

Reader's Guide

One Maryland One Book  
2008



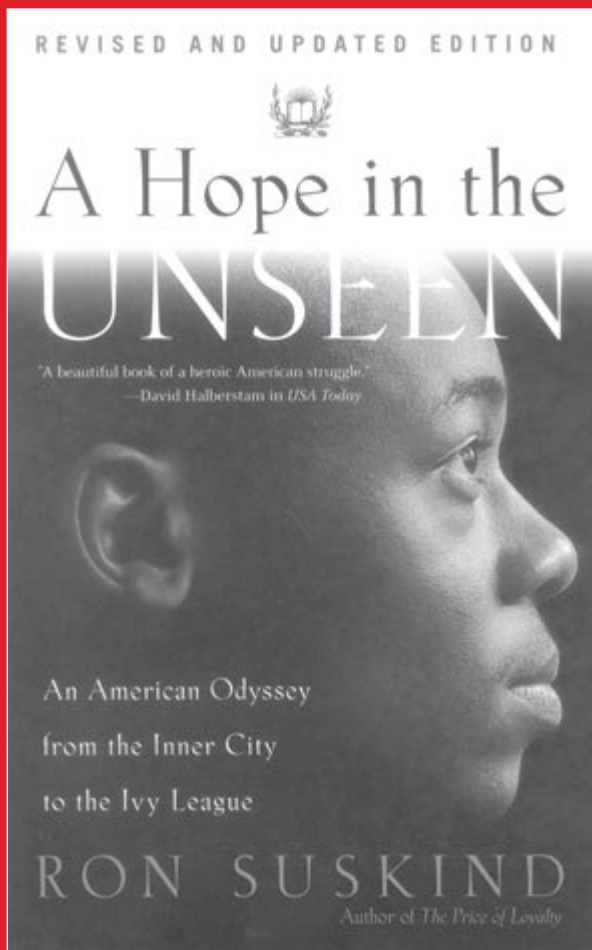
*A Hope in the Unseen:  
An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League*

by Ron Suskind

Imagine if all five million Marylanders read the same great book at the same time.

The Maryland Center for the Book, a program of the Maryland Humanities Council, is pleased to launch One Maryland One Book—Maryland's first-ever statewide, community-centered reading program designed to encourage everyone in the state to read and discuss one common book.

This year's selection—*A Hope in the Unseen* by Ron Suskind—is rich and multilayered. It was selected not only because it offers the opportunity to discuss important and highly relevant topics such as education and socioeconomics, but also because it presents the opportunity to talk about race and race relations in Maryland and in America—a common theme running through the Maryland Humanities Council's programming in 2008.



### Get the Book.

Pick up a copy of *A Hope in the Unseen* at your local public library or bookstore and start up a conversation with your family, friends, co-workers or even the person sitting next to you on the bus or train. This is your chance to take a moment to have a great conversation that moves beyond the weather or what you did today.

### Join In.

We invite you to join Honorary Chair, Maryland's First Lady Katie O'Malley, and millions of other Marylanders at one of the many conversations and related programs happening around the state in August, September and October.

To find One Maryland One Book programs in your area, go to [www.onemarylandonebook.org](http://www.onemarylandonebook.org) and click on the Calendar.

*A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League* by Ron Suskind  
14 Chapters; 390 pgs (including Epilogue, Author's note, and Afterword)  
Lexile: 1080; Reading level: gr. 9. Updated edition © 2005  
ISBN 0-7679-0126-6

## Letter from the Honorary Chairperson



Greetings,

On behalf of the State of Maryland, I would like to invite you to participate in One Maryland One Book, Maryland's first-ever statewide community reading project. I was delighted to be asked to serve as Honorary Chair for this momentous project because it offers an opportunity for residents in communities around the state to reconnect by opening dialogues with one another.

This year's selected book, *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League* by Ron Suskind, is one that broaches topics relevant to our daily lives, such as race, class and educational achievement. I encourage you not only to read it, but also to talk to family, friends, neighbors and co-workers about how the issues in the book relate to your community, our state and our country.

Spearheaded by the Maryland Center for the Book, this project is only possible due to the involvement of many community partners and the support of our sponsors, whom we heartily thank for their support. Please join me and many other Marylanders in this reading project by going to your local public library to check out a copy of *A Hope in the Unseen*. I hope that it spurs conversations and thoughts to make this world a better place.

Thank you for being a part of this very special project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katie O'Malley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Katie O'Malley  
*First Lady of Maryland*

**“I encourage you not only to read it, but also to talk to family, friends, neighbors and co-workers about how the issues in the book relate to your community, our state and our country.”**

## About the Book

It is 1993, and Cedric Jennings is a bright and ferociously determined honor student at Ballou, a high school in one of Washington D.C.'s most dangerous neighborhoods, where the dropout rate is well into double digits and just 80 students out of more than 1,350 boast an average of B or better. At Ballou, Cedric has almost no friends. He eats lunch in a classroom most days, plowing through the extra work he has asked for, knowing that he's really competing with kids from other, harder schools. Cedric Jennings's driving ambition—which is fully supported by his forceful mother—is to attend a top-flight college.

In September 1995, after years of near superhuman dedication, he realizes that ambition when he begins as a freshman at Brown University. *A Hope in the Unseen* chronicles Cedric's odyssey during his last two years of high school, follows him through his difficult first year at Brown, and tells the story of his subsequent successes in college and the world of work. <sup>1</sup>

## About the Author



Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and best-selling author Ron Suskind has written several important works of nonfiction that have framed national debates while exploring the complexities of the human experience. His first book, *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey*

*from the Inner City to the Ivy League* (1995), is based on a series of articles written for the *Wall Street Journal* that earned Suskind the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing in 1995.

He has since written two other best-selling works of nonfiction, *The One Percent Doctrine* (2006), a journey deep inside America's battles with violent terrorists, and *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House and the Education of Paul O'Neill* (2004), both critically-acclaimed works.

Mr. Suskind currently writes for various national magazines, including *Time Magazine*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Esquire* and the *Wall Street Journal*, appears on network television, and spends summers as a Distinguished Visiting Scholar at Dartmouth College. He is a graduate of the University of Virginia and Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, and lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife, Cornelia Kennedy Suskind, and their two sons, Walter and Owen.

## About Cedric Jennings

Cedric Jennings was born in 1977 and raised in one of the most depressed and dangerous neighborhoods in Washington, D.C.'s Southeast section. His father was a frequently absent and jailed drug addict, while his mother, Barbara Jennings, was a devout church woman who quit her government job and went on welfare for several years to devote her time to raising Cedric.

With his mother's support and good grades in school, Cedric went on to complete a childhood dream and attended an Ivy League school. After graduating from Brown in 1999, Cedric received his Master of Education at Harvard University and a Master of Social Work in 2003 from the University of Michigan. Presently, he speaks at schools and universities across the country on issues in education and youth advocacy. He plans to eventually earn a doctorate degree and become a psychotherapist working with disadvantaged youth.



<sup>1</sup> From the back cover

## Discussion Questions

1. At Ballou High School, bright students like Cedric learn the lesson that “distinctiveness can be dangerous, so it’s best to develop an aptitude for not being noticed.” How do you think Cedric’s experiences would compare or contrast with the educational experience in your community’s public schools?
2. Why do you think the code at Ballou allows girls more traditional success than boys?
3. Explain LaTisha’s ideas about “staying local” versus trying to “go somewhere he ain’t never seen or has no idea about.” What is right and what is wrong about her view, in Cedric’s case?
4. How would you describe Barbara Jennings as a mother? On the eve of eviction, Barbara confesses she has let Cedric down, “again.” Is this a fair assessment of their relationship? Why?
5. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas advises Cedric to avoid African American studies and ethnic identity groups at Brown University. Do you agree with Thomas? Why do you think Cedric was “curiously happy to be headed for home” after his meeting with Thomas?
6. Given his academic background at Ballou, was Brown a good choice for Cedric? How do you think the university performed in offering him support services?
7. How and why do the same behavioral patterns that kept Cedric alive and intact at Ballou backfire for him at Brown? What sort of balance does he strike between “selling out” to the white establishment and succeeding on his own terms?
8. Does Cedric’s story alter your opinion of affirmative action? How?
9. Cedric Jennings is African American; Ron Suskind, the author, is white. Does this book reflect historical and contemporary ways in which whites have spoken for blacks in America? To what extent do you think the author has bridged the racial divide to portray Cedric?
10. Do you think that this book, *A Hope in the Unseen*, was a good choice for starting adult and teen discussions touching on issues about race in Maryland? Why? What other books would you recommend?

## Questions for Teens to Discuss

1. How are Cedric’s high school experiences different from or similar to your own?
2. How do Cedric’s home and church experiences help or hinder what he is trying to achieve in school?
3. What do you think of Cedric’s experience in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) summer program? How could the program have been changed to benefit students like Cedric?
4. After Cedric hears Professor Trilling tell him he is not MIT material, Cedric calls Trilling a racist. How is Cedric right? How is he wrong? (pg. 97)
5. How would you describe Cedric’s early days at Brown University? How do you think Cedric views his fellow students, white and black?
6. On pages 292-293, Suskind describes the various groups at Brown. How are such divisions positive? How are they negative?
7. Chiniqua says, in reference to music and culture, “You have to have grown up with it like us, to really know it.” (pg. 315) Do you agree or disagree? If this is true, what does it tell us about cross-cultural relationships? Does multicultural education then not have a purpose?
8. Cedric writes in his paper for his education class that “The first step is to agree that most people share the goal of true diversity, with many races competing freely and successfully.” (pg. 338) Is this true in your experience? Why would some people be against true diversity? What will true diversity cost some groups?
9. What are some of the elements of Cedric’s personality that helped him during his first year at Brown?
10. What question would you ask either the author or Cedric about the experiences covered in the book?

## Additional Resources

We hope that your participation in **One Maryland One Book** inspires you to keep reading, talking and delving into the many thought-provoking topics revealed in *A Hope in the Unseen*. The following are other books and movies that might be of interest. We encourage you to continue your exploration!



## Fiction

### *Invisible Man*

Ralph Ellison

A classic from the moment it first appeared in 1952, *Invisible Man* chronicles the travels of its narrator, a young, nameless black man, as he moves through the hellish levels of American intolerance and cultural blindness.

### *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

Carson McCullers

Set in 1930s Georgia, this book looks at individuals viewed as outcasts who are isolated because of race, politics, disability and sensibility.

### *Caucasia*

Danzy Sena

Growing up in a biracial family in 1970s Boston, Birdie sees her family disintegrate due to increasing racial tensions. Her father and older sister move to Brazil, where they hope to find true racial equality, while Birdie and her mother drift through the country, eventually settling in a small New Hampshire town.

### *Apex Hides the Hurt*

Colson Whitehead

A satire of contemporary culture where almost everything is subsumed by the tides of marketing, this book is set in a fictional town in need of a new name, but memory and history are holding things back.

### *Native Son*

Richard Wright

As a young black man in the Chicago of the 1930s, Bigger Thomas is doomed, trapped in a downward spiral that will lead to arrest, prison, or death, driven by despair, frustration, poverty, and incomprehension. After he murders a young white woman in a moment of panic, these walls begin to close in.

## Nonfiction

*And Still We Rise: The Trials and Triumphs of Twelve Gifted Inner-City Students*

Miles Corwin

*Los Angeles Times* reporter Corwin offers a viscerally affecting glimpse inside the world of an inner-city high school, following the seniors in an Advanced Placement English class from their first day of school in 1997 to graduation.

*African American Men in College*

Michael J. Cuyjet and Associates

This book provides an in-depth discussion of the challenges facing African American college men and offers ideas and solutions to promote academic success.

*The Pact: Three Young Men Make a Promise and Fulfill a Dream*

Sampson Davis

Filled with drama, courage, temptation, and ultimately, triumph, this is the uplifting story of three teenaged boys from broken homes in Newark, New Jersey, who pledged to support one another in realizing their dreams. Despite the tremendous difficulties they faced, today two are doctors and one is a dentist.

*Privilege: Harvard and the Education of the Ruling Class*

Ross Gregory Douthat

Douthat offers readers an insider's trenchant look at life at Harvard University from the perspective of a student not born into privilege.

*Letters to a Young Brother: MANifest Your Destiny*

Hill Harper

Inspired by Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, Harper, a young black actor and graduate of Brown University and Harvard Law School, offers similar inspiration to young men clamoring for advice and encouragement at a time when popular culture offers little positive direction.

*There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing up in the Other America*

Alex Kotlowitz

The devastating story of brothers Lafayette and Pharoah Rivers, children of the Chicago ghetto, is powerfully told here by Kotlowitz, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter who first met the boys in 1985 when they were 10 and 7, respectively.

*Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*

Jonathan Kozol

In 1988, Kozol visited schools in over 30 inner-city neighborhoods. In this account, he concludes that real integration has seriously declined and education for minorities and the poor has moved backwards by at least several decades.

*Class Dismissed: A Year in the Life of an American High School, A Glimpse into the Heart of a Nation*

Meredith Maran

This fascinating look at the members of the Berkeley High School class of 2000 is an engrossing and often humbling account of the stark realities of public education in "a country that has yet to deliver on its founding promise of equal opportunity."

*On the Outside Looking In: A Year in an Inner-City High School*

Christina Rathbone

Over the course of a year, Christina Rathbone spent time with students at New York City's West Side High School. As she discovered, there are no easy answers to the challenges faced by underfunded high schools working with youths from poor and dysfunctional families.

*Young, Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students*

Claude Steele, Theresa Perry and Asa Hilliard III

Three black educators join forces to focus on improving the educational experiences of African American children in schools.

*I Choose to Stay: A Black Teacher Refuses to Desert the Inner City*

Salome Thomas-El

Here is the inspiring story of an African American educator who decided to make a difference as a teacher, mentor, and role model in Philadelphia's inner city.

## Maryland Stories

*Back in the Day: My Life and Times with Tupac Shakur*  
Darrin Keith Bastfield

Written by one of Shakur's close friends from the Baltimore School for the Arts, this biography includes memories and experiences that the two shared during Tupac's teen years in Baltimore. The shy teen who evolved into a major hip-hop talent is documented by someone who saw the genius in the short-lived star.

*Gifted Hands*

Ben Carson with Cecil Murphey

This book tells of Dr. Ben Carson's inspiring odyssey from his childhood in inner-city Detroit to his position as director of pediatric neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital at age 33.

*Benjamin Banneker: Surveyor, Astronomer, Publisher, Patriot*  
Charles A. Cerami

Banneker was a free black man and son of an African. Yet in post-Revolutionary America even a free black suffered from racism. Given that Banneker was one of America's first truly great scientists, his ability to overcome the odds is testimony to his prominence.

*Why Should White Guys Have All the Fun?: How Reginald Lewis Created a Billion-Dollar Business Empire*  
Reginald F. Lewis

This book traces Reginald F. Lewis's rise from a working-class neighborhood in east Baltimore to Harvard Law School and, ultimately, into the elite circle of Wall Street dealmakers.

*No Free Ride: From the Mean Streets to the Mainstream*  
Kwesi Mfume with Ron Stodhill II

This book chronicles the travels of a young man growing up in west Baltimore's streets who became a congressman and leader of the NAACP.

*Breaking the Color Barrier: The U.S. Naval Academy's First Black Midshipmen and the Struggle for Racial Equality*  
Robert J. Schneller, Jr.

The story of Wesley Brown, who in 1949 became the first black midshipman to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy, is recounted in this book.

*Pioneering Research in Surgical Shock and Cardiovascular Surgery: Vivien T. Thomas and His Work with Alfred Blalock*  
Vivien Thomas

In his autobiography, Vivien Thomas recounts his life's journey from a southern African American man with no formal medical training to a man who overcame enormous odds to become one of the most famous persons associated with surgical breakthroughs.

## Teen Reading

*Tyrell*

Coe Booth

Torn between the needs of the women in his life and his seven-year-old brother, Tyrell is determined to stay clean as he agonizes over creating a new life for his family.

*Bucking the Sarge*

Christopher Paul Curtis

Fifteen-year-old Luther T. Farrell longs to leave Flint, Michigan and go to college to become a philosopher. Good thing his slum-lord mother, The Sarge, has taken his \$92,000 in earnings and put it into a college fund...or has she?

*We Beat the Street: How a Friendship Pact Led to Success*

Sampson Davis, George Jenkins and Rameck Hunt, with Sharon Draper

This story is an adaptation of *The Pact: Three Young Men Make a Promise and Fulfill a Dream*, about three teens who pledge to support one another in realizing their dreams. (nonfiction)

*New Boy*

Julian Houston

Rob Garrett is sent from segregated 1950s Virginia to integrate an elite Connecticut boarding school. While he is afforded this unique opportunity, how can he help with the Civil Rights movement that is beginning back home?

*Brother Hood*

Janet McDonald

Nate Whitely struggles with his dual identity: an academically gifted student at a prestigious boarding school and a Harlem brother back in the old neighborhood.

*The Beast*

Walter Dean Myers

High school senior Anthony "Spoon" Witherspoon reluctantly leaves his Harlem home and his girlfriend Gabi to attend a Connecticut prep school. Spoon hopes to get into an Ivy League college with his elite education, but wonders if he'll make it when he discovers Gabi has started to use "the beast," heroin.

*The African American Student's Guide to Excellence in College*

Brian Peterson

This book covers the entire college experience from how to study more efficiently to managing money to the dating scene. (nonfiction)



*Fall of Rome*

Martha Southgate

Conflict bubbles up at Chelsea, an elite Connecticut school, when Jerome Washington, “the only negro on the faculty,” is pushed by the new English teacher to help a troubled black Brooklyn scholarship student.

*True Believer*

Virginia Euwer Wolff

This novel in verse follows a strong young girl and her fierce determination through the muddled emotions of high school.

**Movies***Akeelah and the Bee, 2006.*

A young girl from south Los Angeles tries to make it to the National Spelling Bee.

 *Antwone Fisher, 2002.*

Fisher, a young navy man, is forced to see a psychiatrist after a violent outburst against a fellow crewman. During the course of treatment, a painful past is revealed and a new hope begins.

*The Boys of Baraka, 2006.*

This book documents a group of twelve-year-old boys from inner-city Baltimore who are sent to an experimental boarding school in rural Kenya.

*Dangerous Minds, 1995.*

An ex-marine teacher struggles to connect with her students in an inner-city school.

*Finding Forester, 2000.*

An African American teen writing prodigy finds a mentor in a reclusive author.

*Freedom Writers, 2007.*

A young teacher inspires her class of at-risk students to learn tolerance, apply themselves, and pursue education beyond high school.

*The Great Debaters, 2007.*

Based on a true story, Melvin B. Tolson, a professor at Wiley College, Texas, inspires students to form the school's first debate team, which goes on to challenge Harvard in the national championship in 1935.

*The Hobart Shakespeareans, 2006.*

Rafe Esquith has his Los Angeles elementary school students read and perform Shakespeare's plays.

*Lean on Me, 1989.*

An arrogant and unorthodox teacher returns as principal to the idyllic high school from which he had earlier been fired to find it a den of drug abuse, gang violence and urban despair. Eventually his successful, though unorthodox, methods lead to a clash with city officials that threatens to undo all his efforts.

*Stand and Deliver, 1988.*

A dedicated teacher inspires his dropout-prone students to learn calculus to build up their self-esteem. They do so well that they are accused of cheating.

*A Touch of Greatness, 2004.*

This feature length film is about the unorthodox Albert Cullum, who taught in the early 1960s, and his positive influence on his students. It includes two hours of bonus material which highlights archival footage of Cullum and his students.

Notes

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[www.onemarylandonebook.org](http://www.onemarylandonebook.org)

## Sponsors

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