

# books

## SLEEPWALKING TO SEGREGATION?

Nissa Finney and Ludi Simpson

(Policy Press, £14.99)



When Trevor Phillips, then head of the Commission for Racial Equality, made his infamous statement in 2005 that Britain was “sleepwalking to segregation” because ethnic communities were increasingly living apart, it gave New Labour’s cover of respectability to the claims of right-wing organisations

such as Migration WatchUK. In piled the mainstream press to repeat the stories of white flight, minorities refusing to integrate and Britain rapidly becoming a country of ghettos.

But just because they were uttered by the head of an equal opportunities watchdog, it doesn’t mean the claims were true, as the authors show in this important book. Academically rigorous but still readable, it demolishes these myths and shows that, far from living “parallel lives”, as the Cattle Report on Oldham’s 2001 riots claimed, minorities and the white population are more evenly

spread than in the past.

The segregation myths are a modern reworking of what used to be called playing the race card, say Finney and Simpson, and create a real problem, fostering a climate in which “community cohesion” policies put the onus on minorities to get with the government’s programme and prove their Britishness.

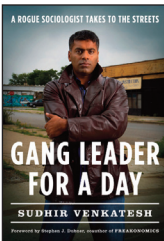
More important, believes Finney, is to identify specific social problems such as housing or working conditions and improve them to the benefit of all.

KEVIN GOPAL

## Author Q&A: Sudhir Venkatesh

### GANG LEADER FOR A DAY

(Penguin, £8.99)



Tie-dyed, Grateful Dead-loving sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh

wandered off campus against advice and found himself held overnight by suspicious members of Chicago’s notorious crack-dealing Black Kings gang. But when he returned undaunted the next day to the Robert Taylor Homes – the largest housing project in the US – armed with a six-pack of beer and a willingness to listen, he was welcomed by JT, the gang’s charismatic leader, who thought he was about to become the subject of a biography and gave him astonishing access, at one point allowing him to manage the gang for a day. Instead, over seven years, Venkatesh used that access to compile a fascinating, comprehensive account of a world in which the gangs, the police and housing officials – and at some stages possibly even the author himself – all jostled for space in an uneasy, grey moral area. Moving, funny “rogue sociology”.

You interview women who ran things at Robert Taylor before the gangs took over. Robert Taylor’s gone but do you see a time when women might run things again?

If the economy gets

severely depressed we will see women joining gangs, although more likely they will occupy a diverse set of roles in the underground economy, ranging from thieves to independent drug traffickers. Women who do so are typically mothers who desperately need to find food for their households.

**Was the Black Kings’ claim to be a community organisation reality, aspiration or merely a fig leaf for commercial activity?**

I think it was a little bit of both. On the one hand, they wanted to stay true to a three-decades old lineage: namely, the gang was an organisation seeking to advance the local interests of oppressed minorities. This notion arose from the days of the Civil Rights movement when the gangs had a serious role to play in the Black Power movement. But, when gangs started dealing drugs, these political stances became justifications for trafficking. I never

met that many leaders who took the black power legacy seriously – most felt that if you build up the economic base, you will end up advancing on social issues.

**Are housing authorities learning the mistakes of the past or are they condemned to repeat them?**

Housing authorities have very little flexibility to think “outside the box”, as it were. They have a specific set of services they must provide and they are repeatedly victim to budget cuts. This means they end up being negligent more often than not. It also means that they are the repositories for the most poorly prepared city bureaucrats because no one with any power would want to sit in the office (it’s a recipe for failure).

**Does your study of the Black Kings offer lessons for the study of gangs in other countries?**

Yes. In the UK and in Europe, we are seeing the signs of deep disenfranchisement of young people manifesting in the turn toward guns. If I were a UK minister, I would think seriously about fashioning a response that is intensive and consistent. Get guns out of the hands of young people as soon as humanely possible.

**What does recession mean for gangs’ recruitment and activities?**

Very simply, gang recruitment will be on the rise, around the world. There is a strong correlation between economic downturns and gang activity.

KEVIN GOPAL



## Off the shelf

### THE ANARCHIST’S ANGEL

Gareth Thompson

(Definitions, £6.99)

Bitter about the accident that scarred his face, lonely 15-year-old outsider Samson Ashburner hides himself away in the woods in Cumbria until Romany girl Angel Obscura shows that not everyone is obsessed with appearances. A tensely satisfying coming-of-age novel.

FIONA PYMONT

### SMOOTH TALKING STRANGER

Lisa Kleypas

(Piatkus, £12.99)

“He was tall and lean, all hard muscle and easy masculinity, with dark eyes and heavy, well-cut black hair.” Yes, people do still write like this so if some sizzling sensual drama that revolves around an abandoned baby boy and paternity tests appeals, this is the book for you.

LIANNE STEINBERG

### THE INFORMERS

Juan Gabriel Vasquez

(£7.99, Bloomsbury)

This debut novel, translated from Spanish, is an engrossing tale of loyalty, betrayal and intrigue focussing on the consequences of World War II. With a subtle layering of plot lines, the question of whether we carry the sins of our fathers is explored as a modern parable.

LIANNE STEINBERG

### LIFE SENTENCES

Laura Lipman

(Avon, £6.99)

Baltimore writer Cassandra Fallows is convinced mining her own memories is the failsafe route to fame and fortune. Lipman’s penetrating psychological study dissects both the tricks of memory and the gaps in between.

FIONA PYMONT