4-1-2009


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Because Ideas Matter...

The faculty and staff of Butler University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences presents

Recommended Readings

_Gang Leader for A Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets_


Reviewed by J. Rocky Colavito

While a graduate student in Sociology at the University of Chicago, Sudahir Venkatesh took a research survey into the Lake Park projects. What he got instead of answers to the survey questions was an extended friendship with JT, one of the leaders of a local gang, and what grew out of this friendship serves as the basis for what's reported in this thought-provoking book. Venkatesh provides an unflinching look into the way of life in one of Chicago's most oppressed neighborhoods, one that abhors the culture of drugs and violence yet comes to depend on the fruits that these deliver.

Venkatesh also pulls no punches with his own misguided expectations and preconceived notions, showing the reader how his own eyes are opened on multiple occasions. Whether it is in making the wrong choice to help out a local prostitute (who hits him up for money to feed her children when someone else has already fed them) or in not reading situations right (Venkatesh finds himself in the crossfire between rival gangs during a party at the projects). In so doing, we get a newfound, if grudging, respect for JT and the others who work within the strictures that life in the projects gives them.

I was struck by how well Venkatesh brought life in the projects into clarity without blatantly playing the racial oppression card, and came away from this read with a much different perspective on sociological research in general and these different lives in particular. Check it out!

- J. Rocky Colavito is professor of English and Director of Writing Programs at Butler University.