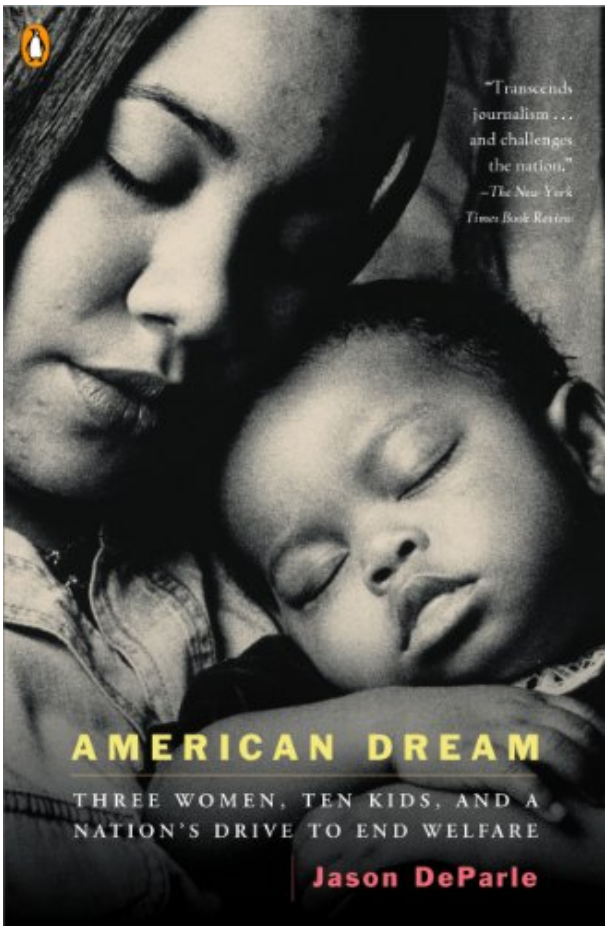
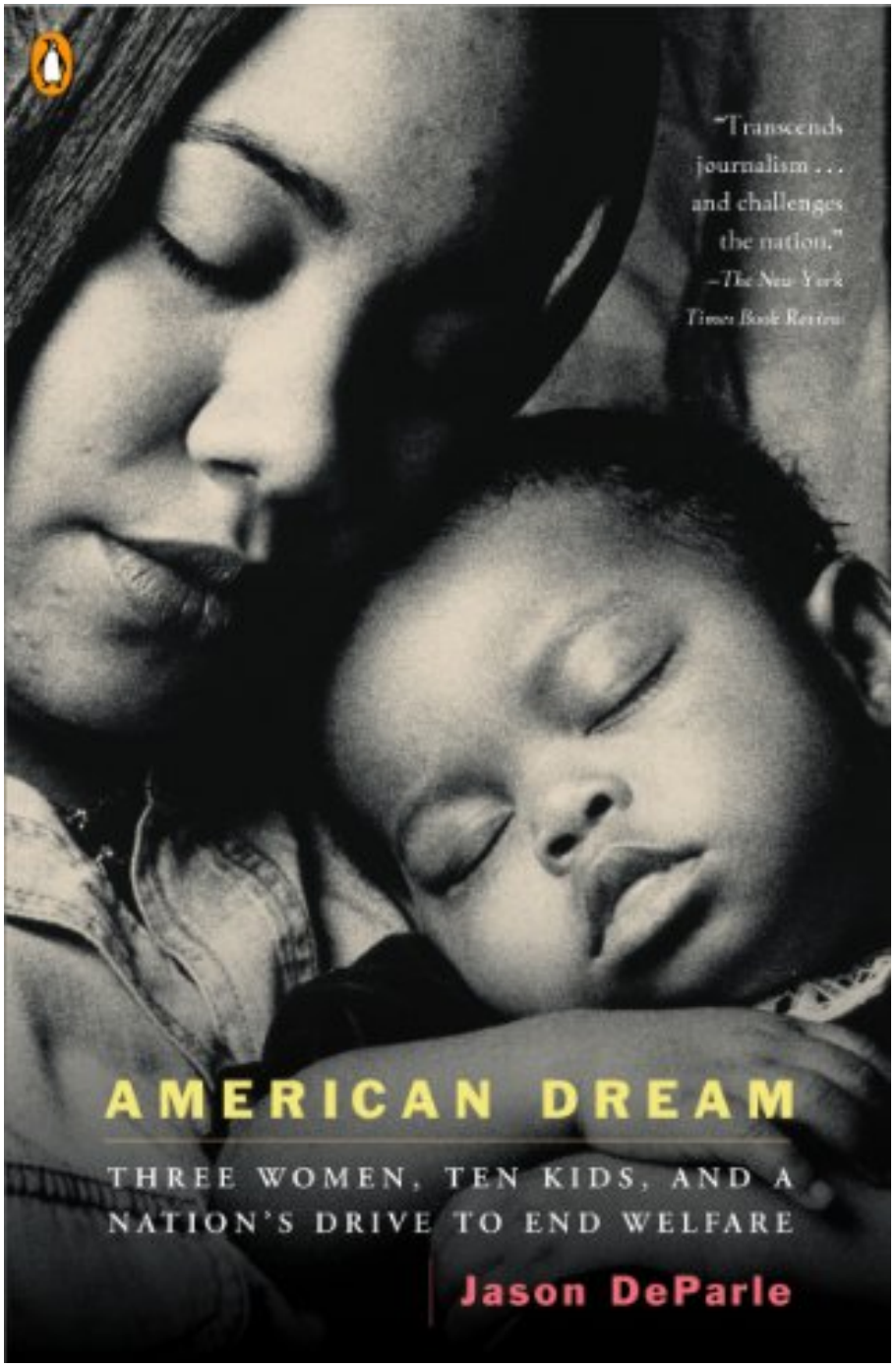
AMERICAN DREAM: THREE WOMEN, TEN KIDS, AND A NATION'S DRIVE TO END WELFARE BY JASON DEPARLE





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Amazon.com Review
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In this definitive work, two-time Pulitzer finalist Jason DeParle cuts between the mean streets of Milwaukee and the corridors of Washington to produce a masterpiece of literary journalism. At the heart of the story are three cousins whose different lives follow similar trajectories. Leaving welfare, Angie puts her heart in her work. Jewell bets on an imprisoned man. Opal guards a tragic secret that threatens her kids and her life. DeParle traces their family history back six generations to slavery and weaves poor people, politicians, reformers, and rogues into a spellbinding epic.

With a vivid sense of humanity, DeParle demonstrates that although we live in a country where anyone can make it, generation after generation some families don’t. To read American Dream is to understand why.

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Most helpful customer reviews

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.
An authentic look inside real lives of women on welfare.
By Theresa Welsh
This book helped me find answers to a question I've wondered about since my years as a welfare case worker in Detroit way back in the 1960s. Yes, I have often wondered: What happened to all those Moms who used to get ADC checks and all the women who might have gotten them if Bill Clinton had not decided to "end welfare as we know it."

Did we create hordes of new poor and homeless people? Was "ending welfare" an act of cruelty towards the destitute, or was it a gentle shove for poor women into a working life?

The answer is complicated, but, surprisingly (at least to me), it appears to fall more into the positive side than as an act of abandonment of mothers in need. It turns out that women on welfare actually had more options than just collecting a welfare check. Many actually had jobs off and on that they did not report, and they also had boyfriends who contributed (they didn't report this either).

My employment as a case worker came while I was still in college; it was the 1960s and I was young and dumb. I patrolled a "zone" on the west side of Detroit where virtually every house had someone getting a government check. The houses were densely packed in this poor neighborhood, so I walked from one house to another to visit the mothers (and one father) on my caseload. I was somewhat shocked that virtually ALL the children were born out of wedlock (that was shocking to a young woman who had recently attended Catholic schools).

While the author traces the mothers of the three women whose lives he chronicles back to the James Eastland cotton plantation in Mississippi, in my own caseload, the women were much closer to the cotton fields. Many of them told me they had only gone to the third grade in school because they had to drop out to pick cotton. A substantial number of them were illiterate and signed their names with an X. They were less employable than Angie, Jewell and Opal in the book.

I wrote about my experiences as an ADC worker (then called simply "Aid to Dependent Children") and revisiting my old "zone" at my website (theseekerbooks).

I was impressed with the level of involvement the author had with the women whose lives he describes. He obviously became a factor in their lives as he spent time talking with them and ferrying them for visits to prisons holding various boyfriends. He liberally quotes the people he writes about (including the typical black way of speaking) and describes chaotic situations in their home. Clearly, he got to know them, and win their trust. This approach has the advantage of "making it real" through seeing the hardships and pain of poverty first-hand. But it can limit understanding the role of welfare to what can be gleaned from the situation of those whose lives he enters. Still, the story he tells is powerful, and there is much to learn from the experiences of Angie, Jewell, Opal and their offspring.

I share the author's surprise that it turned out that women on welfare (at least in the years of the 1990s when the "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996" -- the "end welfare" law -- was passed) could fairly quickly get jobs. In fact, many were already working, but just not reporting their income. It also became apparent that the women did not value the government check quite as much as the public thought they did. When you asked them to attend classes or do just about anything that might be an inconvenience, many just walked away and gave up their check. The law left it to the states to decide on time limits and work requirements to continue getting a welfare check, and there was a lot of talk about providing job training, but mostly it came down to "get a job."

But were these former welfare recipients better off when they were working as opposed to staying home with their kids? the answer is unclear. Certainly, their children had a hard time. Most were employed at such low pay that they were not better off financially, and many found themselves chronically behind on their rent and running out of food before payday.

But was there a benefit from "the dignity of work" itself? I found this question an interesting inversion of the basic premise behind ADC when I was a caseworker. The basic idea then was that children need their mothers in the home, taking care of them. Back in the 1950s and into the 1960s, the idea of a family was a man going to a job each day and a woman staying home and raising their children and, by the way, the man and the woman were married (to each other). That idea began changing in the 1960s, and by the 1980s it had morphed into the idea that a family was a man and woman (maybe married) raising children and both working to pay the bills. Bill Clinton thought children would be proud of a mother who worked (as his mother did)... and that work brought with it a pride in accomplishment.

All I can say about this is that times change. We have not actually abandoned the poor to having to manage on minimum wages. The "earned income credit" at tax time has been a tremendous help (and cheap, with no big bureaucracy needed to administer it). We still have food stamps, some states have expanded Medicaid, and there are various programs to help with child care. There is no doubt that single Moms living on minimum wages have a hard time, and (in my humble opinion) should receive more help. I am glad to see so much support for an increase in the minimum wage.

The author also points out that programs that help both men and women can do a lot; the children he got to

know suffered without their fathers, and the fathers themselves got little help to find real employment. Most of the men in the lives of these three women ended up dealing drugs and some went to prison. Helping women is a fine idea, but helping families (married or not) is an even better idea.

Jason DeParle has given us a wonderful book based on the experiences of real people whose lives were touched by the former welfare system and by its ending. If you have ever wondered what happened to all the people who used to get welfare checks, I highly recommend "American Dream" and wonder what happened to Angie, Jewell and Opal since this book first appeared in print in 2004.

5 of 6 people found the following review helpful.
A great book about some awful realities
By James Gerofsky
American Dream is truly an excellent read, one of the best books that a wonk like me has seen in a long, long time. What a great idea: discuss a public policy issue by showing what does and doesn't happen to a handful of real, living people being affected by it. Are there books like this about abortion, the death penalty, school vouchers, etc.? I hope that someone is writing a similar book right now about the black male problem. As Mr. DeParle makes clear, the problems encountered by black females and children coming off welfare won't truly be solved until our nation does something to help keep black males off the streets and out of jail.

To summarize the welfare debate in a nutshell, conservatives had been complaining for four decades that the liberalized AFDC welfare system fostered dependency amidst its recipients and was the driving factor behind family breakdown and continuing poverty. Liberals were able to fight these contentions off, arguing correctly that most welfare beneficiaries were women who faced a legitimate crisis (divorce, injury, sickness, etc.) and used welfare for a short period in order to get their lives together. They were successful until about 1983, when a study performed by two bona fide Harvard liberals (David Ellwood and Mary Jo Bane) showed that although the majority of welfare recipients were short-term, one-time users, a small portion of recipients did stay for a long time, and thus absorbed a disproportionate share of federal and state welfare funding. Conservatives seized on this and gained political momentum, eventually putting President Clinton in a position where the status quo was no longer viable. Thus, in 1996, "welfare as we know it" came to an end, replaced by a time-limited, "work first" system.

DeParle did not introduce a "typical" AFDC recipient in this book, i.e. one who went on welfare during a family crisis, used the money to get her life back together, and got off for good within 20 months. (It's too bad that he didn't; it would have added a bit of depth, showing what's at stake when you let states control the entry gate.) He found three women who could have been poster children for the anti-welfare conservatives (posters with bulls-eye rings, that is). He then showed us some surprising things about them, surprising to a white suburbanite like me anyway. First off: they did work. Conservatives said that welfare made them not want to work, and bureaucrats said that they couldn't work and receive welfare. But work and receive welfare they did. Second . . . . well, I won't let all the cats out of the bag. But Angie, Jewell and Opal showed us that both the conservatives and liberals were wrong, and neither group really understood women like them (and probably still don't).

DeParle gets extra points for tracing the family roots of his three main characters back to the Mississippi delta in the days of slavery and reconstruction. It's rather clear that a lot of the problems and patterns of life that affect women like Angie, Jewell and Opal can't be seperated and considered independently of the bad old days. He also brings the story up to date (2004), where the children seem to be succumbing to the same life patterns of struggle and disadvantage that overtook their mothers and fathers. Having full-time working mothers does not appear to be the magic bullet for the next generation.

DeParle concludes with some simple, common sense recommendations for the future. He doesn't suggest that we go back to the days of AFDC. He couldn't. The welfare rolls were cut by more than half in the late 90s and children are not starving in the streets . But the question of whether the children of poverty now have a better chance to escape the fate of their parents, or even get by as well as they did, is definitely in play. In 1991, David Ellwood, responding to conservatives who co-opted his study on welfare dependency, suggested a deal: take unlimited welfare away, but make work worthwhile for those with minimal education and job experience, i.e. those headed for $6 or $7 an hour "careers" at McDonalds or a nursing home. This deal would involve government support for child care, transportation, health insurance, after school programs, wage supplements and job advancement training. So far, Ellwood's deal has been implemented mostly on the "take away" side. Other than an enhanced earned income tax credit, not much has been provided to "make work worthwhile" for low-wage workers in the post-unionization era. DeParle makes a strong case that it's time to make good on that side of the deal.

Just a few of many unforgettable vignettes in American Dream: a mother sending her teenage daughter to spend a "getaway weekend" with a friend of the family who happens to be a prostitute; a teenage boy with few male role models who dreams of becoming a pimp after having one around the house; another teenage boy who won't forgive his father for refusing to turn states evidence against his colleagues in a drug gang encounter where a teen girl was accidentally shot and killed (thus gaining a long jail sentence); a woman succumbing to crack, and yet having more and more children (despite the end of welfare as we knew it); a live-in boyfriend who dies after having a car battery dropped on his head by an angry woman who broke into the house; rampant confusion, chaos, and melancholia amongst the staff of the leading work placement agency; greed and corruption amidst its management; and yet, a case worker who, for just a little while, decides to overcome it all by dreaming the impossible dream and tilting at a windmill-like system on behalf of his clients.

Kudos, Mr. DeParle, for a job well done. If only we could say something similar to the architects of "post welfare".

16 of 19 people found the following review helpful.
Powerful insight and a great read
By Bennett Johnston
I have long been interested in social policy and the politics of welfare. That said, I don't read alot of books on the subject anymore--most don't justify the investment of time, attention and money. This book stands out because of Deparle's extraordinary ambition in tracing the roots of intergenerational poverty; his excellent analysis of a broad, complex subject; and his exceptional skills as a writer and storyteller. This book is a good read!

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