

# Book Review

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**Jonathan Eig, *King: A Life*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2023. 669 pp., ISBN-13 978-0-37427-929-5 (Cloth), pp. 669; \$39.00/\$47.00Can.**

“Our very survival,” Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK), wrote, “depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change.” (557)<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Eig’s authentic biography is reflective of his genius as well as MLK’s life and death which mirror the continued crisis, color, and character of the United States of America. The opening sentence of this classic study says it all: “On December 5, 1955, a young Black man became one of America’s founding fathers.” (3)

Eig’s well-documented biography is an event of fortitude and courage as well as vision and authenticity. Few contemporary biographies can match his insightful narratives, analyses, and depths of understanding of a complex man who “became our only modern-day founding father—as well as the nation’s most mourned martyr.” The author of this biography “gives us a King for our times: a deep thinker, a brilliant strategist, and a committed radical who led one of history’s greatest movements, and whose demands for racial and economic justice remain as urgent today as they were in his lifetime” (left blurb).

One of the saddest ironies of great men and women is that they morph into mascots at the hands of their followers. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi comes to mind. In Modi’s India, ironically, Gandhi is used as a tool to propagate values and practices which run contrary to the Gandhian ideals. Gandhi, the “father of the nation,” has become a garlanded poster that subconsciously redeems the anti-Gandhian establishment. In the US, Trumpian values and practices have reduced MLK’s role to irrelevance. Likewise, South Africa is in chaos in post-Mandela developments.

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<sup>1</sup> Page numbers within parenthesis refer to the quotes as given in the book under review.

This 669-page book, divided into three parts containing forty-five chapters, seeks to immortalize MLK and his legacy. As a Black man, intellectual, activist, and a national leader he stands out as an American hero notwithstanding his frailties. We live in dangerous times. From Ukraine to Gaza, the banality of violence and terror define the nature of conflicts which cannot be resolved by indiscriminate bombardment and mayhem. Both MLK and MKG—the lost apostles of peace—are nearly footnotes to history. A wise man said: *History is written by those who hang the heroes*. This book would rewrite the future of current history.

King, to paraphrase Kierkegaard's ideas, lived a life in "despair." In the existential labyrinths of temporal and eternal, finite and infinite, and freedom and necessity, MLK embodied *The Sickness Unto Death*. I know no one after MLK who defines the qualitative essence of *despair*. We live in a dangerous world where the ubiquity of terror debases the human condition. Kierkegaard's ambiguity about Christianity evolves as faith in MLK's lifelong struggle against the sins of man. MLK roared in the Black church invoking God to end slavery and injustice. His nonviolent revolution stands out as a requiem. He had a dream that remains unfulfilled: "Black America Still Wears Chains" (42–52).

MLK's assassin, dialectically, immortalized "The Most Dangerous Negro" (340–350). MLK was 39 years old:

"His death lit the nation on fire—that night and for years to come. Memphis burned. Detroit burned. Washington, D.C., burned. More than a hundred cities went up in flames. Dozens of Black men died. More than ten thousand were arrested."

" 'Every racist in the country has killed Dr. King,' the activist James Farmer told a reporter. 'Evil societies always destroy their consciences.'" (552)

Jonathan Eig is one of the most reputed biographers of our time. His dedication, fortitude, and determination enlighten every page and person, event, situation, and context that define MLK as a liberator of humanity. This immeasurably documented and masterfully narrated biography is a monumental work that would keep the flames of freedom alive forever.

This inquisitive reviewer is stoically touched by the illustrious vignettes of this magnificent life story:

- "We want and are entitled to the basic rights and opportunities of American citizens: The right to earn a living at work for which we are fitted by training and ability; equal opportunities in education, health, recreation, and similar public services; the right to vote; equality before the law..."<sup>2</sup>
- "King was a product of the Black church. He learned the values of love and sacrifice and humility from the church, and he learned to live those

<sup>2</sup>A letter to the editor of *The Atlanta Constitution* in 1946 in response to the shotgun murder of two Black couples in Walton County, Georgia (p. 61).

values (158)... [January 30, 1956, after threatening explosion on his porch. Black neighbors, many of them armed, surrounded his house. King's'] boomed from his damaged porch]:

- "We believe in law and order.... Don't get your weapons. He who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword. Remember that is what God said.... For what we are doing is right, what we are doing is just. And God is with us." (160)
- "More than six hundred people marched through Selma on March 7, 1965. ... On March 15, President Lyndon Johnson addressed from the Capitol. Across the country, seventeen million people tuned in to hear the President:

*At times history and fate meet in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama.*

*There, long suffering men and women peacefully protested the denial of their rights as Americans. Many were brutally assaulted. One good man, a man of God, was killed. ... The real hero of this struggle is the American Negro. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches every city and state in America. This cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. ... And...we...shall ..overcome!" (433-434)*

- "A single shot rang out. ... He died there at 7:05 p.m. on April 4, 1968. ... Dr. Martin Luther King, the apostle of nonviolence in the civil rights movement, has been shot to death in Memphis, Tennessee," the CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite told the nation. (553)