

# A Hope in the UNSEEN

RON SUSKIND

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## If you enjoyed *A Hope in the Unseen*... you might check these out:

Cary, Lorene. *Black Ice* (Vintage 1991).

In this compelling autobiographical memoir, Cary recounts her experiences in the early 1970s as the first African American female student admitted to St. Paul's preparatory school in Concord, New Hampshire. She chronicles leaving her West Philadelphia neighborhood for the elite New England academy and details her coming-of-age, a time in which she was forced to negotiate both the emotional and geographic distance from her family and her former way of life and the double role of being Black and female in a formerly all-male, all-white world of privilege.

Corwin, Miles. *And Still We Rise: The Trials and Triumphs of Twelve Gifted Inner-City Students* (Perennial 2001).

Best-selling author of *The Killing Season* and veteran *Los Angeles Times* reporter Miles Corwin spent a school year with twelve high school seniors from South-Central; these kids qualified for a gifted program because of their exceptional IQs and test scores. Sitting alongside them in classrooms where bullets were known to crack through windows, Corwin chronicles their amazing stories as they face the greatest challenges of their academic lives. *And Still We Rise* is an unforgettable story about transcending obstacles that would dash the hopes of all but the most exceptional spirits.

Dash, Leon. *Rosa Lee: A Mother and Her Family in Urban America* (Plume 1997).

Drug-addled, welfare-using and AIDS-infected, Rosa Lee—a black woman living in the slums of Washington, D.C.—shines an enormous amount of light on the seemingly intractable problems of the underclass by allowing Leon Dash to tell her story, an absorbing tale of inner-city despair. Dash won the Pulitzer Prize for a series of articles on Rosa Lee for the *Washington Post*.

Delpit, Lisa D. *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New Press 1996).

In a radical and piercing analysis of what is happening in American classrooms today, Lisa Delpit suggests that many of the academic problems attributed to children of color actually result from miscommunications: schools and “other people’s children” struggle with the imbalance of power and the dynamics of inequality plaguing the system.

Jones, Lealan. *Our America* (Pocket Books 1998).

Through two award-winning National Public Radio documentaries, and now this powerful book, Lealan Jones and Lloyd Newman have become loud voices from one of this country’s darkest places, Chicago’s Ida B. Wells housing project. Set against the remarkable photographs of a young photographer from the projects, *Our America* reveals the unforgiving world of these two amazing young men and their unrelenting struggle to survive. With a gift for clarity, they tell their own stories and others, including the death of Eric Morse, a five-year-old who died after two other little boys dropped him from the fourteenth floor of an Ida B. Wells apartment building.

Kotlowitz, Alex. *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in The Other America* (Anchor 1992).

Kotlowitz tells the devastating story of brothers Lafayette and Pharoah Rivers, children of the Chicago ghetto. Kotlowitz, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, first met the boys in 1985 when they were ten and seven, respectively. Their family includes a mother, a frequently absent father, an older brother and younger triplets. This powerful story witnesses the horrors of growing up in a housing project tyrannized by drug gangs, where murders and shootings frequently occur.

Kozol, Jonathan. *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (Perennial 1992).

In 1988, Kozol visited schools in over thirty neighborhoods, including East St. Louis, Harlem, the Bronx, Chicago, Jersey City, and San Antonio. In this account, he concludes that real integration has seriously declined; education for minorities and the poor has moved backwards several decades. Shocked by the persistent segregation in poorer neighborhoods, Kozol describes campuses located in high-crime areas, which often lack the most basic needs: rooms with no heat, few supplies or texts, labs with no equipment or running water, sewer backups, fumes, and overwhelming fiscal shortages.

Rodriguez, Sandra. *Giants Among Us* (Vanderbilt UP 2002).

How do young people from undereducated and impoverished backgrounds find success in college? What are the factors that lead them to overcome their socioeconomic disadvantages and sometimes the disapproval of families and friends to succeed in college? Sandra Rodriguez posed this to seventeen first-generation college graduates; their compelling life stories contribute significantly to what little we know about this phenomenon. The daughter of parents who didn't finish elementary school, Rodriguez uses many examples from her own life in the course of examining the participants' experiences before, during, and after college that directed them toward social or educational activism.

Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together In The Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race: A Psychologist Explains the Development of Racial Identity* (Basic Books, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. 2003).

Anyone who has been to a high school or college has noticed how students self-segregate along racial lines. Beverly Daniel Tatum has noticed it too, and she doesn't think it's so bad. As she explains in this provocative, though not-altogether-convincing book, these students are in the process of establishing their racial identities. As Tatum sees it, Blacks must secure a racial identity free of negative stereotypes. The challenge to Whites, on which she expounds, is to give up the privilege that their skin color affords and to work actively to combat injustice in society.

## CINEMA

*Boyz n the Hood* 1991 (directed by John Singleton).

Cuba Gooding Jr. plays Tre Styles, a teenager growing up in South Central Los Angeles. His father, Furious (Laurence Fishburne), is divorced and living away from Tre and his mother (Angela Bassett), but he's still involved in Tre's life, teaching him the values of right and wrong and responsibility. Meanwhile, Tre's childhood friends Ricky (Morris Chestnut) and Doughboy (Ice Cube) are living their lives in the turmoil of violence and poverty that has plagued their neighborhood. Ricky, a talented football player, strives to get a full athletic scholarship to college. The tragedies encountered by these young men are an accurate and dramatic portrait of at-risk youth.

*Dead Poets Society* 1989 (directed by Peter Weir).

Robin Williams stars as an English teacher who doesn't fit into the conservative prep school where he teaches, but whose charisma and love for poetry inspire several boys to revive a secret society with a bohemian flavor. Peter Weir adds layers of emotional depth in scenes of conflict between the boys and adults. A subplot involving one father's pressure on his son to drop his interest in theater reaches heartbreaking proportions.

*Drumline* 2002 (directed by Charles Stone III).

This formulaic yet surprisingly captivating movie honors the military precision of college football marching bands. Devon (played by Will Smith protégé Nick Cannon) is a brash Brooklyn kid with a snare-drumming scholarship to fictional Atlanta A&T University. He can't read music and has a poor attitude, but he's the best natural drummer the college has ever seen, so he quickly rises through the marching band ranks. The school year brings Devon a girlfriend (Zoë Saldana), clashes with his old-school band director (Orlando Jones), and well-earned redemption at the marching band championship.

*Finding Forrester* 2000 (directed by Gus Van Sant)

Jamal (Rob Brown) is a basketball player and gifted student whose writing talent is nurtured by a famously reclusive author. William Forrester (Sean Connery) became a literary icon four decades earlier with a Pulitzer-winning novel, then disappeared into his dark, book-filled apartment, agoraphobic and withdrawn from publishing, but as passionate as ever about writing. On a dare, Jamal sneaks into Forrester's musty sanctuary, and what might have been a condescending racial-driven rescue story turns into an inspiring meeting of minds, with mutual respect and intelligence erasing boundaries of culture and generation.

*Good Will Hunting* 1997 (directed by Gus Van Sant).

While working as a university janitor, Will Hunting (Matt Damon) solves an impossible calculus problem scribbled on a hallway blackboard and reluctantly becomes the prodigy of an arrogant MIT professor (Stellan Skarsgård). Will only avoids prison by agreeing to see psychiatrists, all of whom he mocks until he meets his match in the professor's former childhood friend, played by Robin Williams. Both doctor and patient are haunted by the past, and as mutual respect develops, the healing process begins.

*Spellbound* 2002 (directed by Jeffrey Blitz).

*Spellbound* is a thriller documentary, which follows eight kids from their early victories in regional spelling bees to the national competition in Washington, D.C. The kids range from a quietly driven African American girl from a run-down D.C. neighborhood, to a genial Connecticut girl who talks about bringing her *au pair* to a previous competition, to an almost zombie-like boy whose immigrant father has paid one thousand people back in India to pray for the boy's success. Along the way, *Spellbound* contrasts the culturally diverse populations that make up the U.S. and shows how this "game" and intellect truly make everyone equal in the competition.