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BOOK REVIEW

Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City

Sharon A. Pocock, reviewer

Direct Observer but Self-Effacing Narrator

The Power of Third-Person Narration

Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City

Matthew Desmond (Crown Publishers 2016), 418 pages

Sharon A. Pocock, rev'r*

Writers in fields other than language and communication are often well aware of the effects of different narrative stances. In *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, sociologist Matthew Desmond gives the reader an up-close look at the processes and consequences of eviction in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, through the stories of eight families. Desmond relates the stories of a number of low-income renters experiencing precarious housing stability in a North Side, largely Black neighborhood and a South Side, largely White trailer park, and of landlords earning their livelihood by acquiring and managing properties rented to those who live in poverty. While telling the stories of a handful of tenants and landlords, the study at the same time examines the societal and individual circumstances leading to evictions, the legal and less formal processes of eviction that both landlords and renters undergo, and the long- and short-term consequences of eviction on adults, children, and families. As the stories of the various renters illustrate, losing a home and being obliged to move from one place to another makes them into refugees from their lives.

The impact of the book stems in large measure from its narrative stance. Although a very short opening Author's Note indicates that virtually all the events that occurred were "witnessed firsthand,"¹ there is little more about who witnessed those events until the lengthier ending

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1 MATTHEW DESMOND, *EVICTED: POVERTY AND PROFIT IN THE AMERICAN CITY* xi (2016).

note, “About This Project.” This detailed final note explains that Desmond, a sociologist, lived for several months, from May 2008 to December 2009, in the two areas of Milwaukee that were the locales of his research. He observed the lives of the individuals presented in the book and interacted with them on a daily basis. Yet because Desmond made the choice to recount the events he observed as a third-person narrator, the issues, as well as the experiences of both tenants and landlords, remain front and center on every page.

In his endnote, Desmond explains the genesis of his study: he wished to study poverty. “Poverty was a relationship, I thought, involving poor and rich people alike. To understand poverty, I needed to understand that relationship. This sent me searching for a process that bound poor and rich people together in mutual dependence and struggle. Eviction was such a process.”²

Desmond recounts how he lived as “a full-time fieldworker”³ for several months in, first, a rundown trailer park and then a low-income North Side Milwaukee neighborhood, where he shadowed landlords as they “bought property, screened tenants, unclogged sewer pipes, and delivered eviction notices.”⁴ He also spent time with tenants and others he met through them. “I sat beside tenants at eviction court, helped them move, followed them into shelters and abandoned houses, watched their children, fought with them, and slept at their houses. I attended church with them, as well as counseling sessions, AA meetings, funerals, and births.”⁵ As a fieldworker, Desmond used a digital recorder, running constantly, and took notes as well.⁶

In his endnote, Desmond acknowledges his conscious decision to remove himself from the stories and experiences he relates:

Ethnography recently has come to be written almost exclusively in the first person. It is a straightforward way of writing and an effective one The first person has become the chosen mule for this task. *I was there. I saw it happen. And because I saw it happen, you can believe it happened.*⁷

Because Desmond realized the disadvantages of the first-person narrator for the report of his study, he eschewed this narrative choice:

2 *Id.* at 317.

3 *Id.* at 326.

4 *Id.* at 320.

5 *Id.* at 321.

6 *Id.* at 326.

7 *Id.* at 334.

[I]t may be the least well-suited vehicle for capturing the essence of a social world because the “I” filters all. With first-person narration, the subjects and the author are each always held in view, resulting in every observation being trailed by a reaction to the observer. No matter how much care the author takes, the first-person ethnography becomes just as much about the fieldworker as about anything she or he saw.⁸

Through Desmond’s third-person narration, the reader observes and experiences directly the incidents recounted to meet and understand the individuals at the heart of Desmond’s work. The book opens by focusing on a single mother, Arleen, and her two young sons. In three short paragraphs, it recounts an incident that shows how easily families living at the poverty level can lose the roof over their heads. The prologue tells how the two boys, playing outside on a January day, throw snowballs at passing cars. One driver does not continue on his way after one such snowball hits his car but jumps out and chases the boys to their door. The man breaks down the door with a few hard kicks and then simply leaves. The incident, however, results in the decision of Arleen’s landlord to evict Arleen and her two sons from the apartment where they had been living for a scant eight months.⁹

Thus begins an odyssey for Arleen’s family—not homeward, but toward any roof that they can afford. They go first to a homeless shelter for several months, and next to a rental house for several weeks until the city declares the house unfit for human habitation and puts the family out. The family then finds an apartment for four months in an area known for drug-dealing, which causes Arleen concern for her sons’ safety and prompts her continued search for affordable shelter. Arleen finally is able to find and rent a bottom duplex unit owned by Sherrena, one of the landlords whom Desmond shadows. While the unit has a hole in the living room window, a makeshift lock for the front door, and a filthy carpet, it represents a desirable home to Arleen, where she hopes that they will be able to stay through summer and perhaps even winter.¹⁰

In writing, Desmond “prioritized firsthand observation,” relating what he saw and experienced but also checking minutely those events that he did not himself witness.¹¹ But this study is not based solely on the observation of a small number of individuals. After his sojourns in the two

8 *Id.*

9 *Id.* at 1–2.

10 *Id.* at 2–3.

11 *Id.* at 326.

rental neighborhoods of Milwaukee, Desmond oversaw a renters study in Milwaukee, in which some 1,100 renters were interviewed from 2009 to 2011; another study that examined court records for all eviction cases in Milwaukee from 2003 to 2013; and an in-person survey of 250 tenants appearing in Milwaukee eviction court during a six-week period in early 2011.¹²

The abstract data and the experiences of the individuals studied reinforce each other to communicate the ideas that Desmond emphasizes: those living in poverty who must seek housing in the private sector spend an inordinate amount of their very small incomes on substandard housing, which limits their ability to meet other essential life needs; women with small children are the most likely to face both formal and informal evictions; and the lack of a home and the stability it represents takes a toll on adults and children in a far-reaching manner in their lives. The book is not only compelling to read but also provides information and insight into a key aspect of poverty in current-day urban America. The impact of this study results in good part from Desmond's conscious choice to focus the narrative not on himself and his reactions as observer, but rather, through third-person narration, on the lives of the tenants and landlords that he encountered.

12 *Id.* at 329–32.