

Critical Reading Guide 2007
Texas Tech University • Summer Reading Program

A Hope in the Unseen by Ron Suskind

Written by the Orientation Leaders, Dean of Students Department at Florida State University

We hope you find the following questions helpful as you prepare for your entry into academic life at Texas Tech University. This guide will assist you in your critical read and reflection of Ron Suskind's novel, *A Hope in the Unseen*. You are not expected to write out answers to each of the questions, but we suggest you spend time thinking about each one to better prepare you for the discussions, assignments, and activities that you encounter when you arrive on campus. Additionally, you are encouraged to construct your own questions and bring them up in discussion with your faculty members and fellow students.

1. *Ashamed*. The word had been smoldering inside him for weeks... Was he ashamed of getting all A's. No, he was proud of that. So why wouldn't he show his face? Is it maybe he's ashamed of being alone all the time, of being so lame?" (p. 21) Why do you think Cedric was ashamed of his grades and achievements? Have you ever experienced a situation in life where you felt ashamed of who you were or what you have accomplished?
2. Mr. Clarence Taylor, Cedric's chemistry teacher and mentor, always believed in Cedric and encouraged him to do his best. Do you think Cedric had an advantage by having people who believed in him? How do you think Cedric's life would have been different if he didn't have strong supporters like as his mother and Mr. Taylor?
3. When Cedric was eleven he was accepted to Jefferson Junior High School, a magnet junior high school in Washington D.C. Shortly after, Cedric had a very unfulfilling visit with his father. Soon, he began acting out in school and talking back to his teachers, and eventually was expelled. Do you think that Cedric's actions are a direct result of his visit with his father? How have you seen your relationships with family impact your decisions?
4. At one point Cedric said he felt as if he wasn't "living". (pp. 44-64) What do you think Cedric was feeling when he said this? Were the sacrifices Cedric was making worth the outcomes? Why or why not?
5. Living with someone you don't know can sometimes be challenging. Who do you feel is at fault in the conflict between Ron and Cedric? How will you handle differences with your roommate? What do you think about the way they handled the situation? (pp. 64-80)
6. Cedric's mother Barbara has made large sacrifices for the sake of Cedric's success. What do you see as the biggest sacrifice she made to help her son? Who do you think has sacrificed the most to support you?
7. Do you feel that SAT scores define a person's academic ability? If so, how could you explain Cedric's academic ability compared to his SAT scores? How did Cedric react when he heard other students' scores? (pp. 80-100)
8. Torrence says that Cedric is "betraying [his] people, leaving them all behind, by going up to a big white university." Do you think Cedric betrayed "his people?" Do you see this as a common belief shared by many of his friends? How does Cedric's mother feel about Cedric attending Brown? (pp. 80-100)
9. Look over Cedric's admission essay again (pp.107-109). Cedric thanks his mother and God for his success so far. Does this essay seem to be an accurate portrayal of his character so far? Does

his character change once he gets to college? Think back on your admissions essay. What did you write about and how have you changed since then? How do you think college will change you during the next four years?

10. During Cedric's meeting with Justice Clarence Thomas they discuss St. Jude the saint for "causes beyond hope." How can this discussion apply to the theme of this book? Cedric is treading a road not many people in his life have traveled. Many of us emulate family members and others role models in our choice of career because the path is already nicely drawn. Imagine what it is like to desire something that is unexpected and different than the path taken by your family; similar to the goals of Clarence Thomas and Cedric. How can this make a high school or college experience different? (pp. 101-123)

11. In Chapter 5, Cedric had changed his desire for MIT to Brown University. Do you feel that he did this to feel more successful? How do you define success? If you felt as if you'd be more successful in your studies at a less prestigious school, would you change your choice of school?

12. After reading *A Hope in the Unseen*, how do you feel you can relate Cedric's story to your journey to college? Do you feel that Cedric made the right decision to go to such a prestigious university where he continually struggled to keep up with the other students or do you think it would have been better to go to another university where he could have stood out easier academically?

13. During his graduation speech, Cedric calls everyone at Ballou "Dreambusters", because they are the ones that say "You Can't" and "You Won't". Did you encounter a "Dreambusters" in your path to FSU? Ms. Thompson tells Cedric that he needs to be aware of the other students' feelings and asks him to tone down the emotions in his speech. Do you feel that Cedric's speech was too harsh, or was the speech justified? (pp. 123-143)

14. In the novel, one student describes himself as "handicapped", and Cedric disagrees. Cedric says, "identity should come from something you take pride in...it should be something we all share, rather than what separates us" (p. 177). How do you define your identity? What do you think made Cedric come to define identity in this way?

15. Cedric had a hard time adjusting to his new residence hall, the people he lived with, and the atmosphere of Brown University. Why do you think Cedric's residence hall was like a foreign country to him? What factors contribute to his trouble adjusting to college life? Can you relate to Cedric's troubles? What are you most worried about in your transition from high school to college?

16. Cedric was raised in a single parent home and dealt with living in a dangerous neighborhood growing up. Rob, on the other hand, came from what Cedric described as the stereotypical "Leave it to Beaver" family. What kind of backgrounds do you think you will encounter at college and like Cedric, how will they impact the way you relate to others? (pp. 178-195)

17. Throughout Parent's Weekend at Brown (pp. 232-236), there are times when Barbara tries to find comfort throughout the uncommon situation by looking for families who are not Caucasian; however, she finds little to none. What would compel her to feel this way, why?

18. Cedric changes the placement of the radio in his residence hall room and sometimes talks harshly to Rob, his roommate. (p. 243) Would it be correct or incorrect to assume that Cedric possesses characteristics or demonstrates behaviors that alienate him from others?

19. What do you think is the significance of the chapter title "Bursting Heart"? What does this have to do with Cedric's high school experience and life in Washington D.C.? (pp. 243-261)

20. In Chapter 12, Cedric discusses his observations of diversity at Brown University's. He notices differences in race, ethnicity, sexuality, and beliefs, and admits, "Actually knowing people who go in for this stuff has made it increasingly difficult to remain as judgmental as he once was." (pp.

281-303) Do you think this is a common result of being exposed to more diversity? Can you share examples of personal beliefs that were dispelled after getting to know someone different from you?

21. As a part of the curriculum for his Seminar in High School Education course, Cedric begins to observe Slater Junior High School. Although the staff and its students seem painfully similar to his own experiences in junior high and high school, “he knows he’s supposed to reach beyond that now and become a dispassionate observer.” (pp. 281-303) Do you think this is a good mindset for Cedric to have? Do you think that it is a realistic expectation for himself? Why is he asked to do this?

22. After Zayd had finished reading the poem that Cedric had written, he was asked what his favorite line was. Zayd quickly looked at the poem and responded with, “Always looking at same hues is really no fun./Maybe I’ll just let the colors run.” What is the significance of this line, and why is it important that Zayd was the one that pointed it out to Cedric? (p. 305)

23. Rob and Cedric layer an assortment of disgusting substances in their sink over a period of time, ultimately creating a large mess. How is this symbolic of their relationship with one another and how can these types of relationships be resolved? (pp.325-341)

24. Cedric and his mother’s relationship significantly changes when he realizes she has been lying about the debt that she is in. Which character do you sympathize with and why? (pp.325-341)

25. Cedric made numerous sacrifices throughout the book. Do you think they were worth it? Would you have done the same things? How do Cedric’s sacrifices compare to sacrifices made in your life? What sacrifices are you willing to make in college to achieve your goals for later in life?

26. Why do you think there has been little forward motion for many of Cedric’s peers at Ballou High School? Why was Cedric, in your opinion, so different?

27. Some people might criticize Cedric for his choices and view him as a complainer. If someone followed you through high school and wrote a book, what would they say about the goals you set and the choices you made? Would someone consider you to be a complainer when confronted with obstacles in your life?

28. Why do you think Rob Suskind decided to write about Cedric and Barbara’s life? How do you think Phillip Atkins and James Davis would react if they were to read the book today? (pp. 362-390)

We look forward to seeing you on Tuesday, August 21, at 1:00 p.m. at the Student Union Allen Courtyard for the Summer Reading Program Books Discussion.

We also look forward to seeing you at Convocation on August 28th at 5pm in the United Spirit Arena, featuring Ron Suskind, author of *A Hope in the Unseen*, as the keynote speaker.

If you have questions about the Summer Reading Program please contact the Center for Campus Life, 806-742-5433, campuslife@ttu.edu.

Additional Summer Reading Program resources and information can be found at www.summerreading.ttu.edu.