

THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

## The Great Expectations of Matthew Desmond

By Marc Parry | FEBRUARY 24, 2016



Scott Brauer for The Chronicle

Matthew Desmond hopes to bring a fresh approach to the study of poverty by focusing on the trauma of eviction. "Before this work I didn't know how bad it was," he says. "I don't think a lot of us know the state of poverty today."

The selling of sociology's next great hope began with a long talk between a literary agent and her potential client. Jill Kneerim was a veteran dealmaker known for helping Boston-area academics publish trade books. She'd done it for Stephen Greenblatt, shepherding the Harvard Shakespearean's *Will in the World* (W.W. Norton) onto the bestseller list. She'd done it for Caroline Elkins, also of Harvard, whose history of colonialism in Kenya, *Imperial Reckoning* (Henry Holt and Company), won the Pulitzer Prize.

Now here was Matthew Desmond, an urban ethnographer eager to fight poverty. Another Cambridge star paying a visit to her office near Boston's North Station.

By the time they sat down to chat in 2013, Desmond had already established the kind of fairy-tale career that prompts grad students to sigh with jealousy. Harvard had appointed him to its Society of Fellows. The University of Chicago Press had

published a book based on his master's thesis. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation had awarded him about \$500,000 in grants. *The New York Times* had covered his research.

## Sociology and Poverty



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But Desmond was chasing bigger things. For years, the sociologist had been honing a fresh approach to the study of poverty. Social scientists and journalists, he felt, treated the poor as if they were walled off from the rest of the world. Books about this "other America" focused on single mothers, or gang members, or

homeless people. To Desmond, poverty was a relationship, one that brought together the rich and the poor. The way to understand it was to find some process that exposed those ties.

Desmond chose eviction. In 2008, as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, he moved into a Milwaukee trailer park. From that perch he began to immerse himself in the lives of landlords and tenants. He emerged with both individual tales of struggle and macro-level data that revealed just how common eviction had become for the urban poor. If incarceration shaped the lives of men from poor black neighborhoods, he discovered, eviction was now the equivalent for impoverished African-American women.

As Kneerim got to know Desmond, eventually signing him as a client, she grew increasingly excited. In her experience, big-thinking social reformers were rarely good writers. But Desmond produced the kind of spare, intimate prose that could make editors weep. She decided to cast a wide net. In April of 2014, she sent his proposal to 17 editors at as many publishing imprints. Her submission letter promised that the book, a narrative about eight families facing eviction, would read like the award-winning "*Random Family* with the authority of a William Julius Wilson."

The reaction was swift. Fifteen publishers bid on the proposal. The project so riveted Crown's Amanda Cook — a Boston-based editor who works with Erik Larson and Rebecca Skloot — that she jumped at the chance to meet Desmond in Cambridge before he made the rounds of publishers' offices in New York. "I felt like it was an entirely new lens on poverty and inequality," Cook says. "We've been hearing about jobs, and education, and the criminal-justice system, all of which clearly play a role. But reading Matt's proposal, I just began to see housing as the very heart of the problem."

Cook's enthusiasm helped Crown prevail in the auction for Desmond's book, called *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. Nobody involved in the deal will say how much the publisher paid. But two editors from presses that failed to acquire *Evicted* put the amount in the upper six figures. That's an astonishing sum in a field where a veteran ethnographer might be grateful for a four-figure advance. And expectations for the book only intensified last September, when the MacArthur Foundation awarded Desmond a "genius grant."

"That's a lot of pressure," Kathryn Edin, a friend of Desmond's who is a poverty scholar at the Johns Hopkins University, says of the book deal. "It could beg criticism. When people expect so much out of something, anything that's less than perfect could disappoint."

Adding to the pressure: The last sociologist to generate this kind of excitement, Alice Goffman, ended up provoking a backlash — a clash over ethics, methods, and accuracy that roiled the field. Will the public read Desmond's book more skeptically as a result?

**E***victed*, which hits stores on March 1, will change Desmond's life. You can expect to see his blue-eyed, ruddy-complexioned face everywhere: profiles, lectures, book reviews. (In a review scheduled to run in Sunday's *New York Times* — the newspaper's third article on Desmond in just over one week — Barbara Ehrenreich describes *Evicted* as an "astonishing" book that sets "a new standard for reporting on poverty.") But on a recent Wednesday morning, the not-quite-famous scholar is trying to capture a different audience: Harvard undergraduates. It's just past 11 a.m., and 80 or so students have filed into a basement auditorium in William James Hall for Sociology 177, his twice-weekly class on American poverty. The lecture offers a glimpse of what's to come as Desmond barnstorms the country. It's a journey, in words and images, to the streets of Milwaukee.

It begins with questions that have long concerned sociologists. "How do the poor survive?" asks Desmond, 36, an associate professor of sociology and social studies. "When they get clothing and food and stable housing, how is it that they obtain these things? How do they endure common crises, like eviction, or the incarceration of a breadwinner?"

Desmond's path to these questions began with the shock of his own undergraduate education. A preacher's son, he grew up in the small town of Winslow, Ariz. His was a childhood out of Norman Rockwell: football, Boy Scouts, hunting and fishing. His parents had little money. But they believed in social mobility. If they drove past menial laborers, Desmond writes, his father would face him and say, "Do you want to do that for the rest of your life?" He did not. "Then go to college."

When he went away to Arizona State University, though, he began to learn facts about America that didn't jibe with the story he'd been told back home. It was basic stuff. The persistent evidence of racial discrimination. The prevalence of destitution. But he found it mind-blowing. Poverty, he felt, was unnecessary and morally outrageous.



Michael Kienitz

Members of a family watch their belongings being loaded into a truck as they are evicted from an apartment in Milwaukee, the city where Matthew Desmond began studying the complex interplay

Just about this moment, a bank foreclosed on his childhood home. Desmond helped his family move. The experience, he writes, shamed and depressed him. Back at Arizona State, he started spending weekends building houses with Habitat for Humanity and nights getting to know Tempe's homeless population. He wanted to understand poverty. After graduation, he enrolled in the only sociology Ph.D.

between housing insecurity and poverty.

program that accepted him: University of Wisconsin.

In Madison, Desmond fell under the sway of Mustafa Emirbayer, a social theorist whose ideas shaped his decision to study eviction. One day, while reading the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Desmond learned of a dilapidated trailer park on the far south side of town that was in danger of being shut down. It was a potential mass eviction. It seemed like a good place to begin his fieldwork, so he rented a trailer. He lived in the impoverished white area for several months, getting to know the trailer park's tenants, landlord, and manager. Then he moved to a rooming house in a poor black neighborhood on the north side.

That's where he began to spend time with Sherrena Tarver, a tiny woman with brown skin and a booming laugh whose business career drives home one of the central themes of Desmond's research: exploitation. Sherrena (a pseudonym, like all landlord and tenant names in *Evicted*) was an elementary-school teacher who had reinvented herself as an inner-city landlord. Desmond rode along in her '93 Suburban as she went about the daily grind of buying properties, repairing units, screening renters, evicting tenants, and attending court. The more time he spent with landlords like her, the more he came to understand that certain aspects unique to poor areas made them lucrative opportunities.

Landlording in the inner city paid well for the same reason that owning a home there was a poor investment: depressed home values. A comparable property might be worth two or three times more in a middle-class white area. But rents in the richer neighborhood weren't all that much higher, Desmond discovered. For example, a two-bedroom unit in suburban Wauwatosa could command about \$750, while a similar place in the inner city rented for \$550. The Wauwatosa property, however, came with lots more expenses: higher tax and mortgage payments, plus greater maintenance standards. It was tough to match the return on investment of owning in a poor area. Over the years, Sherrena had acquired

three dozen inner-city units, all occupied by impoverished tenants. She calculated her net worth to be about \$2 million.

"The 'hood is good," she liked to say. "There's a lot of money there."

But many poor tenants found the rents out of reach. The housing odyssey of Arleen, a focal point of Desmond's research, was a good example. In January of 2008, the snowiest Milwaukee winter on record, her 13-year-old son Jori tossed a snowball at a car. A man hopped out. Jori ran into his apartment. The man kicked in the door. Nothing else happened, but when Arleen's landlord learned about the damage, she evicted the single mother and her two sons. Arleen eventually rented a two-bedroom apartment from Sherrena in one of the worst parts of Milwaukee. The \$550-a-month rent (utilities not included) amounted to 88 percent of her \$628 welfare check, an impossible sum.

What resulted was a system that functioned a bit like college tuition, with its disparity between "sticker" and actual prices. A landlord might let a tenant move in for partial payment. It was a kind of bargain. The landlord got the ability to be slow with repairs. The tenant got a house. But that state of always being in arrears stripped tenants of legal protections. It meant they couldn't call a building inspector without fearing eviction — not because retaliating against the call was legal, but because evicting for nonpayment was. And Desmond saw that many landlords found it cheaper to contend with evictions than to keep up their properties.

As Desmond pieced together the workings of this market, he needed answers to fundamental questions. How common was eviction? Whom did it affect? What were its long-term consequences? He was perplexed to find no readily available data.

So he gathered it himself. Backed by the MacArthur Foundation, he began a series of studies that formed a bigger picture of housing and poverty. Between 2009 and 2011, he found, more than one in eight Milwaukee renters endured a forced move. Eviction was a blemish that led many landlords to refuse to rent to families. It excluded them from certain housing aid. It drove them into dangerous homes. It compromised their job performance. It affected their mental health.

Back in his Harvard class, Desmond cues an image on the screen behind his lectern: a close-up of two hands against a black background. This is the cover of *All Our Kin*, the 1974 book by Carol Stack that offered an influential answer to his opening question: How do the poor survive?

What kept poor African-Americans above water, Stack argued, was a dense network of family and friends. But that's not what Desmond saw in Milwaukee. The family bonds in poor communities had eroded, worn away by forces like the crack epidemic, the expansion of prisons, and the emergence of the black middle class. For a variety of reasons — poor relatives were in no shape to lend a hand, and better-off ones either didn't want to help or didn't know how — the tenants Desmond met often did not rely on relatives to meet their urgent needs.

Instead, they depended heavily on what Desmond calls "disposable ties." The concept, another major insight from his field work, refers to short-term relationships among new acquaintances who might move in together, pool their money, and mind each other's kids. Desmond illustrates it with the story of what happened to Arleen after Sherrena eventually moved to evict her. One day, as Arleen was preparing to leave her apartment, Sherrena came by to show the place to an 18-year-old named Crystal, who would become the new tenant.

"Where you gonna go?" Crystal asked, as Desmond relays the exchange.

"I don't know," said Arleen, who didn't have anywhere to go.

"If you want to," Crystal said, "you and your kids can stay here until you find a place."

Based on Crystal's appearance and the few facts she could pick up from their short conversation — Crystal spoke tenderly, and mentioned attending church — Arleen accepted the offer on the spot.

When Desmond invites questions, a student puts him on the spot.

"Your relationship with your informants," the student asks, "are they a kind of disposable relationship?"

**I**n his sixth-floor office, which overlooks the Boston skyline, Desmond comes off less like an academic and more like a street-smart minister. He's curious and quick to intimacy, with a warm smile that spreads crow's feet by his eyes. But he can also be a wary conversationalist. Two subjects threaten to distract attention from Desmond's "21st-century *How the Other Half Lives*" — as one early reviewer has already labeled *Evicted* — and he is reluctant to discuss either of them.

The first is his blockbuster book deal. He can't seem to even say the word "money," referring instead to his "nontrivial deal" or "this unexpected response to the book." He was so new to the process that he went to an ethnography conference in New York just as the auction of his book was coming to a head in 2014, because he didn't think choosing a publisher would take much time or thought. Now he's wrestling with the right way to spend the windfall he reaped from a book about poverty.

"I've lost sleep over this," he says. "The irony is huge."

To the student's question about whether his Milwaukee relationships are disposable, his answer is no. Not only has he stayed in touch with many of his

informants, attending events like births and funerals, he also plans to put some of his book's proceeds toward helping them. What's more, he wants to assist the millions of other Americans in a similar boat. Working with a team of students, Desmond is building a website, [justshelter.org](http://justshelter.org), that will act as a clearinghouse for readers who want to learn about the housing crisis and help evicted families. It will map the locations of housing groups across the country and allow readers to upload their own eviction stories.

Those stories are what Desmond really wants to talk about. As he sees it, America is ready for a different conversation about poverty. He finds evidence of that in the momentum around once-intractable issues like the minimum wage and criminal-justice reform. Or look at the recent books that have resonated so widely: *Ghettoside*, by Jill Leovy; *The New Jim Crow*, by Michelle Alexander; *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. If the publishing world went bananas for *Evicted*, Desmond takes it as one more indication of that cultural shift.

With the reach of Crown and the imprimatur of the MacArthur Fellows Program, he is positioned to intervene in the inequality debate in a big way. It's that drive and leadership potential that stand out when you talk to people who know Desmond. "He's a big part of the future of sociology," says Eric Klinenberg, of New York University. "He really wants to bring justice to the poor," says Edin, a former Harvard professor who attended the same Cambridge-area evangelical church as Desmond.

Desmond puts his goals more modestly. "The wager I'm making with the universe is, if I can show this problem in its full complexity, or as much complexity as I can, and as honestly as I can, that in and of itself has a power that is deeply connected to reform," he says. "With housing, this goes back to Jacob Riis, and showing the state of tenements in New York City, and how that scandalized the city and changed housing policy. Before this work I didn't know how bad it was. I don't think a lot of us know the state of poverty today."

The second subject that could distract Desmond from that message comes down to two words: Alice Goffman. The young sociologist made headlines in 2014 with an ethnographic study of young black men caught up in the criminal-justice system, called *On the Run* (University of Chicago Press). Like Desmond, she hoped to arouse interest in the plight of urban America. But her book kicked up a backlash as loud as its initial acclaim. Did the privileged white sociologist have the right to tell this story? Did she parrot sources' claims too credulously? Did her vivid anecdotes actually happen? Had her research crossed the line into criminal behavior?

She became the story. And the controversy over her work also put pressure on her fellow ethnographers. "People doing ethnography today feel more compelled to explain clearly what we do, how we do it," says Klinenberg.

Desmond has done an especially good job spelling out precisely how he went about his research and verified his findings, says Klinenberg. At the start of *Evicted*, an author's note states that most of the events in the book took place between May 2008 and December 2009. Except where it says otherwise in the notes, Desmond writes, all events that happened between those dates were observed firsthand. Every quotation was "captured by a digital recorder or copied from official documents," he adds. He also hired a fact-checker who corroborated the book by combing public records, conducting some 30 interviews, and asking him to produce field notes that verified a randomly selected 10 percent of its pages.

Desmond has been equally fastidious about taking himself out of the text. Unlike many ethnographic studies, including Goffman's, his avoids the first person. He wants readers to react directly to the people in *Evicted*. "Ethnography often provokes very strong feelings," he says. "So I wanted the book to do that. But not about me."

Ethnographers should be more skeptical about their data, Desmond believes. In his fieldwork, for example, he saw women getting evicted at higher rates than men. But when he crunched the data, analyzing hundreds of thousands of court records, it turned out that was only the case in predominantly black and Latino neighborhoods. Women in white neighborhoods were not evicted at higher rates than men. The field had told him a half-truth.

Still, beyond acknowledging that the reception of Goffman's book shaped his fact-checking, he will say nothing about the controversy. Even an old journalism trick — letting a silence linger, in the hope that an interviewee will fill it — fails to wring a quote from him. "This is such a good technique," he says after a few seconds, "where you just kind of let the person talk." Then he sips his Diet Coke, waiting for the next question.

If he worries *Evicted* will become a Goffmanesque target, he isn't showing it. But one thing does terrify him: his next project.

Desmond will try to understand the rise of ultraexpensive cities around the world. He plans to focus on four of those places — London, Delhi, Lagos, and New York — which have taken different approaches to the affordable housing problem. Backed by \$1 million from the National Science Foundation, the project has three main collaborators: Jo Guldi, a historian, who will tackle the question of how we got here; Neil Brenner, an urban theorist, who will examine issues like migration patterns and resource flows; and Desmond, who will supervise a team of ethnographers studying poverty on the ground.

Four cities: each with its own history, culture and politics. A pressing question for the future of our planet: how to make cities livable again. It's a challenge that dwarfs what Desmond has done before.

A problem, in short, that matches his own ambition.

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