

Nickel and Dimed

On (Not) Getting by in America

1. 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.

2. Paraphrase the brief “story within a story” represented by the character called Caroline. What is Caroline’s tale? Why does Ehrenreich get in touch with this person, and what does she learn from her?

3. As her stint at Wal-Mart winds down, the author mentions to several of her colleagues that they “could use a union here”—only, as she herself readily admits, she is “not a union organizer anymore than [she is] Wal-Mart ‘management material.’” So why, then, is she making efforts at unionizing? What has led her to these efforts? What are her reasons, grievances, motivations, and goals?

4. At the outset of her Evaluation chapter, the author seems to arrive at a new understanding of the phrase “unskilled labor.” Explain this new understanding. Do you agree with it? Why or why not?

5. Describe the problems that Ehrenreich has with how the “poverty level” is calculated in this country. Is she correct on this score, in your view? Explain. Also, how does one’s understanding of the poverty level—Ehrenreich’s or anyone else’s—relate to food costs, and to the author’s assertion that our “wages are too low and rents too high.”

6. Why does Ehrenreich refer to low-wage workers, at the close of her book, as “the major philanthropists of our society”?

7. In the Introduction to *Nickel and Dimed*, the author writes: “Unlike many low-wage workers, I have the further advantages of being white and a native English speaker.” Explore whether, why, and how these two facets of Ehrenreich’s identity were, in fact, advantageous over the full duration of her study.

8. Ehrenreich often speaks of dietary matters, of nutrition, of food as fuel. Why does she keep doing so? What did reading this book tell you about how we eat and how we work in America? And what about the correlations that may or may not exist between low-wage American workers and their use of cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol?

9. “Let’s look at the record,” writes Ehrenreich in her Evaluation. What does this record tell us? Where was she most successful in her experiment, and where was she least? Do you agree with the author when she says, after going over her record, “All right, I made mistakes”? Explain why or why not. What could she have done differently, and what would you—in her shoes—have done differently? Explain.

10. The action of *Nickel and Dimed* unfolds in three American communities, as found in three different states: Florida, Maine, and Minnesota. What about your own community? How would *Nickel and Dimed* be different—or similar—if it included the area you call home?