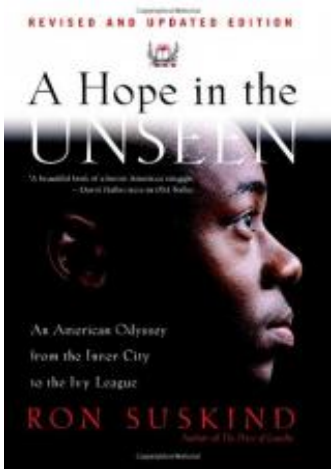
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A Hope in the Unseen

by Ron Suskind



About the Book

At Ballou Senior High, a crime-infested school in Washington, D.C., honor students have learned to keep their heads down. Like most inner-city kids, they know that any special attention in a place this dangerous can make you a target of violence. But Cedric Jennings will not swallow his pride, and with unwavering support from his mother, he studies and strives as if his life depends on it?and it does. The summer after his junior year, at a program for minorities at MIT, he gets a fleeting glimpse of life outside, a glimpse that turns into a face-on challenge one year later: acceptance into Brown University, an Ivy League school.

At Brown, finding himself far behind most of the other freshmen, Cedric must manage a bewildering array of intellectual and social challenges. Cedric had hoped that at college he would finally find a place to fit in, but he discovers he has little in common with either the white students, many of whom come from privileged backgrounds, or the middle-class blacks. Having traveled too far to turn back, Cedric is left to rely on his faith, his intelligence, and his determination to keep alive his hope in the unseen?a future of acceptance and reward that he struggles, each day, to envision.

Discussion Guide

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 Zahd 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?

Author Bio

Ron Suskind graduated from the University of Virginia in 1981 with a B.S. in government. After working for two years as a political consultant, he applied to law school. But when his application essay attracted the attention of professional colleagues in the media, he decided to become a writer instead. He attended Columbia Journalism School and then worked as a reporter for several newspapers, including *The New York Times.* In 1990, he became a staff writer for the *Wall Street Journal* and in 1995 won the Pulitzer Prize in feature writing for his two articles about Cedric Jennings. Ron Suskind lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife and their two sons. **A Hope in the Unseen** is his first book.

Critical Praise

"What distinguishes it . . . is the emotional richness of Cedric's struggle and the extraordinary depth of Suskind's telling of it. . . . Exquisite. "

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