

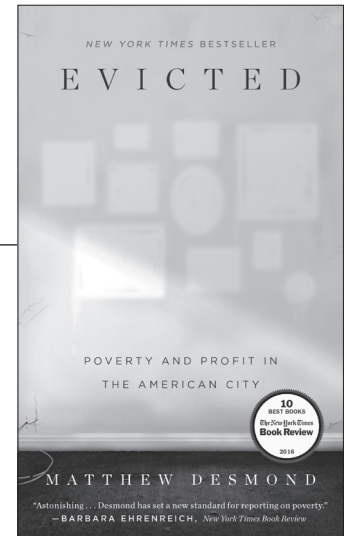


# Freshman Year Reading/ Common Reading Guide

## Evicted

### Poverty and Profit in the American City

by *Matthew Desmond*



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“*Evicted* is that rare book that both enlightens and serves as an urgent call for action.” —William Julius Wilson, Lewis P. and Linda L. Geysler University Professor, Harvard University, and author of *When Work Disappears*

“This sensitive, achingly beautiful ethnography should refocus our understanding of poverty in America on the simple challenge of keeping a roof over your head.” —Robert D. Putnam, Professor of Public Policy, Harvard University, and author of *Bowling Alone* and *Our Kids*

### • about the author •

**MATTHEW DESMOND** is the John L. Loeb Associate Professor of the Social Sciences at Harvard University and codirector of the Justice and Poverty Project. A former member of the Harvard Society of Fellows, he is the author of the award-winning book *On the Fireline*, coauthor of two books on race, and editor of a collection of studies on severe deprivation in America. His work has been supported by the Ford, Russell Sage, and National Science Foundations, and his writing has appeared in the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*. In 2015, Desmond was awarded a MacArthur “Genius” grant.

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### • about the book

In this groundbreaking book, Harvard sociologist and 2015 MacArthur “Genius” Award winner Matthew Desmond takes readers into the poorest neighborhoods of Milwaukee, where families spend most of their income on housing and where eviction has become routine—a vicious cycle that deepens our country’s vast inequality. Based on years of embedded fieldwork and painstakingly gathered data, *Evicted* transforms our understanding of extreme poverty and economic exploitation while providing fresh ideas for solving a devastating, uniquely American problem.

## • guided reading and discussion questions

1. Why was Arleen evicted from her apartment on Milwaukee's near South Side? Were you surprised that her landlord made the decision to evict the family after the apartment door was damaged? Arleen later found an apartment where the rent, not including utilities, was 88% of her welfare check. How might a family like Arleen's manage to cover rent, utilities, and all other expenses on such a small income? What kind of sacrifices do you think families in this situation must make in order to make ends meet?
2. Tenants are often given two options while being evicted from their residence—their possessions can be loaded into a truck and checked into bonded storage or movers can pile their belongings onto the sidewalk. What challenges and consequences may a tenant or family face when experiencing one of these two scenarios? If you were suddenly faced with the decision to move or store your possessions, which option would you choose?
3. Sherrena Tarver claimed to have found her calling as an inner-city entrepreneur, stating "The 'hood is good. There's a lot of money there" (page 152). How did Sherrena profit from being a landlord in poor communities? Do you think her profits were justified? What responsibilities do landlords have when renting out their property? What risks do they take? Do you sympathize with Sherrena? Why or why not?
4. In Milwaukee, evictions spike in the summer and early fall and dip in November when the moratorium on winter utility disconnections begins. When tenants are unable to pay both the rent and the utilities, how might they make a decision about which expense to pay first? If you were forced to choose between paying rent or heat, which would you choose?
5. In an average month at the College Mobile Home Park, nearly 1/3 of tenants were behind on their rent. Why did park landlord Tobin Charney select a handful of tenants to evict each month? How did some tenants escape eviction? Tobin lived 70 miles away from the trailer park he owned. How might this kind of distance benefit a landlord? What problems might it create?
6. How did Tobin benefit from offering his tenants the "Handyman Special" (page 46)—giving families their trailers for free but charging them for lot rent? Why might tenants see this as a better deal than paying the equivalent in rent? How did the high demand for low-cost housing impact Tobin's decisions about whether or not to repair property or forgive late payments? What incentives could be put in place to motivate landlords to maintain their properties? What risks do tenants take when filing a report with a building inspector?
7. Many Americans still believe that the typical low-income family lives in public housing. But only one in four families who qualify for housing assistance receive it. What challenges did Arleen face when trying to get approved for subsidized housing? Assistance programs in Milwaukee either require tenants have dependent children or have experienced a sudden loss of income. How do these services assist people experiencing short-term crises but not those facing more serious long-term poverty? Are there other forms of housing assistance available to low-income individuals and families?
8. How does the process of screening tenants lead to a "geography of advantage and disadvantage" (page 89)? How can landlord decisions impact neighborhood characteristics like schools, crime rates, and levels of civic engagement? How can a criminal background or history of past evictions impact a person's ability to rent property? Do you think a tenant should have to disclose this information? Why or why not?
9. Why do you think landlords like Sherrena rely so heavily on hiring tenants and jobless men to maintain their property? Do you think this affects the employment prospects for people in the neighborhood?
10. What benefits do landlords like Sherrena receive when they rent to tenants who have housing vouchers? Why do some tenants who spend more than 30% of their income on housing receive assistance while others do not? How do landlords like Sherrena and Tobin

benefit financially from the Fair Market Rent set by the Department of Housing and Urban Development? How does this program bring large gains to landlords? How does it prevent gains in racial and economic integration?

11. Why do you think Crystal made the decision to let Arleen and her sons stay until they found another residence? How do tenants like Crystal and Arleen rely on friends and extended kin networks to get by? Does this do anything to lift them out of poverty or distress?
12. Desmond writes, “No one thought the poor more undeserving than the poor themselves” (page 180). How do you see this attitude reflected in residents of the trailer park? Do you see it reflected in Arleen’s actions?
13. What motivated Crystal to call 911 after hearing a domestic disturbance upstairs? How did this strain her relationship with her landlord, Sherenna? What risks do landlords incur once their property becomes a designated nuisance? Should landlords be penalized for their tenants’ behavior? Why or why not?
14. Crystal was diagnosed with a wide range of mental illnesses. What struggles did Crystal face throughout her search for stable housing? How might mental illness present additional challenges to a person already living in poverty? How might mental illness contribute to a person’s history of eviction? What protections do people with mental illnesses have?
15. Why do you think Lorraine chose to spend all of her food stamps on expensive food like lobster and king crab? What personal reaction did you have to her decision? Do you agree with Pastor Daryl that Lorraine is careless with her money because she is operating under a “poverty mentality”? Why might it be difficult for Lorraine to lift herself out of poverty by practicing good behavior or self-control? What options do you believe Lorraine has?
16. Landlords repeatedly turned down Pam and Ned’s rental applications because they have children. Why? Do you think families with children should receive any protection when seeking housing? Why do you think families with children were not considered a protected class when Congress passed the Fair Housing Act in 1968? Do you think it is fair for landlords to charge tenants with children monthly surcharges and children-damage deposits? Why or why not?
17. Why did Doreen choose not to call Sherrena when the house was in desperate need of repair? Do you agree that “The house failed the tenants, and the tenants failed the house” (page 256)? What effect does living in a home that is not decent or functional have on a person’s psychological and emotional health?
18. Why did Vanetta participate in an armed robbery? Do you think the 81-month sentence Vanetta received was too harsh? Why or why not? What challenges do you think Vanetta will face while serving a 15-month prison sentence? What challenges will she face while serving 66 months on parole? Why do you think Vanetta’s public defender failed to mention that she was attending GED classes, providing childcare, and looking for housing every morning? How might that information have impacted her sentencing?
19. What challenges did Scott face while maintaining his sobriety? Do you think the process for Scott to get his nursing license back was reasonable? Why or why not? What relief did Scott receive after receiving subsidized housing and county-subsidized methadone treatment?
20. Arleen received 89 negative responses and one positive from prospective landlords. What impact did this have on her children, Jori and Jafaris? How do children expose families to eviction rather than shield them from it? What happened to Arleen when she was evicted from her apartment? After losing her possessions in storage and having her welfare case closed, what options did Arleen have?
21. If you were unexpectedly evicted from your home, what would the fallout be? How would this impact your education, employment, and relationships? How might a sudden change like eviction affect your physical and mental wellbeing?

22. Why do you think 90% of landlords are represented by attorneys in housing courts while 90% of tenants are not? What would you do if you were facing eviction and in need of legal assistance? Do you think attorneys should be provided to low-income tenants at no cost?
23. Why did Desmond believe it was important to live in the Milwaukee communities most affected by eviction? How did his presence impact the lives of his neighbors? How was his personal experience different from the experiences of the people he interviewed?
24. Why do you think there is so much research on public housing and other housing policies but very little research on the private rental market? What solutions to the lack of affordable housing does Desmond propose? Do you have other ideas for how this issue could be addressed in your community?

## • about this guide's writer

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