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A Hope In The Unseen

An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League
by

Ron Suskind

1998



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Ray Mescallado

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

A Hope in the Unseen is set primarily in three cities. The story begins in Washington, D.C., primarily the inner city neighborhood in the Southeast, where Cedric Jennings lives and attends Frank W. Ballou High School. Another major D.C. setting is Scripture Cathedral, where Cedric and his.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Cedric Lavar Jennings - A student at Frank W. Ballou High School who is determined to achieve academic success. He is known as Lavar by his family, but in school is known as Cedric.

Barbara Jennings - Cedric's mother, she is forty-seven at the start of the book. A devout Christian woman, she works as administrative support for the Department of Agriculture.

Clarence Taylor - Chemistry teacher at Ballou who takes a special interest in Cedric and helps him apply to the MIT summer program for gifted minority students.

Phillip Atkins - A popular junior who is the class clown and hopes to become an entertainer.

LaTisha Williams - A large girl who is also an outcast at the school and a close friend of Cedric.

Donald Korb - A wealthy Boston optometrist who becomes a special benefactor of Cedric.

Nanette "Neddy" Jennings - Fathered by a man different from Cedric's father, she is thirty-one at the start of the book and no longer living with Barbara and Cedric.

Cedric Gilliam - The father of Cedric Jennings and a career criminal.

Bishop C.L. Long - Head of the Scripture Cathedral, the black Pentacostal church that Barbara and Cedric Jennings attend.

Bill Ramsey - A successful African American graduate from MIT who now runs.....

Minor Characters - Ballou High School

Richard Washington - The principal of Ballou during Cedric's Junior year.

Marion Barry - Mayor of Washington D.C. who appears at Ballou for a rally honoring top students.

Tevin Campbell - Famous rhythm and blues singer who appears at Ballou for.....

Minor Characters - Family and Family-Based

Leslie Jennings - Cedric's sister, she is fathered by a man different from Cedric's father. She is twenty-six at the start of the book and no longer living with Barbara and Cedric.

Butch Jennings - Brother of Barbara Jennings, uncle of Cedric Jennings.

Maurice Jennings - Father of Barbara Jennings, grandfather of

Minor Characters - Church and Childhood

LaKeith Ellis - Friend of Cedric Jennings in Jefferson Junior High School.

Torrence Parks - Friend of Cedric Jennings in Jefferson Junior High School, he becomes a convert to Islam and tries to influence Cedric regarding these ideas.

Eric Welcher - Friend of Cedric Jennings in Jefferson Junior High School, they still.....

Minor Characters - M.I.T.

Thomas Washington - A black graduate student at MIT who works in the MITES program.

Jenica Dover - An MIT MITES student from Newton, Massachusetts.

Isa Williams - An MIT MITES student from

Minor Characters - Brown

President Vartan Gregorian - President of Brown.

Phillip Arden - A Brown freshman, the son of a millionaire British industrialist.

Evan Horowitz - A Brown freshman from Stamford, Connecticut with.....

CONFLICT

Protagonist - Cedric Jennings, an honors student in the inner city of Washington, D.C., who has high academic aspirations.

Antagonist - There are a variety of opponents and difficulties that Cedric faces in his quest for academic achievement, including inner city peers who deride his ambition, poor educational standards in.....

Climax - In his first summer back from Brown, Cedric and his mother Barbara are.....

Outcome - Cedric succeeds in his quest for academic achievement as well as self-understanding, and.....

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

Cedric Jennings is an anomaly at Ballou High School in the Southeast neighborhood of Washington, D.C.: in a poorly-performing school where academic achievement is scorned, Cedric proudly strives for high grades with a desire to attend a top university. The sub-par standards at Ballou place him at a distinct disadvantage academically, while frequent taunts and physical threats from other students has alienated him socially. Cedric lives with his mother, Barbara Jennings, who works for the Department of Agriculture; his father Cedric Gilliam is a drug dealer currently in jail.

In his junior year, Cedric is admitted to the Minority Introduction to Engineering and Science (MITES) summer program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He believes this is the start of a new life for him, but when summer arrives he finds the classes much more difficult than his fellow MITES students who attended better schools and were better versed in math and science. Though he makes friends at MIT, he also sees that his ghetto background sets him apart from them. At the end of the program, Cedric is told by faculty director Leon Trilling that he would not be welcome in MIT as a college student. This infuriates Cedric, and he.....

THEMES

Major Themes

The main theme of this non-fiction work is the importance of correct choices in defining one's identity, especially in the face of adversity. Cedric chooses academic achievement as both a means to define himself and as his path to personal success. Education is thus another major theme of the book, while religion and faith - the titular "hope in the unseen" - is another major guide which helps steer Cedric on his quest.

The adversities Cedric faces are thematic concerns of the book, defining the difficult choices he must make. Race is the first such concern, as being African American and a part of the African American community poses specific challenges and opportunities. Social class is.....

Minor Themes

The nature of anger is one of the underlying themes in the development of Cedric's identity, as he often voices the need to have something to push against in order.....

MOOD

The overall mood of *A Hope in the Unseen* is very deadpan and serious. This owes to the journalistic roots of the work: it seeks to convey a specific situation and chain of events in an objective fashion, and in doing so illustrate broader issues concerning American culture.

However, there are also strong novelistic flourishes in the work, which.....

AUTHOR INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Ron Suskind is a journalist who worked for the *Wall Street Journal* from 1993 to 2000 as the senior national affairs reporter. Early in his tenure at the paper, he wrote a series of feature stories about honor students in the inner city of Washington, D.C. While researching and writing, one student in particular came to his attention, Cedric Jennings. This series earned him a Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing in 1995, and was developed into the full-length book *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League*. The book was a popular and critical success for its intimate portrayal of the intersection between race, class, and education.

Suskind has also written extensively about the George W. Bush Presidency and its policies. 2004's *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House and the Education of Paul O'Neill* looks.....

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A Hope in the Unseen began as a series of articles in *The Wall Street Journal*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing, then fleshed out into a full book. In terms of genre, this non-fiction account is also a bildungsroman - that is, a novel of education, not just in the sense of formal education but personal growth and self-awareness. The bildungsroman has a rich literary history, and elements of the genre are often found in other kinds of narratives. *A Hope in the Unseen* is not a novel in the sense that it is a journalistic work based on verifiable facts; however, there is a strong novelistic sensibility to the book which enhances its dramatic power and in that sense makes it a true bildungsroman.

The autobiographical *The Education of Henry Adams* is an inevitable point of comparison, as it is another work of nonfiction which combines a strong dramatic narrative with meditations on.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

1. Something to Push Against

Summary

At a Frank W. Ballou High School assembly with guests D.C. mayor Marion Barry and singer Tevin Campbell, school principal Richard Washington surprises the students by handing out the one hundred dollar checks to students who managed at least a B average. In a school of 1,389 students with high dropout and transfer rates, there were only 79 students who made this level. Most of them do not want attention drawn to themselves, as they wish to avoid persecution and even physical harm for such an achievement, which is why Principal Washington has to make this award ceremony a surprise. He calls out Cedric Jennings' name, but Cedric is not at the assembly. Instead, he is taking a practice SAT test in the chemistry classroom of Clarence Taylor, having suspected the ceremony would take place and wishing to avoid the hassle.

When Taylor finds him there, he tries to provide encouragement for Cedric, whom he's taken under his wing. Taylor asks about his application to a summer program at the Massachusetts Institute for Technology for top minority high schools students; this program often helps pave the way for such students to attend MIT for college. Cedric assures Taylor he sent in the application and asks if he thinks he'll get in. The bell rings before Taylor can properly answer and Cedric heads to Unified Math class, getting teased along the way by students who noticed he wasn't present at the awards ceremony. At Unified Math, he becomes calm as he takes a test, enjoying the confidence and surety it gives him, and expressing his love of the course in the last question of the test.

A week after the assembly awards, Cedric decides to go to the Martin Luther King avenue bus stop and listens as two crack dealers discuss receiving sex in exchange for drugs. He sees other boys flirting with girls but purposely keeps his distance. He goes home to an apartment near the corner of 16th and V streets, and soon after his mother Barbara arrives from work. He makes hash for dinner and, instead of eating separately, they sit together this evening. She assures him he will make it into the MIT program.

On another day of classes, a Code Blue is announced by Assistant Principal Ballard while Cedric is in Advanced Physics. The Code Blue means that students who aren't where they're supposed to be will be rounded up by security. The physics teacher, Mr. Momen, hands out a worksheet which puzzles Cedric. When he sees a girl looking at his paper, she tries to flirt with him. Cedric makes an appeal to Momen, who tells him to get along better with others. After class, he goes to meet his friend LaTisha Williams in the cafeteria; he usually eats alone in empty classrooms, and is harassed by other students along the way. Over lunch, LaTisha teases him about his masculinity and how he once tried to come on to Connie Mitchell. At the end of the day, he runs into LaTisha and they go to the bus stop. There, a boy threatens another with a gun, causing panic among the other students, but that boy runs away without firing. On the bus headed home, Cedric remembers how last spring after the awards ceremony he was threatened by another boy with a gun, this one expressing jealousy at the one hundred dollar check Cedric earned. With that thought, Cedric realizes he didn't go to the awards ceremony, not because he was ashamed of his academic achievements, but because he was scared. This comes as a relief to him, as it is something he can accept about himself.

Notes

The theme of ethnicity and whiteness is played throughout various scenes in the chapter. Students who do well in studies are called "Whitey!", which is considered the harshest epithet against them. Cedric's khaki pants are singled out for ridicule, as they are not popular in this setting. Further, Connie Mitchell, the girl Cedric tries to talk to in LaTisha's story, is described as "a gorgeous, light-skinned ingénue". Masculinity is also touched on, as Cedric is made to feel feminine - and therefore, weak in this context - because he cares about his education so deeply.

2. Don't Let Them Hurt Your Children

Summary

On March 1, Barbara Jennings goes to pay her rent check of \$445.22, leaving only \$30 to withdraw from her account for other expenses. She reminds herself to call her brother Butch, now living in the house where she was raised; he had been living there for free since their father Maurice died, and the situation needs to be resolved between him and his five sisters. Barbara was the third in a family of ten children. She was never favored by either parent but took on many responsibilities to try to earn that favor. By the time she was twenty-eight in 1975, she had given birth to Nanette and Leslie, each by different men. In August of that year she met Cedric Gilliam, who had a criminal past as both a bank robber and drug dealer, but also a bachelor's degree in business. They started a relationship and in fall of 1976 she became pregnant with her third child. She told Cedric and said she thought it will be a boy. Cedric didn't care and told her to choose between the baby or him; she tried to get an abortion twice, but changed her mind each time. On July 24, 1977, Cedric Jennings

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Cedric Jennings - Cedric's growth as a character is the central focus of *A Hope in the Unseen* and is the source of many of the thematic developments in the book. Thus, most of the specific ways in which Cedric develops as a character is dealt with in the Themes section, as his inner life is meant to be a reflection of society in general. That said, the contrast between beginning and end is worth noting in its own right, to illustrate Suskind's masterful achievement in his portrait of an individual young man.

Cedric begins the story insecure about his identity, angry enough to need something to push against in order to succeed, and relying on others (most notably his mother and church) for guidance. By the end of the book he is secure in who he is, has made peace with aspects of himself that had previously bothered him, and has grown into a self-reliant individual on the path to success. Comparing the angry and alienated teen in the first chapter with the contemplative young man in the Epilogue is startling, as it happens so subtly over the course of the book. This development is not achieved by any single event but a continuous chain of discovery and realization, which is exactly how a person grows in real life. It is possible to trace developments to.....

Barbara Jennings - Barbara Jennings is the rock on which Cedric's ambition and drive is built. She protects her son as best she can, so that his future life can be a significant improvement from the one they share. The success of this goal is the crux of her conflict: she has set him on the path desired but that

Cedric Gilliam - Cedric Gilliam is introduced as a person taking poor advantage of his situation, selling drugs while on a prison work release program. He is clever and opportunistic, with a.....

Zayd Dohrn - Zayd Dohrn has to deal with the conflicted feelings Cedric holds for him, alternately enjoying their close friendship and keeping Zayd at a distance, resulting in a month when the two do not talk to each other. However, the two finally cement their friendship, as seen by the hug when....

Rob Burton - Rob Burton has the most vivid conflict with Cedric, as these dorm roommates have heated fights due to their different habits and attitudes. Their relationship has ups and downs, as they sometimes try to mend fences and other times antagonize each other. Interestingly,.....

Chiniqua Milligan - Chiniqua Milligan is the only other African American in Cedric's dorm unit. Having made it to Brown, she decides to explore that aspect of her identity in.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The plot structure is relatively straightforward, as it follows the life of Cedric Jennings from his Junior year at Ballou High School all the way to his sophomore year at Brown University. In that sense, the story is very focused and linear - in many ways reflecting a standard biography, albeit one devoted to only several years in the subject's life.

However, there are ellipses in Cedric's life story as presented in the book: not all the periods in Cedric's life are covered with the same amount of detail, as Suskind opts for the most dramatically powerful events for his focus. This is a necessity on every level imaginable. On the most practical level, a book that dealt with every event in every day of Cedric's life would be too long and too involved; those years have.....

THEMES – THEME ANALYSIS

As the conflicts in the book center around Cedric's inner struggles and interaction with others, his growth as a character often relate to the development of the book's themes. The main theme of the novel - the importance of making correct life choices when defining one's identity - is all about such lessons. The specific decisions Cedric makes are detailed further in this section; for now it suffices to say that as a bildungsroman, *A Hope in the Unseen* follows Cedric in his crucial years of growth by tracking the decisions he made, right and wrong, towards academic achievement and emotional maturity. His stumbles are examined in as much detail as his successes, as Cedric tries to learn from what he did wrong and not repeat the same mistakes.

Thematically, Cedric's decisions to combat adversity aren't the only ones we witness. The choices made by other people in the book are often contrasted against those of Cedric's, often as a counterpoint to.....

AUTHOR'S STYLE

The style of *A Hope in the Unseen* is clearly journalistic in tone and intent. The book is written with an emphasis on objectivity, voicing the opinions of many character but also making sure to balance it with relevant counter-arguments. That balance isn't always provided immediately, often arising organically from the perspective of another character with a different background. Another obvious

QUOTES – QUOTATIONS AND ANALYSIS

The book begins with the following line, describing the academic awards assembly at Ballou High School's auditorium:

A hip-hop tune bursts forth from the six-foot high amplifiers, prompting the shoulder-snug slopes of black teenagers to sway and pivot in their bleacher seats. It takes only a second or two for some eight hundred students to lock onto the backbeat, and the gymnasium starts to thump with a jaunty enthusiasm. (1)

The opening image is actually one of sound, with the emphasis on the size of the amplifiers making clear how loud it is. The image of the heads bobbing in unison so quickly shows there is a shared bond among those in the auditorium, a shared appreciation and cultural understanding. It is significant, then, that Cedric Jennings is not present for this event. The event is for his benefit, in praise of his academic achievement - however, that is beside the point, that is not what defines the value of the audience, who are the vast majority of Ballou students.

Regarding this disconnect between his values and those of his fellow students, Cedric receives some early advice from his mother Barbara in this passage:

"The race," she says with a satisfied smile, "goes not to the swift nor...."

SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS

As a work of journalism, there are few overtly literary flourishes that guide the story in the manner of fiction. However, there are motifs which by their very nature take on an added significance as Cedric grows and matures. It may be said that many of these motifs are true for most any person, as these are common fabrics in our culture.

The institutions in Cedric's life come to symbolize different phases in his development. The primary examples are schools. Though described after the fact, Jefferson Junior High was the place of Cedric's early hopes and aspirations, as well as a reminder of how his weaknesses - his anger and overwhelming pride, as well as financial instability - deprived him of an easier path. Ballou is a place.....

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

Title: *A Hope in the Unseen*

Author: Ron Suskind

Date Published: 1998

Meaning of Title: A convoluted version of a quote from the Bible, specifically Hebrews II:1

Setting: Washington D.C., M.I.T. in Boston, and Brown University in Providence

Genre: Non-fiction bildungsroman

Protagonist: Cedric Jennings.....

STUDY QUESTIONS – MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. By what name is Cedric called by his mother when he was growing up?
 - a. Junior.
 - b. Cedric Two.
 - c. Lavar.
 - d. Malik.
2. Which important national figure does Cedric visit in the spring of his Senior year?
 - a. Coretta Scott King.
 - b. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas.
 - c. Vice President Al Gore.
 - d. Bill Cosby.....

ANSWER KEY

1.) c 2.) b 3.) d 4.) d 5.) a 6.) b 7.) b 8.) d 9.) c 10.) a 11.) b 12.) b 13.) b 14.) c 15.) b

ESSAY TOPIC IDEAS / BOOK REPORT TOPICS

1. The book had originated as a series of articles by author Ron Suskind about Cedric Jennings. Those initial articles earned Cedric some attention, which is noted in passing at several points in the book. Why does Suskind understate the role his writing played in Cedric's life during the course of the story? Was it a wise move? Would it have been better if Suskind had been more forthcoming in describing his role in Cedric's life, or would that detract from Cedric's story?
2. Of all the narrative tangents where the perspective of a character besides Cedric is explored, which ones were the most important? Which ones were the least important? On what do you.....

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