



ROBERT WELSH

# FINGERS TO THE BONE

## BARBARA EHRENREICH ON THE

JAMIE PASSARO

like to tell myself that as long as I live by certain rules — shop locally, recycle, commute by bike, listen to NPR — I am doing my part. But lately I wonder.

On Labor Day morning, I sat on my front porch and drank organic coffee with soy milk and read the Sunday paper. The author of an essay in the magazine section lamented how Americans continue to ignore the plight of our low-wage workers, the Wal-Mart “associates” and the fast-food slingers who just barely get by. I shook my head and went on with my day: a trip to the music store, where I bought two new CDs, then a stop by the grocery. One of the checkers said, “Hey, enjoy the day for me.”

There it was, Labor Day. And while I enjoyed my day off, he was selling his by the hour.

It’s the kind of thing I didn’t give much thought to until I started reading Barbara Ehrenreich’s essays and books. She writes with such conviction about poverty and class inequality that you can’t not pay attention.

In her most recent book, *Nickel and Dimed*: On (Not) Getting By in America (Henry Holt), Ehrenreich calls the working poor “our society’s major philanthropists.” They sacrifice their health, their relationships, their whole lives so that the privileged can live more affordably and conveniently. To research the book, Ehrenreich went undercover as one of the working poor, taking jobs as a waitress, a hotel maid, a housecleaner, a nursing-home aide, and a Wal-Mart “associate.” On job applications, she depicted herself as a divorced homemaker with little employment experience.

This was in 1998, when welfare-reform advocates talked as if any job would lift someone out of poverty. But Ehrenreich found that the numbers didn’t add up. Even though she owned a car and had no one to support, she had trouble getting by. After she paid for rent and food each month, there wasn’t much left. Sometimes there was nothing left. It was a struggle — financially, physically, and mentally. Many of her co-workers held two jobs and worked sixty to eighty hours a week. Some couldn’t save up enough money for a rent deposit and paid hundreds of dollars

a week to live in residential motels. Others lived in their cars. Low-wage work, she concluded, was a trap in all of the ways conservative politicians said welfare was a trap. There was no getting out of it.

*Nickel and Dimed* became a bestseller, and Ehrenreich traveled the television talk-show circuit. In the book, Ehrenreich uses wit and satirical humor to make fun of herself and to mask

her outrage at the general acceptance of anti-union rhetoric, rules against socializing with co-workers, random purse searches, “personality tests” for job applicants, and mandatory drug testing. “If you want to stack Cheerios boxes or vacuum hotel rooms in chemically fascist America,” she writes, “you have to be willing to squat down and pee in front of a health worker (who no doubt had to do the same thing herself).”

I met Ehrenreich when she taught a weekend writing workshop at the University of Oregon. In the classroom, she listened more than lectured. She encouraged us to think and write about class and inequality and to focus more on reporting and “worry about gussying it up later.” And she reminded us of the old newspaper adage that a journalist’s job is to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

Ehrenreich is a trim woman (she works out at the gym almost daily) with intense blue eyes and silvery blond hair. Raised in a family of Scotch-Irish Democrats, she watched her father work his way out of the copper mines in Butte, Montana, to become an executive.

When she went to college in the sixties, she discovered feminism and the antiwar and civil-rights movements, all of which reinforced the values with which she’d been raised. Trained as a scientist — she earned her Ph.D. in cell biology from Rockefeller University in 1968 — she came to journalism through her involvement in social activism. Her specialty was women’s health issues, and her work first appeared in *Ms.* in the late seventies. In the nineties she was a regular essayist for *Time* — until the magazine started rejecting pieces she wrote on poverty, inequality, and capital punishment. She has written or



BARBARA  
EHRENREICH

## PLIGHT OF THE WORKING POOR

# TO ADMIT THAT LARGE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE ARE SYSTEMATICALLY HELD BACK IS HARD, BECAUSE IT MEANS UPWARD MOBILITY IS NOT AN OPTION FOR EVERYBODY. BUT THAT'S THE WAY IT IS. THERE ARE JUST TOO MANY THINGS PRESSING POOR PEOPLE DOWN, KEEPING THEM WHERE THEY ARE.

coauthored twelve books.

*Ehrenreich lives alone near Key West, Florida. She is immensely proud of her two children: Rosa, who teaches at the University of Virginia School of Law, and Ben, a talented freelance journalist who often writes for LA Weekly. In addition to public speaking and the monthly column she writes for the Progressive, Ehrenreich is now at work on a book about the role of communal festivities in social and political movements. "What is drastically missing from our culture," she says, "although some of us might glimpse it in sporting events and rock concerts, are the regular occasions when you are lifted out of yourself in some kind of joyous community feeling."*

*When I visited with Ehrenreich in mid-August, she was staying with her daughter, son-in-law, and seven-month-old grandchild outside of Charlottesville, Virginia. A thunderstorm crashed outside, and after we had finished talking, she loaned me her raincoat and treated me to a movie.*

**Passaro:** What surprised you most during your months of low-wage work?

**Ehrenreich:** It was a surprise to me how challenging these jobs were. I was expecting that I would be doing dull, repetitive work, that I would be bored out of my mind. Instead I was struggling all the time, physically and mentally, to master these jobs. At Wal-Mart I had to memorize the locations of hundreds of clothing items so I could put everything back in its exact place. In the nursing home I had about fifteen minutes to learn the names and dietary requirements of thirty patients. It took all the concentration I had. So I no longer use the word *unskilled* to describe any job.

**Passaro:** How do you think your experience would have been different if you were a man?

**Ehrenreich:** A lot of low-wage jobs are really for either sex now because, as heavy industry declines, the "masculine" jobs of the past are not there anymore. There are men working at Wal-Mart and in restaurants and in nursing homes. The only difference for me is that a man probably would not have been as fearful as I was about living in a creepy residential motel with no privacy or security. That's when it struck me that I was

a *woman* far from home in a dangerous situation.

**Passaro:** In one of the restaurants where you worked, an immigrant dishwasher whom you had befriended was accused of stealing from the storage room, and the manager threatened to fire him. Even though you suspected the dishwasher hadn't taken anything, you didn't speak up for him. What did you learn from that?

**Ehrenreich:** I didn't feel good about it, but I don't know that I could have done anything. The heroic ideal would have been to drop my cover and get the guy a lawyer. But a lawyer couldn't have helped him. You have no rights on a job. Anybody can be fired on suspicion of anything. I could have said to the manager, "Look, I've gotten to know George, and I can't believe that he would've stolen something." But why should the manager listen to me? I was only slightly above George in that hierarchy.

**Passaro:** What are some other ways that workers have no rights?

**Ehrenreich:** Their privacy is constantly being invaded with drug testing and other forms of surveillance. And it's not just low-wage workers. More and more workers of all types are being spied on by cameras on the job. I think drug testing is completely unjustified if you're not driving a school bus or an airplane. I was warned by a co-worker at one job that I had to be careful what I had in my purse because the manager could search it any time it was on their property. If you're a white-collar or pink-collar worker and you use e-mail, it's probably being read. Some firms monitor the websites people visit on their lunch hours, which is nobody's business. They might be trying to get help for a health problem they don't want to talk to their employer about.

What we need is a civil-rights movement for workers. They're not treated with dignity. They're not treated with respect. They don't have elementary forms of privacy. They can be fired for having a funny look on their face.

**Passaro:** You wrote that this person you became while working at Wal-Mart could have been you if your father had not gotten out of the mines in Montana. This person was meaner than you and "not as smart as I had hoped." How close were you to being this person?

**Ehrenreich:** Closer than you might think. My sister has a college degree and is very bright and quick-minded, yet she has spent most of her working life in the pink-collar ghetto, as a telephone business agent. So education and intelligence don't guarantee you a professional position in life.

It's a mystery to me how my sister and I ended up with such different lives. My family was upwardly mobile and went through quite a few social classes in the course of my growing up, but I was always aware of cousins, aunts, and uncles who remained blue-collar people. It wasn't until I got to college that I became aware of the real upper classes. I saw then that I didn't come from the same background as many of the other students. The house I grew up in always had books, but there were aspects of the culture that I had never encountered. I had never had the slightest exposure to chamber music, for example. I really tried to look interested, but . . . [Laughs.]



CLEMENS KALISCHER

**Passaro:** When you went back to your middle-class life after working low-wage jobs, how were you different?

**Ehrenreich:** I was more impatient with affluent people who don't see these problems or who aren't particularly interested and brush them off. That attitude became distasteful to me when I encountered it in the social world. There have been cocktail parties I decided not to attend for that reason. Fortunately, most of my friends, whether middle-class or upper-middle-class, don't fit that description and are working for change in some way.

**Passaro:** Why do you think class inequality is such a taboo subject in the mainstream media?

**Ehrenreich:** It undercuts the American myth that anybody can become rich, that it's just a matter of personal ability and determination. There's a greater openness to talking about class in European countries with a feudal heritage. Where you once had an aristocracy, it's hard to get away from the idea that there are different classes. We don't have that inherited aristocracy, and so we like to tell ourselves that everybody is

equal. To admit that large numbers of people are systematically held back is hard, because it means upward mobility is not an option for everybody. But that's the way it is. There are just too many things pressing poor people down, keeping them where they are.

There was some increased awareness of class in the early sixties, with the "discovery" of poverty, but then poverty got undiscovered sometime in the nineties. Journalist James Fallovs says the poor have become "invisibilized" in our society. They're given very little mention in the news and entertainment media. You just don't hear about them. The media system is fed by corporate advertising, and advertisers want "good demographics" — that is, they want to reach mostly the upper middle class.

*(end of excerpt)*