# Matthew Desmond's 'Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City'



**By Barbara Ehrenreich**
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Lamar, his sons and some other adolescent boys from their Milwaukee neighborhood are sitting around, playing cards and smoking blunts, when there is a loud and confident knock on the door, which could be "a landlord's knock, or a sheriff's." Mercifully it is only Colin, a young white man from their church, who has come to read them passages from the Bible, most of which Lamar knows by heart. The subject wanders off to God and the Devil, with Lamar adding, "And Earth is hell." "Well," Colin corrects him, "not quite hell." An awkward silence falls.

The burden of "Evicted," Matthew Desmond's astonishing book, is to show that the world Lamar inhabits is indeed hell, or as close an approximation as you are likely to find in a 21st-century American city. When Lamar first looked at his two-bedroom apartment, it was an appalling mess, "with maggots sprouting from unwashed dishes in the sink," but he tidied and cleaned it to the point of being "borderline obsessive-compulsive." The underlying problem — or one of them — is that Lamar's income is $628 a month, while his rent is $550, leaving $2.19 a day for the family. He does what he can to pay off part of his rent doing handyman tasks, but this is not easy for a double-amputee crawling around on his stumps, his legs having been lost to frostbite during a stint of homelessness.

Desmond is an academic who teaches at Harvard — a sociologist or, you could say, an ethnographer. But I would like to claim him as a journalist too, and one who, like Katherine Boo in her study of a Mumbai slum, has set a new standard for reporting on poverty. For an earlier book, "On the Fireline," he worked with a team of wildfire fighters in Arizona. In Milwaukee, he moved into a trailer park and then to a rooming house on the poverty-stricken North Side and diligently took notes on the lives of people who pay 70 to 80 percent of their incomes for homes that, objectively speaking, are unfit for human habitation. It was not fun, he wrote in his journal: "I feel dirty, collecting these stories and hardships like so many trophies."



Many of Desmond's informants make or have made "bad choices" of the kind that have become conservatives' universal explanation for poverty. Scott had been a nurse until his opioid addiction cost him his license; Lamar had been a crack addict when he lost his lower legs to the cold. In the most spectacular example of improvidence, 54-year-old Larraine blows an entire month's worth of food stamps on a single meal of lobster tails, shrimp, crab and lemon meringue pie, washed down with Pepsi. It's not wanton spending that makes Larraine poor, though; according to Desmond, it's poverty that makes her sometimes throw money away. Since there's no point in even trying to achieve financial stability, people like Larraine "tried to survive in color, to season the suffering with pleasure" — to have a drink, for example, or smoke a little weed.

One of the worst choices anyone can make is to have children, or even glancing human attachments of any kind. Landlords hate kids for being noisy, for trying to flush toys down the toilet, or — at their most devilish — testing positive for lead poisoning, which can bring down the authorities. Children and other family members are also risk factors for eviction, and not just because they are more mouths to feed. If an address generates, say, three 911 calls a month, the landlord will be issued a "nuisance citation," and the family will probably be evicted. Too bad if the 911 calls were occasioned by domestic violence or, in one case Desmond recounts, a child's asthma attack. As one landlord's son put it, "We can't have police coming up in here."

Eviction itself provides the dramatic punctuation in Desmond's story. If a family's income after rent is in the two-digit zone, there's a powerful temptation to skip a month's rent to buy groceries or pay a utility bill to keep the heat on. If you have complained about non-working drains or holes in the wall, the landlord has one less reason to cut you any slack. You may get a chance to protest in court, though 70 percent of the tenants summoned to court do not show up — because they couldn't miss work or find child care or perhaps didn't even receive the summons. It is at Milwaukee's eviction court, where the tenants are black women and the landlords' lawyers wear "pinstripe suits and power ties," that Desmond has an epiphany:

"If incarceration had come to define the lives of men from impoverished black neighborhoods, eviction was shaping the lives of women. Poor black men were locked up. Poor black women were locked out."

Evictions are scenes of incredible cruelty, if not actual violence. Desmond describes the displacement of a Hispanic woman and her three children. At first she had "borne down

on the emergency with focus and energy," then she started wandering through the halls "aimlessly, almost drunkenly. Her face had that look. The movers and the deputies knew it well. It was the look of someone realizing that her family would be homeless in a matter of hours. It was something like denial giving way to the surrealism of the scene: the speed and violence of it all; gum-chewing sheriffs leaning against your wall, hands resting on holsters, all these strangers, these sweaty men, piling your things outside. . . . It was the face of a mother who climbs out of a cellar to find the tornado has leveled the house."

Among the items left behind at one eviction site are "a half-eaten birthday cake and a balloon still perky with helium."

Children are scarred in the process. They are pulled from one school to another; they periodically lose whatever tiny cache of possessions they may have accumulated. Grown-ups have trouble keeping their jobs, and the lack of an address may compromise their ability to gain, or hold on to, whatever benefits they are eligible for. Of all the evictees depicted in this book, only one — Scott, the former nurse — eventually regains a job and an apartment. When she loses her apartment, Crystal, an ebullient — or perhaps just manic-depressive — young evangelical Christian, turns to prostitution. Arlene, the mother of two, is last seen making her 89th call to find a new home. Like incarceration, eviction can brand a person for life, making her an undesirable tenant and condemning her to ever more filthy, decrepit housing.

Near the end of his book, Desmond tentatively introduces the concept of "exploitation" — "a word that has been scrubbed out of the poverty debate." The landlord who evicts Lamar, Larraine and so many others is rich enough to vacation in the Caribbean while her tenants shiver in Milwaukee. The owner of the trailer park takes in over $400,000 a year. These incomes are made possible by the extreme poverty of the tenants, who are afraid to complain and lack any form of legal representation. Desmond mentions payday loans and for-profit colleges as additional exploiters of the poor — a list to which could be added credit card companies, loan sharks, pay-to-own furniture purveyors and many others who have found a way to spin gold out of human sweat and tears. Poverty in America has become a lucrative business, with appalling results: "No moral code or ethical principle," he writes, "no piece of scripture or holy teaching, can be summoned to defend what we have allowed our country to become."