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Hands to Work: The Stories of Three Families Racing the Welfare Clock

Lynnell Hancock

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HANDS TO WORK



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RACING THE WELFARE CLOCK

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Lynnell Hancock : Hands to Work: The Stories of Three Families Racing the Welfare Clock before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Hands to Work: The Stories of Three Families Racing the Welfare Clock:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. The Work of Being PoorBy farthingFinally an antidote to five years of endless conservative cheerleading about how wonderful welfare reform has worked to get the unworthy poor off the

public dole. The Personal Responsibility Act of 1996, signed by then Pres. Clinton, launched a massive remaking of how federal, state and local governments aid the poor and define who is deserving of help. By one measure, welfare reform has been an unmitigated success: it pushed millions of poor people off the rolls and into a limbo of dubious workfare programs that offered street cleaning, for one example in New York City, as a job training. What has this all meant for poor people buffeted by welfare reform? The policy wonks and elected officials have paid scant attention to that critical question. Luckily, journalist LynNell Hancock has trained her sights on the impact of welfare reform on real people--not the statistics we're usually offered. The women she shadows for several years in researching her book are as different as they could be: a Puerto Rican mother with a drug addiction; an African American mother fending off an ex-husband with a murder conviction; and a Russian immigrant with the drive to become a doctor. Hancock is our medium as we visit their lives and witness the absurdities, the indignities, and the incredible work involved simply in being poor. All these women, Hancock included, deserve a merit badge for having confronted the welfare bureaucracy and survived its limitless hurdles, its rules crafted by people who live in mahogany paneled offices, not roach infested apartments. With careful, sharp-eyed reporting and lively prose, Hancock lets these women's stories--with all their flaws and strengths--come shining through. They are not heroines for being poor; these women are heroines for keeping hope alive in the face of countless humiliations and degradations and for continuing to fight for better lives for themselves and their children. As Congress prepares this spring to reconsider the 1996 welfare law, every member who will cast a vote should read this book. Beautifully written, politically astute but with no finger-wagging, *Hands to Work* is a must read for all who think they know anything about the poor among us.³ of 3 people found the following review helpful. Eloquent, Gripping Stories Behind the Welfare Reform Law By A Customer Journalist LynNell Hancock has produced the book that finally tells the story of the people affected by former President Bill Clinton's promise to "end welfare as we know it." Anyone interested in social policy should be extraordinarily grateful for Hancock's eloquent, evocative work. Following the lives of three women for several years and documenting their struggles to get off welfare, Hancock details the bureaucratic difficulties and the every day obstacles -- like the lack of affordable, decent child care -- that make this goal so elusive. With a journalist's careful eye and graceful prose, Hancock interweaves each woman's story with detailed analysis about the history of national and NYC welfare reform. In the tradition of Jonathon Kozol, her work is page-turning, deeply moving, and intellectually astute. As the clock is about to run out on the five-year limit set by Clinton's legislation, *Hands to Work* couldn't be more important -- or timely.¹ of 4 people found the following review helpful. Oh Please! By Jane A. O'malley Although this book is well written and flows well, the content is at times laughable. The author paints a picture of these poor women as totally helpless. They go about missing appointments making excuses, as to why they can't make appointments or fill out papers. I thought it was hilarious when the author wanted the reader to feel bad because one of the women didn't know how to eat pizza. She kept going on about how hard it is to get welfare and that the government shouldn't ask for ID or proof of need. Hey, while there at it why not just drop bags loads of money out of the sky? I think the author did these women a disservice as she made them out to be so helpless and stupid.

In this illuminating examination of the current state of welfare policy -- five years after the start of President Bill Clinton's Personal Responsibility Act of 1996 -- award-winning veteran reporter and writer LynNell Hancock offers an intimate, heart-wrenching, and beautifully rendered portrait of three women and their families as they struggle to find their way through the new rules and regulations of the public assistance system. "This new welfare world is an emerging, untested social experiment," the author writes, "one that has the potential to define what kind of nation we want to be, what kind of government we think is most fair. It's a political story. It's an economic story. It's a story about social reinvention. But in the end it is simply a human saga. It is about ordinary Americans trying to make a life for themselves, caught by an accident of timing in the wake of a social experiment meant to change the course of their lives." As she examines the laws, policies, and reforms of the last decade, Hancock introduces us to the women who try to carve their futures around America's new commitment to the power of work. ALINA ZUKINA, a wispy refugee from the former Soviet nation of Moldova, hoped to become a doctor. She spent four years juggling a college education with a city workfare program that offered her a small check and an overcrowded schedule. CHRISTINE RIVERA, a proud Puerto Rican, was on her way to self-sufficiency when two things collided: her stubborn heroin addiction and the new welfare rules. BRENDA FIELDS, a feisty mother of two, was eager to embrace any job that might help her overcome her lack of a college degree and limited experience. Despite such resolve, she found that work did not provide all the answers. *Hands to Work* adds a human dimension to the facts and statistics, revealing these three families' histories, their initiation into the system, the obstacles they've faced, the choices they've made, and the futures they seek. Hancock takes us on a journey within the day-to-day struggles of these women, describing their hopes, regrets, and deepest dreams. In so doing, she demystifies contemporary misconceptions of poverty and illustrates how welfare policy and reform have been conceived, offering a thought-provoking look at the most divisive questions about America's neediest citizens.

.com The welfare reform law of 1996 is considered one of the most successful policy achievements in recent memory,

with huge reductions in the number of people receiving public aid. In *Hands to Work*, LynNell Hancock insists that we look beyond the numbers: "The new welfare world is an emerging, untested social experiment--one that has the potential to define what kind of nation we want to be, what kind of government we think is most fair," she writes. "But in the end it is simply a human saga." She describes the lives of three women as they grapple with this new welfare world. They share little in common besides residence in the Bronx: one is an ambitious Russian refugee who wants to become a doctor, another is a Puerto Rican heroin addict, and the last is an African American single mother. Hancock describes their "nuanced and messy" lives in some detail, and their experiences "can be viewed in many ways to justify one political view of welfare or another." Hancock herself views them from a liberal perspective, believing that pumping more money into welfare programs would improve the lot. Readers can make up their own minds, though the ones predisposed to agreeing with Hancock probably will like her book best. --John Miller

From Publishers Weekly

When President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996, the bill set in motion a complete overhaul of the federal welfare system, and states soon followed suit. Hancock, a journalism professor at Columbia University, gives a human face to welfare reform as she follows three women navigating the new rules in New York City. Alina, a 19-year-old immigrant from the former Soviet Republic of Moldova, speaks little English but is determined to become a doctor. Brenda, a single mother of two, has supported herself with minimal government assistance through a series of low-paying jobs until a confluence of unfortunate events leave her jobless and homeless. Christine, who was kicked out of the apartment she shared with the father of her youngest son when he discovers she'd used heroin during the pregnancy, is a longtime dependent of the city's welfare programs. In between the stories of how these very different women deal with a tangled bureaucracy, Hancock details the philosophies and decisions of Mayor Giuliani and Welfare Commissioner Jason Turner, the man previously responsible for implementing Wisconsin's welfare reform system. The disconnect between those in charge and those who require their assistance becomes strikingly clear in Hancock's narrative. Without posing a list of specific solutions, Hancock's incisive look into the welfare quagmire provides insight into some of the major changes that must result if reforms are to be termed successful. (Jan.)

Forecast: As tens of thousands of welfare recipients face the approaching five-year limit on receiving aid, welfare reform will be much in the news, and if Hancock can find a place as a talking head in the media conversation, she should generate good sales.

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From Library Journal

This thoughtful study depicts welfare in America today through the stories of three women from the South Bronx Alina, Brenda, and Christine who were affected by the 1996 Personal Responsibility Act (due to expire in January 2002), which limits lifetime federal financial assistance to five years for families and two years for singles. Hancock (Columbia Univ. Graduate Sch. of Journalism) follows the women through their struggles to become independent and self-supporting with their variably available resources (e.g., family, race, education, lifestyles, and habits) and within the framework of assistance available to them in New York City throughout the 1990s. Hancock's substantive commentaries are seamlessly interwoven with each woman's story as well as a brief review of New York City welfare practices, the lingering dominance of the Puritan work ethic, partisan and ideological conflicts between social and commercial program missions and management, and implications of a change in public attitude from accepting welfare as a service to society to an "entitlement" for "the poor" with attached "work" requirements. Attention-holding and articulate, this important book on how America treats residents who are "down and out" is highly recommended. Suzanne W. Wood, SUNY Coll. of Technology at Alfred

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