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

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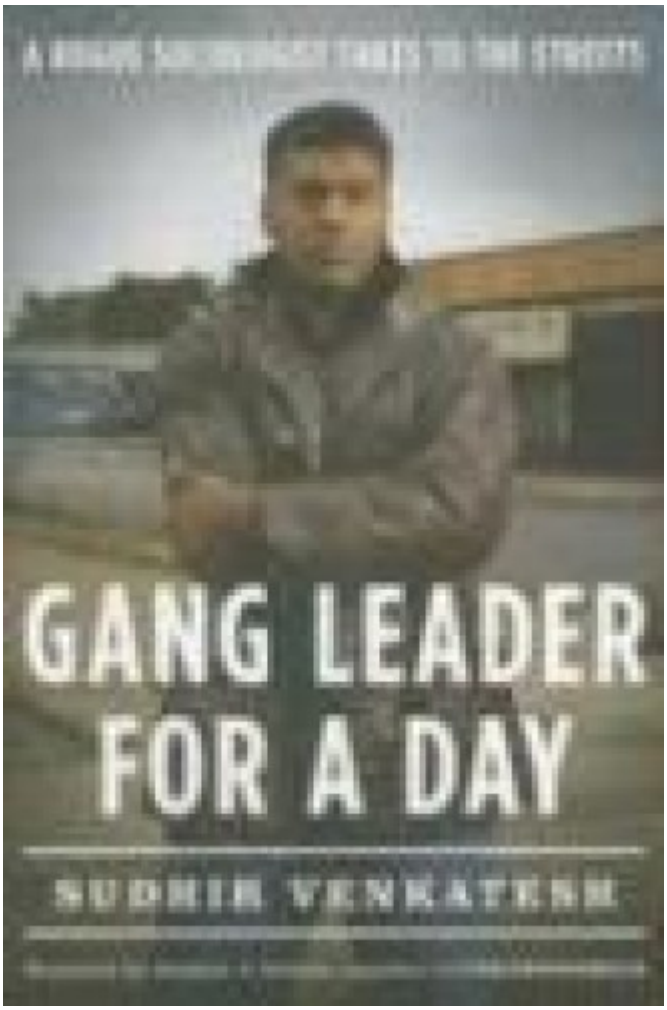
In Review



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

Sudhir Venkatesh
Penguin

At first glance, Sudhir Venkatesh's *Gang Leader for a Day* looks something like a spin-off television show. Venkatesh was featured in Stephen Dubner and Steven Levitt's bestselling *Freakonomics* as the sociologist who befriended gang leaders and got revealing economic information from them. In *Gang Leader for a Day*, he takes on the moniker "rogue sociologist" and, like Dubner and Levitt, tries to communicate his academic pursuit to a general audience.

Looking at the cover—a photo of Venkatesh in a leather jacket looking tough—you might think that you are in for a story written by someone with a large ego. But what makes *Gang Leader for a Day* interesting and provocative reading is Venkatesh's capacity for self-deprecation and deep self-questioning. The book—part memoir, part sociology-lite—is about Venkatesh's six years of research in the Robert Taylor housing projects on the South Side of Chicago.

Venkatesh begins with a portrait of himself as a first-year graduate student wandering naively into one of the most dangerous areas of Chicago with a multiple-choice questionnaire to be answered by residents of the projects. (Question: How does it feel to be black and poor? Choices: very bad, somewhat bad, neither good nor bad, somewhat good, very good.) While being detained by a gang, he meets a junior-level gang leader with whom he makes an unusual connection. Over the next six years, while Venkatesh studies sociology at the University of Chicago and writes his dissertation, J. T. allows him access to an insider's view of gang life, even making him, for a few ineffective hours, "gang leader for a day."

J. T. rises through the gang's ranks because he has intimate knowledge of his neighborhood and is an effective manager. In Venkatesh's description, J. T. is an intelligent, narcissistic and paranoid young man who has made questionable but not unreasoned choices. He is clear about the risks and the rewards he has chosen, and he is as much a middle-management bureaucrat as a criminal thug. On the day that Venkatesh tries to be gang leader, we see that the decisions J. T. has to make on a daily basis are too nuanced for an outsider to fully comprehend and that the stakes of every choice are high.

Many dangers are attendant to this kind of research. There are, of course, the tangible dangers, like getting beaten up, shot or arrested while hanging out with gang members. Venkatesh manages to turn almost everyone against himself, including rogue police officers and the tenants in J. T.'s building. But there is another

concern: the possibility that Venkatesh will get too caught up in J. T.’s version of events. Venkatesh’s professors wisely urge him to pay attention to people other than those whom J. T. directs him to, and particularly to pay attention to women.

Male and female economies in the projects are linked, but also quite distinct. While young men sell drugs and older men have various ad hoc businesses like fixing cars, women live quite separate economic lives. They take in boarders, create small shops in their apartments and sometimes sell their bodies. Their survival skills are ingenious but heartbreaking.

Venkatesh creates a writing group for young women in the projects, and one week the topic is “How I Survive.” From the women, he hears stories of the horrors and indignities of their lives. The women teach him how they keep prostitutes out of their stairwells (by letting their children pee in them), how they negotiate with the gangs for their safety, how they use bribes to prevent eviction, what sex can and cannot be traded for and so on. The group is ultimately disbanded when residents accuse Venkatesh of sleeping with the young women.

J. T.’s female counterweight is the formidable Ms. Bailey, who serves as building president of the local advisory council. Venkatesh creates a complex portrait of a woman of power and fortitude as well as pettiness and cruelty. We learn that ultimately he sees Ms. Bailey as corrupt, and his own feelings about her turn to bitterness, but not before we understand that Venkatesh relies on her and that she frequently betters him in conversation and intelligence.

The central plot of this book concerns neither J. T.’s rise through gang ranks nor Ms. Bailey’s rise and fall as tenant leader, but Venkatesh’s struggle with the ethics of his situation. “We’re all hustlers,” Ms. Bailey tells him. “You’ll do anything to get what you want. Just don’t be ashamed of it.” And the reader begins to wonder how true this is. One day Venkatesh participates in the beating of a crack addict who has just assaulted a prostitute. In another episode, he spends several weeks collecting information on everyone in the building who earns under-the-table cash. He shares this information with J. T. and Ms. Bailey, who then use the information to extort more money from residents. Naïveté or hustling? Venkatesh gives residents, J. T., Ms. Bailey and the reader an opportunity to weigh in, and that’s the power of the book. Yes, it gives you astonishing insights into urban poverty. Yes, your heart aches for the people caught in the crossfire. Yes, you meet characters worthy of Dickens. But ultimately what drives this book is an ethical question about stepping into other

people’s lives with no chance of helping them.

It would be easy to criticize Venkatesh for spending six years flattering the ego of a dangerous gang leader or observing people in desperate circumstances and doing nothing to help. His own actions are questionable and disturbing. But as he takes you on this journey, he doesn’t spare himself from criticism. When J. T. summarizes Venkatesh’s skills harshly—“You can’t fix nothing, you never worked a day in your life. The only thing you know how to do is hang out with niggers like us”—Venkatesh doesn’t try to protest or to prove himself. He writes, “I nearly choked on my beer when he summarized my capacities so succinctly—and, for the most part, accurately.”

Venkatesh’s missteps and betrayals constitute the bulk of the narrative. In this particular war zone (the crack trade of the 1990s) there is no such thing as a neutral observer. J. T. frequently reminds him: “You are either with me or you are with someone else. If you are with someone else, I can’t protect you.”

In the end, Venkatesh may have proved to be the superior hustler. The information he collects from J. T.—J. T. thinks Venkatesh is writing his biography, an impression that the author fails to thoroughly correct—helps him get a prestigious job at Columbia University. J. T. meanwhile leaves gang life but has few other opportunities. Perhaps this is hustling; perhaps it is a vivid picture of the power of resources. Either way, Venkatesh’s book raises more questions than it answers.