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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League
by

Ron Suskind

(New York: Broadway Books, 1998)

Author:

Ron Suskind was *The Wall Street Journal's* senior national affairs reporter from 1993 to 2000. In 1995 he won the Pulitzer Prize in Feature Writing for a two-part series about the high school years of Cedric Jennings. A distinguished visiting scholar at Dartmouth College, he lives in Washington, D.C. with his wife and two sons. [From the book jacket]

Summary:

It is 1993, and Cedric Jennings is a bright and ferociously determined honor student at Ballou, a high school in one of Washington, D.C.'s most dangerous neighborhoods, where the dropout rate is well into double digits and just 80 students out of more than 1,350 boast an average of B or better. At Ballou, Cedric has almost no friends. He eats lunch in a classroom most days, plowing through the extra work he has asked for, knowing that he's really competing with kids from other, harder schools. Cedric Jennings' driving ambition-which is fully supported by his forceful mother-is to attend a top-flight college.

In September 1995, after years of near superhuman dedication, he realizes that ambition when he begins as a freshman at Brown University. In this updated edition, *A Hope in the Unseen* chronicles Cedric's odyssey during his last two years of high school, follows him through his difficult first year at Brown, and now tells the story of his subsequent successes in college and the world of work. [From the book jacket]

Questions:

1. At Frank W. Ballou Senior High, students learn a daily lesson: "distinctiveness can be dangerous, so it's best to develop an aptitude for not being noticed." To what extent does Cedric Jennings heed this lesson? What are the steps he takes to avoid attention from the "crews"? What are the ways in which he defies them? How would members of your book group have responded in Cedric's situation?
2. Teachers and administrators at Ballou, frustrated with the lack of positive role models for students, erect a giant "Wall of Honor" to commemorate those students who manage to maintain a B average or better. Principal Washington offers \$100 checks to students who score straight A's. Why do these measures backfire? How else might the teachers and administrators more effectively boost good students' self esteem?

3. In many ways, Phillip Atkins represents the path not taken by Cedric. Phillip has employed his wit and intelligence not for grades but for popularity, humor, and social skills. What are the sacrifices each one makes to stay on his path? What are the rewards? How do these sacrifices and rewards change over time?
4. Phillip's father, Israel Atkins Sr., advises his children to "set goals so they're attainable, so you can get some security." What do you think about this "shoot low" strategy? What are its strengths and weaknesses, especially when applied to youths living in impoverished and crime-ridden communities?
5. Why do you think Bishop C.L. Long's brand of Apostolic Pentecostalism is so successful among the poor and lower middle class blacks of southeast Washington, D.C.? How do his church and his preaching address their needs? How does his fundraising technique prey on their particular fears? Does it bother you that he drives a Cadillac, and later, a Rolls Royce, or do you feel he deserves such material rewards for his hard work?
6. Mr. Taylor misquotes Hebrews II:I as "the substance of faith is a hope in the unseen." How does his misquotation inspire Cedric more than the actual words of the Bible? What other people throughout history have been motivated by a hope in the unseen? What kind of place is Cedric hoping for? Does he ever find it?
7. How does Cedric feel about his father at the beginning of the book? How do his feelings change through the course of the book? What role does his father play in the formation of Cedric's drive to succeed?
8. Why does Clarence Thomas advise Cedric to avoid Afro-American studies and ethnic identity groups while at Brown? Do you agree with Thomas? To what extent does Cedric heed his words? What do you think Cedric's attitude toward the subject would have been had he come of age when Clarence Thomas did?
9. How are the challenges faced by Cedric at Ballou different from those faced by his female academic rival, LaCountiss Spinner? How have Cedric's difficulties strengthened his ambitions?
10. What are some of the ways in which Cedric's dorm unit is like a foreign land to him? How does he decipher its codes?
11. What are some of the challenges that Brown poses to Cedric's identity as an urban black? What sort of balance does Cedric strike between "selling out" to the white establishment, and succeeding on his own terms? How does he manage to negotiate a truce between fitting in and being himself?
12. How is Zayd Dohrn actually better equipped than his radical, activist parents at negotiating the racial divides of today? Why do you think he is the first Brown

student Cedric opens up to?

13. Cedric overhears a white professor, in discussing affirmative action, saying, "Are we really doing a service to young people to boost them above their academic level and then not offer the services they need? Because who really can? There's no choice but laissez-faire, sink or swim. They should be going to middle-rung universities." Do you agree? Does Cedric receive any special support services at Brown? Is he offered too many breaks? Not enough? Would he have been better served at a middle-rung university?
14. How do the same behavioral patterns that kept Cedric alive and intact at Ballou backfire at Brown? How does he learn to "unfold" and open himself up to his new community?
15. What kind of transformation did Cedric's faith undergo as a result of his first year at Brown? How has his faith helped him in the past? How will it help him in the future?
16. Ninety-two-year-old Miriam Korb remarks to Cedric, "I sure would like to meet your mother. She must be quite a woman." Do you agree? How so? How would you describe Barbara Jennings' relationship with her son? On the eve of eviction, Barbara confesses to Cedric that she's "let you down again, Lavar." How has she let him down in the past? How has she saved him in the past?
17. In the Author's Note, Ron Suskind says he hopes readers will adopt "the ideal that racial distinctions can be bridged by shared understanding." To what extent do you think the racial divide in America can be bridged? Has Suskind, a white man in his thirties, crossed that divide?
18. The book never mentions Cedric's numerous interactions and interviews with the author. What sort of effect might Ron Suskind's research have had on his subjects, particularly Cedric? Why do you think Suskind chose not to include himself in the book? Do you wish he had?
19. One third of the book is told from the perspective of characters other than Cedric. What is the effect of changing the narrative voice? Why might the author have done so?
20. Evaluate the public schools in your community. How would Cedric have fared with your neighborhood teachers? How has *A Hope in the Unseen* affected your perception of your local public-education system?

[From Random House, Inc.]

Further Reading:

Inside Separate Worlds: Life Stories of Young Blacks, Jews and Latinos. Edited by David Schoem. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991.

Rosey Grier's All-American Heroes: Multicultural Success Stories. Roosevelt "Rosey" Grier. New York: MasterMedia, 1993.

My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the civil Rights Movement. Juan Williams. New York: AARP/Sterling Pub., 2004