INTRODUCTION – GETTING READY

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)?

CHAPTER 1 – SERVING IN FLORIDA

6. 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.
7. 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.
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?

CHAPTER 2 – SCRUBBING IN MAINE

11. “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”?
12. 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?
13. 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.
14. 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.

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

CHAPTER 3 – SELLING IN MINNESOTA

16. 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?

17. 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?

18. In her chapter “Selling in Minnesota,” Ehrenreich asserts: “Wherever you look, there is no alternative to the mega-scale corporate order, from which every form of local creativity and initiative has been abolished by distant home offices.” Talk about whether this is true in your own experience. If not, why not? If so, where and when have you seen evidence to support this claim? Try to use your own examples and impressions here—not Ehrenreich’s.

19. Describing the food at a Florida restaurant where she works, Ehrenreich calls it “your basic Ohio cuisine with a tropical twist.” Later, wondering what living in Maine might be like, she says, “Maybe . . . when you give white people a whole state to themselves, they treat one another real nice.” Still later, she writes that certain clothes on sale at her Minnesota Wal-Mart are “seemingly aimed at pudgy fourth grade teachers with important barbecues to attend.” Discuss the biting humor—the sharp and sometimes even mocking wit—appearing throughout this book. How, if at all, does such levity make Ehrenreich’s arguments more effective? And were there instances where you thought her wisecracks went too far—or fell flat? Explain.

20. This book is, of course, more than a report on, and exposé of, “(not) getting by in America”—it is also a detailed critique. To this end, the bulk of its criticism might well be directed at the Wal-Mart empire. Is this appropriate, in your view? Explain. Given that Wal-Mart is far and away the world’s largest company, is it right to expect the retail mega-chain to be all the more fair and respectful of its employees? Explain.

EVALUATION

21. 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?

22. 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.”

23. What is the “money taboo”—and why and how does it function, as Ehrenreich puts it, “most effectively among the lowest-paid people”?

24. Why does Ehrenreich refer to low-wage workers, at the close of her book, as “the major philanthropists of our society”?
25. “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.

GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & EXERCISES

• 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.” How and why were these two facets of Ehrenreich’s identity advantageous over the full duration of her study.

• Near the beginning of this book, Ehrenreich compares the restaurant-tipping habits of Americans and Europeans. Near the end, she notes that, while “most civilized nations compensate for inadequacy of wages by providing relatively generous public services,” the U.S. “leaves its citizens to fend for themselves.” What, in Ehrenreich’s view, could America learn from other countries about how to better treat its low-wage workers?

• 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?

• 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?

• Throughout Nickel and Dimed the author makes complaints about “management.” Summarize the many problems that Ehrenreich has with managers, looking especially at the book’s Wal-Mart passages and the breakdown of “workplace authoritarianism” in the Evaluation chapter.

• Explain why Ehrenreich believes that personality surveys and drug tests are both categorically unfair to low-wage workers. Look back over the full range of her low-wage experiences when responding.

• More than once in these pages, we encounter the severe bodily and psychological harm that hard work at low pay can cause—the physical damage as well as the threats of “repetitive injury of the spirit.” True? Why/why not?

• One of the strengths of this book must be its cast of characters—the real people who live and work in the real world Ehrenreich is reporting on, those workers with whom she toils, relates, confers, cries, argues, and so on. In a short essay, identify and discuss a certain individual (or two) from this book by whom you were particularly touched. In your essay, explain your choice(s).

• In a way, this book can read as a reaction to—or a hands-on test of—the “welfare reform” legislation enacted in the U.S. in the 1990s. “In the rhetorical buildup to welfare reform,” Ehrenreich writes, “it was uniformly assumed that a job was the ticket out of poverty.” Discuss.

• Nickel and Dimed takes place during a so-called economic boom in American history, the period of “peace and prosperity” that was the late 1990s. However, the book is largely about poverty, about the poor—and not simply the helplessly destitute, but rather the poor who are employed full-time. Near the outset of her study, Ehrenreich tells us that “there are no secret economies that nourish the poor; on the contrary, there are a host of special costs.” Near the end, in sum, she tells us that poverty is an experience of “acute distress”—a nonstop “state of emergency.” What did the book teach you about poverty?