

Discussion Questions: Evicted by Matthew Desmond

1. Have you ever been evicted or do you know anyone who has? If the answer is yes, what was your/their experience like, and how has it affected your/their life?
2. What was your experience reading *Evicted*? Were you surprised by what you learned? Was any particular scene or character's story emotionally painful for you to witness?
3. Many people have very codified perceptions of "people who get evicted" and suspect that those people are largely responsible—through bad decision making—for their circumstances. Did you feel this way before reading *Evicted*? Why or why not? Did your opinions change after reading the book? If so, how?
4. In *Evicted*, author Matthew Desmond takes a narrative approach to an important topic and follows the stories of several real people. Which person's story were you most drawn to and why?
5. Sherrrena Tarver claimed to have found her calling as an inner-city entrepreneur, stating, "The 'hood is good. There's a lot of money there" (page 152). How did Sherrrena profit from being a landlord in poor communities? Do you think her profits were justified? What responsibilities do landlords have when renting their property? What risks do they take? Do you sympathize with Sherrrena or not?
6. On Lorraine and her late boyfriend Glen's anniversary, she spends her monthly allocation of food stamps on "two lobster tails, shrimp, king crab legs, salad, and lemon meringue pie" (page 218). Can you relate to her decision? How might you have judged her differently without knowing the backstory that Desmond provides?
7. Because they have children, Arleen, Vanetta, and Pam and Ned frequently find themselves shut out of available housing and resort to lies in order to secure a place to live. Are these lies justified? If you have children, how far would you go to shelter your family?
8. Although eviction is the central issue in *Evicted*, affordable housing interacts intimately with many other social issues. For example: Do parents who have trouble finding/providing safe housing for their children deserve to have their children taken away and put in foster care? Would affordable housing make it easier for addicts and recovering addicts (such as Scott) to enroll in programs that increase chances of rehabilitation? What other major issues can you think of that eviction affects, whether in this book or in the world in general?
9. How does race factor into the types of struggles faced by the individuals profiled in *Evicted*? What about being a woman? Or a single parent?
10. Did reading *Evicted* inspire you to want to help others in positions similar to those of the people in the book? If so, how do you think you might get involved? (Hint: Visit JustShelter.org to learn more about groups and organizations in your local area who are already fighting the good fight!)
11. Why do you think Crystal made the decision to let Arleen and her sons stay until they found another residence? How did tenants such as Crystal and Arleen rely on friends and extended kin networks to get by? Did this do anything to lift them out of poverty or distress? What limitations do these short-term relationships have? Why do you think agencies such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children seek to limit kin dependence?
12. Landlords repeatedly turned down Pam and Ned's rental applications because they have children. Why? Do you think families with children should have any protection when seeking housing? Why do you think families with children were not considered a protected class when Congress passed the Fair Housing Act in 1968? Do you think it is fair for landlords to charge tenants with children monthly surcharges and children-damage deposits? Why or why not?
13. Why did Doreen choose not to call Sherrrena when the house was in desperate need of repair? Do you agree that "The house failed the tenants, and the tenants failed the house" (page 256)? What effects does living in a home that is not decent or functional have on a person's psychological and emotional health?
14. Do you think housing should be a right in America?
15. Many Americans still believe that the typical low-income family lives in public housing. Unfortunately, the opposite is true; only 1 in 4 families who qualify for any kind of housing assistance receive it. In *Evicted*, Desmond proposes a universal housing voucher program. What do you think of that idea?
16. The government spends much more money on homeowner tax benefits for affluent families than on housing assistance to poor families. Is this situation justified? How would you address this issue?