

Book, though flawed, still deserves to be read

Benjamin Franklin once said, "Poverty often deprives a man of all spirit and virtue; it is hard for an empty bag to stand upright."

A similar outlook is reflected in Barbara Ehrenreich's "Nickel and Dimed." In this account of life as one of the working poor, she vividly portrays the sense of deflation many poverty-level wage earners experience as they struggle to meet their most basic financial needs.

Although I disagree with Ehrenreich's negative assessment of big business, I do believe that she makes a very valuable and original contribution to our understanding of the minimum wage earner's lifestyle.

Her experiences help us to understand the fear and despondency minimum wage parents feel when trying to put food on the table or the hopelessness the poor must feel while trying to finance a child's education.

I firmly believe that the United States is any other of a meritocracy than any other country in the world; however, this belief is tempered by the knowledge that socio-economic status, access to solid role models and family each play an instrumental part in the success or failure of an individual. Those who are blessed in all three areas will have a definite advantage over those who are not. As Ehrenreich's book points out, uncontrollable life circumstances play a significant role in the future of an individual.

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Many have argued that the poor individuals in the book are poor because they make bad decisions — a claim that is true in some cases but certainly doesn't hold true universally. Consider those who make bad decisions: Isn't it possible that these bad decisions stem from feelings of hopelessness? It seems entirely realistic that one would grow a bit desperate after trying to save such a small amount of money for such a long time, and negative methods of escapism, such as drug use, could possibly result from this despair.

Instead of completely dismissing this book as liberal propaganda, I believe that both liberal and conservative students alike would benefit from taking a fair look at the lifestyle of the poor and examining the reasons that cause them to live in such conditions.

Instead of assuming that low-wage workers are poor because they don't work as hard as others or because they make bad decisions, we need to delve into the reasons why the poor make seemingly bad choices and why many believe them to be less hardworking than themselves.

While this book, overall, successfully makes a case for paying attention to the plight of the poor, there were some parts that I found to be rather adolescent, such as the sarcastic references to religion and

much of the low-brow humor. I think she mischaracterizes big business horribly and neglects to mention the large number of corporations that donate money to charities for the underprivileged.

Like some conservatives who have already expressed disapproval, some of these mischaracterizations are a major concern. But to lose sight of the book's primary message is an even bigger error—one to which campus conservatives should not fall prey.

Although I favor a summer reading book with a more optimistic message — perhaps a book about individuals who have succeeded financially in America — there is definitely merit in reading about the underprivileged. Not only is this a very practical subject to consider as freshmen prepare to live, learn, and socialize with others of varying socio-economic backgrounds, but it also adds another dimension to the intellectual life of our university.

If this book is enough to encourage students to abandon the sense of entitlement that so many of us feel when looking for jobs and embrace more of a sense of gratitude for the tough labor that so many workers put forth for so little money, then the book will have served its purpose. If it can inspire students to use their education as a means for leaving the world a little better than they found it rather than trying to grab money and power at all costs, then it will prove to have been a great selection. If students are moved to help low-wage earners lift themselves out of poverty, then we will have all benefited from reading it.

Despite the few qualms I have with this book, I think that when we consider the big picture — that Ehrenreich presents us with a very real, vivid experience of the minimum wage earner's lifestyle — we will be grateful for her candor and hopefully moved to help improve the situation of America's working poor.

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Book choice merits holiday

At a university that prides itself on traditions, I proclaim that we should introduce a new one. Let's call it "Misguided Opposition to the Summer Reading Program Day," and let's observe it every year the day before classes begin.

The return (or first trip) to campus in the fall can be tedious. Moving into 100-degree dorms, selling your right arm for books and trying to drop early-morning classes can make these first few days stressful. A holiday would alleviate some of the tension.

Laughable conservative opposition to Michael Sells' "Approaching the Quran" and Barbara Ehrenreich's "Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America" has brought UNC into a positive light two years in a row, and it deserves commemoration.

First and foremost, the Summer Reading Program is essential for fostering the intellectual discourse the University thrives on. I have my complaints about UNC's curriculum; for example, I am set to graduate with a greater knowledge of the rules of racquetball than the intellectual history of our country.

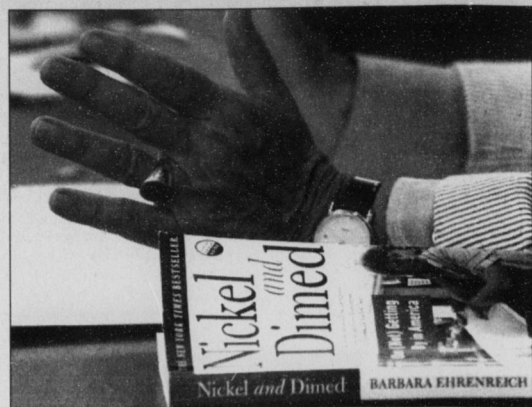
But I take pride in the fact that my school requires (oops — I mean encourages) all incoming students to read and discuss a topical book before classes even start.

My group discussion of "The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down" was what got my dorky juices flowing and had me excited for the classes I was set to take. Only a program like a summer book can accomplish this feat.

Second, we should acknowledge how off-base and yet creative the anti-summer reading activists can be. Last summer, many sadly failed to see the value in reading a book that presents some of the main passages of the holy book of Islam.

Instead, in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, critics claimed that the author, and thus UNC, were presenting a skewed view of religion by not highlighting the Quran's more violent sections. I guess they thought we should read the more acceptable Torah or Bible, books we all know are entirely peaceful.

Now, Ehrenreich's book, which chronicles the life of a low-wage



DTH/BRIAN CASSELLA

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worker, is criticized for its liberal bias. Apparently, showing a group of college students who will probably never live on minimum wage what it's like is out of line.

Of course the author wrote "Nickel and Dimed" to make a point. But this is not unique.

Have members of the Committee for a Better Carolina taken Economics 10, a class required for many majors? In it, we learn the virtues of capitalism, competition and free trade — ideas that don't sit well with many students. Yet these supposedly concerned students haven't raised a stink — nor should they. Part of education is learning all sides and coming to your own informed decision.

The fact that University officials have not given in to the blind opposition is a reason to celebrate.

Third, let's be proud that UNC won't give in to pressure from outside forces.

Last year, a federal lawsuit from the Virginia-based Family Policy Network could easily have caused Chancellor Moeser and other officials to give in and halt discussion of "Approaching the Quran." Yet the talks went on as planned, and last year's freshmen were better off for it. This summer, state legislators who apparently don't have the time or energy to fix the state budget crisis have devoted themselves to criti-

cizing UNC's reading choice.

But administrators, commendably backed by Student Body President Matt Tepper, show no signs of backing down. Moeser has shown courage in fighting these lawmakers, who controls the University's finances. It's nice to know that even at a state university, our education is still ultimately handled by people who actually know what they're doing and not an über-conservative activist network or ignorant state legislators.

Fourth and finally, we should rejoice that the now-annual opposition to the Summer Reading Program has put the national spotlight on our tree-lined campus. Who else can boast that MTV star Gideon Yago visited their school?

But in all seriousness, that UNC continues to push the envelope and stand for academic freedom serves as evidence to the rest of the nation that UNC is a forward-thinking institution. And in a state that elected Jesse Helms too many times, we should be relieved that people can see that there's more to North Carolina than grits and racism.

So "Misguided Opposition to the Summer Reading Program Day" begins this year.

It's time for cake, lemonade and speeches from all involved. Let's just hope they don't quote a leftist like Bill Clinton — then we'll have more trouble on our hands.

Contact Jeff Silver at jmsilver@email.unc.edu.

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