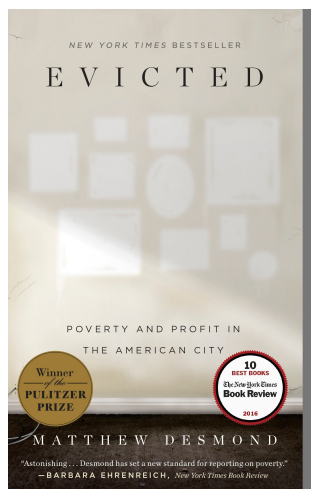




DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR EVICTED



Evicted by Matthew Desmond is our Big Read for January 2021, the second in our Big Read selections, following *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* in October 2020.

Evicted was published in 2016. It was met by accolades in superlatives, e.g., “brilliant,” “astounding”, “a new standard for reporting on poverty.” The Guardian wrote: “What if the dominant discourse on poverty is just wrong? What if the problem is that poverty is profitable?” A startling but appropriate question.

Evicted is not a novel but is written in the third person. It reflects actual circumstances, events and people – though real names are not used.

Matthew Desmond produced a serious ethnographic study (of Milwaukee) undertaken throughout **2008 and 2009 during the great recession**. It stretches over 24 chapters plus a prologue, 21 pages of explaining the project’s context and motivations, a similar length epilogue, an 11-page index and 62 pages of notes and statistics clarifying and commenting on the text. An *academic* undertaking with significant real world and societal implications.

Milwaukee was chosen not because it was then exemplary or even the worst US example of poverty, precarious housing, evictions or desperate living conditions. It was chosen because it was typical of so many de-industrialized American cities (Kansas City, Cleveland, Chicago...) whose experience with ongoing housing crises and routine evictions was very similar, and explained a key part of the cities’ deterioration and accumulation of multiple social issues.

The author lived in the neighborhood among the people he describes and writes from their point of view (i.e., an ethnography). He follows eight families, black and white, families with and without children entangled in the revolving process of eviction, their often desperate and dangerous circumstances, eviction fallout in their community and the harm done to children – demonstrating the complexity of their individual situations and the community impact. People on both sides of the tenant-landlord relationship fall under his scrutiny as well as the range of residents whose lives intersect – from clergy and church elders, to lawyers and judges, to drug dealers and law enforcement. The narrative underscores the relationship between the multiple consequences of eviction, inadequate and insecure housing, and poverty.

Of all the miseries endured by Black communities – lack of jobs, mass incarceration, inferior schools, food deserts, gangs, the need for public assistance – that have rightfully captured media and research attention, the factor unaddressed has been the far-ranging effects of eviction and the downward spiraling living conditions it engenders. For Desmond, this is the most consequential and directly linked to generational poverty.

Adapted from: Seresin, Indiana. "Evicted." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 30 Oct 2018. Web. 28 Nov 2020



About the Author

Matthew Desmond has a sterling professional record built upon his education in communication and justice studies, including a PhD from UW-Madison. His first book was *On the Fireline: Living and Dying with Wildland Firefighters* (2008). He co-authored two volumes on the sociology of race and then achieved international prominence in 2016 with *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, which earned the 2016 National Book Critics Circle Award, the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction, and the 2017 PEN/John Kenneth Galbraith Award. He also was awarded a MacArthur ‘Genius’ Grant (2015). He taught sociology at Harvard and is currently professor of sociology at Princeton where he continues his passion with ongoing research. He founded the Eviction Lab at Princeton University (2017), dedicated to housing research to promote the expansion of affordable housing in America.

Probably at least as important in understanding Desmond’s motivation for pursuing this work is his upbringing as a preacher’s son. He was immersed in the church’s historical role in tending to the needs of the poor. He recognized the relevant historical context in Milwaukee and felt the pull of conscience to use his professional skills to advance understanding and action to comprehend eviction and substandard living conditions as the cause, not just a condition, of poverty. He asks the church today – individual congregations and individuals – to respond to this crisis of the poor.

By explaining how a person reacts to an incident or interprets a change to their circumstances, he reveals – sometimes obliquely – his own ethical stance on their choices or lack thereof. The narrative provides historical context for situations he describes and broadens the reader’s understanding of the ‘why’ behind the ‘what’ faced by the people he follows. He leaves guideposts throughout the text (which we can recognize as themes as we consider the work as a whole), as well as specific statements of the beliefs inspiring his writing in the Epilogue.

From the Epilogue:

- Do we believe that the right to a decent home is part of what it means to be an American? Life and home are so intertwined that it is almost impossible to think of one without the other.
- Eviction is a cause, not just a condition, of poverty.
- The American Dream: the collective work done by neighbors to create a community for everyone to live in safely and productively.

And from his introduction to a discussion guide for faith-based reading groups, addressed directly to readers:

- I’m writing today to ask you to raise your eyes to a new challenge facing millions of American families of moderate means—the lack of affordable housing. Please prayerfully consider the role the church and faith community can play in helping to address this rapidly growing crisis.
- The most vulnerable in our society are most impacted...
- The high cost of housing is pushing families into poverty, and eviction is running through the American city like an epidemic, destabilizing homes, schools, and communities.
- Without stable shelter, everything else falls apart.



Prevalent Underlying Themes in *Evicted*

Consider these themes and where and how they are expressed while reading *Evicted*.

- Safe, decent, affordable housing as primary element of achieving the American Dream
- Relationship between poverty, exploitation and profit
- Inequality, injustice & discrimination
- Housing as a human right
- Community and interaction
- Hopelessness and lack of choice

These issues were not new in America in the early 2000's, but they were certainly exacerbated by the Great Recession beginning 2007. Across the narrative, we encounter and re-encounter the same individuals, situational examples, reactions of power figures and 'victims' and reverberating consequences to the neighborhoods as fates rise, fall and are intermingled through relationships.

Let's look at them not chapter-by-chapter or as specific stories, but how these themes are reflected by their examples.

Discussion Questions

1. The author had an eviction experience in his family. Have you ever been evicted or know anyone who has been evicted? How did that event change you or those around you?
2. Many people have very codified perceptions of "people who get evicted" and suspect that bad decisions make those people largely responsible for their circumstances. Do you feel that way? Did reading *Evicted* modify your opinion in any way? (See Pastor Daryl's decision on p. 127.)
3. What surprised you the most about the living conditions for poor people described in *Evicted*? Did the author create empathy or understanding of the problems and the people experiencing them?
4. There are people and companies that benefit from evictions: moving companies, landlords, the management company at the trailer park. Do they have any spiritual responsibility to these people where they work, or are they simply pursuing their livelihoods?
5. There are many examples of how the landlords regard their tenants relative to their own financial health. For example, Sherrana chose to specialize in the Black poor. She says "hood is good." (p. 152) In what sense did she mean that? How do you feel about that attitude?
6. Sherrana has built considerable wealth by overcoming the odds stacked against a person of her origins and means – tenants, building inspectors and the legal system. Does her achievement make her a hero of the American dream? Or, is she a perversion of the American dream – completely amoral, compassionless, oblivious to the cost everyone in her orbit is forced to bear in service to her personal financial success? (p. 12)
7. Lenny, onsite property manager at College Mobile Home Park, only cares that he collects enough monthly rent to earn his bonuses. On p. 36 he says, "Sometimes I'm a shrink [...] Sometimes I'm the village asshole." Does this level of self-awareness affect how you judge his actions?



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8. In Chapter 11, Sherrana says, “This moment right now, it’s going to create a lot of millionaires. If you have money right now, you can profit from other people’s failures. ...I’m catching the properties. I’m catching ’em.” And on p. 11 after evicting a man with no legs: “Lamar’s got them little boys in there...And I love Lamar. But love don’t pay the bills.” Is this ‘business as usual’? An expression of independence and self-reliance?

9. When city or state officials pressured landlords... landlords often passed the pressure on to their tenants (Chapter 4). Apartment landlords/management companies want to see someone has stable living conditions before they rent to them. If a landlord decides to evict a family, it could mean that family not being able to find a place to secure a future home – maybe ever. In effect, they are demoted to a lower rung in the caste system of their community. How does this contribute to devolving social circumstances for the whole community?

10. In Chapter 7, Desmond explains, “Some landlords neglected to screen tenants for the same reason payday lenders offered unsecured, high-interest loans to families with unpaid debt or lousy credit; ... there was a business model at the bottom of every market.” Would legal restrictions on these practices make a significant difference?

11. Milwaukee renters who experienced eviction were nearly 25% more likely to experience long-term housing problems, especially substandard housing, than other low-income renters (Chapter 6). What factors might explain that?

12. After Lorraine’s food stamps are reinstated, she makes a surprising purchase of a lobster, shrimp, and crab dinner. What do you think of her choices and her defense that tomorrow she will still live in poverty, so she should take advantage of today’s opportunity? If you witnessed a person making such purchases on food stamps, how would you react?

13. The eviction crisis in America is not only based on money, but also significantly on skin color. If a white tenant with much money comes knocking on a landlord's door, that landlord may evict an African American tenant that is three, two, or even just one month behind on their rent. That person then has nowhere to live once they are evicted, and has to bear the agony of living on the streets with children, sometimes in the middle of winter. What allows such practices to survive?

14. The subtle prejudice among the landlords is that the property will be worth more the fewer Black folks live there. The predominant struggles in *Evicted* fall on the Black poor. Why is it harder for us to acknowledge the racism than the other contributing factors to the generational poverty and sorry living conditions described?

15. On page 98, Desmond writes, “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.” Given the crisis among women and, in turn, their children, what kinds of solutions would help alleviate the demands put on single-parent homes?

16. Affordable housing interacts intimately with many other social issues. For example, do parents who have trouble finding/providing safe housing for their children deserve to have their children taken away and put in foster care? Would affordable housing make it easier for addicts and recovering addicts (such as Scott) to enroll in programs that increase chances of rehabilitation? What other major issues do you see as directly connected to evictions?

17. Pam is looking for housing and is turned away twice because she has two children, a practice that is illegal (see p. 229). Given the transient nature of the eviction cycle, which causes families to be constantly uprooted from homes and children from schools, should families with children be treated differently? How far would you go to protect your children from homelessness and the dangers of life on the streets?

18. Why did Doreen choose not to call Sherrana when the house was in desperate need of repair? What effects does living in a home that is not decent or functional have on a person’s psychological and emotional health? (Chapter 21)

19. On page 180, Desmond writes, “No one thought the poor more undeserving than the poor themselves.” Churches



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have a unique opportunity to uplift their congregations. How can the power of prayer and faith help someone who does not think they are deserving of help, help themselves?

20. Many of the people in *Evicted* accept any dwelling/place of residence as a home. How/why would Desmond disagree?

Note that in the Epilogue, he defines “home” as the beginning of civic life because it’s the connections made with neighbors that allow the productive formation of cohesive communities. Therefore, he feels a *home is a right, not a privilege*, because out of it a stable society can emerge.

21. How would you define ‘home’? How is it distinguished from ‘house’? How do your own experiences influence your answer? Have you ever needed to uproot yourself and move to perhaps not just a different location but to entirely different circumstances?

22. Desmond says when people have a place to live, they become better parents, workers, and citizens. Why might this be so?

23. Were you surprised to read in Chapter 14: “But for the most part, tenants had a high tolerance for inequality. ... Who cared what the landlord was making as long as he was willing to work with you until you got back on your feet? There was always something worse than the trailer park, always room to drop lower.” Can you gauge your attitude or choices if you found yourself in that situation?

24. Cardinal Roger Mahony once said, “Any society, any nation, is judged on the basis of how it treats its weakest members—the last, the least, the littlest.” Do you believe this philosophy? And if so, does it create a responsibility for faith-based organizations to take a more active role in uplifting all people?

25. Desmond writes, “No moral code or ethical principle, no piece of scripture or holy teaching, can be summoned to defend what we have allowed our country to become.” What do you think the responsibility of organizations, churches, and individuals should be to help the less fortunate in our communities?

26. Can the church practice true forgiveness without judgment in its treatment of the evicted community? The book portrays families that have limited options, which often results in poor decision-making. Is it possible to release judgment and practice forgiveness in order to create an environment where true change can take place?

27. Does the author create a call to action in the book? Where did you feel that call to action the most?

28. The author suggests that the government should offer housing vouchers. Do you agree, and is this a stand-alone solution?