Book Review: Matthew Desmond, Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City

Jacob Bruggeman
Miami University, bruggej2@miamioh.edu
In his new book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, Harvard’s Matthew Desmond details destitution in Milwaukee’s poorest neighborhoods. Based on years of fieldwork, *Evicted* is a true-to-reality, tear-jerking ethnography that leaves its readers with a sense of hopelessness in the face of a seemingly broken housing system, but also a compelling urge to act. The ethnographic element of *Evicted* grows out of Desmond’s ability to capture real stories, real sentiments, and real struggles. Desmond does these things exactly through telling the stories of several Milwaukee families and their landlords, in whose hands their fates all too often rested. The families’ stories run parallel to the stories of two landlords, Sherrena and Tobin, the former an inner-city “entrepreneur,” the latter an owner of an unbelievably dilapidated trailer park. Though there are many commonalities between the families’ experiences, one in particular prevails in sadness—that is, the relationship between unlivable conditions in houses and tenants’ pleas to their landlords to fix them. In one case examined by Desmond, Ruby and Patrice, two of Sherrena’s renters, would often call about their pipes getting stopped up: “The sink was the first thing to get stopped up,” leading to the family washing their kitchenware in the bathtub, “and pretty soon concrete-colored water was collecting in the bathtub too” (72). Each time after using the toilet—the only semi-reliable way for the family to dispose of water—to dump stove-boiled water used for bathing, it would take about five minutes of “plung[ing] hard” to drain the water (72). Sherrena, in the business only for profit (so much so that Sherrena declares ‘the ’hood is good’), did nothing to address Rudy’s and Patrice’s drainage issues.

Stories like this one make *Evicted* a painfully gripping work, one that reports on the kind of grinding poverty that convulses far too many American cities; the kind of inescapable destitution that has come to characterize poverty in the United States. Aside from the Ruby and Patrice, Desmond follows families and individuals whose housing options are, at best, unimaginable for the middle-class American, and, at worst, genuinely uninhabitable. Indeed, Desmond’s descriptions of Tobin’s trailer park demonstrate almost cesspool-like conditions, clearly a result of the landlord’s savage, unyielding, orientation toward profit. These families and individuals live through abysmal situations—such as constantly clogging pipes—all the same, but at what cost? And why? Desmond poses questions such as these through chronicling the cycle of evictions and general housing struggles his protagonists go through, calling the reader’s attention to “A geography of advantage and disadvantage” in the modern American city (89). This geography is one of unmet expectations, and, in a broader sense, the dichotomy of expectations versus reality, for policy makers, the general public, and those stuck in grinding poverty is a theme, or thrust, of Desmond’s work. Indeed, when it comes to poverty policies, both public and private, the frequency with which well-intended efforts—along with politicians'
and policepersons’ persistent, astounding failure to realize the gap between predicted outcomes and actual outcomes—miss the mark is dumbfounding, and Desmond attempts to make his readers aware of this. In the end, this book is a call to reform poverty policies that still do not put housing first in the solution, and, perhaps more importantly, an exposé of the often sinister and ceaselessly cyclical exploitation of the poorest people in American cities.

JACOB BRUGGEMAN is an honors student in his third year at Miami University with majors in history and political science, and a combined BA – MA program in political science. Jacob was recently honored for his research as one of fifteen national recipients of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History’s 2017-2018 History Scholar awards.