Gang Leader for a Day

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SUDHIR VENKATESH

Sudhir Venkatesh was born in India and attended high school outside of San Diego, California. As he discusses in *Gang Leader for a Day*, his parents encouraged him to pursue a career in the "hard sciences," and he majored in mathematics at UC-San Diego. He then switched, however, to sociology, and accepted a fellowship in the doctoral program at the University of Chicago, a department famed for its influential depictions of life in cities, and for its often quantitative emphasis (on, for example, demographic and economic statistics of communities under study). Venkatesh began observing communities in the poor, predominantly African-American South Side of the city under the direction of Professor William Wilson, an important figure in American sociology. Venkatesh's academic struggles as a doctoral student, his budding research, and his attempts to reconcile the demands of that research with other aspects of his life make up the plot of *Gang Leader for a Day*, a memoir that accompanies his dissertation on urban poverty and off-the-books economies. Venkatesh was, until recently, a tenured professor and prominent sociologist at Columbia University. He now works at Facebook Research (a part of the technology company), where he analyzes "human-computer interaction."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Venkatesh begins his research at the very end of the 1980s, when, as he describes, American society was changing dramatically. Welfare and other systems designed to help the urban poor (many of which were established via Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" of the mid-to-late 1960s) were being defunded, eroded, or altered as part of Ronald Reagan's plan for diminished or nonexistent government interference in the private sector. This meant that, for example, public housing subsidies to large cities fell precipitously in the 1980s, and experiments in large-scale, government-supported living, especially for historically underrepresented minority communities, were no longer utopian ideas heralded by local, state, and federal politicians. Instead, places like the Robert Taylor Homes were characterized (as Venkatesh describes) as "blights," bastions of entrenched poverty, crime and, illicit behavior. These local, state, and government policies continued to deemphasize or even ignore,housing projects and the people who lived in them – and politicians offered, instead, "mixed-income" housing solutions that often led to the breaking-up of families living together in housing projects, and to the "urban renewal" of places like the Homes for large-scale building projects (arenas, convention centers) or housing that favored middle- and upper-middle class working families. Thus Venkatesh's subjects are understudied by researchers because they are barely supported by the governments charged with managing their apartments and policing their communities. Venkatesh's work, in large part, examines how people live in environments so little depicted (and so frequently sensationalized) in the popular press of the 1980s and '90s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Venkatesh's memoir participates in two different literary genres or subfields. The first is the general-interest economics book, which can be summarized, essentially, by one volume: *Freakonomics*, by Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner (economist and journalist, respectively). Venkatesh is featured in that text, and Levitt and Dubner attempt throughout to apply economic problem-solving strategies to issues not usually studied by economists. Thus Venkatesh's work on the gray-market and under-explained interactions of sex workers with their johns, and of drug dealers with drug buyers, sheds light on common social and economic relationships that are not "official," are untaxed, and are not out in the open. These relationships are, however, central to the economic systems of many communities, including places like the Robert Taylor Homes. A second literary movement of which Venkatesh's work is a part is that of the memoir, or "self-writing," in the 1990s and 2000s. These books cross literary genres: there are memoirs of artistic life (Mary Karr's *Lit* and *The Liars' Club*); of illness and feeling (Leslie Jamison's *The Empathy Exams*); of childhood (Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*; Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*; Patti Smith's *Just Kids*). Numerous contemporary critics have pointed out that this genre was and is, in many senses, more popular than the genre of the novel. Thinkers of the period (at magazines like *n+1* and in forums like the *New York Times*) described this phenomenon, and devoted increased magazine-space to reviews and discussions of non-fiction accounts with narrative elements.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets*
- **When Written:** The early 2000s
- **Where Written:** Chicago, Cambridge (Ma.), New York City
- **When Published:** 2008
- **Literary Period:** 21st-century non-fiction, Contemporary sociology
- **Genre:** Sociology (in "general-interest" form); memoir
- **Setting:** the South Side of Chicago, mostly in and around the

Robert Taylor Homes housing projects

- **Climax:** Sudhir kicks a man named Bee-Bee in the Homes, who was accused of beating his girlfriend – thus allowing other members of the Black Kings to apprehend him and beat him, as punishment.
- **Point of View:** first-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Dissertation. Venkatesh's dissertation was published by Harvard University Press in 2002 and is entitled *American Project*. It contains more in-depth and statistically-rigorous discussions of some of the material featured in *Gang Leader for a Day*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Sudhir Venkatesh, a graduate student in sociology at the University of Chicago, begins *Gang Leader for a Day* by describing a crack den in a project on the South Side of that city. Sudhir says he is not there to do drugs, but to observe people as they buy them, do them, and sell them. Sudhir structures his narrative as a series of observations on lower-class urban, predominantly African-American, society, combined with a description of how and why he came to study this particular group.

Initially, Sudhir was a student of Professor Bill Wilson's at UChicago. Wilson, a famous sociologist, encouraged Sudhir to take a questionnaire into the projects of Chicago's South Side, asking respondents "how it feels to be black and poor." Sudhir does this and meets a group of young men one day who, along with their leader, JT, scoff at his question. JT, who Sudhir discovers runs a sub-group of a larger Chicago gang called the Black Kings (BKs), tells Sudhir that he can only learn about their lives if he returns and observes them living. Sudhir does this the next day, offering JT a **beer** and asking if he can follow JT around.

This relationship – in which Sudhir observes JT's life as manager of a drug-dealing business, with attendant "hustles" in prostitution and other petty criminal enterprises – becomes the core of the book. JT introduces Sudhir to his mother, Ms. Mae, who often feeds Sudhir while he's in the Robert Taylor Homes, the projects JT comes to "manage" as gang manager for that region of Chicago. Sudhir also meets, through JT, people like Ms. Bailey, a semi-crooked elected official who benefits both herself and those around her in agitating for better conditions in the projects. Others are characters like C-Note, a "hustler" who makes money doing repairs and cleaning cars – or T-Bone and Price, "lieutenants" of JT's who help him manage the intricacies of the drug-dealing business that is at the center of the Black Kings' moneymaking enterprise.

Eventually, Sudhir "takes over" JT's position as gang leader for one day, and sees how JT manages the "foot soldiers" who sell drugs, the community organizers (like Pastor Wilkins, Officer Reggie, and Autry) who mediate between gangs, and the other people like Johnny, who run stores in the area, and whose small businesses often pay financial tribute to the BKs. Sudhir realizes just how complex JT's business operations are. Similarly, he begins shadowing Ms. Bailey after his advisers urge him to get a different, and more women-centric, understanding of the projects. Ms. Bailey, in her position as "local area coordinator," is charged with making sure families get what they need from the city's housing authority, including apartment repairs and appliances. But she also hands out food and clothing, which she convinces area shops to "donate," often for a fee. And she makes sure that women and their families are cared for, especially when abusive men stop by, demanding money or other favors. Sometimes Sudhir wonders at how Ms. Bailey can accept cash payments and other tributes for her "charitable" services, which she does regularly. But her assistant Catrina urges Sudhir to see Ms. Bailey on the whole as a giving, well-intentioned member of the Robert Taylor community.

By the end of the book, Sudhir collects information on the gray-market and black-market economies of the gang – most notably, the drug-dealing ledgers dating back years, which T-Bone provides Sudhir with secretly. Sudhir uses this data to bolster his observational research on the doings and workings of the BKs within the Robert Taylor Homes. JT gets a "promotion" up the BK ladder by the early 1990s, and Sudhir finds himself with a doctorate, a prestigious fellowship at Harvard, and then a faculty position at Columbia. But urban "renewal" in Chicago forces the demolition of Robert Taylor, and the crack business there falters, leaving JT with less influence within the BKs. By the late 1990s, when Sudhir visits, he realizes that he has a successful academic career – that he, too, has "hustled" in the projects to get the information he needed from his subjects. But JT no longer has the power being a gang leader afforded him, as the money supporting the gang has largely dried up. Nevertheless, JT and Sudhir remain close, if not exactly friends, and the book ends with Sudhir thanking JT for the insight he has provided in an overall picture of working-class life on the South Side.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sudhir Venkatesh – The protagonist and narrator of *Gang Leader for a Day*, Sudhir begins studying the projects on the South Side of Chicago as part of his doctoral research at the University of Chicago. Over the course of the narrative, Sudhir realizes that "studying" a society within the academy is very different from observing how people actually live, work, and play – how they tell jokes and stories, drink **beer**, and care for

their families – in places like the Robert Taylor Homes. *Gang Leader for a Day* is therefore as much a story of Sudhir's transformation as an empathetic researcher as it is a story of life in the underserved neighborhoods of Chicago.

JT – Sudhir's primary research subject, JT is a mid-level manager of the Black Kings, one of the larger, predominantly African-American gangs in Chicago in the 1980s and '90s. JT makes a living organizing the drug trade and managing other illicit or half-legal economies, including prostitution, within projects like the Robert Taylor Homes. He is also interested in the nature of Sudhir's research, having studied some sociology himself in college, and he hopes that Sudhir will one day write his "biography."

Ms. Bailey – A nominally elected local figure and representative for tenants' rights in Building A of the Robert Taylor Homes, Ms. Bailey has a great deal of power in allocating resources for families living around her. Sudhir interviews Ms. Bailey extensively for his project, and makes the mistake of sharing information with her about tenants' earnings, which causes Ms. Bailey to increase her unofficial "tax" on their "hustles."

Professor Bill Wilson – Sudhir's dissertation adviser, Bill Wilson is one of the most famous faculty members in the Sociology Department at the University of Chicago. Wilson kick-starts Sudhir's research by asking him to take a questionnaire into one of the projects on the South Side, to gauge how "happy" African American men are with their jobs and lives.

Charlie and Old Time – Two old men with whom Sudhir converses in a park near the University of Chicago campus. Charlie and Old Time give Sudhir valuable information about black urban community organizations of the '60s and '70s, but encourage Sudhir to talk to younger men to see how people live and work in the 1980s and '90s in Chicago.

C-Note – A "regular" squatter and "hustler" in Robert Taylor, C-Note gets his name from his ability to make "one hundred dollars" in "a hundred ways." C-Note's hustles including fixing cars and appliances, though he sometimes runs afoul of JT's control if he doesn't pay sufficient "tax" to the BKs to continue his operations.

Shorty-Lee – A young member of the BKs, Shorty-Lee agrees to run a group of "registrars" through Robert Taylor, asking for official "votes" from residents. When Shorty-Lee confronts one woman at her apartment, however, it is revealed that he has confused voter registration (the woman is already officially registered with the city) with voter coercion. Shorty-Lee abandons the voting drive soon thereafter.

Cordella A former business partner of Ms. Bailey's mother, Cordella tells Sudhir, during an interview, that she and Ms. Bailey used to manage a brothel in the Robert Taylor Homes. Cordella insists that this form of prostitution was more lucrative, and safer for the women involved, than the current system, in which most "managers" are men.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ms. Mae – JT's mother, Ms. Mae lives in the Robert Taylor Homes. Her apartment is a home base for Sudhir; she often feeds him dinner, and he retreats there to draft notes regarding a day's research in the projects.

Clarisse – A prostitute in Robert Taylor and a distant relative of JT's, Clarisse gives Sudhir important information about what it's like to be a sex worker in the projects of the South Side – who can protect you, and for what price, while working in that hazardous occupation.

Catrina – Ms. Bailey's most industrious and influential assistant. Catrina is killed near the close of the narrative, accidentally, when caught in an argument between her brother and father.

T-Bone – One of JT's lieutenants in the Black Kings. T-Bone manages the gang's finances, and gives Sudhir a "ledger" with valuable financial information at the end of the book, which Sudhir later uses as the basis for a good deal of his sociological research.

Price – Another of JT's lieutenants in the BKs. Price is shot during a drive-by outside Robert Taylor, and Sudhir helps drag him to safety, saving his life.

Creepy – Another of JT's lieutenants, mentioned relatively early in the narrative but not later.

Ms. Easley – A member of the "tenant patrol" at Robert Taylor, whom JT pays off with BK money. Ms. Easley then uses this money to buy school supplies for children in the Homes.

Brass – A squatter in Robert Taylor. Brass refuses to pay JT his full "tax," and JT and other BKs beat Brass for not following his orders.

Lenny Duster – A community organizer in Robert Taylor. Lenny runs an organization called PRIDE, which helps with voter turnout in the Homes, though often in an irregular and unofficial capacity.

Kris and Michael – Two other "hustlers" in Robert Taylor, Kris and Michael run a pop-up car wash in a parking lot and rely on BK members to make sure customers pay their fair share for services rendered.

Boo-Boo – Mother to Coco, Boo-Boo tells JT that the "Arab" working at the bodega has been "raping" her daughter.

Coco – Daughter of Boo-Boo. Sudhir learns that Coco is indeed sleeping with a manager of the bodega, but that their relationship is consensual, and that many women in Robert Taylor sleep with shop owners in the neighborhood in exchange for goods and services for their families.

Officer Reggie – A police officer stationed near Robert Taylor,

Officer Reggie uses "flexible" but ethical police standards to make sure that peace largely reigns between rival gang factions in that area.

Officer Jerry – A policeman who sometimes works with Officer Reggie, Officer Jerry uses unethical practices, violence, and the demanding of bribes and other financial tributes to strike fear into the hearts of Robert Taylor residents.

Autry – Director of a Girls and Boys Club in Building B of Robert Taylor, Autry often mediates disputes between rival gang factions, and allows Sudhir to observe some of these mediations, which typically take place late at night.

Pastor Wilkins – A minister based in a congregation in the local community, Pastor Wilkins works with Autry and Officer Reggie to mediate disputes between gangs.

Johnny – A bodega manager near Robert Taylor. Johnny agrees to offer fair prices to BK members after he is "shaken down" by JT, T-Bone, and Price during Sudhir's day as leader of the gang.

Billy and Otis – Two "foot soldiers" who sell crack on the streets of the South Side for the BKs. Billy and Otis have a dispute about who owes whom money, which Sudhir attempts to mediate during his day as leader of the gang.

Bee-Bee – A man living in Robert Taylor, Bee-Bee is captured via vigilante justice and brought before Ms. Bailey for judgment, after he is accused of beating his girlfriend, Taneesha.

Taneesha – Girlfriend to Bee-Bee, Taneesha survives her beating and is cared for by Catrina, Ms. Bailey, and others living near her in Robert Taylor.

Dorothy – A resident of Robert Taylor as the Homes are prepared to be razed, Dorothy organizes an unofficial network with other families to make sure that displaced community members can live near one another, once Robert Taylor is no more.

Curly A mid-level manager in the BKs and associate of JT's, Curly manages the drug-dealing market in the Robert Taylor Homes before leaving the job voluntarily, and "transferring" to another location, so that JT can take over. Curly and JT maintain a friendly relationship throughout this process.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

HUSTLING

One of the central concerns of *Gang Leader for a Day* is "hustling." The term itself has multiple meanings and contexts. Most simply, hustling means whatever one does to *survive* in the projects. This can involve overt criminal activity, like prostitution or theft; grayer-area criminal activity, like the reselling of goods of questionable origin; or non-criminal odd jobs, like the repair or cleaning of old cars or electronics. Sudhir's idea of hustling changes throughout the book – and he becomes much more understanding of it as a phenomenon when he realizes that he, too, has a "hustle," like many people in Robert Taylor.

Various characters tell Sudhir that they make their way through hustling: Ms. Bailey, C-Note, JT, and Clarisse, each with different degrees of official recognition and power. For example, Ms. Bailey has an "elected" position within the project and uses her leverage to enrich herself and help families not served by the police or the housing authority. JT runs the local chapter of the Black Kings, and his hustles include the selling of crack cocaine and various "protection" rackets, which also (he claims) "support the community" and enrich him.

Against this backdrop, however, many people in the projects remind Sudhir that he, too, has a hustle. This is one of Sudhir's lessons learned by the end of his research stint. Sudhir wants to make his way as an academic sociologist studying the economy and life of the Chicago projects. To do this, he sometimes has to protect his own interests in the face of other, competing interests. For example, Sudhir shares off-the-books job information with Ms. Bailey and JT, only to realize that the two use this information to ask for more protection money from project residents. Thus, Sudhir's hustle does not always align with the best interests of those in the community he studies. In some cases, Sudhir must choose whether to prioritize his own research and career, or the stability and wellbeing of those around him.

In this way, Sudhir's hustles, along with those of JT and Ms. Bailey in particular, demonstrate that "self-interest" and self-enrichment often come with a cost. Sudhir genuinely wants to help families in Robert Taylor, but he also wants to make his dissertation better, and to further his academic career. Ms. Bailey and JT really do want to help the community – but they also enrich themselves in the process. When Sudhir sees the positive *and* negative effects of his own hustles, he is more inclined, by the end of the book, to understand JT and Ms. Bailey's self-interested behavior in context – to observe the real social good of what they do, along with the morally questionable side.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Sudhir is preparing for a career in academia—the teaching of college students. But the interaction

with his "subjects" produces a far more complex web of teaching and learning, one in which the "subjects" often teach Sudhir about the reality of their lives in the projects. Thus, Sudhir is far from the only teacher in his account, and the people he studies are certainly not the only "learners."

At the beginning of his tenure in the Robert Taylor Homes, Sudhir admits (privately) to being naïve about the goings-on in the projects. He does not understand, for instance, why younger men might sleep with older women (for food and shelter); why cops might not patrol the projects or CHA employees might not care to help (they do so only when compensated); or why gangs control information so closely (underlings are paid very low wages, compared to gang leaders). To learn more about his surroundings, Sudhir asks questions of JT, Ms. Bailey, Ms. Mae (JT's mother), and others. But he realizes he learns much more by observing and, when possible legally, by participating.

Thus, "learning" about the Black Kings and the Robert Taylor Homes involves becoming a *part* of that community. Sudhir teaches the residents of the homes things about their environment – he finds out, for example, more information about what some of C-Note and others' "side hustles" actually make, and gives this data to Ms. Bailey and JT. But Sudhir is not really the "college professor" or "graduate student" arriving in the projects to pull community members out of poverty. Many well-intentioned, if more naïve, people in Chicago have already tried these methods in the Robert Taylor Homes, as Sudhir notes. Instead, Sudhir "teaches" people about their communities by acting as a conduit for information, as a more or less objective observer who relays to them the things he sees.

Sometimes JT is thankful for this information, or even uses it to his advantage, as when he and Ms. Bailey extort more money from off-the-books businesses in the homes. Other times, Sudhir keeps this information from the gangs, as when T-Bone provides the data that becomes the backbone of Sudhir's academic research on gang economies. Sudhir and JT, especially, develop a relationship that Sudhir characterizes as not quite a friendship. In truth, this relationship is more like an alternation between student and teacher, with each character filling that role at different times. JT learns about life outside the projects (and joins these experiences with his own, as he, too, went to college). And Sudhir, of course, learns about a part of Chicago that very few people at the university care to know about.

By the end of the book, then, the reader understands the "educational" system, of which Sudhir is a part as a doctoral student, as being simply a component of lived life: a network of teaching and learning throughout the Robert Taylor Homes, wherein the researcher learns as much, or more, from his research subjects than they learn from him. Sudhir becomes a better learner as the book goes on, and JT and Ms. Bailey, especially, become more willing teachers, more open to explaining their lives to Sudhir, and demonstrating for him the ways they engage with and help their community.

OBJECTIVITY AND EMPATHY

Throughout his research, Sudhir wonders how he can balance an "objective," or scientific, account of life in the projects with an empathic, or emotionally-infused, view of that world. An apprentice sociologist, Sudhir identifies a divide within his own academic discipline. On the one hand, he perceives that his field is a "science" that hopes to "know" about the world of people and societies, without projecting the biases of those doing the research into the studied communities. But on the other hand, Sudhir recognizes that people are people—that he is, in part, cataloguing the whims, irrationalities, and passions of human beings, and that he too has these passions. Indeed, his intense curiosity and resilience—as many remark in the book, they are surprised to see him back at the Homes again and again—drive the research onward.

In a sense, Sudhir negotiates this divide by writing *Gang Leader for a Day*, a narrative and memoiristic account of his life studying the projects, and by writing his dissertation, a more sober, data-rich, and "analytic" view of the same community. But Sudhir negotiates this divide in other ways—or sometimes fails to negotiate it. He wonders, for example, whether or not he can participate in certain non-legal or paralegal gang activities, and what his obligations are as a researcher when serious criminal activity occurs. Sudhir wonders, too, whether he can help those in the projects who are in need—women who have overdosed, men who are jobless, children who are hungry. Does this intervene in, and change, his research?

The consequence of all this is a pragmatic conclusion on Sudhir's part. He has no "theory" of the projects per se, but rather a set of overlapping, and not always coherent, hunches about what to do in the projects when—how to observe, how to research, how to show care to others. In this, Sudhir says that he trusts his "moral compass," and that phrase might be understood as a stand-in for the kind of running compromise he makes, as a scientist studying the messy lives of people.

CRIME AND THE POLICE

Sudhir recognizes, early in his research, that the relationship between "illegal" acts and the "police," who are supposed to arrest those committing them, is far different from the relationship he'd known till now, as a suburban youth in California.

In simplest terms, the police in the Robert Taylor Homes do not uphold the law, as there appears to be very little that the law does to support those in need. Outside the projects, in wealthier parts of Chicago, the law might protect those whose

property has been stolen, for example, or protect women whose husbands abuse them. But in the Homes, the police are an almost entirely punitive force. They mete out punishment to those who stand in their way, and they take advantage of those in need. There are some policemen, like Officer Reggie, who are from the projects and seek actively to protect those who live there—but on the whole, the police see the projects as a community dependent upon them, and therefore as a community from which concessions can be extracted. It is a pragmatic, and not a legal, system.

Thus, the police in this environment are nearly the same as the gangs or the members of the partially-corrupt management of the Homes (Ms. Bailey). Social services, protection, safety—no one entity can guarantee these for the members of the community, and each entity is out to make sure its power is unchecked. This means that, so long as the police are not harmed, they might allow illegal acts to continue; or, so long as the police get their cut, the illegal activities will not be shut down. "Crime," then, must be redefined under these more pragmatic, and less abstractly moralistic, guidelines. In the projects, crime isn't something that's "against the law" so much as it's something that harms another person directly, often physically. Crimes without victims, like prostitution or drug use (although these can be debated) are much lower on the "crime"-scale than those with obvious victims, like murder, assault, and rape. Gang leaders typically mete out punishment at their discretion. JT, for example, sometimes beats those who cross him, but other times he lets people go because they can be of use to him. As with Sudhir's research, the line between "crime" and "lawful activity," or between "police" and "gang," is really no line at all, but a set of shifting propositions people live with day to day.

POVERTY

Underlying all the above themes are the material conditions of those living in the projects. Put simply, essentially everyone in the Robert Taylor Homes is poor—that is, lacking in some of the basic needs of human life, and having difficulty securing those needs regularly. Some need food and clean water, others need clothing, others need medicine, shelter, heat, or electricity. When Sudhir encounters the depth of the need in the community, he wonders there is anything he or anyone can do to help, and much of his research focuses on how the money that does circulate in the projects collects—where it goes, and who supplies it; how smaller economies form as residents need certain goods or services.

Sudhir pushes back against one of the theories prominent among some social scientists, that there is such a thing as a "culture of poverty" that can keep certain populations trapped in bleak conditions. For Sudhir, this "culture of poverty" appears too much like an active choice on the part of these imagined community-members. Instead, what he sees is a series of situation-specific responses to problems as they arise. Because poor black communities are underserved by the police, by hospital staff, and indeed by most mechanisms that white and/or wealthier parts of society take for granted, the Robert Taylor Homes are often forced to "make do" with whatever they have. This could seem, from the outside, as a "choice" to remain impoverished, or to live lives of crime or off-the-books work.

But Sudhir's study is a long description leading to a different explanation: that poverty is no more a choice than blackness, but is itself a social construct, a set of things imposed and reflected by members of society at all levels. This means that a "solution" to poverty could not be exclusively, or even primarily, a cultural one, although increased awareness and education do play a role in helping people out of dire conditions. Instead, Sudhir seems to believe that a "solution" to poverty would address people in the projects as enlightened, rational agents, as people who respond to the world as they see it, and who try to do as best for themselves and for others that their circumstances allow.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BEER

Beer has a first and straightforward function within the world of the Robert Taylor Homes – people drink it in order to drink it, and possibly to get drunk. Residents drink beer in stairwells and at outdoor gatherings on the grass and around the basketball court. The beer is relatively cheaply available at grocery stores, and many, especially foot soldiers in the gangs, drink it more or less steadily throughout the day. But for Sudhir, beer is also a form of social currency, a means of demonstrating that he is a meaningful part of the group he's studying – the residents of the Homes, or members of the BK gang. When Sudhir is first "stuck" in the stairwell with BK foot soldiers, right as he is meeting JT and beginning his research, he drinks beer with some gang members and, on returning, brings beer for JT and others. Later, Sudhir finds that beer is an important method for announcing that he is willing to participate in the world he observes – that he is not "above" or "outside" it. It is fitting, too, that Sudhir is drinking beer with JT, relaxing, and reminiscing during their final visit in the Robert Taylor Homes, at the end of the book and before the homes are slated for demolition.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Gang Leader for a Day* published in 2008.

Preface Quotes

❝ I hadn't come for the crack; I was here on a different mission. I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, and for my research I had taken to hanging out with the Black Kings, the local crack-selling gang.

Related Characters: Sudhir Venkatesh (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: xiv

Explanation and Analysis

Sudhir here describes the basis for the book. As Stephen Dubner notes in his introduction to the volume, Sudhir is very good at going places others might not be willing to venture – he is okay with stretching far, far past his "comfort zone" in academia, and with exploring a community of which he has little prior knowledge. This quote sets the stage for much of the rest of the book, and also shows just how stark and difficult life in the projects can be. It illustrates the extent to which Sudhir becomes a "part" of the community he studies – or, at least, the extent to which he is willing to try to blend in with that community.

And the quote also points up the difficulties of Sudhir's work. For, after all, he is not "there for the crack." In fact, he is doing the exact opposite – he is attempting, with sobriety and precision, to depict drug use, drug dealing, prostitution, and other crimes and vices one might observe in places like the Robert Taylor Homes. The friction between academic research and the messiness of lived life will be a refrain throughout the text.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ How do an individual's preferences develop? Can we predict human behavior? ... The standard mode of answering these questions was to conduct widespread surveys and then use complex mathematical methods to analyze the survey data. ... It was thought that the key to formulating good policy was to first formulate a good scientific study.

Related Characters: Sudhir Venkatesh (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the book, Sudhir believes that academic questions like these have academic answers – that they can be solved using patient, methodical collection of statistics. And, throughout the text, he narrates the collection of his data in an admirably dispassionate way, even when the events around him are disturbing, violent, or dangerous. But Sudhir also recognizes, after a few days observing JT and other BKs, that one would have to do much more, in the Robert Taylor Homes or in other projects of Chicago, than simply sit back and mark numbers on a form, or ask questions with multiple-choice answers.

Thus, Sudhir doesn't want to abandon the rigor that got him into the University of Chicago in the first place. But he does want to attack the subtler, perhaps less mathematically-driven questions of how and why people behave as they do under certain circumstances. Thus his study will mix quantitative and descriptive features, as a means of showing what life is really like in Chicago's housing projects.

❝ You got blacks who are beating their heads trying to figure out a way to live where you live! Don't ask me why. And then you got a whole lot of black folk who realize it ain't no use. Like us. We just spend our time trying to get by, and we live around here, where it ain't so pretty, but at least you won't get your ass beat. At least not by the police.

Related Characters: Charlie and Old Time (speaker), Sudhir Venkatesh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Charlie, in this passage, identifies some of the difficulties inherent in "helping" African Americans either to leave or "improve" their communities. As Charlie notes, some people in his neighborhood simply want to leave – they don't want to live in a place that's less physically appealing than, say, Hyde Park, just a few blocks over. But Charlie also describes the trade-off of living in a largely African-American neighborhood: he doesn't have to worry about police violence against citizens, because so many police refuse to do their jobs where Charlie and Old Time live.

Sudhir believes, through much of the book, that it's crazy for people not to call the police when there's trouble. Where Sudhir was raised, in relatively wealthy suburban Southern California, the police responded to citizens and helped them. But here, in African American neighborhoods of

Chicago, the police are mostly feared and avoided – since when they do show up, they generally do more harm than good.

"Go back to where you came from ... and be more careful when you walk around the city. ... You shouldn't go around asking them silly-ass questions. ... With people like us, you should hang out, get to know what they do, how they do it. No one is going to answer questions like that. You need to understand how young people live on the streets.

Related Characters: JT (speaker), Sudhir Venkatesh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

It's easy to see this conversation between JT and Sudhir as the foundation of Sudhir's research. And, in a sense, it is. JT encourages Sudhir to do exactly the opposite of Bill Wilson's survey – to go out and see what people do, how they live, and how they talk to one another, rather than to impose upon them a set of impressions, questions, and descriptions found on a questionnaire. Because JT has studied some sociology and has a college degree, he's more familiar than many in the neighborhood with the nature of academic research. JT therefore knows that, despite their best efforts, sociologists sometimes find themselves quite removed from the people they study.

Sudhir, for his part, is very much willing to volunteer to observe the gang and its activities. As Dubner notes in his introduction, and as is apparent throughout the book to perhaps most readers, Sudhir's work is difficult. It requires him to consistently make decisions about what is ethical, about how much to participate and when – and when to document an event without interfering. The years that Sudhir put into studying Robert Taylor are very little when compared with a life lived in that community – but it is a great deal more than nearly all researchers were willing to spend there until that time.

"Beer? ... You said I should hang out with folks if I want to know what their life is like.

Related Characters: Sudhir Venkatesh (speaker), JT

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This is Sudhir's response to JT and the rest of the BKs he met the night before. Most likely, JT expected that Sudhir would never return, that he would go back to the University of Chicago with a story or two, as he hints during their last conversation – and that would be that. But Sudhir, to his credit, allows not even another day to go by. And he notices right away that there is a form of "hanging out" currency among the gang members: beer.

Thus Sudhir offers to drink and chat with the gang members, and to begin to listen to them rather than to impose on them a set of guidelines the University has created for the "study" of urban populations. It perhaps also helps that many in the BKs are not able to identify the culture from which Sudhir comes – he is a second-generation Indian American from California, but he works and studies at a largely white institution. Thus, Sudhir frustrates some of the most obvious divisions between Hyde Park and the Robert Taylor Homes.

Chapter 2 Quotes

"You always take the sure bet in this game. Nothing can be predicted—not supply, not anything. The [person] who tells you he's going to have product a year from now is lying. He could be in jail or dead. So take your discount now.

Related Characters: JT (speaker), Sudhir Venkatesh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

JT enjoys dispensing advice to Sudhir about the nature of his work and the craft he brings to it. In particular, JT seems not to be fazed by the fact that he sells drugs, particularly crack cocaine, a "cheap high" that cannot be said to do any good for anyone who purchases it. JT instead believes that selling drugs is, at least indirectly, a way to "give back" to the community in which he lives. He justifies this by saying that profits from the drug-selling trade can be plowed back into the Robert Taylor Homes, in the form of donations to after-school programs, or little bits of cash given out to families or people in need.

And JT isn't wrong in this – the gang really does help the community in some ways, in a symbiosis Sudhir spends much of the book trying to understand. But JT also sells a product that kills the people who use it. And although JT expresses a good deal of introspection over the course of the narrative, he never really questions the sale of crack, believing instead that people who rely on the drug are "crackheads" who deserve whatever comes to them.

> We stepped inside an apartment furnished with couches and a few reclining chairs that faced a big TV. There was a Christian show playing. ... The domestic scene surprised me a bit, for I had read so much about the poverty and danger in Robert Taylor, how children ran around without parents and how drugs had overtaken the community.

Related Characters: Sudhir Venkatesh (speaker), Ms. Mae

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

Sudhir realizes one of his significant stereotypical preconceptions in this section. He thought that, perhaps, because Robert Taylor is so bleak on the outside, dominated by slabs of brick and concrete, that the interior of the apartments could have no "homelike" character, could not look as though anyone lived there. But people do live in these apartments, including Ms. Mae, JT's mother – as she has done for a great many years.

Sudhir will come to rely on Ms. Mae as a surrogate mother and caretaker in the building. He talks to her about her life, and Ms. Mae provides Sudhir with a place to eat and sleep and draft up his notes, which will go on to form the core of the narrative the reader is reading, as well as of Sudhir's dissertation. Indeed, Ms. Mae will become one of several matriarchs with whom Sudhir interacts, the most prominent of which being Ms. Bailey, who runs the local governing council in Building A of the Homes.

> And we don't just fight each other. We have basketball tournaments, softball tournaments, card games. Sometimes it's just people in the organization who play, but sometimes we find the best people in the building ... so it's a building thing.

Related Characters: JT (speaker), Sudhir Venkatesh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

One thing Sudhir realizes is the interconnectedness of the BKs to the rest of the Robert Taylor Homes. Many people in the gang, and many people living in the building, second this view. The BKs take over much of what is left behind by a lack of housing authority support in the Homes and the near total lack of a police presence. The BKs really do support certain programs – especially for youth – and they try to arrange voter drives and encourage civic engagement.

But as Sudhir notes throughout the text, this is difficult to square with the reality that the BKs are a thoroughly "criminal enterprise." Their profits derive largely, if not almost entirely, from the sale of crack cocaine in low-income neighborhoods. People who disagree with the gang are beaten, and, on very rare occasions, killed. And the gang pays off politicians and police officers in order to make sure its rule in the Robert Taylor Homes and in surrounding neighborhoods is secure.

> Regulars like me, we hustle to make our money, but we only go with guys we know. We don't do it full-time, but if we have to feed our kids, we may make a little money on the side.

Related Characters: Clarisse (speaker), Sudhir Venkatesh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Clarisse here breaks down the different kinds of prostitution that exist in Robert Taylor. As she is quick to point out, she's a "regular," meaning that she receives a certain degree of acceptance, or at least a lack of active disapproval, from the BKs in the buildings where she works. Part of what Sudhir uncovers in examining different aspects of the gray-market economies of the Homes is a tendency for hierarchies, or ordered groups, to form.

Thus, Clarisse argues that she is a less criminal, more "official" prostitute than some women who only work in the Homes part-time. Similarly, prostitutes who are "protected" by pimps achieve greater social stability than those who work "alone," without that protection. Sudhir realizes that,

as in economies outside the Homes, a great deal of time and energy is spent differentiating between different parts of a single working population – of ordering the intricate world of the project's economies.

Chapter 3 Quotes

He [JT] had no real sense of what I would actually be writing—because, in truth, I didn't know myself. Nor did I know if he'd be upset with me for having seen him beat up C-Note, or if perhaps he'd try to censor me.

Related Characters: Sudhir Venkatesh (speaker), C-Note, JT

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

This quote uncovers several important features of Sudhir's work. First, he admits that his "learning" is largely unstructured – once he abandoned the questionnaire script given to him by people in his department, he was no longer operating according to the standardized principles of his discipline. Of course, Sudhir attempts to maintain objectivity and journalistic distance from the people whose lives he is exploring. But there is no stated "mission" or "goal" to his work for years on end.

It is only later, on encouragement from his advisers and after a few key breaks in his work, that Sudhir realizes he can track the flow of money in the underground economies of the Homes – especially once he has access to the ledgers T-Bone provides him. Only then does the research take a certain form. And it is the relative formlessness of Sudhir's early investigations that provides both its freedom and, occasionally, its ethical ambiguity – as when, for example, he is not sure whether or not to intervene when JT and his lieutenants beat C-Note.

JT's ambitions ran even higher. What he wanted, he told me, was to return the gang to its glory days of the 1960s, when South Side gangs worked together with residents to agitate for improvements in their neighborhoods.

Related Characters: Sudhir Venkatesh (speaker), JT

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75-6

Explanation and Analysis

As Sudhir notes, JT doesn't really consider himself to be a leader of a gang. Instead, he believes that his position is one of community elder statesman. It is, for JT, a position that carries real responsibility, and he doesn't take it lightly, although he does seem to enjoy the work that he does – and the perks the job affords (money, cars, alcohol).

What Sudhir here describes is a refrain throughout the book, and a great many characters speak it: that the gangs of the '60s and '70s had a real connection to the community in which they worked, and a degree of political influence that current gangs can only hope to achieve. But that is where JT comes in – he believes that there can be a fusion of the gang's moneymaking and political-social missions, and he hopes to enact exactly this in the area around Robert Taylor.

Shorty-Lee was puzzled. He looked over to the three other BKs. They were toting spiral-bound notebooks in which they "signed up" potential votes. But it seemed that neither Lenny nor JT had told them there was an actual registration form and that registrars had to be licensed.

Related Characters: Sudhir Venkatesh (speaker), JT, Lenny Duster, Shorty-Lee

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Sudhir rapidly realizes that most of the foot soldiers in the gang don't really know what they're "registering" people in the building for, and, as a consequence, what voter registration and voter choice entail. They know it is important for the BKs to be involved in the political process, and in some sense their work, as Sudhir notes, echoes the "Chicago machine" politics of the earlier part of the twentieth century.

Thus Shorty-Lee's lesson in civic engagement, as delivered by this woman at her door, is both a meaningful moment in his (and in Sudhir's) education, and a reminder of the disconnect between the "official" culture of the world outside Robert Taylor and the unofficial, or gray-market, culture that exists within these neighborhoods. Just as CHA employees and the Chicago PD have relatively

circumscribed interactions with the residents of the Homes, so, too, does the political process have only a glancing impact on the lives of most people there – unless JT and others attempt to connect foot soldiers with official institutions of the state, like the voter registry board or the Democratic party.

❝ ... the man was sleeping with Coco, but he was giving her diapers and shit for Coco's baby.

Related Characters: Price (speaker), Coco, Sudhir Venkatesh

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

The phenomenon Sudhir here describes is, as he goes on to note, a relatively common one. A great many women in the projects depend on outside sources of charity to support their families, because the raising of their children, combined with a lack of partner support and lack of available steady employment in the area, makes for constricted income streams. In short, women do what they must do to survive and to help their children.

Sudhir remains open-minded about this, and takes pains not to condemn the women he sees and interacts with for whatever they do to keep their families together. Not all characters behave in this way, however. Ms. Bailey, for her part, is often critical of some women in Robert Taylor, who, she says, will do whatever they can to "get" things from the men around them – including Sudhir. Ms. Bailey goes on later to warn Sudhir that his help given to women around him might encourage other women to take advantage of his time or, perhaps, of his money.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ I was nervous, to be sure, but not because I was implicating myself in an illegal enterprise. In fact, I hadn't even really thought about that angle. ... Only later, when I began sharing my experience with my advisers ... did I begin to understand—and adhere to—the reporting requirements for researchers who are privy to criminal conduct.

Related Characters: Sudhir Venkatesh (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

In truth, Sudhir seems to have relatively little fear regarding the possible legal complexities of his work. He says himself that he relies mostly on his "instinct," and that, for example, when he is leader of the gang, he will not participate directly in anything that could be construed in court as illegal. Sudhir holds to this principle throughout his time with the BKs.

But there are moments when Sudhir exhibits judgment that, though understandable, might not lie completely within the bounds of academic norms. When JT harms C-Note, Sudhir does not interfere, even though he watches C-Note suffer. And when tracking Bee-Bee through the building after he has beaten Taneesha, Sudhir "kicks him in the stomach," subduing him as Bee-Bee was lashing out at a fellow BK. In that latter instance, the action could plausibly be understood as self-defense. But both these incidents underscore just how difficult it is to be "scientific" in one's research of the Robert Taylor Homes.

❝ The next day I would wake up free of the hundreds of obligations and judgments I'd been witness to. But JT wouldn't. He'd still bear all the burdens of running a successful underground economy...

Related Characters: Sudhir Venkatesh (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

Sudhir understands that, in serving as gang leader for only one day, he might be able to engage more fully in the gang's activity, knowing that the job itself will disappear as soon as he wakes up again. In this section, then, Sudhir reflects on what is a more substantial understanding of just how difficult it must be to run the BKs, to worry not just about maintaining one's livelihood, but also about the criminal dangers and possible violence that are a part of that position.

In the latter half of the book, Sudhir takes pains to represent just how hard JT works, and how difficult it is to "rise through the ranks" of the BKs in the way that JT has. This doesn't mean that JT always acts ethically, or in the manner that Sudhir himself would. But it does mean that Sudhir has

a deeper appreciation for what goes in to managing the many overlapping responsibilities and gray-market economies in Robert Taylor.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ For now, be careful when you help the women. They'll take advantage of you, and you won't know what hit you. And I can't be there to protect you.

Related Characters: Ms. Bailey (speaker), Sudhir Venkatesh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Ms. Bailey makes plain that she does not believe the intentions of all the women, or even most of the women, petitioning Sudhir are good. Sudhir, for his part, wants to help the community as best he can, and as he notes elsewhere, the majority of families living in Robert Taylor exist as female-led households. Thus, in a sense, if Sudhir wants to help at all, he will wind up helping a good number of women, or family units led by women.

However, Ms. Bailey has also seen through her work in the Homes just how desperate some people can become, and how willing they are to do whatever it takes to support their families. Ms. Bailey does not seem to fear so much that Sudhir will become physically hurt, or otherwise ethically entangled with families – more that his resources will be strained when he sees the extent of the need surrounding him throughout Robert Taylor.

❝ Do you want to write me another essay? Do you want to write about what just happened?

Related Characters: Sudhir Venkatesh (speaker), Catrina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Sudhir develops another method of outreach to the community around him. As he notes in the book at another point, Sudhir wants to give something that only he can give – that is, something that derives from his experience as a teacher, and does not necessarily involve money or other material support.

Reading Catrina's writing, and later running the essay group for young women allows Sudhir to help people in Robert Taylor with their academic skills. And, perhaps more importantly, this work provides an emotional outlet for people who perhaps do not have many, or have not been encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings with others. And, as Sudhir learns, many have dealt with great difficulties at very young ages, including physical violence, drug abuse, and the raising of families in substantial poverty.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ I spent the next few weeks turning the information in my notebooks into statistical tables and graphs that showed how much different hustlers made. I figured that JT would appreciate this data at least as much as my professors would...

Related Characters: Sudhir Venkatesh (speaker), JT

Related Themes:

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

This is perhaps Sudhir's most naïve or disconnected moment in the text. He does not seem to think that his work here, and the information he collects, will be used by JT and Ms. Bailey to extract anything from the other tenants. As C-Note points out later on, however, Sudhir would have recognized this if he had thought more about the other people his work impacts. But, instead, Sudhir seemed only to delight in the amount of information he was receiving, without giving too much regard to the consequences of sharing that information.

This section also demonstrates Sudhir's continued reliance on mathematical data, even as he has collected an enormous number of narrative accounts of life in the community he's studying. The mixture of first-person and quantitative analysis will go on to form the basis of his independent work, a dissertation (and then book) on the gray-market and understudied economies of Chicago housing projects.

❝ The women wrote and spoke openly about their struggles. Each of them had at least a couple of children, which generally meant at least one "baby daddy" who wasn't in the picture. Each of them had a man in her life who'd been either jailed or killed...

Related Characters: Sudhir Venkatesh (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

The stories the young women tell are, unfortunately, not out of step with the other pieces of data Sudhir has collected about Robert Taylor. In a great many of the households, husbands are either absent or incarcerated. Sudhir spends a great deal of time showing that male incarceration rates in the projects are a result not just of criminal activity, but of a severely selective policing policy in Chicago that targets African-American communities. This, coupled with low employment rates for the area, result in diminished economic opportunities for families, putting enormous strain on the meager government subsidies available to them.

In the writing group, the women speak honestly to one another, and seem to feel comfortable speaking honestly to Sudhir, too. They trust that he has their best interests at heart – although, as it's revealed, there are others in the community who believe Sudhir is having sexual relationships with the women in the group, instead of helping them with their writing (or, as Ms. Bailey terms it, their "homework.")

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ You didn't have to get mixed up in this shit.
He must have heard that I'd helped drag Price into the lobby. I didn't say anything. JT slapped my leg, asked if I wanted a Coke, and walked off to the fridge.

Related Characters: JT (speaker), Sudhir Venkatesh

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

Perhaps as a counterpoint to Sudhir's lack of involvement when C-Note was beaten, and to his participation, however small, in the beating of Bee-Bee, here Sudhir helps Price when he is in need, doing something substantial to save his life. As Sudhir notes, JT does not forget this, nor does he take it lightly. Instead, JT sees it as a sign of loyalty on Sudhir's part – that Sudhir is willing to do what it takes to pitch in around the Homes, even when things become dangerous and violent.

This is another window into the bond that Sudhir and JT share. Although they do not always agree, they possess a kind of symbiotic relationship that, as Sudhir characterizes it, remains over the years, even as Sudhir rockets forward in his academic life and JT finds himself back in Chicago, with diminished gang prospects and his leadership position in the BKs no longer available.

❝ You think I don't know who you [expletive] are? You think we all don't know what you're doing? If you want to play with us, you better be real careful. If you like watching, you may get caught.

Related Characters: Officer Jerry (speaker), Sudhir Venkatesh

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

Officer Jerry, from this quote alone, evidently does not like Sudhir, and perhaps would not like anyone who happened to be looking into his business. This makes sense from what Sudhir writes otherwise about Jerry – that he frequently intimidates families in Robert Taylor, forcing them to pay him so he will no longer bother them. Or that he takes a special relish out of pestering and sometimes hurting leaders of the gang, but does not charge them with crimes – only extorts money from them when he feels like it.

The side of policing that Sudhir thus demonstrates is unsavory, and Sudhir himself writes that he is not used to this kind of behavior from police – or, more adequately, he is not accustomed to seeing the police do this, because in his old suburban neighborhood in San Diego, the police were mostly there to support a (mostly white) community. But on the South Side of Chicago, the police are antagonists to a great many of the people living in Robert Taylor, even to those citizens who do not participate in gang activity and want to lead quiet, unobtrusive lives.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ You need to understand that the Black Kings are not a gang; we are a community organization, responding to people's needs.

Related Characters: Sudhir Venkatesh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

The unnamed gang member in this section says what many people, including JT, have repeated from the beginning. Perhaps what most surprises Sudhir in this case is the fact that a "higher-up" in the BK organization says this, apparently without thinking it to be a strange thing to say (Sudhir has also noted previously that JT says similar things with a straight face, indeed not understanding how they might be perceived as funny by those who see only the criminal side of gang behavior).

In truth, Sudhir finds a great deal that is sympathetic about the BKs. The loyalty among gang members is a genuine bond, and it often extends beyond the simple selling of drugs, or the other extortion schemes the gang uses to make money from tenants in Robert Taylor. But Sudhir has a hard time feeling that there is no difference at all between the BKs and a real charitable organization. Instead, Sudhir, like many living in Robert Taylor, see the BKs as the best, if not an ideal, solution to the problem of inadequate institutional and governmental support throughout the projects.

> The pages of the ledgers were frayed, and some of the handwriting was hard to decipher, but the raw information was fascinating. For the past four years, T-Bone had been dutifully recording the gang's revenues ... and expenses.

Related Characters: Sudhir Venkatesh (speaker), T-Bone

Related Themes:

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

Sudhir seems to recognize immediately just how important this document (the ledger of the BKs' dealings) will be for his career. He says that T-Bone gives it to him for unclear reasons, perhaps, as Sudhir notes later, in part to make plain that the gang itself had an organizational structure – that its finances were not so far removed from the finances of a "legitimate" business.

What is perhaps most shocking to Sudhir in this case is the fact that extreme income inequality is a part of the gang structure. Namely, as he goes on to explain, the gang leaders make almost all the money, and gang "foot soldiers" make vanishingly small amounts. What Sudhir implies in this is relatively straightforward, and itself surprising – that the kind of no-holds-barred capitalist logic that has, in part, caused severe divides between the "haves" and the "have-nots" within Chicago is replicated in the structure of the gang itself. In other words, the gang does not have a "social safety net" for its members, and it is not socialist by design – instead, the gang privileges an "upper class" of leaders who, admittedly, have serious responsibilities, but who make much more money than those who (in Sudhir's words in this section) risk their lives to sell crack on the corner.

> ...perhaps the most unconventional thing I ever did was embrace the idea that I could learn so much, absorb so many lessons, and gain so many experiences at the side of a man who was so far removed from my academic world.

Related Characters: Sudhir Venkatesh (speaker), JT

Related Themes:

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Sudhir more or less summarizes just what is so striking about his relationship with JT. On the one hand, nothing could have been less predictable or stranger than the idea that JT and Sudhir would strike up the "bond" that Sudhir here describes. This relationship is a testament not only to Sudhir's curiosity, but to JT's willingness to share parts of himself with an "outsider" to the projects, one whom he gradually gets to know.

Sudhir knows that he and JT will not be close forever, and that, as he has said sadly, their relationship itself becomes more and more distant as Sudhir progresses along his academic track. But JT, in a sense, "believed" in Sudhir from the start, and encouraged him to research by putting his heart and body on the line – by daring to think of himself as more than a mere academic "reporter" of life in the projects. And Sudhir here expresses genuine gratitude for what was, from JT, a leap of faith and an "unconventional thing" in its own right.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE

Sudhir Venkatesh, the protagonist of the book and its author, wakes up one morning in the Robert Taylor Homes projects in Chicago. He describes that, once awake, he notices others around him sleeping. He has been staying the night in a crack den, an abandoned apartment in one of the project's buildings. But he is not there to ingest drugs, or to engage in any illegal activity. Instead, he is documenting the lives of those who live and work in the projects, as a PhD student at the University of Chicago. He says that *Gang Leader for a Day* is a book about what he learned, and saw, during his years studying low-income neighborhoods in Chicago.

The beginning of the book is striking, and is a chance for Sudhir to explain just what circumstances he finds himself in. It is also, to a certain extent, a self-dramatizing scene – Sudhir could have chosen to begin in any of a number of ways, but here he describes one of the more shocking, possibly dangerous, and, to the general reader, out-of-the-ordinary moments in Robert Taylor. The question, then, is: to what extent is this part of life in Robert Taylor representative? How else does it feel to live and work in that community?

CHAPTER 1 - HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE BLACK AND POOR?

Sudhir begins the narrative by describing his student days in the PhD program in sociology at the University of Chicago. He lives alone between Hyde Park, where the university is, and Woodlawn, a neighborhood of lower-income families, predominately African-American. Sudhir notes that in the first few weeks, although he enjoyed walking around both Hyde Park and Woodlawn, he realized there was a large gulf between life in the two areas. Sudhir wonders how to bridge this gulf, and, in the meantime, observes what he can about Woodlawn and the people living there.

The social geography of Chicago becomes an important part of Sudhir's account. Here, he sets the stage for what, exactly, the South Side is – a predominantly African-American set of neighborhoods with a large, prestigious, and wealthy research institution plopped down in the center. It is this divide between "town and gown," between projects and university life, that will lie beneath much of Sudhir's narrative.

Sudhir writes that, as professionals, sociologists are divided between those who conduct quantitative, mostly statistical, research, and those who describe societies as they observe and experience them. Sudhir wonders whether he wants to engage in one or another of these subdivisions of his field, or if he has to choose between them at all. Meanwhile, he meets Professor William Julius Wilson, a member of the UChicago sociology faculty, and agrees to ask survey questions of African Americans living in the neighborhoods surrounding the university.

Professor Wilson will be a steady, but not overwhelming, presence in the book. From time to time, he will enter the scene to give Sudhir advice, tell him that his tack might need adjusting, or that his observations of gang life might need to be reined in slightly to adhere to researcher reporting laws. But for the most part, Professor Wilson allows Sudhir to do his work – and is proud of the research Sudhir produces.

Sudhir meets a group of older men, including two named Charlie and Old Time, in Washington Park, where he often jogs to clear his mind after classes. Sudhir talks to them about the South Side of Chicago, where many Irish immigrants used to live before they left for the Chicagoland suburbs, and before African American families began moving into the neighborhood. Charlie and Old Time say that they have little hope relations between white and black populations in Chicago can improve. They also say that they wonder whether black poverty as a social issue can be solved or even lessened, either by people suffering from it or by the local and state government charged with helping them.

Charlie and Old Time provide an opportunity for Sudhir to reflect on some of the political and social changes on the South Side from the 1960s to the 1980s. As Charlie and Old Time both note, there was a sense of genuine political possibility in that area in times past, especially when "gangs" were more closely related with politically-active groups like the Black Panthers. Charlie and Old Time are now seemingly more inclined to accept the racial divisions that seem so entrenched in Chicago, but they also think wistfully of how it used to be.

Sudhir appreciates speaking with Charlie and Old Time, but they recommend that he talk to younger men in the neighborhood to get a sense of the way things are now, rather than how they were in the '60s and '70s. Taking this advice, Sudhir visits a housing project in the Oakland neighborhood, in November of 1989. He still has his clipboard with a questionnaire, created by Bill Wilson. In the lobby of one building, Sudhir asks around to see if the young men congregating there know of anyone living in a couple particular apartments listed on his question form. The young men are confused as to why he's in the project in the first place, and wonder aloud if he's Mexican and a member of a rival gang, the Latin Kings.

The question, of course, is whether race relations in Chicago in the past were actually any better than they are in the present – and what those race relations today might be. The questionnaire that Sudhir uses in this section is, in essence, a parody of academic cluelessness; it makes it seem that no one at the University of Chicago has ever spoken to anyone in a low-income neighborhood. After all, who in any circumstance would have a good response to the question, "How does it feel to be poor?"

Sudhir is confused, and though he tells the young men he is a researcher from the university, there to ask questions of people living in certain apartments, the men reply that he must stay with them, and that no one lives in the apartments he's charged with visiting. Finally, Sudhir convinces one of the young men to let him ask something. Sudhir does, reading off the sheet: "How does it feel to be black and poor?" The young men in the lobby laugh openly at what is, to them, an absurd question.

The response of the young men, viewed in light of the academic cluelessness of the questionnaire, is actually quite revealing. Though they find the questions strange and impossible to answer, they do not harm Sudhir, and they only offer him the slimmest of threats, wondering whether he's not a "spy" for a rival gang. Mostly, they are just perplexed by his presence there – and they want to keep an eye on him, to observe him.

The young men do not threaten Sudhir, but they surround him until a man named JT arrives, and asks what Sudhir is doing in the Oakland projects. Sudhir repeats that he is asking questions for a UChicago survey of the neighborhood. JT, who Sudhir realizes is the leader of a unit of the gang of which the young men are members, tells Sudhir that he is not African American, as the survey indicates. Instead, JT identifies himself using a racial epithet, saying that African Americans live in suburbs and "have jobs," whereas people like JT reside in the projects and are in gangs. JT leaves, still somewhat confused at Sudhir but not openly hostile, and the young men huddle around Sudhir in the stairwell of the project, treating him mostly with bemused indifference.

From the start, JT underscores just how different his world is from that of Sudhir. He doesn't even identify with the term "African American," even though, of course, JT is familiar with it, and sees how Sudhir is using it. But JT also notes that terms like African American belong to a world in which social divisions are made on paper, dissected by social scientists and politicians. As JT will go on to show, his world is far different from this "paper" world – it is more complex, harder to navigate, and it requires JT's particular fluid intelligence.

Sudhir stays up much of the night, as the young men around him – "foot soldiers" in JT's gang, known as the Black Kings – tell stories, smoke, and drink **beer**. JT comes back, after having conferred with his superiors, and talks to Sudhir again. He tells Sudhir that if he's interested in learning about life in Chicago, he shouldn't ask questions from surveys, nor should he be formal and "play by the rules" of academia. Sudhir listens eagerly to JT, and is surprised to hear that JT himself graduated from college and took some sociology courses there. JT lets Sudhir go in the early morning, and Sudhir is invigorated by his new firsthand experience with the members of the Black Kings (BK) gang, and especially with JT.

Sudhir doesn't spend too much time thinking about it, but in truth he has very good luck on this journey with the questionnaire, and it could have very easily happened that he wouldn't have met JT, or anyone like him, on his first or on subsequent visits. JT is, in this sense, a perfect subject: he is willing to talk about his life, he's interested in the kind of work Sudhir does, and he respects the intellectual inquiry behind Sudhir's project. But JT also knows enough about university life to see where Sudhir might be blind to life in the projects – and JT helps Sudhir to learn about precisely these areas.

Sudhir goes back to his studio apartment, wondering whether he should continue with his normal graduate routine that day, of classes and department business. But after showering, he buys **beer** and goes back to the same project. He finds JT and says that, if JT says Sudhir should observe people and their daily lives, then he, Sudhir, is happy to do it. JT says that Sudhir is courageous for returning, even if JT is still slightly confused by his persistent desire to research the community. They talk for a time, and when JT is called away on gang business, he tells Sudhir to return the following week, to continue observing life in the Oakland projects.

Sudhir here makes a fateful decision. Another researcher might have continued with the questionnaire, or, understandably, have been hesitant to dive into a research project in a community where he knows so few people. But Sudhir trusted JT – and JT was an easy person to trust. Thus begins the bond that will hold throughout the entire book. JT and Sudhir believe in each other, and grow close talking about their lives – and Sudhir carefully listens to, and notes down, much of what JT says.

CHAPTER 2 – FIRST DAYS ON FEDERAL STREET

Sudhir begins riding around in JT's car and following him in some of his daily activities, although not, for the first eight months or so, any related directly to the Black Kings. JT tells Sudhir a great deal about his life. JT had a job in the professional, "office" world after receiving a college degree, but found that, in general, his being a black man kept him from earning promotions or gaining favor from his superiors. This angered JT, and he returned to the South Side and found himself quickly becoming a "regional manager" with the Kings. As Sudhir asks JT questions about life in the neighborhood, JT responds with a mixture of academic and earthier explanation, saying, for example, that academics' idea of a "culture of poverty" is backward, since low-paying jobs offered to African American employees hardly prompt eager diligence and professional dedication. Sudhir listens to what JT says without noting things down until later, for he fears that JT will talk less candidly as he learns more about Sudhir's research.

Sudhir realizes quickly that JT's work with the BKs is structured as a kind of quasi-business – indeed, that the vast majority of the gang experience is modeled either on for-profit or non-profit behaviors in the "normal" markets of the world outside Robert Taylor. Thus, JT believes he ought to manage in certain ways, behave like an executive, obey chains of command, and otherwise work as one might in a corner office. The primary difference, of course, involves just what the gang is doing – mostly selling crack cocaine – and the violence that often attends this business. JT doesn't seem to like the violence or the uncertainty of the drug market, but he often says that these are simply unavoidable parts of the work.

Finally, by late spring of the first year of his research, Sudhir is asked by JT to accompany him on a gang-related visit, to Curly, another member of the Black Kings. Curly manages the crack-dealing business at the Robert Taylor Homes, Chicago's most notable, largest, and most infamous housing project, bordering the Dan Ryan Expressway. Sudhir agrees to go along with JT, and promises he won't say anything – he'll only observe JT's and Curly's conversation.

In the beginning of their working relationship, JT tries to keep Sudhir away from the day-to-day workings of the gang. There are perhaps several reasons for this: JT wants to make sure Sudhir is trustworthy; he wants to be sure he can present his own gang dealings in a coherent fashion; and he wants to protect Sudhir from some of the violence and complexity of the work he does.

Sudhir doesn't take notes when JT and Curly meet in Curly's mother's apartment in Robert Taylor. But Sudhir does recall that the two gang managers spoke a highly-coded and specific language of drugs markets and regions, products and forms of resistance (other gangs, the police). Later, on the car-ride back, JT fills in Sudhir on what was discussed. He says that Curly, another regional manager (like JT) of the BKs, has been running drug operations in Robert Taylor. Curly is beloved in the gang and loyal, but he's not great with business matters, and gang higher-ups realize this. JT wants a chance to broaden his profits beyond his current "franchise" in the Oakland projects, where Sudhir and JT met earlier that fall. JT is therefore happy to take over Curly's job, amicably, of leading the BK drug trade in Robert Taylor.

Here, again, the workings of the gang seem very similar to those of a large corporation. Curly is a loyal member of the gang (or company), and the higher-ups recognize that it is important to keep him in a position of command, especially as regards managing lower-level "foot soldiers." But the higher-ups also see that JT has an eye for business, and that he can drive up profits. This is the kind of work JT especially relishes, and so the diplomacy of this scene is evident—JT paying respect to Curly, and Curly acknowledging that JT would be better suited to the day-to-day work of boosting sales.

Sudhir is grateful for this information. At the end of the car ride, back near the university, Sudhir thanks JT for everything, presuming that, because JT has effectively been promoted to running the drug business in Robert Taylor, he'll no longer have time to chat with Sudhir. But JT "craves attention" from Sudhir, and asks openly if Sudhir isn't going to write his biography, a way of describing JT's life that also depicts the difficulties of the illicit drug business in Chicago. JT notes that this is the kind of scoop Sudhir couldn't get from a seminar, and Sudhir understands this to be true. He agrees to continue documenting JT's life and conversing with him, even once JT moves over to the Robert Taylor drug market.

Sudhir fears that JT will now want to move on, or will not want to grant Sudhir the same kind of access to the work he does. But in this case Sudhir underestimates JT's desire to have his life studied. Indeed, JT seems to believe that Sudhir wants to write his biography, and the only way Sudhir could do that would be to know everything about the nature of JT's work and about any "promotion" he might receive in the field. Thus this is a break for JT's career and for Sudhir's research.

While JT is preparing to take over his new role, Sudhir researches (in the UChicago library) the Robert Taylor homes. Robert Taylor, named for a director of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), was part of a nationwide progressive system of public housing construction in the middle of the twentieth century. Its goal, like that of all "projects" in urban areas, was to "revitalize" neighborhoods by constructing state-of-the-art housing amenities, and by making them available to impoverished, often minority, communities at subsidized rates. Because these authorities were founded and projects built with good intentions by many involved, there was much optimism in the press, initially, for places like Robert Taylor. But over time, government neglect of the buildings, coupled with overarching economic factors in cities (like deindustrialization, and white flight to the suburbs) caused the projects to fall into neglect, and to become centers of gang-related drug trade and violence in places like Chicago.

As per this research, the Robert Taylor Homes and other projects like them in Chicago and across the country were conceived of as, essentially, utopian spaces. Many social thinkers from all different walks of life thought that these organized housing communities could one day alleviate poverty, or severely restrict it, in places like Chicago with stark divisions between "haves" and "have-nots." One could debate whether projects like these were doomed from the start – and Sudhir notes that the organization of these communities into tall blocks made it very difficult, perhaps impossible, for people to communicate or feel they lived in a sensible neighborhood together.

Sudhir notes that, in the late '80s and early '90s, many in Chicago and across the US understood places like Robert Taylor to be centers of "criminality," rather than beacons of hope for fairer living conditions for the working poor. Although people like Bill Wilson, Sudhir's academic supervisor at UChicago, devoted their lives to understanding what it was like to live in poor parts of American cities, very few people, whether academics or journalists or non-profit workers, knew much about what it was like to live day-to-day in a housing project. That kind of ethnographic study was now becoming the center of Sudhir's research.

What's so striking about Sudhir's research is just how novel it is – how few people have devoted the time and energy to understanding what life is like in housing projects, even though one could never drive on the Dan Ryan Expressway, or on any major expressway in any major American city, without noticing large regions dominated by them. Thus Sudhir's work is notable in part because it reveals a community that was "hiding in plain sight" all along.

After a few weeks in the spring of 1990, when JT is situated in his new role as regional drug manager at Robert Taylor, he invites Sudhir to come down from UChicago to see his new surroundings. Sudhir meets Ms. Mae, JT's mother, who lives in Robert Taylor. JT invites Sudhir to a party, with people standing outside eating and drinking **beer** in the sunshine, assembled around cars and basketball courts, and with music and general merriment. Sudhir is pleasantly surprised by the cordiality with which he's greeted, as he arrives at the party with JT, who refers to him to others as his friend "the Professor." Sudhir begins visiting Robert Taylor regularly, and continues his discussions with JT, who fills him in on the living conditions of people in Robert Taylor.

JT's nickname for Sudhir, "the Professor," is, of course, a joke –as JT knows that Sudhir isn't a professor yet. But it also contains much of the complexity of their relationship. On the one hand, JT defers to Sudhir because he recognizes the depth of Sudhir's education. On the other, the nickname is somewhat sarcastic, as it seems to indicate that, despite Sudhir's smarts in the classroom, he knows very little about how to operate in a world like Robert Taylor.

In particular, Sudhir gets to know JT's mother, Ms. Mae. Ms. Mae often cooks for Sudhir, and tells him about her life before moving to Chicago, in the South, where her parents were sharecroppers. Sudhir offers Ms. Mae money for food after several weeks of eating dinner with her, but she refuses angrily, telling Sudhir never to offer her money again. JT teases Sudhir about his conversations and dinners with his mother, wondering whether Sudhir doesn't visit Robert Taylor only for Ms. Mae's cooking.

Ms. Mae does not speak much in the text, but she is a central figure of care and concern, and Sudhir goes to great lengths to describe just how good her cooking is and how pleasant it can be to know that Ms. Mae will be waiting with food. Sudhir comes to view Ms. Mae's house as a refuge, and he goes there when he wants to process what he's just seen elsewhere in the Homes.

JT also takes Sudhir on tours of the different high-rises of the Robert Taylor Homes, and begins describing to him the complex economic systems of exchange, often outside the "legal markets" of Chicago, that support the Homes. Sudhir observes as JT, along with his associates (lieutenants) T-Bone and Creepy, monitors the squatters in the Homes, who pay the Black Kings a small fee to live there without being bothered by others. Sudhir notes how crack addicts buy their drugs, and observes that sometimes JT will send overdosed addicts to a medical clinic located within the Homes complex, both to help them and to make sure areas are cleared for continued drug sales.

The status of the squatters in the Homes is complex. Really, a great number of gang members and others in the Homes are not on official leases – generally these leases are kept in women's names, to make sure that gang members can't be tracked to specific buildings. This means that, in the eyes of the state, a good many of the men in Robert Taylor are really squatting, even if they're BKs. But the BKs then patrol to see if others from outside the community are living in the Homes.

Sudhir meets others in the Homes, including "regular squatters" like C-Note, a handyman with many "side hustles" who washes cars and mends appliances for tenants in the buildings. Sudhir also meets Ms. Easley, a "tenant monitor" whom JT pays off occasionally so that young people in the building can have daycare and school supplies. Thus Sudhir observes that the Black Kings both maintain and are central to the gray-market economies of the Homes. Not only do the Black Kings sell drugs and control the drug trade—their most important source of income—but they also organize social events, act as landlords, and manage prostitution rings and markets for goods and services (like hair salons). Some tenants, like C-Note and Ms. Mae, are more than happy to share their experiences with Sudhir, who, after weeks of visiting the Homes, accidentally lets slip that he takes notes on everything he observes. But JT seems already to understand this, and is unfazed; indeed, Sudhir often writes up his notes over food in Ms. Mae's apartment.

The BKs structure their own legal system that mimics the legal system that should *in fact be operating in the Homes, but isn't because the Homes suffer from institutional neglect on the part of city and state governments. The BKs collect money from people like C-Note, and this can be frustrating to tenants who do not have a lot to pay. But as Sudhir and, later, Ms. Bailey indicate, the tenants don't have much of a choice, and they seek out entities that would be willing to monitor, keep up, and hold accountable others in the building. What at first appears to be a "lawless" set of families is in fact a tightly-ordered one – just not in the ways that suburbs, or wealthier parts of the city, are arranged.*

Sudhir meets a woman named Clarisse, in her thirties, who is a prostitute in Robert Taylor and a relative of JT's, although JT does not tell Sudhir this—Clarisse does. She says that she's a "regular" prostitute in the building, and that JT allows her to do her work without interference. But JT also manages prostitutes who are "freelance," who do not live in Robert Taylor and/or who have no personal connection to JT or to others in the management of the Black Kings. Sudhir notes that Clarisse says she does not smoke crack, although many prostitutes do. Sudhir also observes that perhaps 15 percent of the residents of the Homes are "hardcore" users of drugs like crack, whereas about a quarter use "occasionally" or socially.

Clarisse's status within Robert Taylor is similar in many ways to that of "regular" squatters like C-Note, as Sudhir here describes. This is not to say that Clarisse's work is in any sense "legal" – not even close. But the gang knows about her, and she knows about the gang. Clarisse is subject to gang "taxes" from time to time, but they don't harass her, they don't impinge on her customer base, and she does what she can to follow the rules they set (and occasionally revise). This symbiosis means that both parties can, largely, go about their business in peace.

Sudhir continues making notes on other "hustles" in the Homes outside of the prostitution ring taxed (but not directly managed) by the Black Kings. He observes C-Note in particular, who tells him his nickname comes from the fact that "he has a hundred ways to make a hundred bucks." One summer day, Sudhir watches C-Note and some of his friends, also "regular" squatters, set up an auto-repair open-air market on the basketball courts. JT comes by after some time and tells C-Note to move, that there's a BK-run basketball game scheduled for the courts that day, but C-Note resists. (Sudhir notes that C-Note was not typically angered by JT, and respected his rule over the Homes, but that C-Note always defended his right to make a profit in one of his hustles.)

C-Note is an important secondary character in the text. In some sense he is a foil to JT – a man who is street-savvy, who generally knows how to make money and, on occasion, to manage other people. But JT has a great deal more authority than C-Note does, and it's not necessarily clear why – other than the fact that JT is the regional leader of a gang, and C-Note is not a part of the gang. Thus belonging to the BKs ensures an enormous amount of leverage within Robert Taylor – something from which C-Note does not benefit.

C-Note does not back down from JT, and refuses to move his auto-repair equipment from the courts. But JT insists and, finally, begins beating and kicking C-Note, and other lieutenants from the BKs join in. Sudhir watches from afar, aghast at what is happening, but worried about what will occur if he breaks up the fight. Finally JT relents, and some friends of C-Note take him to the clinic at the Homes, where doctors treat him for bruised ribs and cuts. Sudhir remarks that he is shocked and saddened by JT's violent outburst. And, as far as his research goes, he realizes it might be dangerous and one-sided to see Robert Taylor only from JT's perspective. He thus begins wondering how to broaden his ethnographic research at the Homes—how to gain research access to others living there.

This is the first of several important ethical episodes for Sudhir in the text. Although he tries always to go by what he calls his "intuition" or "compass," this is an instance where he might have done more, as he seems to acknowledge later. Yes, it would have been enormously difficult to stand up to JT, especially when JT was heated about C-Note's activities. But JT does seem to listen to Sudhir, at least somewhat, and Sudhir in this instance appears to let go of a chance to offer his opinion of JT's behavior.

CHAPTER 3 – SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER ME

Sudhir writes that, by the summer of 1990, after he has been observing the BKs (and especially JT) for about a year, he is shaken by the relationship between the gang's "regulatory" function in the Homes and its violent streak. Sudhir remains disturbed by the beating of C-Note, although he does not bring it up with JT right away. He instead waits until JT and other BKs begin hassling an "irregular squatter" named Brass, who has not paid his tax to the BKs to live in the Homes.

Right away Sudhir has another chance to affect the way that JT deals with other people – or, at least, to comment on it. As with the C-Note incident, after JT harms the squatting party he justifies his behavior to Sudhir as some version of "laying down the law." But it doesn't seem to be the case that C-Note wouldn't have listened to reason – at which point JT's logic for violence seems a little less persuasive.

Brass yells back at JT when JT accuses him of living there for free, and JT and others beat him so badly he lies bleeding on the ground, as Sudhir again watches, from a parked car, and wonders what to do. This time, Sudhir says something to JT, noting that C-Note, unlike Brass, was paying his tax, and that the BKs seemed to beat Brass unnecessarily (because his tax was so small) and C-Note especially so, as C-Note was an acquaintance of the gang's and a "regular" in the project.

In short, Sudhir learns a different side of the BKs in these interactions with Brass and with C-Note. Although the organization is patterned after "legitimate" business, it methods are often unsavory, coercive, and violent. Thus there is no greater logic holding the gang together, in many cases, beyond loyalty and fear – two forces JT is adept at harnessing.

JT responds to Sudhir, however, that both Brass and C-Note had "questioned his authority," and that they therefore deserved punishment, and that it was an unsavory but necessary part of JT's job as gang leader. Sudhir does not push the issue further this time, but his view of JT changes—from seeing him as a subtle businessman to something more complex, with shades of violence and criminal behavior that Sudhir compares to characters from mobster movies "like *The Godfather*."

Sudhir notes throughout the book that there are times the behavior of the gang itself seems modeled on the behavior of gangs in popular culture. In this instance it is mobster movies, and there are other times when Sudhir thinks of representations of black culture from music and TV as well. It's not clear the extent to which the gang "really is" this way, or subtly and perhaps unconsciously takes on the influence of "gang life" from pop culture.

Sudhir takes a short break from his narrative to describe the larger black-market economic system in which the Chicago gangs participate. Because the crack epidemic was at its height in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Sudhir was visiting the Robert Taylor Homes, gang leaders like JT were selling crack in especially competitive markets. This meant that any advantage one gang gained over another could result in thousands of dollars in business. Sudhir realizes, from observing JT and his business dealings, that the BKs had a relatively complex system of money laundering, where large amounts of cash could be invested in local stores and "legitimate" outfits, so that the BKs' income could not be stolen from any one location (of hundreds throughout the gang's Chicago network) or taxed by the state and federal government.

One of the more complex features of JT's business is the way the gang deals with large amounts of money. Sudhir hasn't thought about this much before talking to JT, and he realizes quickly that one can't just keep huge amounts of cash lying around. As JT points out, that cash could be stolen by rival gangs, or lost; it could be confiscated more easily by the police. So "shelters" for cash are extremely important, as are money laundering schemes that make it appear as though profits are not from the drug trade, but instead derive from local businesses, preferably those that deal in large amounts of cash to begin with.

Sudhir is especially surprised to learn from JT that the Black Kings pay off local city officials, including those on the Board of Aldermen. Sudhir had heard that gangs had penetrated into local government, but JT was the first person (in a position to know) to confirm it to him. Sudhir is also shocked to hear JT increasingly say that gangs like the BKs are "taking care of the community" and "helping others," by arranging social events and get-togethers, by "regulating" the gray-market businesses of places like Robert Taylor, and by effectively compartmentalizing the drug trade—by selling "only to junkies," who, according to JT, aren't particularly worth worrying about. Sudhir wonders whether JT seriously believes his gang is at least partially a charitable, community organization, as he more or less describes it. Sudhir is reminded of comments Charlie and Old Time made, back in Washington Park, about the relationship between Chicago gangs in the '60s and '70s and social justice movements and organizations, like the Black Panthers.

This is the flip side of the political influence that JT speaks about, in glowing and optimistic terms, for the gang throughout Chicago. For it is true that the BKs can organize young men to vote, and can help to sponsor events like basketball games throughout the community. But these things, in total, perhaps do not add up to nearly as much as does the BKs' direct "investment" in political authority; the buying of power at the local and state levels. JT doesn't talk about this in too much detail, but he does make it clear that there are officials throughout Chicago who are willing to "listen" to gangs, and to look the other way when it's time for criminal prosecution if the gang is willing to "contribute" to the politician's campaign.

Sudhir continues by saying that "community-based organizations," or CBOs—charities supporting neighborhoods in the South Side—also have complex relationships with gangs like the BKs. Sudhir relates JT's vision for a rejuvenated South Side, one in which, like during the '60s and '70s, gangs help agitate for better living conditions in projects and better professional opportunities for families. Sudhir listens politely to JT's speeches on these subjects, but wonders if JT really means what he says—that the BKs do what they do only because they care about supporting their communities.

This is another instance, as after the beating of C-Note and Brass, when Sudhir is less inclined to believe exactly what JT says. In fact, it becomes clear as the narrative continues that Sudhir grows increasingly critical of the things JT says about his own life, and about the way the gang operates. Like perhaps any leader in his position, JT is prone to exaggeration – which is the enemy of the kind of objective work Sudhir is trying to do.

Sudhir describes in more detail the BKs' relationship to political life. He attends, with JT, a meeting run by Lenny Duster, a community organizer for a local group called PRIDE. At the meeting, Lenny tells many young "foot soldiers" for the BKs that they must go out and "register" voters in Robert Taylor, encouraging them to vote for Democrats, to make sure that Robert Taylor is supported by powerful people in city and state government.

Although Lenny only appears in the book for a few paragraphs, he, like other characters (Autry), occupies an important role in the Homes, as a mediator between "legitimate" authority, in the form of government or police, and "illegitimate," or gang, authority.

Sudhir goes along with some of these foot soldiers as they "canvas" Robert Taylor. Sudhir describes an especially awkward moment in which one woman meets with a young and motivated gang member named Shorty-Lee, directing a "voter drive." The woman says she doesn't need to "register" with the BKs, since she's already an officially registered voter. Her questioning of the foot soldiers, especially of Shorty-Lee, reveals that they do not understand how official voting works, and that BK "registration" is really an unofficial way of coercing Robert Taylor residents into stuffing the ballot boxes for Democrats in the precinct. Sudhir tells the foot soldiers maybe they should continue their canvassing later that day, thus relieving the embarrassment they feel after speaking to the woman.

This is one of the more comic aspects of the book. Sudhir takes great pains not to laugh at his subjects, even as his subjects occasionally laugh at him. And Sudhir has a good rapport with a great many of the BKs, meaning that casual joking is almost always in order. But in this case, Sudhir realizes just how little some of the foot soldiers understand about the political process. This is an educational and civic problem, to be sure – but Sudhir also senses that it is a problem of the recognition of the power democracy can bring to underserved communities. For, after all, anyone living in the projects really does have a vote that can be used in elections.

Sudhir follows other members of the Robert Taylor community, since JT is spending more and more time on political organizing efforts. Sudhir meets with Kris and Michael, two other "hustlers" like C-Note, and helps them as they run a temporary car-washing business one day. When Michael gets in an argument with someone whose car has already been washed, T-Bone, one of JT's lieutenants, comes by and "breaks things up" peaceably, then "winks" at Sudhir as he walks away. Afterward, Sudhir talks to Kris and Michael about the incident. Kris and Michael claim that, since the police don't come to Robert Taylor, they must pay small amounts of "protection" so that the BKs will help them when they're in need.

The idea of "protection" is central to the book, cropping up here and in many different sections. Simply put, the BKs intimidate most people running gray-market business in the projects into paying "tax" to them, which, the BKs claim, is money the BKs can then use to support their organization. The BKs, in turn, stand between the gray-market business and any other entity that might attempt to disrupt it – most likely the police or another gang. This kind of "protection" is not really optional, though, as evident in this instance.

Another day that summer, Sudhir observes an incident in which Robert Taylor community members become angry, especially a woman named Boo-Boo, who claims that the "Arab" clerk at a bodega nearby has raped her daughter, Coco, and given her an STD. Sudhir goes with Price, another BK lieutenant, down to the store, and finds out from others gathered there that one of the store clerks was indeed having a sexual relationship with Coco, who is sixteen, as a trade for "diapers" and other products for Coco's daughter. The situation is defused when another man at the store, the owner, gives away products like soda to the community members gathered, and promises that the other clerk will no longer be involved with Coco.

This important section illustrates just how essential small shop owners are on the periphery of the housing projects – these shop owners sell the kinds of products that residents of the projects cannot really get anywhere else, since there are few cars around. And when families, as in this case, need goods just to keep going, or so that children can be fed and clothed, then the shop owners occasionally take advantage of their position of power, and the result is here described.

Sudhir attempts to see other parts of the Robert Taylor Homes. He visits Ms. Bailey, the building manager in Robert Taylor A, and she walks with him across competing gang lines to Building B, where there is a small Boys and Girls Club, run by a man named Autry. Autry immediately puts Sudhir to work and takes a liking to him, telling him about "mediations" he and a policeman named Officer Reggie organize, in which gang members with "beef" can fight in a controlled environment. Although Sudhir wonders at how Autry and Officer Reggie can condone violence like this, Autry argues that this "mediated" form is far better organized, and less lethal, than what might occur otherwise.

Officer Reggie and Autry are both important and fascinating characters in the story. Officer Reggie seems, at least to Sudhir, to be purer of intention – his greatest aid to the community is to help break up gang disputes and make sure that a certain kind of order is maintained in the projects as much as possible. But most of Reggie's fellow officers don't care to find out much about the living conditions in the Homes. Autry's status is a bit more ambiguous, as he runs the Boys and Girls Club but also seems to enjoy the power that this "brokering" position affords him.

Autry invites Sudhir to a meeting about the "Midnight Basketball" organization, which some in Robert Taylor hope to organize as a community bonding effort. Sudhir attends and runs into JT, who walks in surrounded by other BKs. JT is surprised to see Sudhir there under Autry's "protection" rather than his own, and when the two speak privately before the meeting, Sudhir realizes that JT is angry Sudhir has apparently "switched" allegiances to Autry.

The midnight basketball idea is one of the more striking and imaginative of the gang's plans to help the community. The idea is straightforward and fairly powerful – that, if gang members are playing a game together on a given night, then they're not out causing trouble in other parts of the neighborhood.

Sudhir argues that he is still writing JT's biography, at least primarily, and that he wants to know "what other people think about" JT. JT seems to accept this, but remains suspicious of Sudhir, and Sudhir wonders if he hasn't made a grave error in becoming friends with Autry and moving beyond JT's "protection" in Robert Taylor.

Here, Autry shows just how difficult it can be to depend on certain subjects. Autry has made clear that he knows Sudhir depends to an extent on JT, and thus Autry is willing to "test" Sudhir and force him to decide which group he wants to affiliate himself with in the Homes: the BKs or the Boys and Girls Club.

There's a shooting in Robert Taylor a few weeks later—innocent kids are caught in stray gunfire between the BKs and the Disciples, the gang congregating near zone B. Sudhir attends, with Ms. Bailey, an official meeting with the Chicago Police soon after, and notes how members of the Robert Taylor community express anger at the police, who attempt to answer their safety concerns but more or less concede there is little they can do to interfere in gang-related "warfare" or the preparations for it.

In this case, as Sudhir describes, the police have very little they can do or say to help the residents, since the police presence in the Homes is so minimal to begin with, and it is unlikely that new officers will be brought in to help. But the police do act as conduits for the residents' frustration at least.

Ms. Bailey hints to Sudhir, however, that he should return to the meeting room in a couple hours, and he does. There he finds a Pastor named Wilkins, along with Autry, members of the BKs and the Disciples, and Officer Reggie. Pastor Wilkins mediates between the two gangs, and arranges for a "penalty" such that the BKs get increased drug territory from the Disciples for a week. This, because the BKs didn't "retaliate" against the Disciples for the accidental shooting.

Here, the "penalties" are not all that dissimilar from the kinds of tax penalties a government might levy against a legitimate business. But, of course, in this case the business in question is the selling of crack cocaine, and punishment is a working-out of "turf," since no one is paying real government taxes on any profits accrued.

After the meeting, JT confronts Sudhir again in private, and politely but firmly tells him that, since Sudhir is attending gang-related events individually now, without standing at JT's side, Sudhir is now "on his own." JT says again that he cannot "protect" Sudhir in these situations, and Sudhir says he feels that JT is "slipping from his grasp."

Another instance of protection. It's not clear whether JT is in fact threatening Sudhir here, saying that Sudhir ought to stay close to him and not bond too much with others in the projects. Or, as Sudhir hints, perhaps JT is simply jealous that Sudhir is focusing on other people for his research.

CHAPTER 4 – GANG LEADER FOR A DAY

Times elapses, and its been three years that Sudhir has observed JT and others in the BKs and in the Robert Taylor Homes. In discussions with his adviser Bill Wilson, Sudhir agrees to "expand" his project as a way of understanding how the BKs control and affect the gray-market economies of the projects. To do this, Sudhir resolves to begin asking more pointed questions of JT about how finances work in the gang, and how money moves from group to group throughout the Homes.

The expansion of Sudhir's project derives from several sources. Sudhir sees that he'll need to talk to more people so that his sample of the projects is representative. He also senses that JT might get protective of his work, and so Sudhir needs to make sure his "portfolio" of subjects is large and diverse. And Sudhir's advisers also caution him about depending on any one person's viewpoint of an entire social system.

Sudhir listens to JT talk frequently about how he is the "CEO" of a group of people. But Sudhir believes that JT barely works, instead delegating most of his responsibilities to others. He says this to JT and JT, half-angry but intrigued, tells Sudhir that he can be "gang leader for a day," only one, to see what exactly JT does. Sudhir agrees, with a major stipulation: that he not be directly involved in any criminal activity. JT agrees to this, and they meet in a diner the next morning: JT, Sudhir, T-Bone, and Price.

Here, Sudhir finally gets his chance to see what it's like to operate the gang, if only for a day (with the "experiment" also giving the book its title). Sudhir manages this cleverly – by insinuating that JT doesn't work all that hard at all, and that therefore anyone could do his job. But, as Sudhir will soon find out, the job is very demanding, especially on the level of detail, much of which is kept mentally and not written (to avoid prosecution).

Sudhir immediately has to reckon with several problems. Some tenants in Robert Taylor have thrown a party without cleaning it up, bothering other tenants, and Sudhir has to assign foot soldiers to deal with the mess. Price then tells Sudhir that he, the leader, has to figure out a place for the gang to meet on a weekly basis. Pastor Wilkins has offered a church room to the BKs, but JT and the lieutenants caution that Sudhir might not want to be indebted to Wilkins for so big a favor, since Wilkins has his own agenda. Sudhir realizes just how detailed the gang's business is, even before they've left the diner.

Sudhir believes that these kinds of issues can be resolved in a relatively straightforward fashion. But as demonstrated here, whenever Sudhir decides one way, JT or one of the lieutenants notes where a possible difficulty might arise – one that Sudhir hadn't accounted for. Indeed, running the BKs is like doing a jigsaw puzzle – each piece fits exactly with each other piece, and if one changes, everything else must change in response.

Sudhir then drives with T-Bone, Price, and JT to meet with Johnny, who owns a corner store near Robert Taylor. Johnny pays the BKs "protection," like many businesses. But Johnny is visibly upset at this extortion, and voices his frustration to JT. (Johnny also wonders why Sudhir is talking so much, but JT does not explain that Sudhir is "gang leader for a day.") Johnny agrees to stop raising prices for BK members in the store, which he has been doing out of retaliation, and JT and his lieutenants agree to rein in members of the gang who are brazenly stealing from the shelves while Johnny is present. Sudhir and the BKs leave, the quarrel largely resolved.

Johnny has made an "arrangement" with the BKs in two senses. First, he has permitted certain BKs to receive certain products at a discount – that is, he has acknowledged that the BKs are the dominant, government-like authority in the area. But he also refuses service to other customers, some BKs, who seem to damage the store's reputation, or make it less hospitable to other customers. Thus Johnny is caught between needing the BKs on the one hand, and feeling that certain BK members make his business that much harder to run.

Next, Sudhir must resolve a quarrel between two low-level foot soldiers, Billy and Otis. Sudhir knows them both: he respects Billy's desire for self-improvement, and is afraid of Otis, who once threatened him after Sudhir refereed a BK basketball game and ejected Otis for excessive fouling. Billy, Otis's sales superior, accuses Otis of stealing some of the profits from recent sales. Otis essentially admits to this, but claims he was stealing because Billy wasn't paying him his full cut to begin with. JT and Sudhir walk away, and JT asks Sudhir what he would do to resolve the dispute.

One of the problems in managing the gang is making sure that all money made is accounted for – and that it goes to the top of the gang hierarchy. As Sudhir finds out, the gangs funnel most of their profits to upper-level "executives," people higher even than JT. And "foot soldiers" make very little, thus greatly increasing the incentive for people like Billy and Otis to steal whenever possible, or to "hide" certain profits.

Sudhir says that, because both Billy and Otis have broken the rules, their punishments should "offset," like in the NFL—neither is then punished. JT thinks this is "smart" reasoning, as do the lieutenants, but JT also tells Sudhir that Otis should be punished for stealing (JT agrees with Sudhir, that they can't prove Billy was withholding wages). JT and the lieutenants beat Otis as punishment, and though Sudhir is upset at this (and does not participate), JT justifies his actions, saying that people must pay the consequences when they openly flout the hierarchy within the BKs.

Another instance of JT making sure that all those around him know he is the "boss" of the organization. Physical intimidation remains an important piece of the puzzle. JT worries that, if he's not beating up gang members who don't follow his rules, he simply wouldn't have enough economic leverage to make sure that those members fell in line – the kinds of disincentives a legitimate businessman might use to keep workers working.

To round out his day with the BKs, Sudhir rides with JT to various "street groups," where "directors" report to JT what they've sold, in what quantities, and to whom. The directors also detail police activity and any other problems with staff or customers. Sudhir notes that JT has "informants," often homeless or otherwise under-employed people in the neighborhoods, who can corroborate what the directors say.

This network of spies and informants receives relatively little description in the narrative. But the picture Sudhir paints is of something like a "police state," wherein most activities are monitored. Yet this police state contains almost no police, and is run and managed instead by a drug-dealing collective.

Sudhir is shocked to learn, during these rounds, that many people "rip off" JT to an extent in the handling of normal drug-selling. For example, "mixers" who bake the crack cocaine occasionally "dilute" the mixture and pocket the difference. Similarly, salesmen on teams sometimes skim from the till. Occasionally JT will threaten or beat (or have others beat) salesmen who do this. But other times, JT accepts that this skimming is part of an illegal business—a way to keep his sales teams happy and keep the cops away.

JT must then be willing to tolerate, in his decentralized model (as Sudhir notes), a certain amount of waste. In a legitimate business, JT could complain to the authorities if he thought his suppliers were skimming from the till or otherwise stealing from him. But he has no such recourse in an illegitimate business, and so must account for this loss at each stage when drawing up projected profits for a given period.

At the end of his day as gang leader, Sudhir is exhausted, and realizes just how much JT has to keep track of—nearly all of it in his head, as JT is worried that any written record of his doings could be incriminating if he is ever caught by the police. Sudhir ends the chapter noting that, although he can return to being a researcher after the day is done, JT must return to the gang leader job, one that Sudhir has very clearly underestimated in its complexity and demands.

Sudhir finally realizes just how hard it is to manage the BKs – what kinds of forms of coercion, physical and financial, are required. Sudhir also recognizes the amount of detail inherent to JT's job, all of which JT must manage in his head, as he can't have too many written records of what the gang does and sells.

CHAPTER 5 – MS. BAILEY'S NEIGHBORHOOD

Other professors at UChicago encourage Sudhir to focus more on the women living in the projects, since, as one adviser notes, over "2/3" of the permanent residents of the projects are women. Sudhir hones back in on Ms. Bailey, "building president of the LAC (Local Advisory Council)." Although Ms. Bailey is paid (by the government) a small part-time wage, she has enormous power in her building of the Robert Taylor Homes. She mediates between police, residents, the CHA, and other city officials, and does her best to make sure needy families get the assistance they need. Ms. Bailey has "a strong handshake" too, Sudhir notes, and uses her power to look out for her own interests along with those of others.

Sudhir realizes he hasn't been spending nearly enough time with the majority of the project to which he's devoted his research – namely, the women living there, who are frequently heads of households and primary breadwinners and caregivers. Sudhir is immediately impressed with Ms. Bailey, who seems to combine some of Ms. Mae's maternal qualities with an organizational talent and tolerance for pressure and force that rivals JT's.

Sudhir meets with Ms. Bailey in her "office," which is rundown, but which she rules with an iron fist. Ms. Bailey begins a line of rhetorical questioning, asking Sudhir whether he's going to study "white people" while studying Robert Taylor. Sudhir is confused, since the vast majority of residents are black. But Sudhir realizes over the course of their conversation that Ms. Bailey means that many people in institutions outside the homes – the police, the CHA, CBOs – are white, and their actions have a real impact on the lives of those living in the projects. Sudhir begins to understand Ms. Bailey's point.

Ms. Bailey seems aware from the beginning of the social forces at play in the Homes. She believes that "white people," a stand in for the culture surrounding the Homes (and affluent Chicago is, primarily, white) exert an enormous amount of influence on the Homes, shaping how they are perceived not only in other neighborhoods but also within the project community itself.

Ms. Bailey begins speaking with Sudhir more regularly in her office, although she asks him to step outside, in the beginning, when tenants come by to discuss their problems with her. Sudhir rides around with Ms. Bailey one day, who says she is going out to accept "donations." Sudhir realizes that Ms. Bailey gets items—like winter clothing, food, or alcohol—from local stores, but they're not "donations" per se, as Ms. Bailey usually compensates the store somehow—like, for example, agreeing to tell Robert Taylor families to shop only there. When Sudhir asks what this kind of "charitable" giving means, Ms. Bailey offers a simple response: she'll accept whatever people will give, and will do what she has to do, practically speaking, to make sure people in the Homes have adequate food and clothing.

"Charity," like "business," has its own sense within the Homes. Just as JT can argue that the BKs play a major role in shaping and organizing the community, Ms. Bailey can state that these stores are giving her items as "donations," even though she is sending additional customers their way, or promising other inducements. Charity in a different context might mean giving without any strings, but in the Homes, there is almost nothing that happens without a consequence, either physical, or social, or political. Ms. Bailey just acknowledges this as a fact and builds upon it to serve her constituents.

One day, Sudhir is meeting with Ms. Bailey when Clarisse, the prostitute living in the Homes, comes by, drug-addled and upset, and asking for clothing. Ms. Bailey refuses and tells Clarisse she should stop using drugs, then largely ignores her. Sudhir, upset and confused, helps Clarisse back upstairs and gets her to lie down on a sofa. He realizes that her children living in the apartment haven't eaten in a long time, and goes out to buy them snacks. But when Sudhir returns to the Homes after a couple days, Ms. Bailey scolds him for helping, saying that, if words gets around that Sudhir is willing to support some of the women or their children, that there are some in the Homes who might want to take advantage of that kindness. Echoing JT, Ms. Bailey says she wouldn't be able to "protect" Sudhir under those circumstances.

Sudhir, interestingly, appears to also offer a kind of "charity" in this instance, making sure that Clarisse is safe and back at her apartment, and that her children have eaten enough food. But Ms. Bailey warns that this charity will not be perceived as mere giving by the community at large – it will instead be viewed as the same sort of "quid pro quo" charity that Ms. Bailey has been engaging in. Thus, constituents will believe that Sudhir is getting something from Clarisse in return – sex, drugs, or access to a different part of the Homes.

Sudhir attends a meeting Ms. Bailey holds for residents of the building to air their grievances. Many complain about the presence of the BKs in the homes, the parties they have, the messes they make – or about the squatters who "loiter" in the common spaces of the building. But Ms. Bailey does not back down. She "notes" the requests the community members make, asking her assistants to write them down. But she also says that the BKs protect people in the building, and that paying them off, or allowing them to keep to their own business, is largely good for the people living in Robert Taylor. Although the constituents are angry, they do not fight Ms. Bailey, and the meeting eventually ends.

Ms. Bailey is quick to use her influence in public, and she seems not to care what other residents might think about that – whether they might have a moral scruple with the kind of amoral practicality with which Ms. Bailey gets things done in the Homes. Ms. Bailey figures that these meetings are useful if they enable people to air their grievances and perhaps feel that they've been heard. But the meetings are in no sense democratic – they are a platform for Ms. Bailey to tell the residents what will, and won't, happen for them.

Afterward, Sudhir asks Ms. Bailey about her philosophy of running the project building of which she's leader. She responds that, first things first, her job is to "get things done," and then she can "worry" about the means employed to achieve whatever goal she had in mind. In other words, Ms. Bailey recognizes that her system of using power and leaning on the BKs is far from perfect, but it's the only system available to her. After Ms. Bailey leaves, Catrina, her highest-ranking assistant and secretary, tells Sudhir that there are other facets of Ms. Bailey's personality, positive ones, that he should look out for, including her protective and supportive attitude toward other women in the projects.

Here, Ms. Bailey spells out explicitly what her philosophy is – it's only results that matter, and the ends justify the means. Outside the projects, this might be viewed as a cruel or uncompromising way to go about things – one that leaves out possible moral absolutes, such as, it's wrong to steal or to support the drug trade. But Ms. Bailey argues that moral purity is something available only to people living outside the Homes, who have the privilege not to be involved in the intrigues and difficulties of the projects.

One day, Sudhir is talking to Catrina outside Ms. Bailey's office when a commotion breaks out in the building. Squatters scream that they must apprehend Bee-Bee, a man they believe has just brutally beaten his girlfriend Taneesha. The squatters, including C-Note, are afraid that Bee-Bee will try to leave the building to avoid punishment. Sudhir goes along with the squatters, who call out to Bee-Bee; after he tries to escape, there is a tussle among many of them, and Sudhir kicks Bee-Bee, helping to stop him, while C-Note and the others corral him and take him into Ms. Bailey's office. Ms. Bailey allows others in her office to beat Bee-Bee, and they finally "drag him" outside and deposit him on the street.

In this case, organized vigilante violence is used to patrol the Homes and, supposedly, to make them safer for women and families. And there is no denying that the group, of which Sudhir is a part, makes sure that Taneesha is safe and that Bee-Bee, the man accused of (and "convicted of," in the court of public opinion) beating her is punished. Sudhir takes part in this effort, but not without some concern about what he has done – and what it means that police are not involved in the apprehension of Bee-Bee.

After the incident Sudhir talks to Catrina, who has spoken to Taneesha – and although the girl has been beaten badly, she'll survive. Sudhir asks why Catrina and others never call the police when this happens – why "militias" are charged with protecting women who are abused. Catrina says that they are afraid of the police, and Sudhir becomes frustrated with (what he perceives as) her continued denial of the possibility of any police support. Afterward, Sudhir accepts that, as in other cases, the police simply will not get involved in Robert Taylor, either because they are not invited or because they will not come. He asks if Catrina would like to compose an essay about the day's events; Sudhir has been reading some of Catrina's writing, giving her an outlet for her thoughts and feelings.

Here, Sudhir expresses his frustration to Catrina about what he sees as a stubborn unwillingness of people in the Homes to call the police. Sudhir believes that this unwillingness is, in part, reasonable, deriving as it does from the police's clear lack of interest in protecting public safety in Robert Taylor. But the cycle, for Sudhir, is also a vicious one – if the police aren't called, crime is increasingly handled by vigilantes who'd fear a police presence, and so police continue not to be called.

After the incident, once Sudhir has cooled down and collected his thoughts, he goes back to the Homes. There, he runs into JT, who says that Ms. Bailey is angry with him. When he speaks to Ms. Bailey, she says she's "worried" that Sudhir is "seeing things he's not ready for," and that, because people saw him stand up for Taneesha, they might assume he's involved in other activities in the Homes, perhaps related either to the LAC or, more likely, to the BKs.

As if on cue, JT appears to say once more that Sudhir cannot be "protected" in these cases. It's not evident whether JT is really simply upset about losing control over Sudhir, whether he fears Ms. Bailey's influence, or whether he's really just looking out for Sudhir – and in fact it's probably a combination of these things.

Ms. Bailey admits again that her methods, such as the use of the militia against Bee-Bee, require her to ignore the police or circumvent them. When Sudhir expresses continued frustration at this, Ms. Bailey says that she hopes for the day when she's "no longer needed" in Robert Taylor. But she feels that her job will always have to exist, because people in the CHA and the police will never "come around" the buildings to help.

Here, Ms. Bailey repeats a line that is heard often in the Homes, that although methods used to get by are not always pleasant ones, they are the only methods available to the Homes. When the Homes are better, the methods might change, and official structures could take the place of vigilante and improvised ones.

Sudhir observes what happens when a family loses their front door. Ms. Bailey helps the family to negotiate with the CHA and get a new door, but only after accepting a certain amount of cash to make sure the door actually arrives (bribes for relevant authorities) and is installed (bribes for handymen). Sudhir wonders at just how difficult it is to live in Robert Taylor: in effect, how expensive it is, as the saying goes, to be poor. Sudhir realizes that in his own suburban upbringing, no one had to really worry about something like a door falling off, and a homeowner or renter would have recourse to figure out the problem relatively quickly and cheaply. But in the projects, all problems like this can become major issues, and can involve the "help," typically expensive, of people like Ms. Bailey.

Sudhir here hints at something important that is always in the background in the book, and is mentioned in other sociological treatises on places like the Robert Taylor Homes and other American projects. Simply put, in the US it costs a lot of money to not have money. A vast number of fines exist at the governmental level for people who don't have sufficient cash, and jailing and other regulations often target low-income families. And then the gangs that fill the official void rely on "protection" rackets, which themselves cost families a great deal of money. In the end, if you can't afford to pay for goods and services – then you'll really *have to pay.*

CHAPTER 6 – THE HUSTLER AND THE HUSTLED

Sudhir, after speaking with his professors, learns that some of his research might require him to share his notes with law enforcement, if he's ever subpoenaed. This is because JT and others in the BKs speak to him about events like drive-by shootings, and Sudhir has no "protection" or "privilege" in his interviews with the gang members (as would, say, a lawyer). This causes Sudhir to think more about the way he studies the BKs. He also hopes to gain a more systematic economic picture of the gang, so that his dissertation can contain a quantitative as well as descriptive component.

Sudhir realizes that there is much more to his work, as far as legal ramifications go, than he imagined initially. In particular, till now he has followed the model of "doing first, and asking for forgiveness later." But as Bill Wilson and other professors indicate, this ethic, though effective in the field, might not stand up to institutional scrutiny if and when Sudhir publishes his results. Thus Sudhir must think beforehand about certain kinds of behaviors – such as his observation of, and very occasional participation in, acts of gang violence.

Sudhir meets with Ms. Bailey and JT and tells them what he's learned about the legal status of some of his research. Both Ms. Bailey and JT are not surprised to hear this. Ms. Bailey, in particular, had assumed that Sudhir would eventually be asked to show his notes to someone – another professor, a law-enforcement officer – and tells Sudhir that he's always had a "hustle," that he's always been looking out for his own research while working in the projects. JT says the same thing – that Sudhir is "one of the gang" in that he's done a good job of listening to people and letting them describe their own lives. But JT has seen, too, that Sudhir has to protect the value of the data he collects, and that he is doing it for his own professional advancement.

Sudhir is surprised to realize that Ms. Bailey and JT understand the nature of his "hustle." That is, both Ms. Bailey and JT recognize that, if the law were to ask Sudhir about a particular event, Sudhir would be obliged to give that information to them. This implies at least two things: first, that JT and others are, at least to a degree, "editing" the parts of their lives Sudhir sees, so that he doesn't observe anything too overtly illegal. And, second, that JT and others are willing to threaten some repercussion for Sudhir should he brazenly violate their trust. JT and Ms. Bailey hint at the latter especially in this section.

Sudhir begins interviewing pimps and prostitutes within the buildings – the interviews are arranged by JT and Ms. Bailey, and Sudhir is surprised to hear that many pimps and prostitutes are willing to talk about their work. In general, prostitutes are either "affiliates" or "independents," meaning they have a pimp or they do not. Affiliates are "protected" by their pimps, often from physical harm at the hands of johns, but they also make less money than "independents," who don't have to pay protection. Sudhir talks to an older woman named Cordella, who has run many businesses in Robert Taylor. She tells Sudhir that she used to work for Ms. Bailey's mother, who ran a brothel in the Homes. Cordella says that the prostitution business was better "without men involved."

This is another instance of "protection." Of course, the kind of "protecting" that pimps do for the women working for them is a far cry from actual "protection" of their best interests. As Sudhir indicates, having a pimp means that sex workers possess an additional layer of support between them and their customers, and this in itself is a positive thing. But Sudhir also sees just how difficult the lives of these sex workers are, and just how great the potential is for them to be exploited, both by their customers, who can threaten them, and by pimps, who of course can do the same.

Sudhir learns other interesting facts about Robert Taylor: that unemployment is listed at 96 percent, but is actually much lower, since many have under-the-table but legal jobs part-time, but do not share this income with the CHA, since they would exceed public housing limits and be forced to leave. He also learns that most side hustles are not especially lucrative (especially those selling goods and services), but that taking on tenants ("boarders") in one's apartment is. Further, there is "exchange economy" on top of the gray market, in which bartering is used to swap goods without money being involved at all.

This unemployment rate, which Sudhir only touches on briefly, is in fact utterly shocking, even though it's not quite correct. But even if the unemployment rate were half what is stated here, it would still be far, far greater than any rate posted at any other place in the city. This indicates just how accustomed the Robert Taylor community is to the structural conditions leading to deeply entrenched, systemic unemployment across families.

Sudhir continues his research. He interviews C-Note and some of the other "hustlers," finding out that a lot of their "manual working," like the automotive repairs they did in the lots of the Homes, was fairly lucrative. One day, Sudhir meets with Ms. Bailey to catch up, and finds JT with her in her office. Sudhir, unthinking, shares a good deal of information with both of them about the economic exploits of the "hustlers" and other gray marketeers in the Homes, not worrying about this information-sharing one bit.

This is one of Sudhir's greatest blunders during his time in Robert Taylor. He will realize very soon just how inevitable Ms. Bailey's and JT's response is to this material – and the money they will extract from residents as a result. And Sudhir will similarly realize just how difficult it will be for others to talk to him in the aftermath of this information "leak."

But after a few days, Sudhir realizes that he's angered nearly everyone he normally speaks to in the homes. JT and Ms. Bailey have gone around to tenants with boarders, to people like C-Note, and to prostitutes like Clarisse, asking them for more money, since they're apparently making more (according to Sudhir's notes) than they'd been reporting to the Black Kings and to Ms. Bailey's office. Sudhir apologizes to C-Note and Clarisse in person, and they grudgingly accept that he's sorry. But C-Note says that Sudhir was only "thinking about his own work" and not about other people's lives in the Homes. Sudhir realizes this is at least partially true.

C-Note is, in truth, not wrong in this section. He realizes that Sudhir's greatest drive, as he works in Robert Taylor, is his own research – his dissertation and academic career. Sudhir doesn't want to hurt people, or make them pay more to people like JT – he does not want to interrupt their businesses. But in this particular case, when he saw an opportunity to learn about Robert Taylor, he took it – without spending time to consider who would be impacted, and in what way.

Sudhir attends a funeral later that summer for Catrina, Ms. Bailey's assistant. Sudhir, like many in the buildings, is deeply upset at her death; she was killed by accident in the middle of a fight between her estranged father and other family members. Sudhir decides that, based on Catrina's love of writing, he can perhaps use her death to do some good in the community, by starting an essay-writing and discussion group for women in the homes. Sudhir begins having these events in a diner nearby.

Perhaps the most pathos-inducing section in the book. Sudhir has built up a friendly and mutually-caring relationship with Catrina, who, as Sudhir notes, imagined a life for herself beyond her present conditions. Her death affects a very large number of people in the project, and Sudhir implies that this is so because many recognized her desire to expand her life's horizons.

In the group, young women talk about a great deal of material difficulty. They describe the violence they experience at the hands of men in their lives, and worry, too, about how their children will deal with cycles of poverty. They also talk about, in writing and in discussion, the compromises they must make in negotiating with authority figures like the CHA and Ms. Bailey – some women, for example, have had to "let" their boyfriends or husbands sleep with Ms. Bailey or others in the Homes in order to keep their apartments or gain other material advantages. Sudhir is upset to hear this, and he wonders how the women have managed to "get by" in their lives making these sorts of difficult choices each day.

One of the interesting by-products of this writing group is what Sudhir learns about Ms. Bailey's behavior from the women who have to petition her for the items necessary for life. On Ms. Bailey's side, she only says she's doing what needs to be done – as above, she wishes she could be finished with her job, that her position weren't necessary. But in these cases, Ms. Bailey is very clearly taking advantage of the power she has over other women – and at times very much enjoying the exercise of that power.

Finally, Ms. Bailey tells Sudhir to come to another community meeting, where angry residents ask Sudhir why he's meeting with the women. He tells them all that they're engaged in a writing group, but notes that, until clearing the air, many assumed he was having sex with people in the group, or "pimping them out." Ms. Bailey confirms that Sudhir is "helping the girls with their homework," and community members seem to accept this as plausible. Sudhir wonders whether, even in his attempts to do good, he doesn't just wind up angering people, as when he accidentally caused others in the Homes to be "taxed" by JT and Ms. Bailey.

As previously, when Sudhir attempted to help Clarisse, there are many in the projects who are simply not willing to accept that Sudhir could be doing this out of charity, since, charity here usually involves a kind of mutual benefit, even when one appears to be giving out of the goodness of one's own heart. In this case, the residents assume that Sudhir must be receiving sexual favors from the women, although Sudhir notes that this was the furthest thing from his mind during the time of the writing group meetings.

CHAPTER 7 – BLACK AND BLUE

Sudhir describes an incident that causes him to bond more closely with JT. One day, sitting outside and enjoying the fine weather, Sudhir is talking to JT's uncle, drinking **beer**. A car drives quickly near Robert Taylor, and shots are fired from out its window – a drive-by. Price, standing nearby, is hit, and when others flee inside, Sudhir grabs Price and helps others to pull him to safety inside. He does this even though Ms. Bailey tells Sudhir to "run" when the shots are fired, both to protect him and because she fears he won't be able to protect himself.

This moment of drama disrupts the kind of outdoor party to which Sudhir has become accustomed at Robert Taylor. Sudhir takes this opportunity to imply just how likely violence is at all times, how it can strike before anyone else expects it. It is also a testament to Sudhir's presence of mind that he is able to help Price at all – JT, for his part, is cheered, if also nervous, to hear that Sudhir was so willing to lend a hand in this way.

JT allows other gang members to tend to Price upstairs once they've got him stabilized, and asks to borrow Sudhir's car to take Price to the hospital. (Price will be driven by a woman, since JT doesn't want any BKs to be associated on official hospital records with a report of gun violence if he can help it). Someone takes Price in Sudhir's car, and later JT thanks Sudhir both for his compassion in helping Price and for his ability to deal calmly with the chaos of the day.

JT has always had a great deal of respect for Sudhir's courage (as Dubner himself notes in the Introduction to the book). But JT doesn't ever say this to Sudhir straight out – that Sudhir is brave to be working in the projects. Nevertheless, both Ms. Bailey and JT recognize that, although life in Robert Taylor is normal to them, there are a great many US communities in which it would be far, far from normal.

Sudhir learns from T-Bone that JT has been given a new job in the BK hierarchy, and that he'll now be responsible for managing even more drug-selling units across the city. T-Bone, for his part, is also excited, since he wants to "get out of the game" after saving up money for a couple years. In the downtime Sudhir finds for himself, with JT often away for "training" with gang higher-ups, Sudhir decides to teach a course for gang members on "history, politics, and math." But Sudhir has great difficulty managing the students, and older gang leaders have to come in frequently to tell the students to listen, and not to "play with guns and deal drugs" while "Mr. Professor" is teaching.

Here is one of the few instances where Sudhir discusses in detail his life in front of a classroom. Presumably, he is also teaching at the University of Chicago as part of his doctoral training. But he is humble enough to admit that, in this circumstance, he has an enormously difficult time connecting with any of his students. Indeed, the "informal" classroom of conversations Sudhir has with gang members and other Homes residents are far more productive than the slightly forced educational situation presented here.

Sudhir also begins meeting more frequently with Officer Reggie, sometimes in his police precinct not far from Robert Taylor. By putting together information he learns from Reggie and has heard from JT and others in the BKs, Sudhir realizes that policemen, especially a rogue cop named Officer Jerry, sometimes "volunteer" to bust up gang parties or to "shake down" gang members for cash and valuables during traffic stops or in the Homes. Sudhir recalls other moments, when he's seen Chicago PD stop gang members in cars and effectively "hold them up," taking whatever the members have on them and threatening them, if they don't hand items over, with imprisonment on various weapon and drug possession charges.

The relationship between the BKs, Officer Reggie, and the rest of the Chicago police precinct near the Homes is an interesting and complex one. Reggie does a fine job of mediating when there are disputes between South Side gangs, as indicated earlier in the book. Sudhir notes elsewhere that he trusts Reggie's moral compass. But many in the police department are as skeptical of those helping the Homes (non-profit volunteers, researchers like Sudhir, CHA officials) as they are of the gang members themselves.

In short, Sudhir realizes that the police have a "hustle" just as he does, and just as the gang members do – and the police hustle is really no more "legal" than the gang version.

This is a crucial moment in the text – and the moral equivalency seems to hold. The police protect their own interests, as do the gang members.

In a local "cop bar" one afternoon, Officer Reggie introduces Sudhir to Officer Jerry, a corrupt, white cop whom Sudhir often sees around Robert Taylor, shaking down residents for cash and threatening to imprison them if they don't pay. Jerry is leery of Sudhir, and when Sudhir tries to ask him about his work in the bar, Jerry only gets angry and hurls expletives at Sudhir. Reggie explains later that Jerry is somewhat crooked, but that his anger derives from a defensiveness about the work he does. Sudhir doesn't really believe this, even as he finds Reggie to be a "creative" and empathetic policeman, who really is trying to make the Homes more livable. Sudhir finds that his car has been broken into a few weeks later, and eventually learns that Jerry and similarly crooked cops were trying to "find his notes," to see what sort of incriminating information Sudhir had taken down about their extralegal activities.

If Sudhir's recollection holds true in this case – and he is really our only eyewitness source for information – at least some of the cops in the area are so crooked that they would be willing to intimidate a researcher devoted to describing and helping people who live in poverty. In truth, Officer Jerry benefits, in terms of money and power, from a gang system that keeps official institutions (like the non-corrupt members of the Chicago PD, and the CHA) out of places like Robert Taylor.

Shortly thereafter, Sudhir learns from JT that his new job as a higher-up in the BKs is the real thing. Sudhir is happy to hear it, but JT, on telling Sudhir this, doesn't understand that Sudhir's research is soon going to be over, and that Sudhir will not in fact be writing his biography. Sudhir wonders how exactly to break this information to JT, and realizes just how much he has "hustled" during his time in the projects. He is happy about all the information he's learned, but worries that he's perhaps been using people like JT and Ms. Bailey to further his own career.

It's not evident exactly when JT abandons hope for the idea that Sudhir is writing only about his life. JT has expressed anxiety about "losing" or "not being able to protect" Sudhir, and so Sudhir senses that JT has intuited this new state of affairs. But, nevertheless, Sudhir is nervous about explaining to JT just how his research will benefit Sudhir, and not really depict JT, in its final form.

CHAPTER 8 – THE STAY-TOGETHER GANG

JT invites Sudhir to several of the BKs' large-scale "gatherings" in the suburbs of Chicago, where gang leaders go, Sudhir writes, to buy "large, suburban homes" for their mothers. Sudhir enjoys going to these events, and takes some measure of joy from JT's advancement. But Sudhir also realizes that many of the leaders, like T-Bone and Price, want to find legitimate work outside the gang, even as they fear what that life might mean for them without the BKs' protection. And Sudhir realizes that the Robert Taylor Homes will be torn down in a year or two (the year is now 1995) – meaning that JT and the BKs may no longer have control of as substantial a portion of prime drug-selling turf in the city.

Sudhir realizes that, as his research comes to a close, so too does a larger era in Chicago demography and social politics come to an end. Sudhir notes that by the 1990s, people in positions of government power wanted places like Robert Taylor no longer to exist. And city and state governments were more and more willing to raze those kinds of buildings, and to suffer whatever consequences in attempting to relocate remaining residents into "mixed-use" communities throughout the surrounding urban area.

One evening, T-Bone meets with Sudhir and provides him with "ledgers" containing many years of complex economic data for the BKs – what they sold and when, what their finances really looked like. This information becomes the quantitative backbone of Sudhir's dissertation. T-Bone does this, in part, because (Sudhir believes) he is proud of the work he's done in the gang, and his business acumen. But T-Bone also has some desire, Sudhir perceives, to separate himself from the life he's lived among other gang members. From these ledgers, Sudhir learns that gang profits are unequally distributed, with those at the top making large amounts, and foot soldiers making very, very little.

An enormously important moment for Sudhir's research. The question is: why does T-Bone do this? Sudhir has a couple guesses, first thinking that T-Bone is probably proud of the work he has done, accounting for all the money that's changed hands over the years. Related to this, in Sudhir's eyes, is T-Bone's desire to find a life for himself outside the gang – to indicate that the life he lived with the gang had its own order too, its own rules and internal solidity. If T-Bone could make order out of BK life, this reasoning goes, he'd be able to make a new life after the BKs.

The Robert Taylor Homes, Sudhir learns, will be replaced with a "mix" of living-spaces, some, apparently, being made available to low-income families, although Sudhir and others in the Homes are doubtful that this will mean many of them, or even any at all, will be allowed to stay in that area after Robert Taylor's demolition. Some tenants, like a woman Sudhir meets named Dorothy, organize themselves into random groups in order to find affordable housing together in nearby neighborhoods after the demolition. But Dorothy is only marginally successful in doing this, as are a great many other groups – housing prices are very high in surrounding areas compared to subsidized CHA rents, and many families, having grown up in the projects, are not used to dealing with landlords and other institutional roadblocks on their own.

Sudhir seems to imply that, although people like Dorothy are extremely well-intentioned, and do everything they can to protect themselves and the people around them, they are simply not as powerful as larger, more systematically-organized institutions. Dorothy can't replace a housing authority that works, and she certainly can't stand in for a series of poorly-planned government policies that have resulted in the significant neglect of places like Robert Taylor. Sudhir fears that this kind of government neglect will continue, in a new form.

Sudhir attends a final party in Robert Taylor, sitting outside in the sun as he has many times before. He recalls President Clinton's visit to Robert Taylor two years earlier, in 1994. During that period, and even though the President only passed through very briefly, Sudhir had noticed just how much tenants had cleaned and polished their buildings, even going so far as to plant flowers. Sudhir notes that there are again some flowers at Robert Taylor today – but his pleasant recollection is interrupted by gunfire, which, though not indicative of a gang war (and instead attributable, JT thinks, to people high on drugs), is nevertheless a reminder of the constant dangers of life in that area.

There is, therefore, a good deal of pathos in Bill Clinton's visit to the projects, as places like Robert Taylor are being phased out, torn down, and removed from cities, so that "renewed" neighborhoods can have things like convention centers, arenas, or extensions to airports. Bill Clinton's visit represents "progress" for Chicago in some sense, but it also signals the decline of the community around Robert Taylor as it's existed to this point.

Sudhir learns that his dissertation and doctorate have earned him a job at Harvard as a post-doc at the Society of Fellows. It's a prestigious position, and Sudhir realizes that he is pulling away from people like JT and Ms. Bailey, perhaps for good. Sudhir notes that the drug trade in Robert Taylor, as buildings are condemned and destroyed, trickles down to a small fraction of what it once was – this, too, dovetailing with a drop in crack addiction rates in American cities by the end of the 1990s.

Sudhir adds in that, at this juncture, he has achieved genuine academic success, of a kind that might not have seemed possible to him only a few years before. And this success itself derives in large part from the work he has done in Robert Taylor – and to the information and access people like JT and Ms. Bailey have provided him.

Sudhir meets with JT one evening in Ms. Mae's apartment, and tells him that he'll be moving to Cambridge and turning his research in new directions. At this point, JT knows finally that Sudhir will not be his biographer, but that, instead, Sudhir has gathered what information he's needed from JT and others, and that he has "hustled" in the same way JT has attempted to. But Sudhir notes that he's struck by the quiet sadness in the room, with JT hoping to squeeze what money remains from the gang-related crack business and other "side hustles" in the neighborhood around the Homes.

JT never explicitly acknowledges the manner by which his relationship with Sudhir has changed. He doesn't really push Sudhir when Sudhir hints that his work will no longer focus exclusively on JT – but instead will be a broader portrait of how different underground and gray-area economies interact in Robert Taylor. JT seems to have recognized this a long time ago – and to have come to terms with it, although he still appears sad to see Sudhir leaving.

Sudhir recalls a meeting with JT in 1998, when they go out for dinner, and Sudhir realizes that he's now a professor, not just an apprentice, and that JT, too, is transitioning into a new life. Although Sudhir listens eagerly to JT's stories, both know that they have grown apart in a significant way. Yet they are cordial with one another.

JT used to call Sudhir "Mr. Professor" as a joke. What is poignant in this section is that Sudhir now really is a professor, or very close to one – his research career has turned out. And JT is soon to be out of a job as a gang leader.

Sudhir reports to the reader that JT eventually moved into "legitimate" business and had "some money saved" from the gang; he also "consulted" with BKs when they needed his advice from time to time. But JT the gang leader was no more, just as the Robert Taylor Homes were gone by the very end of the 1990s. Sudhir notes that, despite their differences, he and JT forged a genuine bond, and that Sudhir cannot forget the many lessons he's learned, both about practical matters and his academic work, from spending years talking to JT and observing the livelihoods and families around him. He says that this knowledge has informed, and will continue to inform, his future work as a sociologist studying how communities operate.

Thus Sudhir does what he can, in the closing pages of the narrative, to describe just how sad the transition away from Robert Taylor has been for him – and the kinds of dislocation JT experiences soon thereafter, when the Homes are finally torn down. In this way, the book reflects just how difficult it is for any group to move on and change – especially a group whose circumstances, like those in Robert Taylor, are difficult, pressing, and materially constricted. One gets the sense that Sudhir is deeply appreciative of JT's role in his life, and that JT feels the same way – even if it is hard for each party to express this to the other.

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