

# A journey from the ghetto



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BUSTER**

A Journey From The Ghetto, a paper, Until I read A Hope in the Unseen, the only celebrity I'd ever stalked was Mick Jagger back in high school.

But two decades later, when I finished Ron Suskind's symphonic book about a young man's odyssey from the inner city to the Ivy League, I called in sick to work so that I could read it over again in a single sitting " propped up in bed, phone off the hook, a bowl of cereal disintegrating on my night stand. Then, I tracked down Suskind at the Wall Street Journal and ambushed him." Hi. I'm a sycophant. Just give me five minutes," I pleaded. " I'm absolutely floored by your book. Please let me recount the ways to you.

" A Hope in the Unseen follows Cedric Jennings " a young black honor student at Washington, D. C.'s Ballou High School, arguably the worst public high school in the country " on his fraught and amazing journey from the crack-ravaged streets of Anacostia through his freshman year at Brown University. Cedric is neither a classic manchild in the promised land nor a reformed drug dealer. He's a geek under siege. His beginnings, to be sure, are pure ghetto cliché: father in prison for drugs; reckless, immature mother with a predilection for bad men, short skirts and malt liquor; a neighborhood plagued by crack houses and drive-bys. And yet, when his mother, Barbara, looks down at her miraculous newborn, she pledges: Maybe, if I can save this child, I can save myself, too. Determined that Cedric will beat the odds, she keeps him on a tight leash.

He ping-pongs between a strict Baptist church, a handful of dedicated teachers and his mother's own newfound force of will. After a series of operatic struggles, he finally arrives at Brown. But his story hardly ends

there: This gilded world might as well be a foreign country to him. The mythos of inner-city children surmounting the odds thanks to one inexhaustible teacher or a superhuman single mom is pretty much standard fare these days ” particularly given our new president.

But what makes Suskinds book so stunning ” and such a colossal personal obsession with me ” whats made me go out and buy everyone I love a copy with the same fervency that I used to buy them Exile on Mainstreet ” is the telling. Suskinds literary talent is double-barreled. Hes a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who lived with the Jennings at close range for several years. But hes also a master storyteller with the lyricism of a poet. He gets under the skin and infiltrates the minds of every single character in Cedrics life.

So the story is told directly through their eyes. You dont read it, you experience it viscerally, just as they do. You are transported right from the prison cell where Cedrics father paces, to the ravaged classrooms where Cedrics dogged teachers struggle to maintain order, to the basketball shoes of his classmates who are turning bitter and violent with despair. When Cedric dashes home trying to avoid the neighborhood gangs, your heart pounds along with his. When he arrives at the Brown bookstore, picks up a biography of Winston Churchill, and panics because he doesnt know who Churchill is ” and he knows he should know ” you share his rocketing anxiety. Suskind manages to avoid the icky paternalism that privileged white journalists can easily display toward the poor and minorities. He knows better than to treat Cedric as a specimen; rather, he makes sure that we all become him.

The book is nonfiction, yet packs the emotional wallop of a great epic novel. And though there's plenty to extrapolate about social injustice, race, class and public education, there's no editorializing either. A Hope in the Unseen trusts that we'll "get it," simply by reading an astonishing story, told one scene at a time, the way that Homer or the troubadours might have done around a campfire. Except that this tale, of course, is true. It's a book I'd wished I'd written myself. And I'm happy to call Ron Suskind and tell him this any time. ;,?