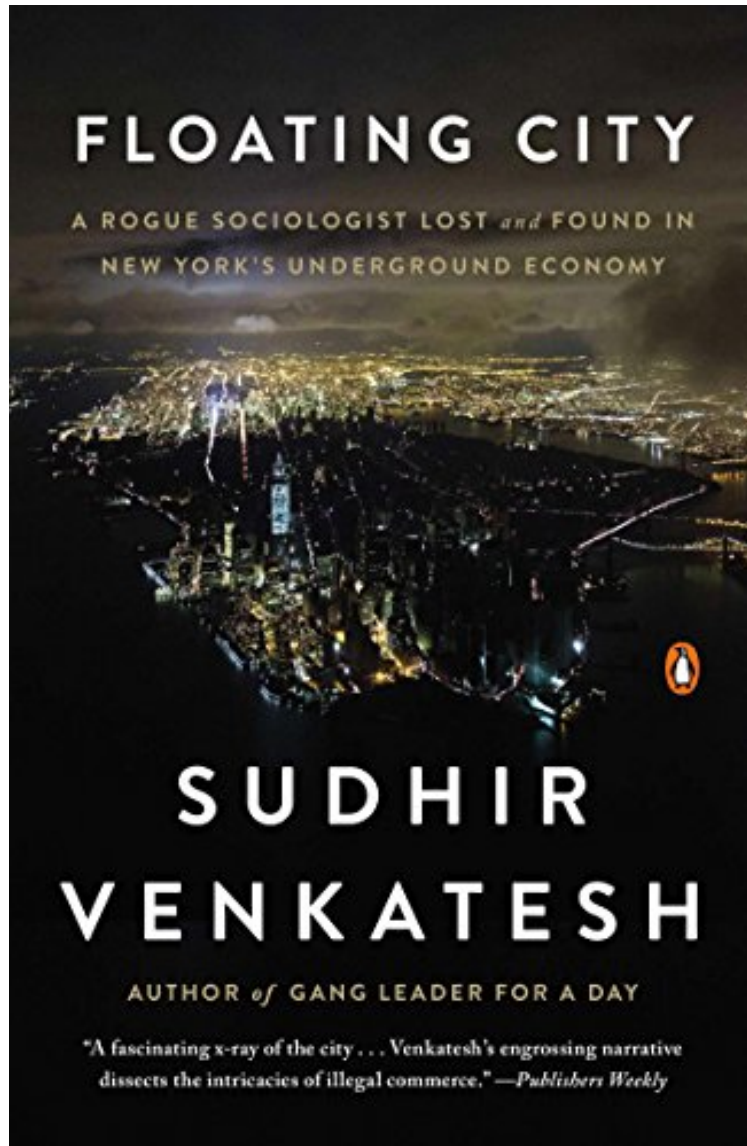


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## Floating City: A Rogue Sociologist Lost and Found in New York's Underground Economy

*Sudhir Venkatesh*

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**Sudhir Venkatesh : Floating City: A Rogue Sociologist Lost and Found in New York's Underground Economy** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Floating City: A Rogue Sociologist Lost and Found in New York's Underground Economy:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. StuckBy Riosin O'MaraI read Floating City today -- I had pre-ordered it to be downloaded to my iPad. The stories in the book about all the people in the 'underground' Venkatesh encountered are very well done and the fact that white elites were among them makes the book even more compelling

to read. However, while Venkatesh frames New York City as one that floats; his continued somewhat unenthusiastic dialogue about the general field of Sociology as well as his Columbia colleagues becomes a broken record pretty early on in the book. This distracts from all the complex, sometimes dark, and interesting characters and social networks that unfold in the book. Shine tells Venkatesh near the end of the book that he and others know how to move on but he sees Venkatesh as standing still and doing nothing. Venkatesh did write this book and it does have a lot to offer, but the narrative feels somewhat forced specifically because of his fixation on how Sociology doesn't seem to take him that seriously. The result is that he often comes off as somewhat whiny. So let's look at the evidence: he is a tenured full professor with an endowed chair at one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the country. His documentary film, *Dislocation*, which focuses on the forced relocation of public housing residents in Chicago, is used in urban sociology, geography, and urban policy classrooms all over the country -- as is his previous autobiographical book "*Gang Leader*". I'd say he is doing very well as a Sociologist. Implicit here is that Columbia University and his colleagues have supported his research both for academic and broader audiences. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A muddled portrait of the old Hell's Kitchen By EM If Venkatesh were a student at an Ivy League school instead of a professor, this book would probably have been handed back with extensive red markings and a note to see the professor. Or a better copy editor. Or a therapist. Written in the first person, the book follows his move to NYC, desperate search for research subjects, quest for tenure, attempt to define sociology and eventual break up with his wife. All the personal upheaval in his life leads to muddled prose. The book lacks the details and insights that would otherwise make the characters from NYC's underworld fully 3-dimensional. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Ambiguously defined By Keith Brubaker I felt the writer was a bit self-conscious. He admits that, but still, I admit it did bother me at times. In the world in which he chose to navigate and 'research' one never knows exactly how accurate an account of that he wishes to study, that he is actually obtaining. It seemed interesting, yet ambiguous, neither research nor novel, vignettes, almost a story, but not quite. There is so little to reference it in some ways. He doesn't explore the personalities and character of his subjects deeply. That is OK, but it lacks the intensity of a fiction where we become involved with the lives of those we are meeting in the pages. There is something impersonal about the people in the book and our author appears to try to keep it that way. Yet, I also had the feeling that he cared for several of them and those are the ones we got to know a bit more than some of the others. There is little discussion of social morality or what the effects of those social practices are upon their practitioners. Perhaps that is as it should have been for the purposes of the kind of book he wished to write. It did occur to me some days after finishing reading the book how much better off our world would be if drugs and prostitution were totally legal in every way and regulated as legitimate commerce. I didn't have any sense of how the author felt about that and perhaps its unimportant, but such a book does assist one in thinking of such things. I think that is good. I was disappointed in that the author himself remained such an enigma. After all, we spent all our time with him. I never felt as if I met him, this guy I spent a whole book with, reading his thoughts.

New York is a city of highs and lows, where wealthy elites share the streets with desperate immigrants and destitute locals. Bridging this economic divide is New York's underground economy, the invisible network of illicit transactions between rich and poor that secretly weaves together the whole city. Sudhir Venkatesh, acclaimed sociologist at Columbia University and author of *Gang Leader for a Day*, returns to the streets to connect the dots of New York's divergent economic worlds and crack the code of the city's underground economy. Based on Venkatesh's interviews with prostitutes and socialites, immigrants and academics, high end drug bosses and street-level dealers, *Floating City* exposes the underground as the city's true engine of social transformation and economic prosperity—revealing a wholly unprecedented vision of New York. A memoir of sociological investigation, *Floating City* draws from Venkatesh's decade of research within the affluent communities of Upper East Side socialites and Midtown businessmen, the drug gangs of Harlem and the sex workers of Brooklyn, the artists of Tribeca and the escort services of Hell's Kitchen. Venkatesh arrived in the city after his groundbreaking research in Chicago, where crime remained stubbornly local: gangs stuck to their housing projects and criminals stayed on their corners. But in *Floating City*, Venkatesh discovers that New York's underground economy unites instead of divides inhabitants: a vast network of "off the books" transactions linking the high and low worlds of the city. Venkatesh shows how dealing in drugs and sex and undocumented labor bridges the conventional divides between rich and poor, unmasking a city knit together by the invisible threads of the underground economy. Venkatesh closely follows a dozen New Yorkers locked in the underground economy. His greatest guide is Shine, an African American drug boss based in Harlem who hopes to break into the elusive, upscale cocaine market. Without connections among wealthy whites, Shine undertakes an audacious campaign of self-reinvention, leaving behind the certainties of race and class with all the drive of the greatest entrepreneurs. As Shine explains to Venkatesh, "This is New York! We're like hummingbirds, man. We go flower to flower. . . . Here, you need to float." *Floating City: A Rogue Sociologist Lost and Found in New York's Underground Economy* chronicles Venkatesh's decade of discovery and loss in the shifting terrain of New York, where research subjects might disappear suddenly and new allies emerge by chance, where close friends might reveal themselves to be

criminals of the lowest order. Propelled by Venkatesh's numerous interviews and firsthand research, *Floating City* at its heart is a story of one man struggling to understand a complex global city constantly in the throes of becoming.

From Booklist Venkatesh, academic and ethnographer, lives within the underground economy in New York while studying it at the margins of the legal world. He states, "The more I could penetrate the underground . . . if it was marginal, criminal or tinged with outsider status, count me in. He observes the essence of mobility, with people moving across physical space as well as reaching beyond their preordained lot in life. He finds extreme violence, which he describes as professional, nothing personal, and just business. And clearly, some of those he meets do not survive. At the same time, he observes kindness in the most unexpected places and people with so little reaching out to those with even less with remarkable loyalty and compassion. The people run businesses; they operate with a plan, seek profits and contain costs, hire, and fire while looking for new markets. Venkatesh brings to life the underground economy of New York, where rich and poor of varying ethnicities and backgrounds meet and function while they float. An enlightening book. --Mary Whaley

From Bookforum Venkatesh dissects the fluid reinventions of self and community that define New York's trade in outlawed goods and services. Selling cocaine or sex is never a simple, unidirectional transaction in Venkatesh's telling—parsimonious explanations are not for him. Instead he delivers an expansive account of the varieties of social power that impinge on the smaller worlds of vice trafficking in New York. *Floating City* is a model of ethnographic thick description, and Venkatesh is an accomplished researcher. It's all the more disappointing, then, that his conclusions feel reductive, especially when it comes to the familiar bugaboos of gentrification and globalization. —Leonard Benardo *New York Magazine*: "If you live in the New York of Shake Shack burgers and business meetings at the W Hotel, you should read Sudhir Venkatesh's *Floating City*! If it's criminal or iniquitous and happens here, it's probably to be found in this book." *The Guardian*: "Compelling! Like the acclaimed writer Katherine Boo, Venkatesh is interested in deep research, in spending years with subjects and piecing together a detailed portrait. Unlike Boo, Venkatesh is present in his books. He has crossed the line and entered the scene." *New York Daily News*: "Entire human ecosystems exist undocumented and hidden from view. That Venkatesh can bring them to the surface—if only for brief flashes of their existence—illuminates the worldview of future sociologists, policy-makers, students and citizens." *Publishers Weekly* (starred): "[A] fascinating X-ray of the city... Venkatesh's engrossing narrative dissects the intricacies of illegal commerce and the subtle ways it both divides and entwines different classes and races, while painting rich, novelistic portraits of its participants and their dreams of self-reinvention." *Kirkus*: "Venkatesh displays a piercing sense of empathy and ability to translate dry sociological principles into an understanding of the difficult lives of the urban poor.... [He] has established a singular voice in urban sociology, and his immersive research and insights remain penetrating and unique." *Library Journal*: "Venkatesh has a talent for transforming ethnographic observations into character-driven accounts. [*Floating City*] is an exciting and compelling work.... Readers interested in the daily workings of the illicit economy will be fascinated by the complexities and contradictions of the underground economy that Venkatesh details." *Booklist*: "Venkatesh brings to life the underground economy of New York, where rich and poor and various ethnicities and backgrounds meet and function while they 'float.' An enlightening read."