and how it was different from Ehrenreich’s experiences at Hearthside and Jerry’s restaurants, and at the hotel attached to Jerry’s. What did you learn from the experience?

• If you haven’t had a job, discuss a stressful project or assignment you’ve had to complete in school. How did you deal with the deadlines and with the stress? Did you develop any strategies to overcome the problems in the situation? Explain.
13. “The hands-and-knees approach is a definite selling point for corporate cleaning services like The Maids,” the author writes. Explain why this “old fashioned way” of housecleaning is thus appealing. Why does it seem to, as Ehrenreich puts it, “gratify the consumers of maid services”?

14. Buying groceries with a voucher at a Shop-n-Save in Maine, Ehrenreich notes of the checkout woman ringing up her purchases: “I attempt to thank her, but she was looking the other way at nothing in particular.” What might such body language mean? Why, if at all, is it telling?

15. Looking back on Chapter Two as a whole, what connections would you make between maids and minorities in the United States? What about between maids and poverty, and maids and “invisibility”? Refer to the text itself when making your links. Nickel & Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America Second Quarter Book Assignment

16. Who is Budgie? Why does Ehrenreich tell us to let Budgie “be a stand-in”? Also, would it be accurate to say that the author’s efforts to find a safe and affordable place to live were least successful in Minnesota? Explain why or why not.

17. What are three observations, thoughts, and/or questions that you have regarding her efforts and “study” of inequality in Maine?

18. People often give the “right” answers that may not be the truth, as Ehrenreich did on her job application. Why should/shouldn’t people always tell the truth, both in their personal and working lives? Explain your argument, using an example (or two) from your own experience.