

บทปริทัศน์หนังสือ (Book Review)

Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City

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Evicted is a detailed account of how, in one of the richest countries in the world, poor families, many of them racial and ethnic minorities, are regularly forced out of their homes, are expendable and simply forgotten in the booming, profit-making U.S. housing market. Matthew Desmond, an American sociologist, eloquently presented vivid narratives of 8 families living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin between May 2008 and December 2009 where eviction is not only common for poor families, but it has become a business in itself where people make profit from other's misfortunes. This modern ethnography not only depicts the painful narratives of those evicted, but also discusses the points of view of the profit-making landlords and the companies that actually does the packing and moving of unfortunate families. Evicted presents how poor families—Black, White, Hispanic—struggle every month to avoid being homeless.

Cycles of Poverty

One of the striking data presented by Desmond is how rent for many struggling families in the inner cities would usually be 50% or more of their paychecks. In one example, Arlene, a single mother with two sons—thirteen and five—pay \$550 for rent for a two-bedroom apartment in “one of the worst neighborhoods in America’s forth-poorest city” (page 3). This rent was 88% of her \$628 a month welfare check, and did not even include utilities. It is no wonder then that Arlene would fall behind on her rent and become vulnerable to being evicted. Sometimes families are evicted in the middle of the winter, during Christmas or even in a middle of a rainstorm where their belongings, from mattresses to asthma machines, are left on a curb by the road drenched from the rain.

One example was of Lamar and his two boys. A former crack addict and Vietnam War veteran with no legs, Lamar works to reduce his rent by doing odds jobs like clearing the basement of his unit and painting the other units owned by the landlord. However, his landlord Sherrena didn’t always agree with the total value Lamar may have placed on his labor. Sometimes Lamar, after completing a job for Sherrena, would only be paid a fraction of what he thought he deserved for that job.

When Lamar first came to look at the apartment, it was a mess, with maggots sprouting from unwashed dishes in the kitchen. But Lamar needed a home—he and his sons

had been sharing a room in the basement of his mother's house; she gave all of them a nine p.m. curfew—and saw the place had promise. Sherrena has waived Lamar's security deposit. She thought he would be approved for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), a monthly stipend for low-income people who are either elderly or have mental or physical disabilities. But that hadn't worked out yet. (Page 25)

...Lamar thought the basement job he had done for Sherrena and Quentin was worth \$250. The basement was covered with mildewed clothes, trash, and dog shit, reminding him of a recurring dream he had where he would crawl into a strange, shadowed basement to buy dope. He refused to ask any of the boys for help, thinking the work beneath them. He cleaned the basement alone, working until his stubs grew too sore. It took him a week. Sherrena credited him \$50 for it. He still owed her \$260. (Page 26)

Aside from finding enough rent money each month, the renters in the book also had to consider other expenses like utilities, phone bill, toilet paper, soap, clothing and school supplies (for their growing children). When money is tight, renters had to find other ways to pay for these necessities. For example, Lamar “sold \$150 of food stamps for \$75 cash, the going rate in Milwaukee.” (Page 26) By doing this, Lamar triggers consequences like not having a stocked refrigerator for

his children, and that they would have to go to their grandmothers for food. Moreover, Desmond further explains that renters often had to decide between “keeping the lights and heat on” and paying rent.

We energies disconnected roughly 50,000 households each year for nonpayment. Many tenants who in the winter stayed current on their rent at the expense of their heating bill tried in the summer to climb back in the black with the utility company by shorting their landlord. Come the following winter, they had to be connected to benefit from the moratorium on disconnection [Wisconsin law states that utility service that provides heat cannot be disconnected during the heating moratorium period if a customer is connected at the start of the moratorium]. So every year in Milwaukee evictions spiked in the summer and early fall and dipped again in November when the moratorium began. (Pages 15-16)

These are some of the many realities presented throughout the book, how families are just trying to make it in the American Dream.

Landlords and Profits

Sherrena Tarver is one of the most interesting characters in the book. She goes from being empathetic to her poor, single-mother tenants—many times even giving them a chance when they have

eviction records or buying them groceries to stock their fridge when they move in, to being a profit-seeking landlord with a bottom line.

There was a knock at the door. It was the landlord, Sherrena Tarver. Sherrena, a black woman with bobbed hair and fresh nails, was loaded down with groceries. She had spent \$40 of her own money and picked up the rest at a food pantry. She knew Arleen needed it. (Page 3)

Arleen remembered when they used to take a break from doing evictions around Christmastime in Milwaukee. But they did away with that in 1991, after a landlord convinced the American Civil Liberties Union to argue that the practice was an unfair religious celebration. Some old-timers still observed the moratorium out of kindness or habit or ignorance. Sherrena was not one of them. (Page 101)

But Desmond also reminds us that the landlords are not in this for charity, but instead it is a business after all, and sometimes it can be ruthless, evicting families in the middle of winter when they know the families have no where else to go. But landlords also need to worry about their mortgages so not to face foreclosure on their properties.

There was no hedging in this business. When a tenant didn't pay \$500, her landlord lost \$500. When that

happened, landlords with mortgages dug into their savings or their income to make sure the bank didn't hand them a foreclosure notice. There were no euphemisms either: no "downsizing," no "quarterly losses." Landlords took the gains and losses directly; they saw the deprivation and waste up close. Old-timers liked recalling their first big loss, their initial breaking-in: the time a tenant tore down her own ceiling, took pictures, and convinced the court commissioner it was the landlord's fault; the time an evicted couple stuffed socks down the sinks and turned the water on full-blast before moving out. Rookie landlords hardened or quit.

Sherrena nodded reassuringly and said, almost to herself, "I guess I got to stop feeling sorry for these people because nobody is feeling sorry for me. Last time I checked, the mortgage company still wanted their money." (Page 11)

Throughout the book, Desmond not only provides a superb ethnography into the lived experiences of the families, he also provides detailed statistics and other empirical evidence to compliment the narratives.

Tenants in eviction court were generally poor, and almost all of them (92 percent) had missed rent payments. The majority spent at least half their household income on rent. One

third devoted at least 80 percent to it. Of the tenants who did come to court and were evicted, only 1 in 6 had another place lined up: shelters or the apartments of friends or family. A few resigned themselves to the streets. Most simply did not know where they would go. (Page 97)

Eviction is a complicated process and involves not only the tenants and landlords, but also include going to eviction court (small claims court), lawyers, housing commissioner, sheriff deputies, and finally movers paid by the landlords to physically move out the tenants from the property. Readers are taken through this process, step by step, even inside an eviction court where Desmond successfully paints the animated scenes with his words.

Eviction as Everyday Life

For the poor in inner-city Milwaukee—and many cities throughout the US for that matter, eviction is part of their every life. Tenants are not surprised to get an eviction notice. Many already have an eviction on their records and thus the next eviction is just inevitable; it will come sooner or later. On top of this, what is remarkable is that eviction, after all, is a business. And so some people make profit from these men and women struggling to make ends meet. These profit makers include the sheriff's office that dispatches several armed deputies to initiate the actual “moving out” of tenants; clerks, lawyers and even the commissioner in the small claims court that handle eviction cases; but the clearest profiteers of all are probably

the moving companies hired by landlords to throw out tenants as well as the storage facilities that keep the belongings of evicted families. These realities are faced everyday by families throughout the US, struggling to have a permanent home. For many, a home becomes permanent for a few months, or for luckier renters, maybe a year or two before they have to find and create the next “permanent” home. This is their reality.

This book is highly recommended for students and researchers in the social sciences (anthropology, sociology, urban studies, American studies), urban planning and development, social and public policy, and public health. One of the less studied social determinants of health is indeed housing. Desmond has shown in this book that by not having sustained, adequate housing, a person may fall into a cascade of deleterious mental and physical health effects that not only affect the individual, but also the family and even the community. This book is also recommended for policy makers and implementers, to remind them of how lack of housing contribute to poverty, and subsequently reproducing social and economic inequality—a vicious never-ending cycle. Through studying and understanding these mechanisms, structural and policy-level interventions can be designed to improve the lives of the poor.