



Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets

By Sudhir Venkatesh

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A New York Times Bestseller

Foreword by Stephen J. Dubner, coauthor of *Freakonomics*

When first-year graduate student Sudhir Venkatesh walked into an abandoned building in one of Chicago's most notorious housing projects, he hoped to find a few people willing to take a multiple-choice survey on urban poverty--and impress his professors with his boldness. He never imagined that as a result of this assignment he would befriend a gang leader named JT and spend the better part of a decade embedded inside the projects under JT's protection. From a privileged position of unprecedented access, Venkatesh observed JT and the rest of his gang as they operated their crack-selling business, made peace with their neighbors, evaded the law, and rose up or fell within the ranks of the gang's complex hierarchical structure. Examining the morally ambiguous, highly intricate, and often corrupt struggle to survive in an urban war zone, *Gang Leader for a Day* also tells the story of the complicated friendship that develops between Venkatesh and JT--two young and ambitious men a universe apart.

"Riveting."--*The New York Times*

"Compelling... dramatic... Venkatesh gives readers a window into a way of life that few Americans understand."--*Newsweek*

"An eye-opening account into an underserved city within the city."--*Chicago Tribune*

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"A rich portrait of the urban poor, drawn not from statistics but from vivid tales of their lives and his, and how they intertwined."--*The Economist*

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ignored or lumped into ill-defined stereotype."--*Financial Times*

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In the late 1980s and 1990s, rogue sociologist Venkatesh infiltrated the world of tenant and gang life in Chicago's Robert Taylor Home projects. He found a complex system of compromises and subsistence that makes life (barely) manageable. Venkatesh excellently illustrates the resourcefulness of impoverished communities in contrast to a society that has virtually abandoned them. He also reveals the symbiotic relationship between the community and the gangs that helps sustain each. Reg Rogers reads with great emphasis and rhythm. His lilting, cadence and vocal characterization of tenants is enjoyable. Rogers's first-person narrative establishes a deep intimacy with the reader. Venkatesh reads the final chapter, but he lacks the subtly and nuance that Rogers projects throughout his reading. The insubstantial author interview on the last disc mostly covers material already discussed in the book.

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School—As a young graduate student fresh off an extended stint following the Grateful Dead, Venkatesh began studying urban poverty. With a combination of an ethnographer's curiosity about another culture and some massive naïveté, he gathered firsthand knowledge of the intricacies of Chicago's Robert Taylor projects. Early on, he met a megalomaniac gang leader known here as J.T., who became his mentor. Venkatesh observed and learned how the crack game works, and how many have their fingers in the pie and need life to remain the way it is. He observed violence, corruption, near homelessness, good cops, bad cops, and a lot of neglect and politics-as-usual. He made errors in judgment—it took a long time for his street smarts to catch up to his book smarts—but he tells the story in such a way as to allow readers to figure out his missteps as he did. Finally, as the projects began to come down, Venkatesh was able to demonstrate how something that seems positive is not actually good for everyone. The first line in his preface, "I woke up at about 7:30 a.m. in a crack den," reflects the prurient side of his studies, the first chapter title, "How does it feel to be black and poor?" reflects the theoretical side, and both work together in this well-rounded portrayal.—*Jamie Watson, Harford County Public Library, MD*

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Review

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Hyacinth Mills:

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Brandon Justice:

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Hilary Rangel:

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