

What do we mean by “The Story?”

A Workshop

Fall 2012

For two classes next week, we’re going to have student presentations on the selection from Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed: On (not) Getting By in America* --the chapter called “Serving in Florida.” You will be assigned to one of the groups described below.

What are my goals for this exercise? Primarily, our goal together will be to tease out the different ways in which we use the word “story” when talking about a work of narrative journalism, so that we can see the work as

- a **process** rather than simply a “product” or text—that is, something produced and even negotiated on the ground;
- a matter of a reporter’s **selections** (e.g. which literary form to use, with whom to talk, how to research the matter); -and-
- **not an inevitable “reflection” of the real, but something that might have been contested even as it was made.** That is, maybe these dimensions of “the story” we’ll generate will “match up,” and maybe they won’t; maybe subjects *in* the story would disagree with what Ehrenreich reports on, or add to it; perhaps we will discover convergence points, or gaps or points of potential friction in how she approached her task or reporting on low-wage work and decided to write it up.

Groups should meet once outside of class before their presentation day, with email or Canvas posts to continue their discussions, if needed. Two speakers should be elected to present each group’s main findings. Feel free to email me as you go along. Here are our groups:

Group 1: The News Story Group

Group speakers should be prepared to talk for 10-15 minutes on what their group considers the “news content” of the story Ehrenreich’s chapter tells. That is, what is it telling its readers that they need to know--about American social life, the economy, today’s class structure, and so on? If you like, imagine yourself as the editor who gave Ehrenreich the assignment in the first place. Please remember, as well, that your task is *descriptive, not evaluative*. Don’t offer comments, right away, on what you felt about whether she met this task. Just describe the “story” in terms of its ostensible news content.

Group 2: The Story-Form Group

Group speakers should be prepared to talk for 10-15 minutes on what their group considers the “story form” that Ehrenreich’s chapter represents—that is, the literary

form into which she might be thought to “plug” her content. You might list the parts of the story that seem “literary” to you (e.g. “first person narration” or “how she uses dialogue” or doesn’t), and see if any parts remind you of fictional stories or genres you have encountered before, e.g. as an English major. (One hint: you might look up “the picaresque”). What is the style of the chapter, and in particular, what is Ehrenreich’s *persona*?—that is, if you thought of “Barb” as a “character,” what kind of character is she? Please remember, as well, that your task is *descriptive, not evaluative*. Don’t offer comments, right away, on what you felt about the way the story was told. Just describe it.

Group 3: The Subject-Story Group

Group speakers should be prepared to talk for 10-15 minutes on what their group might say about Ehrenreich’s chapter if they were some of the *subjects* of this chapter—that is, some of the workers it represents. That is, in this case, by “story” I mean the story such subjects might tell if Ehrenreich was not present, about their lives and their workplaces—as it were, their “story” in terms of “their viewpoint” or “the way they’d describe the world they live in.” Please begin with passages *in* this chapter (testimonies from such workers), but feel free to make educated guesses, as well, about what they might testify to.

Group 4: The “Story of How the Story was Made” Group

Group speakers should be prepared to talk for 10-15 minutes on what their group considers the reporter-techniques and methods that Ehrenreich’s chapter represents. That is, how did she go about reporting on this story—what strategies did she use? An obvious place to start here is thinking about “immersion” techniques, and the strategy of going “undercover.” But take things beyond that: where did Ehrenreich go; which kinds of jobs did she pick; to whom did she talk? Please remember, as well, that your task is *descriptive, not evaluative*. Don’t offer comments, right away, on what you felt about the way the story was told. Just describe it.

On next Wednesday, groups 1 and 3 will present. On Friday, groups 2 and 4 will present. This is, I should add, not a “debate.” It’s a collaborative process through which we can explore the “dimensionality” of works of narrative journalism.