

Suggested Discussion Questions for Matthew Desmond's *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*

1. Throughout *Evicted*, we learn how eviction essentially traps poor people in a cycle of poverty, how it makes securing future housing more difficult, can lead to a loss of a job, and have other damaging effects on families. Desmond argues that eviction is “a cause and not just a condition of poverty” (p. 299). What does he mean by this statement? When you think of causes of poverty, what comes to mind? Why are the poor disproportionately impacted by eviction, while the middle class are not?
2. Desmond discusses the connection between sub-standard housing, the high cost of rent, and health issues facing tenants and their families. How do housing conditions contribute to health issues? For example, Lorraine sometimes had to choose between paying her rent and filling her pain medication prescriptions (p. 42), and we learn that “suicides attributed to evictions and foreclosures doubled between 2005 and 2010, years when housing costs soared” (p. 298). What are other examples of health-related issues facing tenants in the book? How are children, in particular, at risk? (See *Notes*, p. 386-7). How do the landlords respond to these issues?
3. Desmond points out that landlords are often unwilling to rent to tenants with children: “Children didn’t shield families from eviction; they exposed them to it” (p. 287). How do children “expose” families to eviction? We learn that Arleen and her children moved about once a year, many times due to eviction (p. 100-101). What are the long-term consequences for children who don’t have stable housing? What are the consequences for Arleen’s children, Jori and Jafaris, in particular?
4. Desmond talks about how eviction impacts the lives of women (p. 98). More specifically, he describes the nuisance property ordinance which allows “police departments to penalize landlords for the behavior of their tenants.” In Milwaukee, if 911 is called three or more times in 30 days the property is designated a nuisance (p. 190). The third most common nuisance activity is domestic violence and regardless of the reason for the call, landlords are encouraged to evict the tenant of a property designated a nuisance. What issue is the nuisance law trying to address and what is the impact of the law? Who benefits from the nuisance law? Does the nuisance law perpetuate the cycle of violence? How else are women impacted by eviction?
5. While Vanetta and Crystal are looking for an apartment, they ask a landlord if he has any with bathtubs. The landlord begins to tell them about another apartment and then pretends to pick up a phone call and tells them that the apartment is rented (p. 249). Desmond goes back to the same apartment the next day, presents himself as having the same amount of income and children as Crystal and Vanetta, and he tells the landlord that he would like a unit with a tub. The landlord tells

him about the other unit and even drives him there. Is Desmond privileged because of his gender and race? Where else do we see examples of preferential treatment?

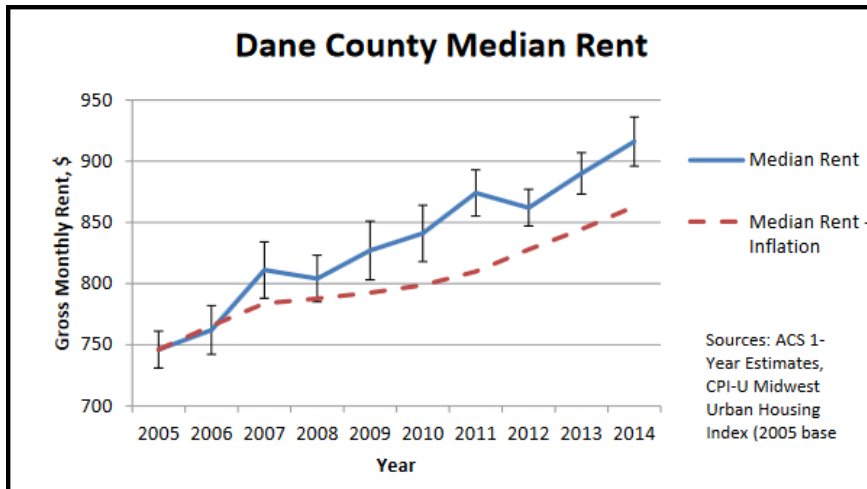
6. Describing the city's continually reinforced segregation, Desmond notes "Most Milwaukeeans believed their city was racially segregated because people preferred it that way. But the ghetto had always been more a product of social design than desire" (p. 249). Who or what are the "designers" or forces that keep Milwaukee segregated? How do the neighborhoods that the book's characters live in—whether by choice or by necessity—reinforce their racial and class identities? How do these forces impact Pam's experience (see p. 236), and Vanetta and Crystal's experience (see p. 249) looking for a new apartment? How does their racial identity restrict their choices, and how does it afford them privilege?
7. Desmond reflects on his description of the project at the end of the book: "I wanted to try to write a book about poverty that didn't focus exclusively on poor people or poor places. Poverty was a relationship, I thought, involving poor and rich people alike... This sent me searching for a process that bound poor and rich people together in mutual dependence and struggle. Eviction was such a process" (p. 317). How does eviction bind rich and poor people together? How does the relationship between rich and poor compare to the relationship between landlord and tenant? What are some ways that tenants and landlords in *Evicted* benefit and struggle due to their roles? On a larger scale, are there organizations or government programs mentioned in *Evicted* that enforce or challenge this mutual dependence?
8. Desmond points out that, compared to wealthier areas, residents in poorer neighborhoods are much more likely to help their neighbors. Tenants support one another in times of dire need by helping with bills or buying groceries, but not without judgment or shaming. Desmond writes, "For such vital exchanges to take place, residents had to make their needs known and acknowledge their failures" (p. 181). Neighbors console and prevent a tenant from harming herself when Child Protective Services takes her children away, although one resident still remarks, "It ain't nothing to be proud of... But the Lord took 'em for some reason" (p. 181). Desmond notes that trailer park residents often feel "evictions were deserved, understood to be the outcome of individual failure" (p. 179). How does this revelation compare to Desmond's description of the frequent protests against evictions and unsanitary conditions in the early twentieth century, when "renters opposed landlords and saw themselves as a class with shared interests and a unified purpose" (p. 180)? What changed so drastically in the last hundred or so years, and why?
9. Though Sherrena's and Tobin's tenants struggle to pay their rent, the landlords both have an estimated net worth of approximately \$2 million. Sherrena remarks, "The 'hood is good. There's a lot of money there" (p. 152). Similarly, Desmond notes of Tobin, "The annual income of the landlord of perhaps the worst trailer park in the fourth-poorest city in America is 30 times that of his tenants working full-time for minimum wage, and 55 times the annual income of his tenants receiving welfare or SSI. There are two freedoms at odds with each other: the freedom to profit from rents and the freedom to live in a safe and affordable home" (p. 308). Do you see these freedoms being affirmed or denied in *Evicted*? Where is the line between running a profitable business and exploitation? On which side of that line do you see Sherrena and Tobin?

10. Ruminating on the reasons for Lorraine's purchase of lobster with food stamps, Desmond reflects that "it was not because her benefits left her with so much but because they left her with so little" (p. 219). Even with austere personal budgets and self-control, Desmond contends that for those at the bottom, pulling oneself up by the bootstraps is practically impossible. After learning about the characters in *Evicted*, do you think individuals get stuck in a cycle of poverty due to a "poverty mentality"—they are poor because they throw money away, or—as Desmond suggests—they throw money away because they are poor? Did this chapter challenge or reaffirm your previously held beliefs about people living in poverty?

11. In the Epilogue, Desmond describes the affordable housing crisis more broadly and says that it is "driving poor families to financial ruin and even starting to engulf families with moderate incomes" (p. 303). Desmond also says "the right to a decent home is part of what it means to be an American" (p. 300). What does Desmond mean by this statement and does it extend to owning a home? Are there any parallels between those who are evicted and those who lost their homes during the recent housing crisis? Are evictions and foreclosures part of the same system that keep people from opportunities or are they distinct and separate issues?

12. Throughout the book, there are notes of tension between the omniscient, impartial lens implied by the use of third person narrative, and the very real human suffering the author is bearing witness to. By utilizing third person, Desmond attempts to minimize the role of the author in the story, which he feels distracts from the primary focus of the book: the rampant inequality in the U.S. housing system. And yet, while Desmond made every attempt to construct an impartial, impeccably researched account of this systemic issue, as an author he made conscious choices to include and exclude particular details. Given that Sherrena and Tobin have approximately the same net worth (see p. 152, p. 175), it is notable that the ways Sherrena spends her money are carefully accounted for—gambling at a casino, hair braids in Jamaica, a matching purse and fur-lined Coach boots, her lipstick-red Camaro, while descriptions of how Tobin spends his wealth—beyond his Cadillac—are absent. How does Desmond's portrayal of Sherrena—an African American, female landlord, contrast with his portrayal of Tobin—a white, male landlord? How does the inclusion of these details influence the reader's assessment of these two landlords?

13. Approximately 20,000 people are homeless in Wisconsin on any given night and the number continues to rise, despite a decrease in homelessness nationwide (Wisconsin Coalition Against Homelessness, 2016). Furthermore, more than 12,000 low-income households able to secure housing in Dane County spend more than 50% of their income on rent. Between 16,000 and 31,000 affordable housing units are currently needed, with a forecasted 648 to 1209 units needed each year for the next 26 years (Paulsen, 2015). The figures below from the recently published *Regional Trends in Population and Housing* show that rent in the area is increasing faster than the rate of inflation (Figure 1) and that vacancy rates are decreasing (Figure 2). Were you aware of the increase in homelessness and cost-burdened rental households in Wisconsin? Why do you think the numbers are rising in our state, but decreasing in other states? How is this problem being addressed in Madison? After reading *Evicted* and learning about how poverty is affecting Wisconsin residents, are you compelled to take action to address the problem in your community, and if so, what would that action look like?



“According to the American Community Survey, median rent [in Dane County] was around \$750 per month in 2005 and had risen to \$916 in 2014, much faster than the rate of average urban housing inflation in the Midwest.”

Regional Trends in Population and Housing, p.15

Figure 1. Increase in Dane County median rent, 2005-2014. Reprinted from *Regional Trends in Population and Housing, May 2016*, Capitol Area Regional Planning Commission, Dane County, WI.

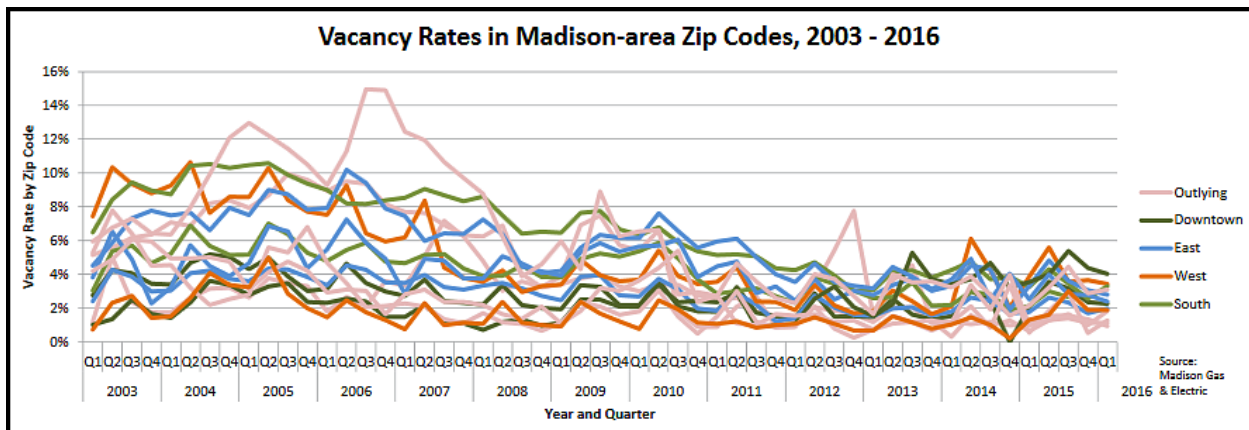


Figure 2. Decrease in Madison vacancy rates, 2003-2015. Reprinted from *Regional Trends in Population and Housing, May 2016*, Capitol Area Regional Planning Commission, Dane County, WI.

Works Cited

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NOTE: A Teacher's Guide, including a list of characters, is available on the Penguin Random House website: <http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/247816/evicted-by-matthew-desmond/9780553447439/teachers-guide/>

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