

Real Estate

Q&A / MATTHEW DESMOND

Author living among poor details the harsh struggles

By Jim Weiker
The Columbus Dispatch

From May 2008 until July 2009, Matthew Desmond lived in a squalid boarding house and derelict trailer park in Milwaukee, recording the precarious lives of tenants amid roaches, drugs, filth, crime and absolute poverty.

He documented his experience in the book "Evicted," a portrait of life on the lowest rung of the housing ladder, where one disability payment or one McDonald's paycheck is all that separates tenants from homelessness.

Desmond, now a sociologist at Harvard University, spoke with The Dispatch about the experience in anticipation of his keynote speech at the Housing Ohio annual conference in Columbus on Monday.

Q: What prompted you to pursue this topic: evictions and housing?

A: I'd always been concerned that America is unmatched by any rich democracy in the depth and expanse of its poverty, and I wanted to know what role housing played in that picture.

I was surprised to find when I started that we didn't know a whole heck of a lot about it.

Q: Were you surprised by what you encountered?

A: I really was. It was incredible to me how common evictions have become. When you read accounts of evictions, they used to be rare; they drew crowds.

Now we're counting them in the hundreds of thousands, maybe even in the millions.

The effect that evictions have on families and communities is incredible.

It's not just a bad day. You don't just lose your home. That eviction follows you around.

It can affect your soul, your mental health.

Q: Did you find it hard to live in such squalid conditions?

A: For the most time when I was living in a trailer, I was



Matthew Desmond, now a Harvard sociologist, lived in a trailer while chronicling housing pressures on the poor during the recession.
MICHAEL KIENITZ



■ "Evicted" (Crown, 432 pages, \$28) by Matthew Desmond

even though I was in one of the nicest trailers and the landlord knew I was a writer.

It was tough, but I also learned a ton.

I saw incredible poverty, but I also met people who were brilliant, who were spunky, who had a lot of grit in facing adversity.

Each one just affirmed the fact that people refuse to be reduced to their hardships.

Q: You got close to the tenants and record some incredibly tragic scenes.

help, or were you frustrated by decisions some made?

A: There were times I did intervene, but for the most part, I didn't. One of the reasons is because I really believe in this type of work, in immersive reporting and a sociology of poverty that bears witness to the poor.

Q: You don't take the easy way out by demonizing landlords. Was that a temptation at all?

A: I don't think I would be doing my job if I did.

When you spend enough time with them, you realize the relationship is complicated.

It was important to me to understand how landlords tick, and I learned a huge amount from them.

Q: You paint a bleak picture but also suggest that housing for the poor can be addressed through a universal housing-voucher program. Do you see any political appetite for that, given its \$20 billion-or-so price tag?

A: It's very plain to me that

without addressing housing. A housing-voucher program would absolutely change the face of poverty in America. ... We can afford this. We can do better. ...

The bigger picture is that we do have a universal housing program; it's just not for the poor. It comes in terms of housing tax breaks for the middle and upper class. We spend \$171 billion a year subsidizing housing for the middle and upper class with mortgage-interest deductions and capital-gains exclusions.

Q: The book includes so many heartbreaking tales. Is there a single image that still haunts you?

A: I remember this one eviction that's told toward the end of the book, when Arleen moved back in with Trisha. We didn't know it, but movers were coming, and therefore Arleen was going to lose her home again.

I was wrapping up the project and was pretty ground down, and so was Arleen. Jafaris (her son) came home from school — he was 7 — and climbed the steps, and to this scene, with the family's belongings being removed from the home, he gives nothing.

He doesn't cry; he doesn't retrieve anything.

It isn't dramatic, but to me, it's chilling that kids like Jafaris have grown so used to this.

Q: What response have you received from those depicted in the book?

A: It's kind of amazing to me how much people respond to the integrity of the work. I think one reason is that the book offers a different interpretation of their eviction. ... I remember when we lost our home when I was young to foreclosure, feeling ashamed and embarrassed, and a lot of folks in the book feel the same way.

They blame themselves. They are very hard on themselves. Showing them that they are part of a larger narrative gives them an opportunity to see their story outside of a casing of shame.