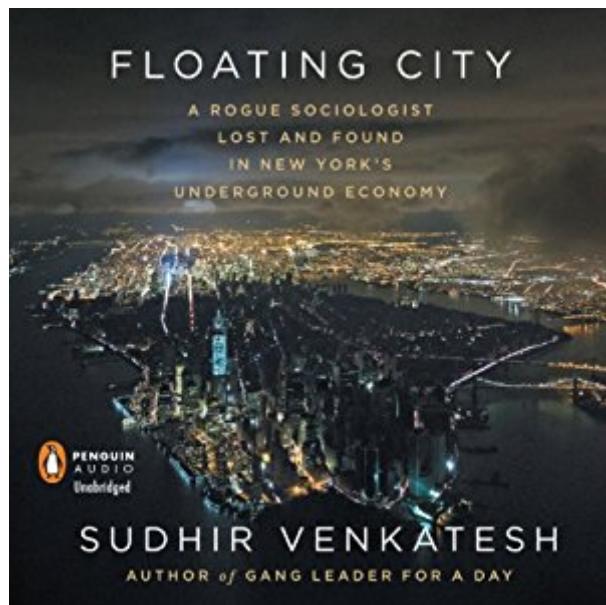


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# Floating City: A Rogue Sociologist Lost And Found In New York's Underground Economy



## Synopsis

"[A] fascinating X-ray of the city...Venkatesh's engrossing narrative dissects the intricacies of illegal commerce." (Publishers Weekly) 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.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 8 hours and 17 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Penguin Audio

Audible.com Release Date: September 12, 2013

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00ETBZN9O

Best Sellers Rank: #97 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Professionals & Academics > Social Scientists & Psychologists #345 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Public Affairs & Policy > Social Policy #557 in Books > Audible Audiobooks >

## Customer Reviews

I 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.

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.

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.

The underground economy in New York would have been a fascinating topic. This book is at best a collection of anecdotes centering more on the author than the alleged topic and not presenting any non-obvious insights into the underground economy. His discussions of events in his life and his reactions to people he meets are uninteresting whines of a privileged academic.

Author does research on the sex industry in NY and the interactions of the different people with each other. He becomes emotionally involved (not sexually) with his subjects. Author links some of his feelings with his own failing marriage but that was a side issue. The book was drawn out for too many chapters and did not follow characters in depth as much as the reader would have liked. Most of what he writes about is illegal, such as prostitution, drug pushing and pimping so how he could write about it without police involvement made me wonder how much the police ignore and how much they are paid to ignore. Interesting book but not a compelling read.

Another work by the Columbia University sociologist Venkatesh, who illuminates the "darker" side of New York City dwellers. If you still believe that the poor don't try hard enough, read this book. It demonstrates how some poor people can't catch a break and how others resort to any means they can to survive.

I read this book after the interesting bit the author worked on Freakonomics. I was expecting

something new and interesting about the new york underground economy....what I found was generalities you can catch on a tv show.

I adore Sudhir Ventakesh's writing, reporting and storytelling. Unfortunately, he disappointed me this go around. It was self indulgent and subjective. Too self reflective and a conclusion that was thinly thread together.

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