

Author illustrates realities for people on welfare

Living on the Edge: The Realities of Welfare in America, by Mark Robert Rank; Columbia University Press (New York, 1994); 266 pp.; \$29.95.

By Mary Kenny
Catholic News Service

Most people view someone on welfare as "a good-for-nothing freeloader who drives a Cadillac, uses food stamps to buy sirloin steak or watches soap operas all day."

Mark Robert Rank, in *Living on the Edge*, goes behind the stereotype to present readers with the facts.

Rank uses statistical methods on a representative sample of welfare recipients in Wisconsin. In addition, he uses extensive interviews to get to the human face of the people receiving welfare.

His overall conclusion is that welfare recipients are neither saints nor sinners. They are much like the rest of us. Most work very hard and care about their children and about their children's future. "The difference lies not within them, but primarily within their position in relation to the larger forces found in our society."

Where welfare recipients might dif-



fer from the rest of us is in their courage to hope. Despite daunting odds, most see a brighter future ahead.

Contrary to the myth of Cadillacs and sirloin steak, surviving on welfare is difficult. Most recipients run out of money before the end of each month, not from poor management but simply because the amount will not stretch that far. Most recipients, including children, do not have food at the end of each month.

Because of the stigma attached to welfare, existence is also psychologically difficult. Most recipients already work or want to work. The jobs available are usually low paying, erratic and lack benefits, particularly health insurance. For these reasons, even when employed, recipients frequently need assistance, par-

ticularly health care.

Despite these difficulties and again contrary to myth, most recipients do not spend their lives on welfare. The group with the longest average time on welfare, female heads of households, averages 2.5 years on public assistance.

The author suggests six changes that might improve or alleviate welfare in many circumstances:

- Jobs which pay a living wage and provide effective job training.

- Providing opportunities for the poor to acquire assets and thus survive times of crisis.

- Tax benefits to assist low-income workers as we now assist middle and high-income workers.

- Initiating effective programs to assist single mothers.

- Universal health care.

- Strengthening self-help institutions in low-income neighborhoods.

Models exist for all these programs. The costs of such programs would be offset by the real reduction in the need for welfare.

This book is hard-hitting and factual. The author is compassionate without being sentimental. Although the author is a research scholar, the writing is not dry. The author's style is readable, the book as absorbing as a story.

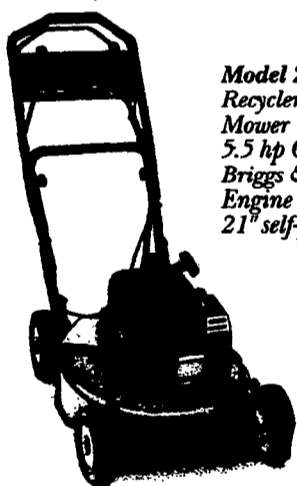
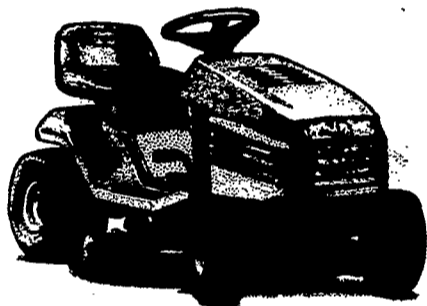
Stereotypes persist because people like them. Perhaps Americans do not want to dispel the myths of welfare. However, followers of Jesus have committed themselves to concern for the poor, not pity, not encouragement of dependency, but genuine concern for those who, as the author says, are just like us, our brothers and sisters. This book is must reading, not only for legislators, policy makers, and social welfare workers, but also for the ordinary citizens who care about their government and their neighbors.

Mary Kenny is co-author of the Catholic News Service column "Family Talk" and of four books on marriage and family.

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Twentieth Century Fox
Madeleine Stowe is Cody, Andie MacDowell is Eileen, Mary Stuart Masterson is Anita and Drew Barrymore is Lilly in *Bad Girls*.

Poignant themes, subjects help make releases worth watching

NEW YORK (CNS) — The following are capsule reviews of movies recently reviewed by the U.S. Catholic Conference Office for Film and Broadcasting.

'When a Man Loves a Woman'

(Touchstone) After an airline pilot (Andy Garcia) discovers that his wife (Meg Ryan) has become an alcoholic, they get help, but each must learn to change destructive behavior patterns to save their marriage and nurture their small daughters. Despite its sometimes soggy treatment, director Luis Mandoki's drama is credible in its depiction of alcoholism's tragic consequences on a family. Scenes of drunkenness with fleeting nudity and minor violence as well as intermittent rough language. The USCC classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

'No Escape'

(Savoy) Convicted of murder and sentenced to life on a remote island inhabited solely by condemned felons, an ex-Marine (Ray Liotta) joins forces with a colony of peaceable convicts who live in constant danger from a larger band (led by Stuart Wilson) which murders for sport. Director Martin Campbell's macho action flick goes through the motions of pitting reformed cons against evil cons but its focus is essentially on gory battles. Excessive graphic violence, much mindless mayhem and a few instances of rough language. The USCC

classification is O — morally offensive. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

'Bad Girls'

(20th Century Fox) Superficial feminist Western in which prostitutes (Madeleine Stowe, Mary Stuart Masterson, Andie MacDowell and Drew Barrymore) flee a murder charge only to run into a gang of sadistic outlaws (led by James Russo and Robert Loggia). Director Jonathan Kaplan's oater is nothing but a string of tired Western clichés. Some gunfights, revenge murders and frequent sexual references. The USCC classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

'With Honors'

(Warner Bros.) When a self-involved Harvard senior (Brendan Fraser) accidentally loses a crucial term paper, he gets it back from a cantankerous homeless man (Joe Pesci) by providing him with a place to sleep, out of which develops an unlikely bond. Director Alek Keshishian's poignant story unreels in earnest if methodical fashion as the student and his three roommates come to care for the stranger, who in turn has some wisdom to share. Fleeting bedroom scene, occasional sexual references and a few instances of profanity. The USCC classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.