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

By Sudhir Venkatesh



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**Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets** By Sudhir Venkatesh

**First introduced in *Freakonomics*, here is the full story of Sudhir Venkatesh, the sociology grad student who infiltrated one of Chicago's most notorious gangs**

The story of the young sociologist who studied a Chicago crack-dealing gang from the inside captured the world's attention when it was first described in *Freakonomics*. *Gang Leader for a Day* is the fascinating full story of how Sudhir Venkatesh managed to gain entrance into the gang, what he learned, and how his method revolutionized the academic establishment.

When Venkatesh walked into an abandoned building in one of Chicago's most notorious housing projects, he was looking for people to take a multiple-choice survey on urban poverty. A first-year grad student hoping to impress his professors with his boldness, he never imagined that as a result of the assignment he would befriend a gang leader named JT and spend the better part of a decade inside the projects under JT's protection, documenting what he saw there.

Over the next seven years, Venkatesh got to know the neighborhood dealers, crackheads, squatters, prostitutes, pimps, activists, cops, organizers, and officials. From his privileged position of unprecedented access, he observed JT and the rest of the gang as they operated their crack-selling business, conducted PR within their community, and rose up or fell within the ranks of the gang's complex organizational structure.

In Hollywood-speak, *Gang Leader for a Day* is *The Wire* meets Harvard University. It's a brazen, page turning, and fundamentally honest view into the morally ambiguous, highly intricate, often corrupt struggle to survive in what is tantamount to an urban war zone. It is also the story of a complicated friendship between Sudhir and JT—two young and ambitious men a universe apart.



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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Honest and entertaining, Columbia University professor Venkatesh vividly recounts his seven years following and befriending a Chicago crack-dealing gang in a fascinating look into the complex world of the Windy City's urban poor. As introduced in Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner's bestseller, *Freakonomics*, Venkatesh became involved with the Black Kings—and their charismatic leader J.T.—as a first-year doctoral student at the University of Chicago. Sent to the projects with a multiple-choice test on poverty as his calling card, Venkatesh was, to his surprise, invited in to see how the drug dealers functioned in real life, from their corporate structure to the corporal punishment meted out to traitors and snitches. Venkatesh's narrative breaks down common misperceptions (such as all gang members are uneducated and cash rich, when the opposite is often true), the native of India also addresses his shame and subsequent emotional conflicts over collecting research on illegal activities and serving as the Black Kings' primary decision-maker for a day—hardly the actions of a detached sociological observer. But overinvolved or not, this graduate student turned gang-running rogue sociologist has an intimate and compelling tale to tell. (*Jan.*) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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

"*Gang Leader for a Day* is not another voyeuristic look into the supposedly tawdry, disorganized life of the black poor. Venkatesh entered the Chicago gang world at the height of the crack epidemic and what he found was a tightly organized community, held together by friendship and compassion as well as force. I couldn't stop reading, and ended up loving this brave, reckless young scholar, as well as the gang leader J.T., who has to be one of the greatest characters ever to emerge from something that could be called sociological research." -- **Barbara Ehrenreich** "*Gang Leader for a Day* is an absolutely incredible book. **Sudhir Venkatesh's memoir of his years observing life in Chicago's inner city is a book unlike any other I have read, equal parts comedy and tragedy. How is it that a naïve suburban kid ends up running a crack gang (if only for a day) on his way to becoming one of the world's leading scholars? You have to read it to find out, but heed this warning: don't pick up the book unless you have a few hours to spare because I promise you will not be able to put it down once you start.**" --**Steven D. Levitt**, co-author, *Freakonomics* "This extraordinary book features the fascinating research of a brilliant young

sociologist. Sudhir Venkatesh spent several years closely interacting with crack-selling gang members and struggling poor residents in a large and very dangerous public housing project in Chicago. His riveting portrait of day-to-day life in this poor community, including the challenges confronting parents in a drug-infested and violent social environment, is disturbing. But, *Gang Leader for a Day* is rich with original information and insights on poor families, drug dealers and even the police. It will leave an indelible impression on readers." ---William Julius Wilson, Harvard University  
Lewis P. and Linda L. Geyser Professor "Whether you enjoy fiction, history, or biography you'll be drawn to Venkatesh's gripping retelling of his experiences in the Robert Taylor Homes. *Gang Leader for a Day* poignantly reminds us that there continue to be separate and unequal Americas that ultimately impact us all." --Congressman Jesse L. Jackson, Jr. (D-IL)

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **John Drew:**

In this 21st century, people become competitive in each way. By being competitive today, people have to do something to make these individuals survive, being in the middle of the crowded place and notice by simply surrounding. One thing that oftentimes many people have underestimated it for a while is reading. That's why, by reading a e-book your ability to survive improve then having chance to stand than other is high. In your case who want to start reading the book, we give you this particular *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets* book as nice and daily reading e-book. Why, because this book is greater than just a book.

#### **Damon Smith:**

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