

Secular Women of the Triangle Book Club Discussion Questions

Poverty, by America by Matthew Desmond

Discussion Questions

1. Desmond shares a lot of facts and statistics related to poverty. Are there any that stood out to you or were particularly surprising? Were there any passages that were uncomfortable for you to read? 2. In the prologue, Desmond says that he “began paying attention to poverty when [he] was a child” and that at the time he mostly blamed his dad for their family’s poverty.
 - a. When did you first start “paying attention to poverty”? Were there any specific moments or events in your life that made you aware of this class divide?
 - b. Like child Desmond blaming his dad for what he later realized stemmed from larger, societal problems, has your view of poverty changed as you’ve gotten older? If so, how?
3. If you come from a religious background, what messages did your faith teach about poverty or wealth? Were you ever exposed to ideas like the prosperity gospel, and if so, how did that shape your views? How has your mindset around poverty and wealth changed since you left the faith?
 - a. Many faiths emphasize charity. What did that look like for you? How did your faith community frame who is worthy of support? In what ways did your religious background shape how you think about giving to those who are in need? Has this book changed what you see as your personal responsibility?
4. Desmond states that “young people are commonly told that they can avoid poverty in America by following three simple steps: graduate from high school, obtain a full-time job, and wait until they get married to have children.”
 - a. Were you given this (or similar) advice as a child? How did you feel about the advice at the time? What advice would you give kids today on how to avoid poverty?
5. Desmond points out that while we often associate “welfare” with programs like food stamps or Social Security, we don’t usually apply the same label— or stigma— to benefits like the Earned Income Tax Credit or mortgage interest deductions.
 - a. Before reading the book, how did you understand or feel about welfare programs? Has the book shifted your perspective in any way?
6. Throughout the book, Desmond often draws a clear distinction between the privileged and the poor. Do you think this line is as clear in the real world? Are there different ways or different times when you or someone you know has been in between categories or shifted categories?
7. In Chapter 8, Desmond states that “poverty in America is not simply the result of actions taken by Congress and corporate boards but the millions of decisions we make each day when going about our business.” Do you agree with this sentiment? Where do you think the majority of responsibility for poverty— and fixing it— in America lies? What do you think the best actions are to overturn poverty?
8. Do you look at your community differently after reading this book? In what ways? Desmond talks about the “walls” that we build up to keep some people poor and others rich. Do you see those dynamics at work in your community? If so, what are they and what could we do about it?
9. Desmond quotes James Baldwin’s 1961 remark: It’s “extremely expensive to be poor.” In what ways did this book help you understand how costly poverty can be – not just financially, but in other areas of life as well?
10. Have you ever thought of ways that you might benefit from the poor’s struggles? Were you challenged to make any changes after reading this book?
 - a. Desmond implores everyone to become “poverty abolitionists”. What do you think that you can

do in your life or that Secular Women of the Triangle can do as a group to become poverty abolitionists?