A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League Study Guide

A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League by Ron Suskind

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

An incoming freshman at Brown University would note nothing unusual about junior Cedric Jennings. In fact, he would see a confident young man who obviously looks like he "belongs" there. This "belonging" is Cedric's personal "miracle."

Born into poverty in Southeastern Washington, D.C., Cedric Jennings is raised by his single mother, Barbara. His father, a career convict, is both physically and emotionally absent from the young boy's life. Vowing that her son will be the first child to break the family cycle, Barbara Jennings combines strict discipline and strong religious training to raise a son who becomes a serious, isolated scholar, steeped in the teachings of Bishop Long at the Scripture Cathedral. Together, mother and son forge a symbiotic relationship; she, sacrificing for him and he, in turn, becoming a testament to her hard work and faith.

Cedric survives the chaotic life at Ballou High School by keeping his head low and absorbing the ridicule and harassment that all achievers receive from the "crews" (gang members) and "wanna-bes," managing to have only very casual friendships with a few other students. Along the way, he also receives the mentoring of a few committed adults and, ultimately, the big prize - admission to Brown University.

Not having begun the race in the same place as the other Brown students, Cedric faces almost insurmountable challenges. His clearly inferior academic preparation and his lack of knowledge of "mainstream" American culture result in turbulent, sometimes devastating experiences during his freshman year. Rocky relationships with other students and struggles to keep up in classes cause Cedric to vacillate between abandoning his dream and mustering the courage and determination to prove that he is capable. The reality is that most young people in his situation fail. He emerges from this purgatory, however, to discover that he can fill the academic and social gaps and, in so doing, create his own unique identity as a combination of all the he was, is now, and will be.

Ron Suskind first met Cedric Jennings when he wrote a two-part series of articles about Ballou High School for The Wall Street Journal. Fascinated by the dilemmas of achieving students in inner-city high schools, he followed Cedric through his remaining high school career and on to Brown University. As he did so, and expanded his initial articles into a biography of this young man, he created a work that, at one level, tells the story of individual struggle against the odds but, at another, clearly depicts the inequalities that continue to plague American society.

Something To Push Against

Something To Push Against Summary and Analysis

Cedric Jennings and Delante Coleman ("Head") are both students at Frank W. Ballou Senior High School, an all-black public institution in one of the worst sections of Washington, D.C. Delante runs one of the large school gangs, The Trenton Park Crew, has a thriving drug business, cruises in a Lexus, and is clearly driven. Cedric is just as driven. A young man who isolates himself from all of the "gangsters" so prevalent and disruptive at his school and who appears to be "ashamed" of his 4.02 grade point average, but who, nevertheless, is driven to academic achievement and to getting "out" of his violent, depressed environment. Of the 1,389 students at Ballou High School, 79 are on the honor roll, having achieved at least a "B" (3.0) grade point average. These kids are the subjects of ridicule - known as sellouts, nerds, and "whities" - and the targets of violence, so much so, that many of them request their names not be placed on the honor roll placard outside the principal's office. The dropout/transfer rate at Ballou is a discouraging fifty per cent, and there is a sense throughout the school that no one is really in control. The majority of students are victims of the "crab bucket" syndrome - if crabs are placed in a bucket, and one attempts to crawl out, the others will pull it back down into the bucket, until they all die there. Cedric hopes he is a crab that has crawled beyond their reach.

Mr. Taylor, the chemistry teacher, found Cedric as a ninth grader and has mentored him through his current junior year. His classroom is Cedric's sanctuary from the chaos and discord of the hallways, assemblies, and lunchroom. Also, Mr. Taylor has assisted Cedric in the application process for a summer program at M.I.T., designed specifically for exemplary minority high school students, and his desire to go is "white-hot." He struggles with the feelings of shame for an unwillingness to be publicly "distinctive" at Ballou for his achievements and for his self-induced isolation from other students. To Cedric, however, reaching out to other "kids," would be like "doing drugs."

Barbara Jennings is Cedric's mother. Giving up a "party" life as a younger woman, she has now moved to a life of sacrifice and religion. She and Cedric live in a two-bedroom apartment in the same dangerous community in which Cedric attends school. Barbara works as a clerk for the Department of Agriculture and volunteers for her church in most of her spare time. She, too, wants Cedric to escape and, in fact, was the first to find and bring to her son this potential opportunity for a summer at M.I.T. They have little time for conversation, however, as she is often involved in church activities, and Cedric prefers the peace and quiet of his room with its plasma television.

A "Code Blue" at Ballou is used as a warning to all students to clear the hallways and get into their classrooms. Large security guards roam the halls, grabbing errant kids, in an attempt to gain some sense of control. Unless a "Code Blue" is announced, students roam the school at will, without reprisal. Between classes, students play craps in the hallways, fight, or, in extreme instances, threaten one another with guns. The lunchroom

is no better. On one occasion, Cedric witnesses a student pull a gun on another at the bus stop directly outside of the school building. During his bus ride home on that same day, he has a bit of any epiphany. What he has been identifying as shame is not that; it is fear. He is afraid - afraid of the dangers of his school, the violence and drug dealing in his neighborhood, and, most important, of the forces that push against his all-consuming desire to get out.

Don't Let Them Hurt Our Children

Don't Let Them Hurt Our Children Summary and Analysis

Barbara Jennings had a difficult childhood, one of many children in her household, with frustrated parents who often became violent in punishment. As a teen, she just wanted "out," and, as a result, sought male relationships which might evolve into a marriage. Instead, she obtained two illegitimate daughters from two different fathers, neither of whom stayed around to provide support. Eventually, she met Cedric Gilliam, a man she believed was making something of himself. Though he is a paroled bank robber, he had obtained a college degree while in prison, and she was impressed. A brief dating period followed, although Cedric was obviously seeing other women as well, and when Barbara announced her ensuing pregnancy, he told her to get an abortion or say farewell. She chose the latter.

Son Cedric Lavar Jennings was born on July 24, 1977. Vowing to call him Lavar and to provide the best she could for him, Barbara changed her life, joining Reverend C. L. Long's Scripture Church and immersing herself in church work, employment at the Department of Agriculture, and raising three children without enough income. Cedric Lavar quickly grasped the elements of a poverty lifestyle, living with relatives in between slum apartments and evictions, visiting thrift stores and food pantries, and going to church with his mother. When he was two, Barbara decided to quit her job and go on welfare, believing that a child's formative years required her constant guidance. Together, they went to libraries, museums, and church while the two older girls were in school.

The neighborhood was old, dirty and dangerous, and it was time for Cedric to go to kindergarten. Barbara prepared him for his daily routine by walking him through the neighborhood, pointing out the drug dealers on every corner who used young children to deliver their product, making certain that he would never talk to them. She walked him to the school, demonstrating the path he was to follow every day, in order to arrive home safely. Satisfied that she had taught him well, Barbara went back to work, and Cedric became a latchkey child, walking home each day, double-locking the door, and telephoning his mother to report in.

A brief re-entry of Cedric's father into his life was not successful, but Cedric Junior now knew him and knew also that his real first name was also Cedric. Vowing to call himself Cedric from that point forward, he moved through elementary school with honors and praise from his teachers. At church four times a week, he joined the children's choir and soon became a featured soloist, performing on a local religious television network. Mama was proud of her son, even as she continued to tithe the required ten per cent and faced frequent repossessions and utility shut-offs. Cedric had so distinguished himself in elementary school that he was accepted to Jefferson Middle School, a highly competitive magnet school, where he found a group of friends and continued to excel.

Three events served to negatively impact Cedric as an 8th grader. First, as the school work became harder and required far more time, he was forced to study without heat or light, creating frustration and dropping grades. Second, a visit to his father, who was now in prison again, left Cedric feeling slighted and unacceptable to a man who preferred conversation with the athletic cousin. Third, parents of fellow children's choir members began to complain about Cedric's preferred solo status, and he lost his "position." Frustrated and angry, Cedric began to act out at school, becoming disrespectful with teachers, engaging in quarrels and minor fights with peers, and allowing his grades to slip further. He was not invited back to Jefferson for 9th grade which meant he had to join the student body at Ballou. Here he remained though high school, recouping his drive to do well but immersed in the violent, non-achieving mass of an urban slum high school.

Rise and Shine

Rise and Shine Summary and Analysis

Cedric is up and out the door each morning by 6:30, arriving at school far before other students in order to complete his school work and continue preparation for the upcoming SAT. The urgency within him says he must do it now or lose his only chance. Because so little learning can occur in most of his classes and because he knows he will eventually compete with peers far more effectively prepared than he has been, he must spend these mornings in pursuit of learning. Further, he is working on a science fair project, a chemical analysis of the effects of acid rain on buildings, that will be part of a city-wide competition. Ballou High School, during the regular school day, has little to offer its capable students. While his advanced combination math and science classes are challenging, all other classes are like "thin soup." Students don't attend, the curriculum is watered down, and learning expectations rarely reach beyond the concrete, rote, lower-level cognitive skills. All of this work has but one goal - admission to an Ivy League school, away from Washington and away from the local colleges any other capable Ballou student might attend.

Cedric's father remains in prison but has been awarded work-release at a D.C. barbershop. He is seeing an old girlfriend again, who is a computer programmer with the Justice Department. While out, he is not following the rules - dealing heroin, using himself, and secretly pocketing excess cash. He's older and wiser now, the anger replaced by a shrewdness that allows him, at least for now, to beat the system. However, he is not shrewd enough. Too much traffic in and out of the barbershop has been observed by work-release supervisors, and Cedric Gilliam is turning in too little money for the haircuts he must be giving. His freedom is canceled indefinitely. Knowing he needs some activity, Cedric weighs his options and finally goes to the library to call his son, Lavar. The last call did not go well, ending with a yelling match, Cedric Senior telling Cedric Junior that he has not right to be disrespectful to him and Cedric Junior shouting back that his father was a disgrace and had not right to judge him. Cedric contemplates the adult figures in his life and realizes that his parents are not truly significant.

Cedric's alter ego at school is Phillip Atkins. Phil is probably every bit as bright as Cedric but learned early on that if one chooses to develop intellectual skills, he chooses an adolescence of isolation and ridicule, if not worse, at Ballou High School. Phillip's choice has been to become the clown. In this role, he can move among any group at school, with his humor and his self-appointed nickname, Blunt. He is popular with girls, outgoing, and willing to forgo an academic future for acceptance and emotional safety. Phil lives in one of the projects, in a family dedicated to two things: the Jehovah's Witness Church and a commitment to maintaining low expectations for the future. Phil's father expresses it well. When poor black kids "shoot too high," they face only disappointment and anger. These two emotions lead to criminal behavior, and then they are "lost." Phil's dream is entertainment. In addition to his humor and his great imitations

of celebrities, he has discovered tap dancing and has participated in school dance programs, much to his father's dismay.

Cedric envies Phil his lightheartedness and longs to gain some balance in his life, to have some experiences that other teens have. Further, he has not heard from M.I.T. and is facing the stark possibility that his application has been rejected. In a moment of frustration, he leaves school to walk through the rain, contemplating his misery. Dutiful son that he is, however, he ends his sojourn through the drug-infested streets at church, having promised his mother he would attend the Thursday evening service. The instilled religious emotions are once again stirred as he listens to Reverend Long and becomes caught up in the power of a huge congregation confirming their faith even in the face of adversity. His reward awaits at home - his letter of acceptance from M.I.T.

Skin Deep

Skin Deep Summary and Analysis

Students attending the Minority Introduction to Engineering and Science program at M.I.T. are dubbed the MIT-MITES, and they have come from all over the country. Cedric quickly gleans important information which impacts his comfort level. Though his fellow students are black or Hispanic (one exception is a part-Native American student), they are all from middle or upper-class backgrounds, and their SAT scores are significantly higher than his. Also, when the initial assessment tests are given to determine which level of classes to be assigned, it is clear that the curriculum at Ballou has not prepared him to compete on an equal footing. Cedric finds himself in the basic physics, chemistry and English classes, and, even in these, he is often "lost." Undaunted, he avoids the cliques and study groups in favor of individual study in his room, not wanting to broadcast his academic inadequacies or his socioeconomic background.

Eventually, Cedric finds it easier to move among the various groups of students, admitting his "ghetto" background and engaging in playful bantering with his African-American peers. Though his mid-terms are a disaster, his group of three makes it to the quarter-finals in the robot competition, and he is developing a new comfort level. On his birthday, several friends prepare a "ghetto bag" of treats, including condoms, M&Ms, boom box batteries and a rap CD, as a joke, which Cedric takes well. As he becomes more socially engaged, moreover, his begins to achieve more, moving up to the middle of his calculus class and improving in the others.

Bill Ramsey is the program director, a position he has held for seven years. One of very few African-American educators at M.I.T., he is keenly aware of the push for "affirmative action," runs a model program, and is dedicated to finding gifted minority recruits for eventual admission. He struggles with the reality that the minorities he brings in are overwhelmingly from upwardly mobile or upper class minority families, even though he usually selects one or two from urban slum schools. The deck is clearly stacked against them, and rarely do they meet with success in the summer program.

During the final week, all students have an exit interview with Professor Trilling, the white professor who leads the academic component of the program. He informs Cedric that his academic record is not strong enough for M.I.T., citing his junior year SAT scores and his current standing in the program. The final blow is his recommendation that Cedric consider Howard University or the University of Maryland for his college training. Cedric is angry and humiliated, and, even though his friends are supportive with a big send off, he leaves for home without attending the farewell banquet.

At home for the remainder of the summer, Cedric continues to struggle with his identity. Barbara is attempting to push him into taking one of the offered scholarships from prestigious high schools for his senior year, but he knows he will not fit with the largely white population in these private schools. He really does not fit in with the majority at

Ballou either. Cedric is in his own "purgatory." He might eventually fit into the group with whom he spent six weeks at M.I.T., but not just yet. Ballou, as bad as it is, is the most comfortable place right now. As he contemplates his choice, he thinks, "Comfortable is the place I hate."

To Him Who Endureth

To Him Who Endureth Summary and Analysis

One of Cedric's afternoon classes at Ballou is College Prep, a course that, in the early fall, helps seniors prepare for their final SAT and then to complete the application process to colleges. Having read and re-read the admission requirements for Yale, Harvard, Princeton and M.I.T., Cedric is slowly resigning himself to a "middle-rung" college at best. Remembering that a science teacher once mentioned Brown University, he looks it up. Less competitive than Harvard, it still has an average SAT score of 1290, but seems also to be a bit more flexible with requirements and coursework. Despite his most recent SAT score of only 960, he completes the application. In his essay, he speaks to his faith, his supportive mother, and his hard work. Success, however, he states, is not solely reflected in grades, test scores and awards."...Individual advancement and continuous progression depend on one's ability to deal with different people." (p. 107) As an additional bit of campaigning, Cedric prays over the envelope, asking God for His assistance. It is November, and Cedric is hoping for an early admission decision, to obtain this "prize" and resolve, once and for all, his increasing awareness that Ballou and its student population are not comfortable any more.

The acceptance letter is found in the mail box about midnight, following a particularly long evening at church. Cedric's response is rather lackluster, given that he truly viewed potential acceptance as a miracle. "Gaawwd, am I glad that's over with," is what he can muster for the moment. To Barbara, the journey has reached its natural destination, though it has come quickly, she thinks, as she dresses for her final PTA meeting. Semester grades will be passed out, and Cedric is anxious to see them. The "B" in physics is unacceptable, and Barbara agrees. Together, mother and son confront the teacher who agrees to a re-test, on which he eventually achieves an "A."

A highlight of Cedric's senior year is a meeting, by invitation, with Clarence Thomas at his office in the Supreme Court Building. Thomas is perhaps the least public of all Justices, having shunned publicity after his confirmation battle and the accusations of Anita Hill. He does occasionally meet with outstanding black students, however, in an attempt to encourage and mentor them. Cedric came to Thomas' notice when he was featured in a Wall Street Journal series about Ballou.

Justice Thomas begins the meeting by pointing Cedric in the direction of potential scholarship money but moves the conversation into their perceived similarities. Together, they trade stories of slights, ridicule and imposing barricades to personal achievement. Thomas is concerned about Cedric's prospects at Brown, an environment of bright white students where he might lose his identity and, worse, in frustration and anger, drop into non-productivity. He counsels Cedric to avoid the courses on race relations and African-American studies, to stick with the strong academics of math and science, and to avoid alignment with any racial or ethnic groups. The way to "beat" the white kids, according to Thomas, is to simply outwork them. Speaking more of his own

experiences and current status in his counsel, Thomas seems angry as he warns Cedric that he will not be able to go back to his "old" world and may never be wholly accepted by his "new" world either. Cedric simply wants to be part of "something bigger, with kids - black kids, Hispanics, whatever. With everyone being an achiever, just like him." (p. 122)

May at Ballou High School brings a virtual end to learning. With summer break looming, most kids decide to begin early, and classrooms dwindle in numbers. It is also the month of assemblies, one of which is a gathering to present student awards. Cedric receives four scholarships. LaCountiss Spinner, he female counterpart, receives as many. The assembly program lists the college selections of sixty-four of the eight hundred fifty seniors, and an asterisk indicates a scholarship offering. Clearly, Cedric stands out with acceptances and scholarship offers from four schools in addition to Brown. Realizing that the printed program sets him up for greater harassment, envy, and ridicule, Cedric vows to maintain a neutral and silent demeanor, understanding that any cockiness could clearly be dangerous.

Graduation is nigh, and Cedric is struggling with more than maintaining a low profile. His speech, as the salutatorian, is full of anger and condemnation of the school, and it must be revised. He must also repair his relationship with Mr. Taylor, his strongest mentor. Earlier in the semester, Cedric had angrily accused Mr. Taylor of pushing him too hard and has not been back to the once favorite classroom since. As he works his way through these two challenges, Cedric realizes that everyone has dreams, no matter how small. Some kids and parents just dream of a high school diploma; some teachers dream that they will impact even a few students. These dreams, though smaller than Cedric's, must still be respected and validated. The speech is revised along the lines of Langston Hughes' poem, "Dreams;" he visits Mr. Taylor and restores the lost camaraderie; he matures just a bit more.

The auditorium is filled and horribly warm. Capped and gowned students are filing in, and relatives are screaming from the seats - a typical graduation ceremony in urban America. Through the din, officials on the stage request quiet, but, not achieving that, move forward with the program. Cedric is the first to speak. He hears the low din of conversation, perhaps some words of ridicule from his classmates, but launches into his speech by first thanking God and his mother. He begins the speech as planned, but the din of lack of attentiveness grows. Finally, realizing that he forgot his glasses, he looks out upon the sea of unrecognizable faces and begins to ad lib, adding back in the parts of his speech that were eliminated as too negative.

He speaks to the "Dreambusters," those who insisted that he couldn't do it, that he couldn't make it into the Ivy League. He blasts the fellow student who said he would not last two years. He is preaching to the audience, not speaking. With a loud, "There is nothing me and my God can't handle," he has the adults audience standing in ovation. He moves on. "For the race is not given to the swift nor to the strong, but to him who endureth until the end!" More thunderous applause ensues, as if this graduation is actually a revival meeting. Cedric finishes his speech with the full poem by Langston Hughes, clearly the least memorable part of the oration. The net effect is that formerly

hostile classmates now applaud him, and strangers are complimenting his words. Barbara stands in pride as her son, loaded with awards, walks toward the oak tree where they gather after the ceremony, losing control for perhaps the first time in years. "My Baaaaaaby!" she screams.

The Pretender

The Pretender Summary and Analysis

The summer between high and college is a "no man's land" for Cedric. A boring job as an intern with Price Waterhouse at least allows some frivolity, in the form of clothes and music. The sweltering summer has resulted in typical violence, and two young men Cedric knew have been killed: one in an armed robbery at McDonald's and one in a drug war of some sort. Phillip is not going to college and has a permanent job in a mail room. Latisha is going to UDC in the fall on a full scholarship. His social life is non-existent, as usual, including occasional trips to the mall and continued frequent evenings at church, as Barbara holds onto the reigns, believing that she can still exert some influence over Cedric's life after he is gone. At church, Bishop Long warns that he is not to forget, amidst all of the human learning and accomplishments, that only God has the real answers. This could be construed as a strange message from a pastor who now lives in a beautiful suburban home in Maryland, who drives a Cadillac and dresses in custom-made suits, all on the backs of his poor parishioners who at times contribute their last dollar to the church in hopes of receiving return blessings "ten-fold." Those who do "make it" usually leave his church for good, and many of those now criticize his practices.

By August's end, the town is emptying, as those who can afford to leave for cooler spots north and east perform their annual exodus, not to return until after Labor Day. Cedric Gilliam, who has been out on parole, recently failed a drug test and is attempting to avoid the federal marshals for just a few more night of freedom. In Southeast D.C., Barbara's sister is throwing a farewell party for Cedric, who will be leaving for Brown in two days. In attendance are Barbara's sisters and their children, the only other adult male a cousin named Douglas. The meal finished and a family prayer given for his safety and well-being, Cedric decides on a detour as he walks home - he'll go by the old house on 15th Street where his mother grew up and where he lived on and off - just to see it one more time. His Uncle Butch and some friends are on the porch. Cedric has not seen Butch in a long time but knows he has had a government job for quite a while, probably since he got out of prison many years ago. The conversation is loose and casual among this group of absentee uncles and fathers, a group with whom Cedric has not had much experience. It's just another place into which he will never fit. Clearly, it is time to leave everything behind.

Goodbye to Yesterday

Goodbye to Yesterday Summary and Analysis

The trip to Providence brings an end to the long-established roles that both Cedric and Barbara have played - he, the dutiful, hard-working partner in the fulfillment of her dreams for him and she, the sacrificing, disciplined protector. As the rental van is unloaded, Barbara begins to assess her son's new environment, particularly the "culture" of the other parents. She might as well be in a foreign country, in a society into which she will never move, and she worries that Cedric will become a "foreigner" as well.

Cedric and his white roommate orient themselves to their room and to one another. Sharing music and the effort to organize their habitat breaks the ice well. For the next six days, they will participate, along with thirty-one other kids in their dorm group, in the Freshman orientation program. From reading the brochure, Cedric quickly determines that their group is a microcosm of the entire student body. More than half are white and the remainder a mixture of Asian, Hispanic, Indian, one Arab, two Europeans, and one other black, an attractive girl from New York. With this diversity, however, comes conformity as well. They all have prerequisite knowledge and social adeptness that he lacks. They have come from high schools and home environments in which curriculum was far more rigorous and social/cultural experiences far more broadening. He is scared, and, in this fear, hatches a plan for survival. Taking advantage of Brown's policy of student autonomy, he signs up for the lower level of physics and Spanish classes, along with a literature class that focuses on an author he has already read. In addition, he selects the "satisfactory/no credit" option for grading, ensuring that he will not "flunk out" during this first semester, but, more important, that he will have additional time to fill the background "gaps" between himself and his peers.

Two gifts Cedric possesses which begin to establish some rapport with his peers are his singing voice and his humor. He participated in a dorm karaoke party, amazing fellow students with his voice, and, at breakfast the following morning, begins to type-cast his new found "friends" in terms of characters on classic sitcoms. His table mates encourage him to sign up for one of the campus singing groups and urge him to identify a sit-com personality with whom they each fit. Thus, his roommate becomes "Wally" from "Leave it to Beaver," and a cute blond girl becomes "Marsha" from "The Brady Bunch."

The orientation activities aside, and with classes beginning the next day, Cedric races to the bookstore to purchase texts for calculus, Spanish and the literature course focusing on Richard Wright. Realizing that he must select a fourth course, he plans to look at texts first and choose a course based upon the least difficult one. As he looks through the stacks of books, he sees a picture of Winston Churchill and thinks to himself, "I should know who this man is," but cannot identify him until he reads the jacket cover. A calendar hangs on the wall with a picture of Jerry Garcia of The Grateful Dead and

Cedric commits the face and name to memory. So much information to accumulate in such a short period of time! He finally settles on an introductory course in the Education Department - History of American Education - based upon a relatively easy text and the course catalogue description.

All in all, the orientation has been a taste of reality for Cedric. Group discussions continue to drive home the point that his background and experience are no match for those of his school mates and the biggest challenge will be filling the holes that separate him from others relative to general knowledge. He has had his first experience with freedom from self-exile and isolation, however, and he loves it.

Fierce Intimacies

Fierce Intimacies Summary and Analysis

Cedric sits in his History of American Education class, contemplating the fact that all of the other students are "...guided by some mysterious encoded knowledge of history, economics, and education, of culture and social events, that they picked up in school or at home or God knows where" (p.190). Competing in this environment is rather comparable to being dropped into a foreign country without the language or cultural understanding. He is clearly a product of "affirmative action," a topic of current hot debate, given the recent California Board of Regents decision to end the practice of racial admission quotas. What Cedric now understands is that admission is the sum total of affirmative action for disadvantaged minorities. Continued support of counseling or extra tutoring is not available in most instances, and the dropout rate of these kids far exceeds that of better equipped whites. He vows not to be a statistic and reverts to his known behavior - avoidance of social situations and hard work to fill in as many of the gaps as possible. Having put faith in his literature class to assist him with development of thinking and writing skills, Cedric is sorely disappointed to discover that the professor, one of the few black instructors on campus, has low expectations for himself and for his students. No help there!

His polar opposite, Rob Burton, is a social being, popular and sought out by other students, and having him for a roommate probably contributes to Cedric's social insecurities. In high school, Cedric avoided the social life of Ballou, consisting of prevalent sex, drugs, and drinking, because, in his world, that led to poverty, prison or death. His monastic life was predicated on the premise that hard work, clean living and good grades would get him into a top college. Now he is here, and all of the smart kids, Rob included, are drinking, partying, getting high and having sex with no catastrophic consequences. Cedric is confused and a bit envious - probably the reason for his frustration with the messy state of Rob's side of the room. A heated confrontation over phone message not passed on severely damages the relationship with Rob, and it is a permanent cavern. Tolerating one another will be as good as it gets from October forward.

Down the hall is Zayd Dohrn, a good-looking blond kid who shares a love for soul and rap music with Cedric. The common interest softens Cedric and soon he is comfortable just hanging out in Zayd's room with the many friends who continually stop by. As the friendship develops, moreover, Cedric is finally able to talk to someone about his fears and his discomfort in this white world. Chiniqua Milligan, a black female student in the same dorm, is attracted to Cedric for different reasons. The daughter of a bus driver and a teacher aide, Chiniqua grew up in an apartment close to Harlem. Her ticket out came far earlier than Cedric's, when she was picked to attend a top prep school in New York, as part of a special program to reward achieving minority students. There, she received the social and academic training that makes her life at Brown much easier. In Cedric, as well as in a group of black students in another dorm, she sees an offering of black

culture she had missed during her adolescence of close white contact and cultural sophistication. Here, validating her "blackness" is far less dangerous than it would have been in the streets and clubs of Harlem. Other dorm residents are drawn to this "exotic bird," the ghetto kid who made it out and whose speech and expressions are clearly urban black. They worry, however, that he will not party with them, and perceive that his aloofness may be a message that he does not like them. Well-intentioned advice is offered regarding his disputes with rob, but Cedric shuns it, believing that their differences cannot help but cause friction when the close physical proximity is considered. It is a case of two cultural opposites thrown into an intimate relationship with no common bonding factors.

In stark contrast to the issues his son faces, Cedric Gilliam this night awaits a ride from his parole officer, having finally realized that he cannot hide from the marshals any longer. Too many dirty drug tests are returning him to prison, this time to a medium-security wing, much more dangerous than the previous minimum-security stints. Sherene, his current woman, has secured a lawyer who will accompany him to his parole board hearing, an event that will determine his penal future. While the recommendation is for a year-long inpatient drug treatment program, the celebration is short-lived, for the waiting list is lengthy. So, here he sits, contemplating his life compared to that of his son, a young man who is managing his life far better than his father, shooting so high and actually making it.

Feeling a bit guilty for not shooting high enough, Cedric is staring at his 94% grade on his mid-term calculus project. He has done well in courses that presented little challenge, but there is not much satisfaction. Not that he did not study. In fact, he engaged in a frenzy of work, usually at the library, in order to avoid Rob as much as possible. He has decided not to retreat from the other white students, however, because he does not want to be defined by what Rob may say. He finds their behavior confusing, however. These white boys are far more physically demonstrative with one another, showing a vulnerability which is so foreign to Cedric's experience. Also, they exude such self-confidence, not in a boastful way, but in a way that allows self-criticism and the ability to receive "put-downs" and jabs from others, without ego damage. The line is drawn one evening, however, as several boys and Cedric congregate in Zayd's room, and the jabbing terns to homosexuality. Cedric is appalled, says so, and quickly leaves the room. Later a sexually connotative note is left on his message board, and he blows, creating quite a scene in the open hallway. While others recoil, Zayd remains loyal, finding in Cedric a deeply interesting persona.

Not a great deal is known about Zayd Dohrn. Certainly, others are curious about his strange name. He has come from Chicago, having excelled at the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago and is a confident "ladies man," engaging in short-term sexual relationships with a variety of girls. His ethos is experimentation of any type - the riskier the better - which has perhaps come from the nurture of two professor parents on the "edgy" south side of Chicago. Zayd has had a life filled with a continual progression of diverse intellectuals, writers, and philosophers through his home, each leaving his impact on the child. This ethos sets Zayd apart from all others at Brown. He avoids cliques and conformity, moving easily among all groups at will, comfortable in his own

skin and unaffected by either praise or criticism. It is Zayd who reaches out to Cedric, the young ghetto black who has now isolated himself from everyone, locking his door and refusing to answer the knocks and calls from the other side. Zayd is eventually able to gain admittance, and casual conversation restores their old camaraderie. Further, Cedric discovers that Zayd is, in fact, named after an uncle of rapper Tupac Shakur, and a man who participated in Black Panther activities with his parents in the 1960s. Cedric's exile is over.

Bill Payers on Parade

Bill Payers on Parade Summary and Analysis

Proud and happy moms and dads descend for "Parents' Weekend," a scene repeated on college campuses throughout the country in the fall. At Brown, they arrive in luxury cars or by air to "kidnap" their kids for shopping and restaurant fare. It is a big and profitable weekend for the town of Providence, and Brown is spruced up in order to impress the bill payers.

Bernadine Dohrn and Bill Ayers, parents of Zayd, are among the throng. To these two children of the sixties, and former members of the Underground Weathermen, present college life seems dull and shallow, with this generation committed to "self" rather than "humanity." Having been on the FBI's Most Wanted List, and in hiding when Zayd was born, they have now taken their places in more mainstream society, she as a lawyer working with a Northwestern University program and he as a professor of education at the University of Illinois. Both remain leftist liberals, however, and only the "causes" have changed. Vowing not to argue with her son this weekend, Bernadine still cannot embrace his focuses on sexual conquests, consumerism, and personal development. Where are the grand causes in these kids' lives?

Barbara and daughter Neddy have endured a middle-of-the-night train ride and arrive in the rain on Saturday of Parents' Weekend. Both are hoping that this outing will reverse the downward spiral of Barbara's life since Cedric left home. She has run up some bills that cannot now be paid, the telephone has been cut off, and, in her depression, is even missing church events. As well, she fears that Cedric did not want her to come, that he is embarrassed by her. Not wanting to mingle with the "upper crust" parents, Barbara takes her son to some nearby malls, containing the very same stores found at home, but there is a greater comfort level for all three in this place, as they talk about the changes in the home neighborhood. Dinner is expensive, but Barbara is determined to show that she can do one thing other Brown parents can do: spend money on their children. By Sunday morning, she is out of cash and anxious to get home. Clearly, this place is not for her. While other parents are returning to an environment they knew themselves as young adults, Barbara can only think that her life is on a totally different plane; scraping by, working, pinching pennies to survive, immersed in a lifestyle most of them would find completely abhorrent. As she climbs the stairs of the dormitory for a final farewell to Cedric, she is greeted by Bernadine who naturally assumes she is Cedric's mother. Barbara is confused by the friendliness of this woman and mumbles a few words of greeting with a nod, as she meets Zayd, and continues her ascent. Clearly, Bernadine is disappointed that Barbara is unwilling to stop and converse, share some thoughts on the "times."

A Bursting Heart

A Bursting Heart Summary and Analysis

Donald Korb is a wealthy optometrist who mentors minority students. He met Cedric during the M.I.T. summer program and now provides financial support with a monthly allowance of two hundred dollars. He is concerned about Ce4dric's inferior educational background and has arranged for tutoring sessions, specifically in written expression, with Helaine Schupack, an old friend. For his first session, Cedric brings in two essays with which he is struggling, one on a short story by Richard Wright and one on his family's history of education. Helaine sees great inspiration in Cedric's writings and, once the grammar is cleaned up a bit, knows that this will suffice for now. He will receive good grades because he is able to give personal perspective to the topics. Later in his college career, however, he will be forced to write more dispassionate pieces, so he will need assistance with expository composition in the future.

Rob Burton will never need such assistance. He and Cedric are barely speaking now, and the last of the common property, Cedric's CD player has been moved to its owner's side of the room. Rob has his own, and there is often strife regarding whose music is to be played as well as the choice between music or television. A solution is found by the use of headphones, but the tension continues. Never seeming to feel tension, Zayd remains a busy boy. He has written a play, is being courted by a number of female upperclassmen, and is thoroughly immersed in his philosophy class - existentialism. He always finds time for Cedric, however, and they have become close enough to share the worst details of their childhoods, Zayd in hiding with his criminal parents and Cedric moving from one slum apartment to another, with a destitute mother and father in prison. Part of Zayd's fascination with Cedric stems from his black and white view of the world. Things are right or wrong, and moral principles must always guide one's actions. Zayd is confounded that someone can actually live up to such standards and be so authentic about it. He believes part of Cedric's "uptightness" is created by inner conflict regarding his principles from his old life and the assault on them in this new world. The other great attraction is that Cedric does not befriend people easily; others must win his friendship by being loyal, consistent, and trustworthy. Because of this, Zayd's relationship with Cedric is of great value, and it has taken almost until Thanksgiving to win it.

Cedric will be spending Thanksgiving at Dr. Korb's "palace" on Beacon Hill. Normal optometrists are not this wealthy, but Korb patented a new process for production of soft contact lenses and was an instant millionaire. As Cedric surveys his surroundings and the assorted guests, he muses that he has come from the very bottom (Southeast D.C.) to the very top (Beacon Hill) in a few short months, even if he does have to watch someone else in order to know which utensil to use and even if the upper-class white Thanksgiving has strange foods. He is clearly uncomfortable, out of his element, despite the continued efforts of the Korbs and others to demonstrate their care for him. Another experience in a world still so foreign.

The foreign nature of Cedric's new world is also noted by Tom James, professor of the History of American Education course. He has had a wealth of minority students and has completed significant research on education of various social and ethnic groups in America throughout history. Generally, contemporary minority students fall into two categories. The "accommodationists" usually enter the white world of education by high school and are able to adopt much of white middle class mores and values. By the time they reach college, they are able to navigate easily among the majority culture and their own,trading roles as situations might dictate. Others, like Cedric, however, are "culturally fixed." These are the products of inner-city public education, recipients of affirmative action policies on college campuses, who are unable to step out of their shoes and intellectualize their "roots." They become "passionate, sometimes angry, and often fail. James knows that Cedric has monumental challenges ahead as the first semester ends.

Back Home

Back Home Summary and Analysis

At semester's end, Cedric has easily passed all of his courses, but the victory seems shallow having opted for less than challenging classes. Home for a month over Christmas, he at first welcomes the familiarity of his room and family. As the days proceed, however, he experiences a rather dull tension, drifting through uneventful days and nights. He returns to a sparsely-attended alumni day at Ballou, speaks briefly to several teachers, and realizes that all around him is decay and the grim reality of violence, low expectations, and burned out adults. This part of his life is gone forever, and he knows he will never again visit this dismal place.

Latisha and Cedric have corresponded, and he takes her to Scripture Cathedral, where she has an epiphany and is "saved." She has had difficulty at UDC and will only take two courses next semester. Again, Cedric can no longer relate, as is also the case when he attends a family gathering at his grandmother's. His conclusion? No one at home truly understands his new life at Brown, and his emotional and spiritual ties to Southeast D.C. are fading. There is a sense of relief for Cedric as he returns to Andrews Hall. This is his home now, and he is going to make it work.

First is the issue of second semester classes. No more pass/fail grading options; no more low level courses. This semester he will take a challenging combination of psychology, calculus, an education field experience, the continuation of Spanish, and a computer science course in discreet math. The first few days of classes demonstrate that the challenges will be significant, but Cedric has had an epiphany of his own. What he accomplished the first semester was the sacrifice of his pride in favor of the easy path. Pride has been a dilemma, he realizes, and has conflicted him throughout his life thus far. Reverend Long has always taught that pride is a sin, for it comes from an attitude of elevation above others. Yet pride is at the very core of his being; it has pushed him to achieve against insurmountable odds at Ballou, and it will sustain him here at Brown. He may owe a lot to God, as he has been taught, but the hard work will be his, and he will be proud of himself.

The break has not changed Zayd. He is anxious to re-connect with Cedric, and they appear to resume their friendship where it was left before the month-long break. Things become bit strained, however, as they enter unexplored territory in discussion of the ability of blacks and whites to truly have the same depth of friendship that those of the same race enjoy. Zayd insists that there is no difference, but Cedric, still "wearing" his blackness as such a significant part of his identity, insists that Zayd, like all other whites at Brown, will continue to see him as a black friend rather than simply a friend. The discussion is unresolved, and a wedge has been driven between the two.

Let the Colors Run

Let the Colors Run Summary and Analysis

The bus travels to a section of Providence not often seen by Brown students. Slater Junior High School sits amid the dirty snow, pawn shops, and crap housing. It has been arranged for Cedric to spend two mornings a week, observing a classroom in eighth grade math. The teacher is a white male, and students are "tracked" into classes according to ability. In this environment, Cedric sees from whence he has come and completes his assigned journal as the black faces arrive and leave, lined up and walked from place to place. Here, kids are off-task, creating continual distractions for a teacher, whose response is to shout, condemn, and reprimand more than tech. Conversations with Mr. Fleming, the teacher, reveal low expectations and an attitude toward these kids that leaves Cedric filled with rage. His observations and analysis are the focus of a major paper for a mid-term grade, but he is struggling with its construction. The professor, an educator with experience in poor urban environments and on a three-year renewable teaching contract with Brown, is insisting upon an academic, objective piece. Cedric is unable to transcend his own background and emotions or his anger about the treatment of the young students he has observed. In the end, he alters the assignment, writing an introspective and poignant poem, which does not meet the assignment guidelines. Luckily, the instructor is moved" and grants a B grade, telling Cedric that the next paper must be a scholarly work and will carry greater weight than his poem. He worries that Cedric is not able to "step away" from the anger and outrage he feels about his own lacks in educational and social experiences. Cedric agrees and notes that he has begun this process in other aspects of his life a Brown.

Part of this process of separation from his past occurred over the month at home, as Cedric finalized an emotional break from his high school, his neighborhood, and, to some degree, from his church. The single emotional tie is to his mother, who will always be the remnant of that former life. All is not well with Barbara at home, though, and he is not aware of her circumstances. Barbara has, in some respects, experienced some freedom from her earlier sacrifices raising her son. Her closet houses new dresses and shoes, but the rent has gone unpaid for three months, and she is now facing eviction.

A second part of the process appears to be a thaw on the roommate relationship. Cedric has honestly revealed his high school tribulations to Rob. They have had breakfast together, during which Rob expresses his outrage at the "wall of shame" incident, specifically, male restroom graffiti listing all black male students dating white girls. The incident has sparked a campus-wide discussion of ethnic groups either staying "with their own" or branching out without color identity. Certainly, there are campus-wide black, gay, Asian, women's and Indian groups, and black students even have their own dorm, Harambee Hall. Students of Cedric's unit at Andrews Hall are still close, despite the ethnic diversity, but many also have one foot in more narrow associations based upon ethnicity. Cedric has avoided black student associations but is beginning to understand that having one foot in both worlds is "doable." As well, his judgmental, right

or wrong perspective is beginning to wane. He now personally knows fellow students who are gay, and they are not bad people.

The most important part of the process, however, is the understanding that the self-imposed exile which was so important through high school is not necessary here. At Ballou, he was the target of ridicule, hatred, and disdain. Here, no one sees hard work, pride and ambition as negative qualities; here, he is not a "sell out;" here, everyone is on his or her own path without the need to ridicule others or, more important, isolate themselves to avoid others.

A Place Up Ahead

A Place Up Ahead Summary and Analysis

Two lines of the poem Cedric wrote for his education field experience say, "always looking at the same hues is really no fun/ Maybe I'll just let the colors run." Zayd agrees that these are the best of the entire piece. After a tense period, Cedric and Zayd are back to the old relationship with one important change. Cedric now sees himself as Zayd's equal, not as a ghetto black kid trying to find acceptance. This is a major step for Cedric, for he is no longer seeking acceptance from white students as an inferior but hard-working minority lacking in the necessary skills to succeed at Brown; he is approaching relationships as a social equal who needs to work hard academically to meet his own goals.

Mid-terms are upon the freshmen, and the accompanying stress is evident. In psychology class, there are two mid-term exams, the first to be returned today. Cedric is horrified by a 30% and must consider his options. He cannot drop the class because he may have to drop the discreet math class. Spanish is not problem, and he surprises himself and his professor with a 94 and a 98 on his two calculus tests. Five courses, two of which have been truly difficult, force Cedric to realize that he has taken on too much in his efforts to stand above the others. The new plan? Convert the psychology class to a pass/fail and pour energy into the second mid-term and the assigned paper. Drop discreet math, the take-home exam for which would easily take a week to complete.

The workload and stress reduced, Cedric can focus somewhat more on his social relationships between study sessions. These include a casual date with Chinniqua (his first date at Brown), the mutual sharing of music with Rob, hanging out with Zayd and participating in some of the spring party weekends. Many of the parties are sponsored by social and ethnic students associations, pointing to the idea that has been gelling in Cedric's mind lately. One can be an authentic member of an ethnic group but can be a part of a larger culture as well. These two identities are not mutually exclusive nor are they as complicated as he has made them. Two other party experiences reinforce this new understanding, along with a short afternoon sojourn to the urban black section of Providence to touch base with his roots once again. The key, he decides, is to savor and taste all of life's experiences - black, white, mixed - for "...being here doesn't alter who he is...he's becoming sure enough of himself that he can get right up close, feel the pulse, smell the air, see what there is to see, and not lose himself. He can stay or leave. He can decide, because now he knows what's here. The choices are all his." (p. 333).

Meeting the Man

Meeting the Man Summary and Analysis

It is May on the Brown campus, and the flurry of activity has reached its high point. Parties abound; papers are due and finals are coming; there are plans to be made for housing arrangement next year; and, of course, there is the inevitable cleaning out of dorm rooms for the three-month move home. Cedric has a few more "firsts." Most notable from a social standpoint is that he has happily attended a number of parties without losing himself by succumbing to drinking, pot or sex. He has attended his first pop concert, given by the hugely popular black group, the Fugees, attended by screaming fans of every ethnicity. Cedric has never felt so "at home." The crowning point of acceptance, he knows, will be earning grades that keep him on an even par. Calculus and Spanish are no problem at all. In psychology, he received a 70% on his second mid-term and has been told by the professor that if he passes the final, he will pass the course. Cedric has divided the text into sections and has a time line for covering it all. The final grade for his educational field experience course will be the paper which must be exemplary and scholarly. He has work to do, but he also has a plan.

Tensions have risen again between Cedric and Rob, over a sink of all things. It began when rob shaved and did not clean out the sink. To make a statement, Cedric added baby powder and body lotion to the mix. Each has continued to add more mess as the final week has progressed, neither one communicating with the other. Rob is now packed and ready to leave; Cedric is cross-legged on his bed, studying for his final in calculus. Finally, rob breaks the silence, wishing Cedric good luck on his final and expressing the hope that his summer goes well. Cedric manages a "thank you." Reflecting on their relationship, Cedric remembers his mother's words - Rob is a test given by God; if Cedric fails the test, anther Rob will come into his life. He vows to seek Rob out next year and repair this damage. Zayd expresses his farewell in a manner which Cedric has shunned all year - a huge hug - but accepts it now, realizing that it is OK for guys to show affection. Two girls leave messages for him, referring to next year - "Next year, I'll dance," he murmurs to himself.

Cedric's homecoming is not pleasant. Barbara must now admit that eviction is upon them but fails to tell Cedric until a few hours before the marshals are to arrive to place their possessions on the street. The amount owed is now $2790.00, and she has not way to raise the money. Cedric is livid with his mother for her pride, for not informing other family members of her plight before it became an irreversible crisis. Barbara has tried to obtain assistance from charitable and governmental organizations, but funds are short. In a moment of panic, she contacted the assistant pastor at Scripture Cathedral, and he has promised to try. As the household goods are being taken to the street, the pastor arrives with the funds, and the crisis has been averted. Cedric, however, retreats into silence, refusing to speak to his mother, even though he is concerned about her

health. She has been experiencing chest pain lately, but has not sought medical attention - another point of contention between the two.

Other loose ends of Cedric's life have to be tied up as well. He visits his father and tucks away forever the earlier feelings of anger, disappointment and embarrassment. His father is being released to a drug rehabilitation program and seems old and small now. He schedules a meeting with Bishop Long to tell him that he has "outgrown" the church, though God and Jesus will always be a part of his life. Somehow, he needs Long's blessing and he receives it. The great loose end, however, is the relationship with his mother. As he watches her sleep in the darkness, Cedric realizes that he is part of the reasons she is now suffering. She has given to him all that she could, and he must receive it gratefully, without anger or resentment. She is truly the reason he is where he now, and it is time for him to do some of the caring. He tells her this, and the bond is sealed, a new relationship now forged. Now, perhaps, he can share his grades - A in calculus, B in field experience, and a "pass" in both Spanish and psychology.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary and Analysis

By his junior year at Brown, Cedric is indistinguishable from other Brown students. Carrying a B average, the old baggage is falling away, unfamiliar encounters are fewer and less stressful, and the initial confusion of college life and social interactions has virtually dissipated. Few students with Cedric's background make this journey successfully. Certainly, his former Ballou classmates have not. Latisha has quit school and is working for a fundamentalist church. Others who left for college have dropped out, and far more have taken the place of former dealers and criminals on the streets of Southeast D.C.

As for his parents, Cedric completed his drug program successfully and remains drug-free, living with his mother in D.C. Barbara's financial woes continued and she was eventually evicted. She has moved back to the house on 15th Street and is paying off her old debt rather rapidly. She is still a strong member of her church and continues to support it with the ten per cent tithing rule. Bishop Long has elevated his transportation to a Rolls Royce.

Of the initial dorm group, Rob and Cedric repaired their relationship during the sophomore year and remain solid friends; Zayd and Cedric have continued their close relationship, even though Zayd is spending his junior year at Oxford. Cedric himself spends more time socializing with black students at Brown. He is a regular visitor to Harambee House, where Chinniqua lives, and is dating a female basketball player from Virginia. As Cedric branches out in coursework and studies the history of immigration to this country, he sees that the journeys of those individuals are analogous to his journey from one "country" (Southeast D.C.) to another (the Ivy League). What drove them is what drives him - "a hope in the unseen."

Characters

Cedric Jennings

Born into poverty, Cedric grew up in the urban ghetto of southeast Washington, D.C., protected and strictly disciplined by his mother, Barbara. His life was completely consumed by school work and church, leaving no time for the drugs, sex and crime so prevalent all around him. As a high schooler, Cedric was a straight "A" student, an accomplishment that earned him ridicule, disdain and bullying from the majority of fellow students. Despite a rather low SAT score, Cedric was admitted to Brown University, thanks to affirmative action, a host of scholarships and the financial support of a wealthy mentor. Admission did not guarantee success and social acceptance, however, and the freshman year was a struggle. An honor student from an inner-city public high school, Cedric soon discovered, was far behind middle and upper-class peers who had experienced the rigorous curricula of top notch public and private schools.

From a social standpoint, Cedric struggled with the apparent conflict of retaining his own ethnic identity and roots while attempting to move among a much broader group of sophisticated and socially adept group of young people. Part of acceptance among achievers of this new society at Brown, Cedric understands, is academic success, and, beginning the race behind the others, means that he will have to work harder to catch up. y the end of his freshman year, Cedric has achieved a merging of his two "identities," allowing a comfort level with his "own" as well as with the broader Brown community. As well, he has met his academic goals to a degree that suggests he is closing the large gap between himself and his peers.

Barbara Jennings

Cedric's mother was a child of poverty, growing up in a home of many children and without much affection. After two illegitimate girls, she becomes pregnant again and gives birth to Cedric. Vowing that he will be raised and nurtured correctly, Barbara gives up a life of "sin" and devotes all of her resources to Cedric and her church. Raising her son in a strict environment of school work and religious activities, she is rewarded by his acceptance to Brown University. On her own, with no needs to fill but her own, Barbara becomes financially irresponsible and eventually moves back into the home of her childhood where she can live virtually free and repay her mountainous debt. Throughout her life, Barbara has had little ambition for herself and is satisfied with a menial government job and her trust that God will provide all she needs. Barbara is typical of most middle-aged urban blacks of her time. There is a resignation to living in lack, to finding solace in her religion, and to embracing the matriarchal aspect of raising children. She sees herself as a martyr for her male child but believes that her efforts and sacrifices were not only worth the result but were God's will. Barbara continues to be the one aspect of his old life that Cedric will retain, this mother who cared so much and who is now ready to receive some care from him.

Cedric Gilliam

Cedric's father is uninvolved in his son's life. In fact, upon learning of Barbara's pregnancy, he gave her the choice of an abortion or his departure. Cedric has spent so much time in prison for drugs and dealing that he has managed to earn two college degrees, with which he does nothing. He is a weak person, who appears unable to clean up his existence in order to remain regularly employed and no longer the target of federal marshals who are rather consistently looking for him with warrants. His sporadic intrusions into his son's life leave Cedric Jr. confused and often angry, but as well demonstrate to his son the results of a life not lived on purpose. Cedric Jr. is both attracted to and embarrassed by his father, but maintains intermittent contact with him, as a part of his quest to develop a mature identity. Following Cedric Jr.'s freshman year, the two visit in prison, as Cedric Sr. is on the verge of release. The college lad has questions for his father, primarily related to love of Barbara and his son. Cedric Sr. admits that he is unable to say the word "love." As a id-lifer, Cedric Gilliam finally enters a year-long drug rehabilitation program but, as a repeat offender, is unable to secure solid employment. Father and son have established a cordial relationship, and Cedric Jr. is now in control of it.

Bishop Long

Pastor of Scripture Cathedral, Reverend Long is a dichotomy of personal qualities. He appears to be a man steeped in his religion, has the ability to inspire the faithful, and is quite successful in extracting the ten per cent tithe from the majority of his congregation. All of this allows his move to the suburbs and the eventual purchase of a Rolls Royce. He often acts as a spiritual adviser to Cedric, warning him against veering from the strict and complete reliance upon God. Cedric appreciates the lifelong guidance from this pastor but eventually "outgrows" the church, adopting a more modified religious approach. `

Rob Burton

Son of two doctors, Rob has led an easy upper-class life and is an excellent student. He has arrived at Brown with all of the advantages of his upbringing and settles in as Cedric's roommates. Likable and fun, Rob is able to party and achieve good grades, and his sloppiness is a source of irritation for Cedric. Their rocky relationship is evident and often degrades into long periods of silence.

Zayd Dohrn

Zayd is the son of two former Underground Weathermen who have now taken their places in "acceptable" society as college professors. Of all the students in Cedric's dormitory, he is perhaps the most gregarious and independent, able to move among all groups with ease. Zayd befriends Cedric, finding him fascinating with his strict moral

codes and inner-city behaviors. Together, they work toward the establishment of a solid relationship of equals.

Clarence Taylor

Mr. Taylor is a stable part of Cedric's high school career at Ballou. More than just a chemistry teacher, he provides Cedric a "safe haven" amidst the chaos and the encouragement to pursue his higher educational goals.

Dr. Donald Korb

Dr. Korb is a wealthy optometrist who serves as a mentor and provides financial support to Cedric during his years at Brown. He is committed to assisting poor urban blacks who have intellectual promise but realizes the challenges they face. In addition to giving Cedric a monthly allowance, he arranges for special tutoring to help fill some of the gaps in Cedric's high school education.

Chinniqua Milligan

Chinniqua is an African-American student who, unlike Cedric, entered the white middle-class educational world at an earlier age and exhibits a far great sense of self as she joins the Brown student body. She and Cedric become good friends and, through her, he begins to see the potential to move among more than one societal "world."

Latisha Williams

Latisha is a good student at Ballou High School and a friend to Cedric. While there is never any romantic interest on Cedric's part, he is happy to have a friend who shares some of his attitudes and goals. She goes on to University of D.C. but drops out in favor of a life of religious work.

Clarence Thomas

The only black Supreme Court Justice, Clarence Thomas sets up a meeting with Cedric, as he does with many promising black high school students as they prepare for college. Cedric does not find much to take from the meeting, believing that Thomas is almost hiding from the public.

Objects/Places

Ballou High School

An inner city public high school in Southeast Washington, D.C.

Spiritual Cathedral

Church to which Cedric and his mother Barbara both belong. The head pastor is Bishop Long.

Brown University

One of the "Ivy League" colleges, located in Providence, Rhode Island

Andrews Hall

The dormitory at Brown in which Cedric spends his freshman year.

M.I. T.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the site of a summer program for minority students which Cedric attends between his junior and senior years.

Harambee House

All-black dormitory at Brown University

Slater Junior High School

A school in the inner city of Providence and site of Cedric's educational field experience during his freshman year.

Lorton Corectional Institution

Site of Cedric's father's incarceration in Washington, D.C.

Billboard

The Brown University student newspaper

House on 15th Street

A clapboard house in southeast Washington, D.C. in which Barbara was raised, to which Barbara and Cedric moved several times in between apartments, and the final residence for Barbara after her eviction from the apartment she and Cedric shared while he was in high school

Themes

The Myth of Equal Education

There has been a strong push to ensure equal educational opportunity to all American citizens since the mid-1950s. Efforts have included court cases, state legislation, and a re-aligning of state funding to individual school districts, but the disparity continues without much change. Across the country, inner-city public school facilities are in poor condition, staff tends to be less expert, and equipment and supplies are clearly inferior to that of their suburban counterparts.

The characteristics of the poverty culture housed in these schools, moreover, mean that these student populations are far more at risk for educational failure than than suburban counterparts. There have been herculean efforts on the part of most cities to integrate their school populations, in an effort to provide more equality, but, in most cases, these plans have resulted in the more capable poor children being moved to formerly white schools, while the less capable minority students remain in the inferior schools. When less capable students are moved to higher-functioning schools, moreover, they are often placed in specialized classes because of their clear gaps in academic achievement. The end result of all of these efforts, as statistics clearly demonstrate, is that the majority of minority students, if they graduate from high school, are lacking in the skills and content knowledge that their white counterparts have. They thus enter employment or post-secondary education with deficits that often cannot be eradicated without substantial effort and outside support. All of the court cases, legislation, and financial re-arrangement, while perhaps demonstrating "equality" on paper, do not, in fact, provide equal educational experiences for all American children. This inherent inequality is apparent as one follows the road taken by Cedric Jennings through high school and his first year of college. He is clearly an academic star at his high school, but that achievement has not resulted in a high SAT score or placed him on equal footing with the competition he meets at Brown University. For Cedric, closing the gap entails working twice at hard as other students, engaging in self-learning of middle-class culture and mores, and boning up on a myriad of majority terms, vocabulary, and references never covered at his high school. It is a monumental task which most inner-city kids would not assume or, if assumed, would not complete successfully.

Search For One's Identity

As children grow into adulthood, their journey includes experiences and relationships which help to define who they eventually become. Ideally, children have at least one loving, nurturing parent, a solid educational foundation, the benefit of healthy peer relationships, and a support system that includes family and, most often, spiritual/ethical values. All of these things result in a "developed" person, one who is both educated and principled. The reverse of this picture results in an wholly different identity. As an adult, the individual defines himself in terms of his development, as capable, productive, and

optimistic, or, in other cases, incapable, unproductive and pessimistic. As well, an individual defines himself in terms of his peer group within society, adopting the values and principles of that peer group. For many, the search for identity is a progressive, sequential and relatively predictable process. These adults take their place in society much as their parents have done. For children like Cedric Jennings, however, the path is far more complex and dangerous. His initial identity is as an inner-city black kid from poverty and a single-parent home.

Interwoven into this identity is his religion, a pentecostal sect which holds that anything accomplished or gained comes directly from God, as He ordains it. Success, then, is not the result of secular factors and appears to be almost pre-ordained for some and not for others, according to their spiritual steadfastness. As Cedric enters Brown University, his identity is assaulted by middle-class black students, from suburbia and professional parents, and middle and upper-class whites, all of whom seem to have a far more secular view of their universe. For Cedric the conflict is substantial. Irrespective of the academic holes he must fill as quickly as possible, he is torn between the culture and religion he has left behind, the unique cultural identity of middle-class minorities and the white majority world. For Cedric, the struggle to identify himself is painful and consistently filled with uncomfortable and frightening experiences. What he comes to realize, however, is that the struggle need not be as difficult as he has made it. He can choose to identify himself as a part of any and all cultures - as the inner-city kid with a unique language, faith, and introspective demeanor, as a cooler, more worldly member of the black middle-class, a peer group he is coming to understand and embrace, or a part of the broader culture of college-graduate professionals - black, Hispanic, Asian, Arabic, or white.

The Enduring Cycle of Poverty

Statistically, children who are born into poverty will remain in poverty throughout their lifetimes. Cedric Jennings is the exception to the rule, and demonstrates, through the biographical account in A Hope in the Unseen, how difficult it is to break this cycle. The motivation, the steadfastness, the tenacity, and the hard work are what has set Cedric above the rule, but the reality is that children born into poverty and its culture have an almost impossible task of overcoming their social and economic "roots" and developing the personal qualities that will allow them to cross the barriers and arrive into the American middle class. Suskind clearly demonstrates the nature of this cycle as he describes Cedric's classmates at Ballou, the goals and aspirations of some of them, and then provides a follow-up on them in his Epilogue. These students have returned and resigned themselves to life as their parents know it - menial employment, religious zeal, low-income housing and poor education for their own children. They cycle is further demonstrated as one reads of Barbara Jennings' own life, born and raised in Southeast Washington, D.C., raising three illegitimate children, accepting the fact that her employment and financial circumstances will never improve, and completing her cycle by living in the home of her childhood, unable to afford her own housing. The cycle is demonstrated by the life of Cedric Gilliam, a child of the inner city who, after earning two college degrees in prison, cannot muster up the motivation to "right" himself and pursue

a life other than that of drugs and prison. The cycle is demonstrated when Cedric returns to Ballou for an alumni day and finds the same chaos that will always exist in his high school, or when he completes an educational field experience in an inner-city school in Providence. He sees the same students that were his peers in D.C., wondering how many of them have the potential to achieve but who never will have the opportunity to do so. Suskind offers no solutions, but he clearly makes the statement that equality of opportunity is an ideal far from achieved in America.

Style

Perspective

Ron Suskind, author of A Hope in the Unseen, is a journalist and staff writer for The Wall Street Journal. Living in Washington, D.C., Suskind, in 1995, wrote a two-article series on Cedric Jennings' high school career, a work for which he received a Pulitzer Prize. So struck was Suskind by the struggles of an inner-city black kid to survive and thrive, Suskind followed Cedric into college, to discover the specific challenges that such a young person faces in the Ivy League world of middle and upper-class college students. Because Suskind leads the reader through the myriad of Cedric's struggles, successes and failures through Cedric's own eyes, the reader is given a first-person, omniscient account of events, experiences, emotions and thoughts of a young man struggling to survive and, indeed, thrive, in a "foreign" world. Within the context of Cedric's story, however, Suskind is able to inject provocative and quality discussion of racial issues which continue to plague American society today: affirmative action, discrimination in employment, the justice system for poor blacks, and the socio/economic plight of inner-city minorities. Perhaps the most important statement to be made from this work is the pervasive persistence of the culture of poverty and our apparent inability to find effective solutions to the removal of the ceilings placed upon poor, urban minorities, so that all of them may have hope in the unseen.

Tone

The story of Cedric Jennings inspires optimism in our American progressivism. It is a "rags to riches" story, not in monetary achievement, but in in the pursuit of an American dream of education and acceptance into mainstream society. Indeed, Cedric himself compares his dream with those of immigrants to America who have had a dream of a better life in a land of democracy and equality. Through the struggles and setbacks, the reader is eventually rewarded with the "Cinderella" ending of the young man who made it "against all odds." Underlying this optimism, however, is the grander statement of pessimism. For every Cedric Jennings, there are millions of young black men and women who do not make it, who, like Cedric's friends from high school, settle for a job in the mail room, opt for religious zeal over college, or who simply fail to "make the grade" in college. Worse, like so many in Cedric's senior class, they opt for sporadic employment, illegitimate children, criminal activity, drugs and alcohol. Without being combative over the issues of poor minorities and lingering racism in America, Suskind nevertheless points out that the picture is not changing significantly for minorities in this country. Cedric Jennings is clearly the exception to the rule - this fact serves to lend a pessimism that is clearly "between the lines."

Structure

The structure of A Hope in the Unseen is chronological, detailing the sojourn of Cedric Jennings from an achieving high school student and dutiful, religious adolescent, through the unchartered territory of a turbulent first year at Brown University. Within his chronological context, however, Suskind is able to adeptly weave a thematic approach, focusing on distinct aspects of the struggle as the journey moves forward. The reader thus witnesses the sequential academic saga in precise semester accomplishments and failures, but, as well, receives a thematic structure that transcends the chronology. These themes include his relationships with his mother, his imprisoned father, and classmates in both high school and college; introspection and change related to the role of religion in his life; and the search for an identity that allows him to move amidst a significantly broadened society while maintaining his own uniqueness. Finally, Suskind is able to overlap a discussion of the issues related to poverty and racism in America, specifically the "stacked deck" against poor minority students who must compete with better prepared white counterparts, policies of affirmative action, and the prevalence of generational poverty, in order to demonstrate the infancy of the process in identifying and implementing effective solutions to race and class in America.

Quotes

Pride. Cedric's 4.02 grade point average virtually ties him for first in the junior class with a quiet, studious girl named LaCountiss Spinner. Pride in such accomplishment is acceptable behavior for sterling students at high schools across the land, but at Ballou and other urban schools like it, something else is at work. Educators have even coined a phrase for it. They call it the crab/bucket syndrome: when one crab tries to climb from the bucket, the others pull it back down. The forces dragging students toward failure - especially those who have crawled farthest up the side - flow through every corner of the school. Inside the bucket, there is little chance of escape. (p.17)

They lived frugally. The girls were in school, and Barbara and Lavar took buses to thrift shops in low-rent strip malls. She'd buy him books there and sometimes clothing. She'd prowl through the racks while he played with the secondhand toys. She bought cards with colors and numbers and they'd sit while she flashed the cards and drilled him. They visited museums and the Anacostia library. Countless hours were spent at the church. There were plenty of women around - between Barbara's sisters and Scripture's missionary ladies - and young Lavar was the pride of a matriarchy. (p. 31)

For both mother and son, one thing was certain: at the darkest moments, there was always the sanctuary of Scripture Cathedral. Like for so many inner-city blacks who left mainstream churches for Pentecostal congregations in the 1970s and 1980s (making it the fastest-growing denomination in the country), the Scripture Cathedral offered Cedric and Barbara neat designations of good and evil and strict rules forbidding even common activities, like watching movies or dressing provocatively. For Barbara, who, like so many, came to fervent Pentecostalism from a life broken by poverty and neglect, the church provided both moral orderliness and an absolution for past failures that finally allowed her peace about all that had gone wrong over the years. Here, success was not an honor, nor privation a dishonor; the Lord assiduously threw up tests and kept score based solely on faith Bishop Long, in his sermons, railed against the sins of pride and ambition. (p. 36)

He's run through this train of logic before, countless times. He strokes his brow, something he does when he feels stress coming on, and settles into his fall back position. It's simple, he concludes. M.I.T. wants minority undergraduates, and the program's corporate sponsors eventually want minority employees. That's why he's ended up running a program filled with self-assured middle- or upper-middle-class black and Hispanic kids - leaders of tomorrow, all - many of whom are here for little more than resume padding.
Still, every year he'll find room for a few poor kids from bad schools. And they're the ones that drive him crazy with yearning, the ones who dream in Technicolor but can't integrate fractions to save their lives. (p. 91)

Cedric, always attentive to potential threats, has spent the two weeks since the awards ceremony with his face frozen in an innocuous half-smile, trying to look utterly neutral and inert, shrugging a lot as though all his good fortune stems from some sort of clerical

error. It's just the most recent of many poses Cedric has affected since he got into Brown. Once word got out about his acceptance, he noticed a grimness start to come over his antagonists in the halls. It was easier to be the headstrong monk, a boy on a long-shot mission, before he's actually won anything. With the prize in hand, he realized his single-minded drive came across as aloof cockiness; his painful martyrdom suddenly looked like self-nomination for sainthood. So he toned it down, not telling anyone about the Clarence Thomas meeting. Not discussing his preparations for Brown. Not talking too much about the awards. Pride, he knows, can get you killed in a place like this. (pp. 125-6)

It's something Long can detect. When a congregant, probably living paycheck to paycheck, gives $500, winning a trip to the stage for Bishop's own Holy spirit "touch" to the forehead, it's because that contributor truly believes the bible's assurance that each such gift will return a blessing to them tenfold. But, as the true believer dances on the stage, infused with the Spirit and sure that tenfold - or a hundred-fold - rewards are coming. Long might spot some lady in her new dress wince or a newly confident man, fresh from a big promotion, snicker. There are a few congregates who've discovered another way to get ahead, to get that house, and a bigger one after it - the secular way, by studying hard, going to a top college and maybe graduate school, by networking, strategizing, and matching preparation with opportunity. Sure, they still believe in God, but He's got competition now - a belief in the sovereignty of self - and the spell of absolute, unquestioning faith, upon which Long has built his cathedral, is broken. (p. 151)

While Barbara is delighted that Cedric, so tightly wound yesterday, is now buoyantly bouncing as he walks, an unwanted self-consciousness is welling up inside her. She'd rather not notice the cars other parents are driving, the clothes they're wearing, and the ease with which they move. She knows, of course, that the typical Brown parents probably went to college and on to some professional status that their offspring, by virtue of this Ivy League acceptance, are now bounding toward. Here, it's a day for her to be proud, but she can't help staring at them - these smiling, polished people - and overhearing their jaunty melody of generational succession: a child's footsteps following their own, steps on a path that leads to prosperity's table and a saved seat right next to Mom and Dad. pp. 163-64

As he passes the next day with this crowd, Cedric slips into his polite but wary game face, responding quickly when questioned, avoiding extended conversations, taking in more than he is giving out. He's taking mental notes on every discussion of who hails from where and what they've done, every hand raised in a group discussion that's not his, every offhand late-night reference to Hemingway or John Grisham, to Beethoven or Bob Dylan. From the collected references, he tries to decipher patterns of behavior and custom. It's exhausting. Periodically, he breaks from the crowd, retreating to his room to unwind, feeling like he's been cramming for a test. (p. 168)

One month into this new world of higher education, Cedric Jennings's chin is barely above the waterline. So many class discussions are full of references he doesn't understand - he often feels like a foreigner, like one of those Asian kids he sees in the

math lab who can barely speak English but integrate fractions at blinding speed. By now, he understands that Maura knows what to write on her pad and the sleepers will be able to skim the required readings, all of them guided by some mysterious encoded knowledge of history, economics, and education, of culture and social events, that they picked up in school or at home or God knows where. (p. 190)

Cedric knows all this, just as he knows his resistance (to sex, drugs, and drink) was made possible, back when, by Barbara's fierce code, Pastor Long's admonitions against all such licentiousness, and the constant reminders of Cedric Gilliam's broken journey, testifying to what can happen when someone without hope of personal betterment discover drinking and drugs. But, eventually, something else took root. Cedric needing to justify his monkish routine night after night, developed a genuine belief that sacrifice, hard work, and extremely clean living would lead to rewards, including a scholarship to a top college. (p. 197)

The juxtaposition of Cedric and Franklin causes Tom to squirm. He knows Cedric mostly from his papers, especially the family tree paper where he so boldly revealed how fifth is at the center of his life, and from a few times he's spoken up in class. Cedric is not accomodationist. He is black and urban, a church kid from the inner city and, at this point, still culturally fixed, always in his shoes. He can't step away from it, can't intellectualize it, because it's still too close, too visceral. It's why so many kids like him - passionate, sometimes angry kids - fail here. (p. 260)

By now, the school day has started. Cedric notices James has already disappeared, and he wanders out into the halls, not sure what to do. He peers into a few classrooms, thinking that everything seems the same but weirdly far off, like he's watching it on TV. On the first floor he walks past a cluster of boys who should be in class - they look sort of puny to him - and then he stops, reaching out to touch his first-floor locker. It's someone else's now, but he turns and leans his back against it and tries to sketch outlines of the previous owner, the angry boy who ran a gauntlet in these halls and preached at graduation. But he can't. The only thing around him that stirs any remembrance is the thing that, back then, he struggled to overlook - the very ruin of the place, the fading light in teachers' eyes, the bleakness all around. Maybe he didn't notice it as much when he was here, or maybe it was the blight, closing in, that kept him running, and he saw it only in passing. Now he smells despair every where, and it makes his nostrils burn. (p. 267)

The key, he finally realizes, has always been pride. Over years, it had quietly knitted itself into his core. But, just like at church it was sort of a sin in his neighborhood and at Ballou. Though he'd never actually use the word, kids must have sensed it in him when they always attacked him for "thinking he was better than everyone else." He ended up building all those convoluted rationales for lofty ambition, saying he needed to go to a famous college, a place everyone had heard of, to justify all of his painful sacrifices. It's all clear now: that was just a cover. It was pride - pure, simple, in-your-face, shining breastplate pride - that got him to this place. And, after making it this far, he'll be damned if he'll swallow it now. (p. 275-76)

All of which makes his current exile mostly self-imposed, a remnant, maybe, of long years when he became accustomed to being alone, convincing himself that it meant he was special - and maybe better in some fundamental, godly way - than the other kids on the street or at church or at Ballou. He had to tie his identity to that notion of separateness; it was the only way he could stay on course and keep his sanity, really, as they hurled insults at him about racial betrayal or insufficient maleness and foolhardy optimism. Here, no one is really hurling anything. They're just all going about their business - everyone in their own little show - and he has to find some other way to feel special. Being alone doesn't seem to be working. (p. 203)

He dealt with this crowd somewhat at MIT, black kids who say they're from New York though they live in Westchester County, black kids with bright futures who are as anxious to co-opt inner-city coolness as the white kids in the unit. The difference is that the black middle-class kids can really pull it off. He feared that, if he got close to Harambee, the undertow would be irresistible and his oaths about integration, about taking the toughest path, mixing with kids from all races and creeds, would give way to a separatist compromise. At Brown, that's the path of least resistance almost everyone takes. And where would that end? Cedric Jennings as a middle-class wanna-be, a poor imitation, trying to keep up with doctors' kids from good high schools who also happen to be black...being here doesn't alter who he is ...he's becoming sure enough of himself that he can get right up close, feel the pulse, smell the air, see what there is to see, and not lose himself. He can stay or leave. He can decide, because now he knows what's here. The choices are all his. (pp. 332-33)

Subtly, almost without notice, the passing days bring him self-knowledge, which is what all the lecturing, note-taking, testing, and endless intervening hours are really about anyway. He still hears the echo from rutted Southeast Washington and presses through gusts of thankfulness and survivor's guilt to figure out why he escaped when so many - who are so much like him - did not. As he searches and learns more in classes and discussions about the country's immigrant past, the phrase "a hope in the unseen" continues to resonate. That's the thing, he figures, that built the country, that drew often luckless people across oceans to a place they could barely imagine. He knows it is what propelled him from one country to another - even though he is nothing but an immigrant, and even though these are anything but hopeful days for most African Americans. Nonetheless, the fact remains; he had hope in a better world he could not yet see that overwhelmed the cries of "you can't" or "you won't" or "why bother." More than anything else, mustering that faith, on cue, is what separated him from his peers, and distinguishes him from so many people in these literal, sophisticated times. It has made all the difference. (p. 364-65)

Topics for Discussion

Two lines from Cedric's poem read, "Always looking at same hues is no fun,/ Maybe I'll just let the colors run." Given the context of the entire poem, discuss what Cedric is attempting to say.

Define "affirmative action." Is it a valid policy for organizations and institutions? Defend your response.

What middle-class values does Cedric already possess when he enters Brown, even though he does not realize it. Cite specific examples from the text to support your listing.

Why are sex, drugs and drinking the cause of ruin in inner city kids and yet not a problem among middle and upper-class Brown students?

It is often said that African American women cling to their religion. Why do you think this is so? Support your answer by citing specific examples from the life of Barbara Jennings.

Attempts to make education equal for all races, beginning with Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 through court-ordered desegregation, do not appear to have resolved the issue. What new solutions might be implemented?

In many ways,Cedric's path and unfolding insights can be termed a "coming of age," something every person experiences. How and why is Cedric's "coming of age" more difficult?