

## Discussion Questions *(continued)*

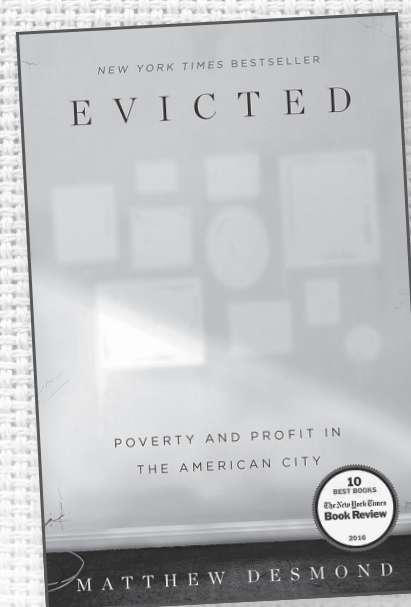
3. Sherrena Tarver claimed to have found her calling as an inner-city entrepreneur, stating “The ‘hood is good. There’s a lot of money there” (page 152). How did Sherrena profit from being a landlord in poor communities? Do you think her profits were justified? What responsibilities do landlords have 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 that 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?

More questions can be found at: <http://bit.ly/2tofzZb>

[kpl.gov/book-club-in-a-bag](http://kpl.gov/book-club-in-a-bag)



# Book Club in a Bag



**“It doesn’t happen every week (or every month, or even year), but every once in a while a book comes along that changes the national conversation ... Evicted looks to be one of those books.”**

**— Pamela Paul, Ed., New York Times Book Review**

# Evicted

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## Summary

From Harvard sociologist and MacArthur “Genius” Matthew Desmond, a landmark work of scholarship and reportage that will forever change the way we look at poverty in America.

In this brilliant, heartbreaking book, Matthew Desmond takes us into the poorest neighborhoods of Milwaukee to tell the story of eight families on the edge.

Arleen is a single mother trying to raise her two sons on the \$20 a month she has left after paying for their rundown apartment. Scott is a gentle nurse consumed by a heroin addiction. Lamar, a man with no legs and a neighborhood full of boys to look after, tries to work his way out of debt. Vanetta participates in a botched stickup after her hours are cut. All are spending almost everything they have on rent, and all have fallen behind.

The fates of these families are in the hands of two landlords: Sherrena Tarver, a former schoolteacher turned inner-city entrepreneur, and Tobin Charney, who runs one of the worst trailer parks in Milwaukee. They loathe some of their tenants and are fond of others, but as Sherrena puts it, “Love don’t pay the bills.” She moves to evict Arleen and her boys a few days before Christmas.

Even in the most desolate areas of American cities, evictions used to be rare. But today, most poor renting families are spending more than half of their income on housing, and eviction has become ordinary, especially for single mothers.

In vivid, intimate prose, Desmond provides a ground-level view of one of the most urgent issues facing America today. As we see families forced into shelters, squalid apartments, or more dangerous neighborhoods, we bear witness to the human cost of America’s vast inequality—and to people’s determination and intelligence in the face of hardship.

Based on years of embedded fieldwork and painstakingly gathered data, this masterful book transforms our understanding of extreme poverty and economic exploitation while providing fresh ideas for solving a devastating, uniquely American problem.

Its unforgettable scenes of hope and loss remind us of the centrality of home, without which nothing else is possible. *(From the publisher.)*

**Matthew Desmond** (source: LitLovers.com)

- Birth—ca. 1980
- Raised—Winslow, Arizona, USA
- Education—B.A., Arizona State University; Ph.D., University of Wisconsin
- Awards—MacArthur Grant
- Currently—lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts

**Matthew Desmond** is an American urban social scientist, author, and Harvard Associate Professor. He is also the 2015 recipient of the MacArthur “genius” Grant.

Raised in Winslow, Arizona, Desmond’s father was a nondenominational minister while his mother worked at various jobs. The family lived on a tight budget, and during his college years, their home was repossessed by the bank.

Desmond earned two B.S. degrees from Arizona State University. It was during that time his family lost their home, and Desmond began volunteering with Habitat for Humanity and socializing with homeless people in Tempe.

After graduating from Arizona State, Desmond headed to the University of Wisconsin, in Madison, where he obtained his Ph.D. in 2010. Moving farther eastward, Desmond became a Junior Fellow at the Society of Fellows at Harvard University (2010–2013), and was eventually hired as associate professor by the school’s Department of Sociology. He holds the department’s John L. Loeb Chair.

Desmond achieved nationwide acclaim for his 2016 book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, in which he exposes the low end of the inner city real estate market, where evictions have become a highly profitable enterprise. Starting as a graduate student, Desmond spent eight years conducting fieldwork in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He followed the plight of eight families, eventually concluding that that eviction is a cause, rather than merely a symptom, of poverty.

Prior to *Evicted*, Desmond also published *On the Fireline* (2007), coauthored *Race in America* (2015) and *The Racial Order* (2015), and edited the inaugural issue of *RSF: Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, which focuses on severe poverty. (Adapted from New York Times and MacArthur Foundation articles. Retrieved 9/6/2016.)

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## Discussion Questions (Source: Simon and Schuster)

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?

*Discussion questions continued on back ...*