

# With Liberty and Access to All?

SUGGESTED LEARNING STRATEGIES: Double-Entry Journal, Writing Prompts

Use information from *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* to complete this double-entry journal. Your journal should include at least five quotes from the excerpt that contain something that “grabs” your attention or emotions. On the left side of the journal, copy the text portion, along with the paragraph number. On the right side of the journal, write your response to the quote. Use additional paper if necessary.

## Double-Entry Journal

| Quoted Material from the Text | Paragraph Number | The Effect of the Quote on You |
|-------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------|
|                               |                  |                                |

From  
**NICKEL AND DIMED:**

# On (Not) Getting By in America

by Barbara Ehrenreich

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barbara Ehrenreich, a social activist, feminist, and political essayist has written for several well-known publications about controversial topics such as healthcare, war, families, and women’s issues. In the excerpt here, she writes about working for a maid service in Maine, part of her experience of working with the nation’s “working poor” in entry-level jobs.

It is undeniably fall when I find myself being assigned, day after day, to Holly’s team. There’s fog in the morning now and the farm stands are pushing pumpkins. On the radio in our company car the classic rock station notes the season by playing “Maggie May” several times a day — It’s late September and I really should be BACK at school. Other people are going out to their offices or classrooms; we stay behind, Cinderella-like, in their usually deserted homes. On the pop station, it’s Pearl Jam’s hypnotic “Last Kiss,” so beautifully sad, it makes bereavement<sup>1</sup> seem like an enviable condition. Not that we ever comment on what the radio brings us or on any other part of the world outside The Maids and its string of client houses. In this, the most dutiful and serious of all the teams I have been on, the conversation, at least in the morning, is all about the houses that lie ahead. Murphy — isn’t that the one that took four hours the first time? Yeah, but it’s OK once you get past the master bath, which you’ve gotta use mold killer on... And so on. Or we pass around our routing sheet and study the day’s owners’ “Hot Buttons,” as sketched in by Tammy. Typical “Hot Buttons” are baseboards, windowsills, and ceiling fans — never, of course, poverty, racism, or global warming.

But the relevant point about Holly is that she is visibly unwell — possibly whiter, on a daily basis, than anyone else in the state. We’re not just talking Caucasian here; think bridal gowns, tuberculosis, and death. All I know about her is that she is twenty-three, has been married for almost a year, and manages to feed her husband, herself and an elderly relative on \$30–\$50 a week, which is only a little more than what I spend on food for myself. I’d be surprised if she weighs more than ninety-two pounds

## My Notes

1

2

<sup>1</sup> **bereavement:** mourning or sadness at the death of a loved one

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before breakfast, assuming breakfast is even on her agenda. During an eight-to-nine-hour shift, I never see her eat more than one of those tiny cracker sandwiches with peanut butter filling, and you would think she had no use for food at all if it weren't for the fact that every afternoon at about 2:30 she starts up a food-fantasy conversation in the car."What did you have for dinner last night, Marge?" she'll ask, Marge being our oldest and most affluent team member, who — thanks to a working commercial fisherman husband — sometimes brings reports from such fine-dining spots as T.G.I. Friday's. Or we'll drive by a Dairy Queen and Holly will say, "They have great Foursquares" — the local name for a sundae — "there, you know. With four kinds of sauce. You get chocolate, strawberry, butterscotch, and marshmallow and any kind of ice cream you want. I had one once and let it get a little melted and, oh my God," etc.

- 3 Today, though, even Marge, who normally chatters on obliviously<sup>2</sup> about the events in her life ("It was the biggest spider" or "So she just puts a little mustard right in with the baked beans..."), notices how shaky Holly looks."Is it just indigestion or is there nausea?" she asks. When Holly admits to nausea, Marge wants to know if she's pregnant. No answer. Marge asks again, and again no answer."I'm talking to you, Holly, answer me." It's a tense moment, with Marge prying and Holly just as rudely stonewalling, but Holly, as team leader, prevails.
- 4 There are only the three of us — Denise is out with a migraine — and at the first house I suggest that Marge and I do all the vacuuming for the day. Marge doesn't chime in on my offer, but it doesn't matter since Holly says no way. I resolve to race through dusting so I can take over as much as possible from Holly. When I finish, I rush to the kitchen, only to find a scene so melodramatic that for a second I think I have walked out of *Dusting*, the videotape, and into an entirely different movie. Holly is in a distinctly un-team-leader-like position, standing slumped over a counter with her head on her arms. "I shouldn't be here today," she says, looking up wanly.<sup>3</sup> "I had a big fight with my husband. I didn't want to go to work this morning but he said I had to." This confidence is so completely out of character that I'm speechless. She goes on. The problem is probably that she's pregnant. It's been seven weeks and the nausea is out of control, which is why she can't eat anything and gets so weak, but she wants it to be a secret until she can tell Ted herself.
- 5 Very tentatively and mindful of the deep reserve of rural Mainers, as explained to me by a sociologist acquaintance, I touch her arm and tell her she shouldn't be doing this. Even if she were feeling OK she probably shouldn't be around the chemicals we use. She should go home. But all I can talk her into is taking the Pure Protein sports bar I always carry in my bag in case my sandwich let me down. At first she refuses it. Then, when

<sup>2</sup> **obliviously**: unaware or forgetful

<sup>3</sup> **wanly**: weakly; suggesting ill health, fatigue, or unhappiness



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a world-wide basis if possible. I am a “good person,” as my demented charges at the nursing home agree, but maybe I’m also just sick of my suddenly acquired insignificance. Maybe I want to “be somebody,” as Jesse Jackson likes to say, somebody generous, competent, brave, and perhaps, above all, noticeable.

- 8 Maids, as an occupational group, are not visible, and when we are seen we are often sorry for it.<sup>6</sup> On the way to the Martha Stewart-ish place, when Holly and Marge were complaining about her haughtiness in the past encounter, I had ventured to ask why so many of the owners seem hostile and contemptuous toward us. “They think we’re stupid,” was Holly’s answer.” They think we have nothing better to do with our time.” Marge too looked suddenly sober.” We’re nothing to these people,” she said.” We’re just maids.” Nor are we much of anything to anyone else. Even convenience store clerks, who are \$6-an-hour gals themselves, seem to look down on us. In Key West, my waitress’s polo shirt was always a conversation starter: “You at Jerry’s?” a clerk might ask.” I used to work at the waffle place just up the boulevard from there.” But a maid’s uniform has the opposite effect. At one place where we stopped for refreshments, an actual diner with a counter, I tried to order iced tea to take out, but the waitress just kept standing there chatting with a coworker, ignoring my “Excuse me’s.” Then there’s the supermarket. I used to stop on my way home from work, but I couldn’t take the stares, which are easily translatable into: What are you doing here? And, No wonder she’s poor, she’s got a beer in her shopping cart! True, I don’t look so good by the end of the day and probably smell like eau de toilet and sweat, but it’s the brilliant green-and-yellow uniform that gives me away, like prison clothes on a fugitive...

<sup>6</sup> This invisibility persists at the macroscopic level. The Census Bureau reports that there were 550,000 domestic workers in 1998, up 10 percent since 1996, but this may be a considerable underestimate, since so much of the servant economy is still underground, or at least very low to the ground, where few data collectors ever venture. In 1993, for example, the year when Zoe Baird lost her chance to be attorney general for paying her undocumented nanny off the books, it was estimated that fewer than 10 percent of those Americans who paid a housecleaner more than \$1,000 a year reported these payments to the IRS. Sociologist Mary Romero offers an example of how severe the undercounting can be: the 1980 census found only 1,063 “private household workers” in El Paso, although at the same time that city’s Department of Planning, Research, and Development estimated their numbers at 13,400 and local bus drivers estimated thathalf of the 28,300 bus trips taken daily were taken by maids going to and returning from work (Main in the U.S.A., p. 92). The honesty of employers has increased since the Baird scandal, but most experts believe the household workers remain largely uncounted and invisible to the larger economy.