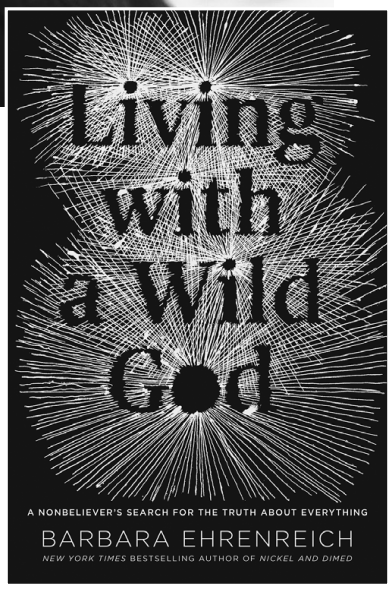
Barbara Ehrenreich. Photo: Peter Abzug.



Scholar-Practitioner Q & A . . .

An Interview with Barbara Ehrenreich

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Barbara Ehrenreich, born 1941 in Butte, Montana, is an activist, feminist, and immersion journalist. She is one of America's leading investigative reporters, and perhaps best known for *Nickel and Dimed*, her 2001 book-length investigation into the life of the working poor—the literary fruit of working for three months at various minimum-wage jobs and trying to live off their meager incomes. Her famous *Harper's* magazine essay, "Welcome to Cancerland," spurred by her being diagnosed with breast cancer, excoriated what she called the "cult" of breast cancer, and won a 2002 U.S. National Magazine Award. Her parents were pro-union and anti-Republican, and as she grew up she herself became a social democrat. She has been both a teacher and a scholar, with her academic training in chemistry, physics, and biology (her PhD in the latter science achieved at Rockefeller University). She has worked for *Mother Jones* and *Ms.*, written columns for *Time* in the 1990s and the *New York Times* in the 2000s, and has supported causes from shutting down the Vietnam War to women's reproductive health rights.

The unstoppable Ehrenreich, at age seventy-three, shows no sign of easing up. The author or coauthor of twenty-one books, her most recent, an atheist's meditation on the nature of religious belief, is called *Living with a Wild God*.[1] As always, she casts a satirical eye on politics and culture at large, and her writing remains pugilistic, sharp, and funny. She writes with pride and affection about her working-class background, her fight to increase the minimum wage, and her creation of the Economic Hardship Reporting Project. This interview was conducted by telephone on February 20, 2015.

Literary Journalism Studies
Vol. 7, No. 1, Spring 2015

Leonora Flis: Regarding the official history, or canon, of American journalism (and broader if we can open up the scope a bit), our special issue is truly international in the selection of writers discussed. Do you feel that women reporters still occupy a marginal position?

Barbara Ehrenreich: I don't know how to answer that. There are certainly a lot of women reporters—I don't know the numbers. But when it comes to the level of punditry, as you well know, it's all white guys, older white guys. Many mornings I listen to NPR and there are women reporting from Ukraine and Liberia and everywhere. It's great, but I wonder if they'll ever get to be talking heads. The overall thing that bothers me about journalism now is not about sexism or elitism, but it's a whole profession that's being destroyed or has been destroyed. There's no way to make a living. I mean, I made my living most of my life as a freelance writer. The kind of people who can do the writing are those who can afford it—unless there are some wildly overpaid examples left from the earlier days. But the kind of information we get on class, poverty, and race, in relation to the reporting, is confined to the relatively affluent. One big thing that I work on is a project I actually started, called the Economic Hardship Reporting Project, where we raise money so that people who are low income, which is a lot of journalists or people who have never been writers, can do the reporting and the essays on these sorts of issues.

Flis: What do you think of women reporters who expose themselves to extreme and dangerous conditions, such as war? One of the essays in our special issue talks about female reporters from the Spanish Civil War, for example. It discusses the work of Martha Gellhorn, Gerda Taro, and Andrée Viollis. I wonder if you feel that women perceive crisis situations differently from men. Svetlana Alexiyevich and many others claim that women have a different psychological and physiological makeup.

Ehrenreich: I have no reason to think there are differences, but I don't know. We're way past the notion that women are more delicate and can't be exposed. We're way past that. We keep forgetting that women bleed every month. I don't think there is some special sensitivity based on gender.

Flis: I'm from Slovenia and I often wonder how the socialism I grew up in affected women's rights. Also, communism, in essence, was probably more a state of mind than a method of government, at least in the former Yugoslavia. As a consequence of these ideologies, there was probably a lack of personal identity and individuality among people, or rather a fear of expressing such attitudes. What do you see as a major difference in terms of the development/formation of women's rights in the capitalist West, if compared to Eastern Europe, for example?

BE: You are raising basic issues about socialism that concern the submergence of the individual into the collective, which is historical and repellent. While I approve of self-sacrifice and being able to contribute to collective ventures, there is always a dialectic, a tension, with one's ability to stand back and be critical and reject what's going on.

Flis: I have a lot of admiration for your Economic Hardship Reporting Project, which gives unemployed or underemployed journalists a chance. Are there more women in these categories, and if so, why do you think this is the case?

Ehrenreich: I couldn't tell you. My coeditor and I on this project are both women. We maybe have attracted a disproportionate number of women writers and photojournalists about things that we're interested in and know. We've had a certain amount about abortion rights—that's just something we think about. On the other hand, some of our strongest pieces have been from men, and particularly black men. So, I will say again that the overwhelming problem for journalists right now is not sexism but the disappearance of our way of life.

William Dow: Here's a large question regarding narrative genres. Do you have a preference for what you'd like your writing to be called: narrative journalism, reportage, literary journalism, creative nonfiction, investigative journalism? A combination of these forms? None of the above?

Ehrenreich: I have no idea.

Dow: It's been called many different things, so I've just been wondering if you have a specific preference.

Ehrenreich: Well, it's not something I've really thought about.

Flis and Dow: Regardless of taxonomy, do you think that a more subjective kind of journalism is needed to comment on today's complex realities? Have perhaps the more traditional styles of reporting turned out to be inadequate and not suited to our present times? You generally write a subjective kind of journalism.

Ehrenreich: Well, not always. Sometimes I write quite impersonal sorts of essays. It seems to be what works best for whatever I'm saying, when I want to use the word "I" or not at all. It depends on what I'm doing.

Dow: But you do use the first person in most of your later books. Do you consider this to be the most empowering narrative voice?

Ehrenreich: Some of my work has been personal and first person. A lot has not been. The big change came with *Nickel and Dimed*,[2] which really had to be in the first person. And I had never done that before, written at length in the first-person singular. So when I realized that I had to do that and that I could do it, it was kind of fun and liberating. But I will tell you that there

is a pressure in the publishing world toward narrative that I had resisted for a time and then had eventually given into.

Dow: Are you speaking specifically about long-form narrative in the genres of reportage, literary journalism, investigative journalism, and creative nonfiction?

Ehrenreich: I feel like a dummy because I actually don't think in those terms. There was a book that I published in the last decade called *Dancing in the Streets*[3] that's not in the first person. At the very end I bring in a flash of personal experience, but that's just because I wanted to do that.

Dow: Do the form and content sometimes come together once you have your subject?

Ehrenreich: Sometimes it comes together, sometimes not so much. I'm struggling with the new book I'm working on. The first chapter will be somewhat narrative, but that will be the end of that.

Flis: What is your main professional and personal ethical guideline when you are interviewing people, especially people in dire conditions, doing field research, and later constructing your texts?

Ehrenreich: I actually don't like doing that—a terrible thing to say, maybe. *Nickel and Dimed* is not interviews; there are reported conversations. The truth is, I really feel uncomfortable interviewing somebody. It seems a little predatory: "Tell me about your suffering and your misery and everything so that I can turn this into a commodity."

Dow: I was under the assumption that you did quite a bit of this in your research.

Ehrenreich: This is actually something about which I've talked to my son, Ben Ehrenreich, who is truly a literary journalist, by the way. It was a great relief for him to discover similar ideas about interviewing. A few years ago he'd been through a project that involved interviewing the mother of a son who died in Britain. There are people who really take great pride in their empathy and in their ability to draw a story out of someone. He doesn't. I don't.

Dow: This is something I've been curious about: who do you imagine your readership to be?

Ehrenreich: I can't.

Dow: In 2006, the period of *Bait and Switch*,[4] you said something about preferring your readership to be from the professional-managerial class?

Ehrenreich: Did I say that?

Dow: Yes, I thought I read that in an interview. You don't recall that?

Ehrenreich: No, I don't recall saying that. But pretty clearly, that's the kind of people I was talking to and mixing with, and even impersonating.

Dow: But don't you have an image of a reader out there, someone you can imagine connecting to?

Ehrenreich: When I wrote essays for *Time* magazine in the '90s I sometimes did have someone in mind, an uncle who was conservative but would listen to arguments. So, sometimes I think of Uncle Jack. But then at some point I realized I could not confine myself. *Time* is a little bit stylized, or it was in the days that it was a magazine. But *Nickel and Dimed,* it's been called "plain spoken," which sounds to me a little bit like "slow witted." But I used words and made references there that are somewhat obscure. You'd have to go to a dictionary. And I thought, I don't care, I have to get away from "is this going to be at the right level?" So I have some words in there, like "glossolalia."

Dow: Your latest book, *Living with a Wild God*, has been called a memoir in many of the reviews. Is that what you would call it, or does your phrase "metaphysical thriller" work better?

Ehrenreich: I guess I was doing my best to promote the book. That's a good case, though. I started thinking of a book about the history of religion. That sounds a little bit ambitious, but I had certain themes. I was documenting or fascinated by the rise of monotheism—and very critical of it. The conventional wisdom is that this was such a huge advance in morality and understanding the world. I said, no, it was really the death of thousands of views.

Dow: So this is the origin of the project, to write a religious history?

Ehrenreich: Yes. I wrote a proposal for my agent and she said, "This is just too intellectual and academic—could you work something like a narrative into it?" And I remember just steaming for days—how could I do that? Well, it turned out I had a way to do it and I had a personal journal that I could build on. But there was a pressure to go for a narrative and so there are a lot of aperçus about the history of religion. But there's no consistent argument, and I feel a little bad about that.

Dow: Incidentally, the copy of your book that I purchased at an English-language bookstore in Paris was in the Religious Studies section. Were you expecting this kind of categorization?

Ehrenreich: Yes, that's fine. I don't care.

Dow: *Living with a Wild God* is probably your most intimate published writing to date. It certainly has a different tone from anything else that you've published. How difficult was it to reveal so much about your personal life?

Ehrenreich: I do feel a certain kind of embarrassment. But once I got on a track of making a narrative out of it I had to talk about, for example, my family. I didn't make any revelations that would be deeply mortifying—but some of it sort of is.

Dow: For me, some of the most poignant revelations in the book are when you have a conversation with or address—either in the second or third person—your sixteen-year-old self.

Ehrenreich: Yes. That kind of conversation is going on all through the book.

Dow: So many of your successful works, including *Living with a Wild God*—in which you engage in a fundamental quarrel with yourself—are cast, to return to this a bit, in the first person. How do you want to take the reader with you on this first-person journey?

Ehrenreich: I was told that it should be a narrative, so that implies some kind of time sequence, etc. I had no particular trick in bringing the reader along. The trick was always in going from the philosophical or metaphysical to the personal or finding ways to keep the metaphysical and personal moving along.

Dow: In *Living with a Wild God*, you provide the reader with perhaps the fullest description ever of the books you've read and the influences writers have had on you. These range from Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* to Agatha Christie mysteries, from Kerouac and Zola to Conrad, Proust, and Camus. In general, what literary quality do you want to give to your work?

Ehrenreich: What kind of literary quality? Well, this is just how it is. Why am I writer? Because I am a reader. I was as a child and still am a pretty compulsive reader. And in my youth I don't think we had young adult books. I was just from an early age thrown into the classics. I didn't know they were classics; they were just entertaining books, like Bullfinch's *The Age of Fable* (1855). I was just going for what was intriguing to me.

Dow: At one point in *Living with a Wild God*, you say that as an adolescent, "literature was [your] default activity."[5]

Ehrenreich: I was always sneaking off to a book. I was really excited about books.

Dow: It seems to me that in much of your work you masterfully engage in literary activity, using literary techniques in the creation of character, e.g., the rapid-fire character sketches of the McLean Bible Church career ministry in *Bait and Switch*[6]; the reconstructions of dialogue, such as the ironic exchanges between the narrator and Marge and Holly in *Nickel and Dimed*[7]; and in the use of figurative language, such as the many metaphorical constructions and explanations you provide in *Living with a Wild God*, for instance, "Metaphorically, you could describe the situation this way: I am adrift at sea for years clinging to a piece of flotsam or wreckage, alone and prepared to die."[8] Are literary techniques important to your writerly arsenal?

Ehrenreich: I'm not consciously thinking let's throw in a metaphorical

construction here, or something like that. My granddaughter recently had in the seventh grade an assignment to read something and identify metaphors. There was a list of literary devices. And I got so annoyed. I said, "Anna, that's not how I write. I don't sit down with these tools and say I'll do this one now or try that one." I don't think that way. I go with my subjective senses. I guess I honor that in some way. What you would call a metaphorical construction is not a writing device; it's how I'm seeing something.

Dow: In several of your works, there are two identities, or two Barbaras, an observer and a participant, an interpreter and a character. Some of the most powerful passages in *Living with a Wild God* involve verbal exchanges between a present-day Barbara and her adolescent self. Toward the end of the book, for example, in a mixture of justification and confession, you directly address your sixteen-year-old self. How difficult is it to keep authorial control when one is both the subject and object of a narrative?

Ehrenreich: Well, I don't know if we ever get away from that entirely. I don't think it's easy to avoid that. Now it's quite marked in *Living with a Wild God,* because the younger self is a character and yet she's a character with agency and subjectivity who can reach out from the past and address me, Barbara. I don't know how else to put it.

Dow: Is *Living with a Wild God* another form of what you've called "immersion journalism," though with substantive differences. Here you're immersing yourself in your past life and seeking answers to your "metaphysical questing."[9] And so, in more general terms, do you think of yourself as an immersion journalist who has much in common with an American debunking tradition (the critical part of your "search of a non-believer" in *Living with a Wild God*) and muckraking legacy (London, Sinclair, Steffens, Tarbell, Naomi Klein, etc.)?

Ehrenreich: When I started doing *Nickel and Dimed* I had never heard the phrase "immersion journalism." At one point I was doing some part-time teaching at a journalism school and I was introduced to that term. I certainly had read things like *Down and Out in Paris and London.* But it had never been a genre so I just thought here I am doing these jobs and what do I need to tell people about what goes on? At first it was kind of a mystery to me. What would I be saying? I earned so much today and I spent so much? That would be boring. And then I just began to freely talk about everything that went on. And, as you expected, my personal reactions were part of this.

Dow: Yes, of course. To expand a bit on the muckraking point: you've described your "real job" in *Living with a Wild God* as "a sentry patrolling the perimeters of the human community, always on the lookout for fresh outbreaks of violence and danger, ready to sound the alarm."[10] Is there any

alarm-sounding in this book?

Ehrenreich: I guess so, yes. We don't really collectively know what is going on in this world, universe, whatever. We tended in the way of Western science to think of the material world as the edge, as if the world were a mechanism that works itself out. And I'm saying, no, I think it's a little more complex—either scary or exhilarating, depending on how you think about it—to deal with an on-edge world.

Dow: And that maybe speaks to the open-endedness of the book. You make this point in *Fear of Falling*,[11] that fully knowing ourselves has a great deal to do with knowing our social class. How does your self-identification as a middle-class writer help you know yourself and guide your material? To what degree has your social class informed the answer to your recurrent question in *Living with a Wild God,* "What is going on here?"[12]

Ehrenreich: I'm sure that question comes up for many people who have always been in the same social class or in more stable situations, so I don't know. But "What is going one here?" goes beyond the social. When I talk about the situation, I'm just talking about life existence, the panoply of physical and other sorts of things I interact with every minute.

Dow: Right. Is there, though, an underlying sort of consciousness of yourself as kind of a middle-class writer?

Ehrenreich: What do you mean by middle class?

Dow: Well, that's the term that you used as a self-identification.

Ehrenreich: Yes, it's so imprecise it doesn't mean much. I came from the blue-collar working class. I kind of dipped back into it in certain ways in my thirties through my choice of a partner and the life we lived. I am economically privileged compared to most people. But I am driven by injustice and my passions are stirred by class injustice—as well as gender and racial. But I sometimes get myself in trouble by being critical of certain rich people.

Dow: The *New York Times* book review of *Living with a Wild God* called the book's narrator "unreliable."[13] Do we have an unreliable narrator or something much more complex in the narrative voice?

Ehrenreich: An unreliable narrator? I don't know what to make of that unless this reviewer had some kind of information into my history and biography that I don't have. I was really agonizing about what is the truth of that situation. I was not trying to be coy.

Dow: *Living with a Wild God* is centered on a mystical experience that results in an extended reflection on religion and belief. It seems to me that one of your key realizations is the profound importance your family legacy of atheism has had in shaping your identity—a more important force, you write, than "nationality or even class."[14] To what degree has this "encounter"

both confirmed and questioned your beliefs as an atheist—specifically your atheism derived from "a proud tradition of working-class rejection of authority?"[15]

Ehrenreich: Yes, those things are linked—at least from the peculiar history of my family. It's a strain of the culture of Butte, Montana, or it was—or probably of non-Catholic working-class culture in the late nineteenth century. I know a little bit about that: it was called "free thought." There were things that I heard in my family, like "never trust doctors, lawyers, priests, or bosses." Something may have been picked up from the free-thought literature. I don't have any evidence of that—but there are certain echoes. We were poor people but everybody I knew of could read, and they were curious. The rap on my family was that everybody was a genius and they really were smart people who thought about a lot of things. I tried to explain that in relation to mining. The question of the book that I like most was to think about this, and that link between my father and me and his kind of forged scientific interests.

Dow: You were educated as a scientist, and an "aggressive rationality" can be seen in much of your work. Do scientific rigor and mysticism coexist in *Living with a Wild God*, or at least end up tolerating each other?

Ehrenreich: I'm trying to take the subject of mysticism and look at it with a certain kind of rigor, not in the trivial sense of the mystical experience, but to say suppose we took seriously this kind of thing as data, which was what led me to such strange things as reading the Christian mystics.

Dow: Does your principal rejection of theism actually only concern monotheism and what you've termed "a parental god"?

Ehrenreich: The language here gets difficult, the semantics. There is such a thing as pantheism and there is panentheism—there are a whole bunch of these, which are all kind of hair-splitting. But they are not monotheism; they come closer to a world that is alive.

Dow: What does the evocative "wild god" of your title refer to? Is this an animistic god? A polytheistic god? Is this, finally, your god—or as much of a god as you can possibly believe in?

Ehrenreich: It's probably animistic. I was uneasy about having the word "god" in the title because it leads to: "Do you believe in God or not?" And: "You call it God?" But I decided I liked the way it sounded and I liked taking on directly that notion of a good, wise God. A big influence, and I do credit it, is science fiction. Not just literature, but science fiction. But with science fiction in the '50s they could raise questions: suppose there is a deity who was not good, suppose there is a deity who has his own agenda, etc. Science fiction was something that was permissible to me and that was neither part of my scientific atheist background nor my theistic background.

Dow: In *Living with a Wild God*, you argue, "My political instincts were, and remain, resolutely populist."[16] Regarding this point, political analyst Ruy Teixeira described you this way in 2003: "She's fundamentally a class-oriented populist, who doesn't really focus on what's feasible or effective in politics."[17] Is this an accurate description of you today? In other words, do your aspirations for social change continue to lie more in grassroots efforts and working-class militancy rather than in government reforms and policies?

Ehrenreich: Yes. I do not disdain policy reform. It's just that I come from a generation who believed that our notion of change would not come from above.

Dow: *Living with a Wild God* stresses the need for what you call "a responsible narrator,"[18] a forthright, morally sound, socially and politically conscious narrator who usually is, by the way, a ferocious feminist, unstoppable idealist, and committed socialist. Most of your responsible narrators resist and reject mainstream American verities. In the foreword to *Living with a Wild God*, you state, "I will never write an autobiography, nor am I sure, after all these years, that there is even one coherent 'self' or 'voice' to serve as narrator,"[19] and then you proceed to write what certainly can be considered an autobiography, presenting a highly recognizable, highly responsible Barbara Ehrenreich voice.

Ehrenreich: That's kind of embarrassing. I was thinking that there is nothing in *Living with a Wild God* about my experiences as an activist and agitator. It's just not there. There's little about the central thing, which is my family, my actual family, my children. So it's a highly selective tracking of this one particular thread. I could have, but I don't think it would have been that fascinating to write about the heady days in American socialism that I lived through—American socialism being, of course, miniscule. There were so many political debates, and comings-out, and comings-together, and so on.

Dow: This leads to a larger question. You've said that journalists are historically "part of the working class" as opposed to having any kind of "elite or privileged status."[20]

Ehrenreich: They were, yes.

Dow: What do you attribute this status to, and, given that the working class in the US has taken a severe beating in the last fifty years, what is your general prognosis on newspaper and magazine journalism in the US?

Ehrenreich: Pretty bad. Historically, in the '40s and '50s, beat reporters at a newspaper would be disproportionately male. That was not a prestigious occupation; it was, you know the phrase, used over and over again, shoe leather. Go out there and get the story. And then I was around for the fat days, too, which were in the '80s [and '90s]. And in some places there was money. Editors would take you out for lunch at fancy places. I was overpaid, I think, by *Time*.[21] All that's gone.

Dow: Have the poor and working class been eliminated from media consciousness? If journalists are part of the working class, should they have more of an obligation to write about this class and the working poor?

Ehrenreich: The people who would be best at that cannot take on the obligation if they can't feed themselves by doing so. And journalists who are privileged enough—I would say at this point in my life, I am—that's a responsibility. But I can't say that, for example, to a journalist we had with the Economic Hardship Reporting Project who was making his living in part by selling his plasma. He needs to write about these things, but I want him to eat.

Dow: What kind of counterculture exists in the US today? And are you hopeful about the future of this culture? How do you see your continuing role in it?

Ehrenreich: A counterculture, oh, God. The American counterculture that came out of the '70s and so forth has really been undercut by one basic thing—high finance/corporate America. It's hard to get a roof over your head without making all kinds of compromises. I don't see any visibly clear defendant of the counterculture I used to know. It's interesting—my son Ben has a huge circle of friends in Los Angeles, many of whom are writers or other kinds of fairly marginal people economically. And they are diverse: a lot of them are Latinos, a lot are from working-class backgrounds. It's different from the old counterculture—there's a huge interest in art and experimental things—and it's refreshing for me to be around those folks.

Dow: So, are you relatively optimistic?

Ehrenreich: No, I'm never optimistic. I don't know if you've read my book, *Bright-Sided?*[22]

Dow: Yes, I have.

Ehrenreich: My stance is not optimism. My stance is that the realities are really grim, yet we have to work hard. My stance is not that we will overcome and have a wonderful, fair, loving, kind world. It might not be possible, but I'll die trying.

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Notes

1. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Living with a Wild God: A Nonbeliever's Search for the Truth About Everything* (New York: Twelve Publishing, 2014).

2. *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001).

3. *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

4. *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream (*New York: Metropolitan Books, *2005).*

5. *Wild God*, 84.

6. *Bait and Switch*, 132.

7. *Nickel and Dimed*, 96–98.

8. *Wild God*, 207.

9. Ibid., 183.

10. Ibid., 195.

11. *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).

12. *Wild God*, 235.

13. Parul Sehgal, "Vision Quest," review of *Living with a Wild God*," by Barbara Ehrenreich, *New York Times*, April 25, 2014, Sunday Book Review, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/27/books/review/living-with-a-wild-god-by-barbara-ehrenreich.html?_r=0.

14. *Wild God*, 203.

15. Ibid., 3.

16. Ibid., 186.

17. Ruy Teixeira, quoted in Scott Sherman, "Class Warrior," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 2003, 41.

18. *Wild God*, 45.

19. Ibid., x.

20. Barbara Ehrenreich, "A License to Fight," convocation speech, Graduate School of Journalism, University of California at Berkeley, June 1, 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiiQPklLTWk.

21. Ibid. In her Berkeley convocation speech Ehrenreich told students and faculty that her best-ever writing gig was ten dollars a word for writing her *Time* magazine column in the '90s.

22. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009).