

Surviving in a Material World: The Lived Experience of People in Poverty

Ronald Paul Hill

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“Approximately 12 percent of the population in this country lives in poverty, totaling about 32 million Americans.” One in five young people lives without access to life’s basic necessities like sufficient food, rent, or health care. Worldwide, statistics are equally appalling. Approximately one-third of the developing world subsists on less than one dollar a day.

In his narrative examination of different types of poverty, author Ronald Paul Hill seeks to enlighten readers to look beyond stereotypical perceptions of impoverished populations and the causes for their plights. Hill personalizes the poverty experience in his collection of vignettes where fictional characters represent actual people and situations. A homeless man is ostracized by his family; a family on an insufficient and stigmatizing welfare budget battles the system; an Appalachian family tries to obtain health care in rural, poor America; an Aboriginal people are estranged from their indigenous roots; a young car thief attempts to survive in mainstream society. Each chapter is preceded by a provocative commentary on the factors leading to poverty and homelessness. “God forbid you ever had to walk a mile in his shoes, ‘Cause then you really might know what it is like to sing the blues.”

Each account illustrates the book’s title by depicting the forced resourcefulness and communal solidarity of the homeless. The book’s format may diffuse its message by presenting so many different types of poverty, but the specificity compensates for any shortfalls. Christmas presents are precious underwear and socks, birthday parties are fantasies, dinner out is an ironically named Happy Meal at McDonald’s. Ever important in this realm of the immaterial are churches and shantytowns, prayer groups, and kin. Keepsake mementos, such as photos, have new value as alienation from mainstream consumerism pervades. Survival strategies like scavenging for car parts and salable building materials, “dumpster diving,” and navigating social service agencies, finding transportation, and mediating cultures all prove the resilience and tenacity of the human spirit. Jack finds a warm breakfast and welcome in a shantytown; Zoë, in the benevolence of nuns running a private shelter. Mary returns to her Aboriginal roots to revive a lost ethnic pride, and Fast Eddie learns that there is a life beyond the thrills of stealing cars, sex, and drugs.

The book is cautiously hopeful, aware of current short-term “solutions” to these complex social issues. It is a call to action in a world where so few have so much, and so many, so little.

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