

# Book Club Kits!

# EVICTED



## About the Author:

**Matthew Desmond** is the John L. Loeb Associate Professor of the Social Sciences at Harvard University and co-director of the Justice and Poverty Project. A former member of the Harvard Society of Fellows, he is the author of the award-winning book, *On the Fireline*, coauthor of two books on race, and editor of a collection of studies on severe deprivation in America. His work has been supported by the Ford, Russell Sage, and National Science Foundations, and his writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker* and *Chicago Tribune*. In 2015, Desmond was awarded a MacArthur "Genius" grant.

<http://www.evictedbook.com/bios/matthew-desmond>



## Inside the kit:

(8) book copies

(1) book club guide

## About the Book:

*From the author's website*

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.

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.

## Suggested Reads:

Ehrenreich, Barbara  
*Nickel and Dimed*

Bruder, Jessica  
*Nomadland*

Dum, Christopher P.  
*Exiled in America*

1. Have you ever been evicted or do you know anyone who has? If the answer is yes, what was your/their experience like, and how has it affected your/their life?
2. What was your experience reading *Evicted*? Were you surprised by what you learned? Was any particular scene or character's story emotionally painful for you to witness?
3. Many people have very codified perceptions of "people who get evicted" and suspect that those people are largely responsible—through bad decision making—for their circumstances. Did you feel this way before reading *Evicted*? Why or why not? Did your opinions change after reading the book? If so, how?
4. In *Evicted*, author Matthew Desmond takes a narrative approach to an important topic and follows the stories of several real people. Which person's story were you most drawn to and why?
5. 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 their property? What risks do they take? Do you sympathize with Sherrena or not?
6. On Lorraine and her late boyfriend Glen's anniversary, she spends her monthly allocation of food stamps on "two lobster tails, shrimp, king crab legs, salad, and lemon meringue pie" (page 218). Can you relate to her decision? How might you have judged her differently without knowing the backstory that Desmond provides?
7. Because they have children, Arleen, Vanetta, and Pam and Ned frequently find themselves shut out of available housing and resort to lies in order to secure a place to live. Are these lies justified? If you have children, how far would you go to shelter your family?
8. How does race factor into the types of struggles faced by the individuals profiled in *Evicted*? What about being a woman? Or a single parent?
9. Why do you think Crystal made the decision to let Arleen and her sons stay until they found another residence? How did tenants such as Crystal and Arleen rely on friends and extended kin networks to get by? Did this do anything to lift them out of poverty or distress? What limitations do these short-term relationships have? Why do you think agencies such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children seek to limit kin dependence?
10. Why did Doreen choose not to call Sherrena when the house was in desperate need of repair? Do you agree that "The house failed the tenants, and the tenants failed the house" (page 256)? What effects does living in a home that is not decent or functional have on a person's psychological and emotional health?
11. Do you think housing should be a right in America?
12. Many Americans still believe that the typical low-income family lives in public housing. Unfortunately, the opposite is true; only 1 in 4 families who qualify for any kind of housing assistance receive it. In *Evicted*, Desmond proposes a universal housing voucher program. What do you think of that idea?
13. The government spends much more money on homeowner tax benefits for affluent families than on housing assistance to poor families. Is this situation justified? How would you address this issue?