**THE WORKING POOR: INVISIBLE IN AMERICA**  
by David Shipler

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**Chapter 1: Money and Its Opposite**  
Summary and Questions by UAA Faculty Trish Jenkins

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**SUMMARY**

Chapter 1, “Money and Its Opposite,” focuses on how money ebbs and flows in the lives of the working poor, and how this ebb and flow influences their attitudes and behaviors. This becomes clear through an understanding of the following:

- The Earned Income Tax received by low income workers, in addition to a refund of taxes withheld, often needed for past-due bills and large purchases that low income workers are unable to save for the rest of the year.

- Predatory and deceptive financing by private institutions, as well as schemes and scams by con artists, which result in high interest rates, unnecessary fees and taxes, investments that pay nothing, and lost wages.

- Lack of knowledge, resources, and confidence on the part of low income workers, which makes them unable to maximally benefit from situations and which lowers their resistance to predatory and deceptive financing practices and schemes.

- Wasteful spending habits and material expectations of low income workers, driven by lack of self discipline and the need for gratification, and resulting in unhealthy lifestyles and crippling debt.

- A preoccupation with money on the part of low income workers which can either foster strategic budgeting and thrifty living that allows for a healthier lifestyle, or rationalized indulgent and profligate spending that leads to unmet needs.

- Bartering of goods and services and relying on do-it-yourself solutions, which keeps expenses down and destitution at bay.

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**QUESTIONS**

1. Payday lending is legal and regulated in most states though not in all. In some states where it is illegal or limited, payday lending chains argue to legislators that there is a huge need for such a service. The Consumers Union, however, argues that payday lenders exploit those who face financial hardship. Payday loans have a 10 to 20% default rate and cost lenders a substantial amount of their revenue. Are payday loans a much-needed service or a disservice to those in need? Are the high interest rates justified in light of the default rate?

2. Have you ever overlooked the fine print in a service contract or do you know of someone who did, as Debra Hall did with her cell phone contract? Were the contract and/or salesperson intentionally misleading or were you careless—or was it a matter of both? What is required to be what Shipler refers to as “a little savvy about the ways of the commercial world?”

3. Metaphors help writers make compelling statements. Recall these three from chapter one:

   - “Poverty is like a bleeding wound. It weakens the defenses. It lowers resistance. It attracts predators” (page 18)
   - “High interest may be the most ubiquitous trap for low-wage workers” (page 22)
   - “Such are the interlocking deficits of poverty, one reinforcing the other until an entire structure of want has been built” (page 26)

Explore the implications of these metaphors. What effect do they have on you? What argument is Shipler making about the working poor through these metaphors? What other metaphors can you find?

4. Not all low income people put fun ahead of necessities like milk and prescription drugs; however, many live paycheck-to-paycheck and many live as Lisa Brooks did—“close to the edge of insolvency” (page 26). Should people like Lisa Brooks deny themselves things like cable TV? Do you agree with Shipler who says, “There are worse ways than television to escape, and why should the poor not share in that vast common ground created by American TV?” (page 28)

5. A “sympathetic character” in a story is one with whom you might identify, one you care about, or one you might admire. What aspects of Sarah Goodell, the young wife and mother who admittedly beat her husband Willie, make her a sympathetic character? Does considering this make you reconsider your view of her?