

NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS

Volume 47, Number 6 · [April 13, 2000](#), pp. 40-43.

The Man Who Was King

By [David J. Garrow](#)

I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.

by Michael Eric Dyson

Free Press, 404 pp., \$25.00

On Thursday evening, April 4, 1968, nine-year-old Michael Eric Dyson, while watching television at home in Detroit, heard the name Martin Luther King Jr. for the first time. The TV reported that King had been shot dead in Memphis, Tennessee, but it was less the news of King's assassination than the broadcast of excerpts from King's final speech of the night before—his "Mountaintop" address—that captivated the young Dyson. "As I listened to his last speech, I was immediately converted beyond the realm of will into a passionate identification with this soldier of love."^[1]

Dyson dropped out of high school but eventually became a Baptist minister and, at age thirty-five, received a Ph.D. in religion from Princeton University.^[2] Virtually all of Dyson's previous publications—whether in magazines or books^[3]—have sounded like extended Op-Ed essays. But his new work of "biocriticism" on Martin Luther King Jr. is a thoughtful and provocative book that tries to put both King's accomplishments and his flaws in perspective.

Martin Luther King Jr. has become so familiar to Americans over the past fifteen years—not only through television documentaries like *Eyes on the Prize*, but also through books by former aides such as Ralph Abernathy and Andrew Young and by writers such as Taylor Branch and myself^[4]—that people can be readily excused for believing that there is nothing significant about King that they have not already been told. Indeed, in recent years most civil rights scholarship has increasingly concentrated on aspects of the black freedom struggle that only glancingly concern King. In sharp contrast to a biographical emphasis on "great leaders," the shift of scholars toward a predominantly "grass-roots" approach to Southern black activism of the 1950s and 1960s has become the predominant trend during the 1990s. In recent years the half-dozen best civil rights histories have included two excellent books on indigenous activism in Mississippi,^[5] two fine studies of local movements in Alabama,^[6] a valuable look at one Florida locale,^[7] and a superb history of black efforts in Louisiana.^[8] On television, recycled footage of King's "I Have a Dream" address at the 1963 March on Washington may well remain the dominant visual image of America's civil rights years, but among historians interest in King has been fading for more than a decade.



Dyson's *I May Not Get There With You* concentrates on King's legacy rather than on his part in events from 1955 to 1968. Dyson gives particular attention to the ways in which King's writings and speeches have been used (and misused) in recent years. He also analyzes the severe pounding that King's reputation and image have suffered during the past ten years from a series of revelations concerning sex, plagiarism, and the commercially driven behavior of his family. Dyson has made a thorough study of King's own words and the interpretative literature about him, but he makes little effort to present King within the setting of the movement's wider history.

When one looks back now, more than thirty years later, on the brief trajectory of King's life—a life that brought him national acclaim at age twenty-seven, and was ended by James Earl Ray at age thirty-nine^[9]—several turning points have become clearer. The Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-1956 was started not by Mrs. Rosa Parks, not by longtime local NAACP leader E.D. Nixon, and not by King and his fellow pastors but by a group of middle-class black women, the Women's Political Council. Those women had been considering a bus protest for several years,^[10] but when Mrs. Parks's arrest, on December 1, 1955, prompted them to put their plan into motion, they knew that their own jobs as teachers within segregated but nonetheless white-controlled institutions could easily be threatened. This meant the boycott would have to be publicly led by black citizens less vulnerable to easy economic retaliation. When Montgomery's black civic leaders met four days later, twenty-six-year-old Martin Luther King Jr., who had been pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church for a little more than a year and who had recently turned down the presidency of the NAACP's Montgomery branch, was unanimously chosen to head the new protest.

King was thus drafted to take on a position of leadership that he had not sought and that, during the boycott's first seven weeks, he increasingly came to feel he did not want and could not handle. Only on January 27, when he underwent a private spiritual crisis, which King scholars generally call the "kitchen experience" and which James H. Cone accurately calls "the most critical turning point in King's life," did King reluctantly begin to accept the stressful and inevitably dangerous position in which he had been placed.^[11]

As Dyson appreciates, King from 1956 onward, especially in private settings, consistently exhibited a humility and selflessness that was then, and is still, unmatched by any other major American political figure. That absence of egotistical qualities was explained in no small part by the accidental manner—as King himself saw it—in which he had been placed on the national scene. While his aides and admirers often eagerly promoted him as a leader, King always insisted that he was merely a representative for a much wider movement that he knew full well he did not "lead," let alone control. King eloquently put forward ideas about the direction the movement should take. But, believing that he had been called to be of service to others, King never leaped to take command or issue instructions to others.

The years between 1960 and 1965 are now remembered as the movement's years of glory, but in the widespread black Southern insurgence of that time, young people—not ministers like King—almost always were in the forefront of the struggle. In his excessively long book on the black college students, including John Lewis and Diane Nash, who headed up the early sit-ins in Nashville, David Halberstam^[12] illustrates how in most places it was students whose energy

propelled black communities forward. Nowadays the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) is nowhere near as well remembered for its role in those years as King is, but a secret ballot among movement veterans or civil rights historians would confirm that SNCC's young activists were far more important to the Southern movement in those years than was Martin Luther King Jr. Clayborne Carson's excellent intellectual history of SNCC first appeared in 1981,^[13] but scholars have failed to make full use of the remarkably rich collection of SNCC's archival papers (which became available only after Carson's book was completed) or to publish other comprehensive studies of SNCC. The absence of such books represents the single greatest deficiency in civil rights historiography.^[14]

King always understood that much of his celebrity was made possible by the efforts of students and older local activists all across the South. Even at the height of his fame in 1964, when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, King went out of his way to emphasize that he was accepting the award not as a personal honor but simply as a trustee on behalf of the entire movement. The Nobel Prize significantly strengthened King's self-sacrificial understanding of his own life. The more honors he received, the more obligated and at times guilty the awards and praise made him feel.^[15] The Nobel award reinforced King's belief that his prophetic responsibilities required him to address issues of violence and nonviolence that did not explicitly involve "civil rights"; it fundamentally strengthened King's willingness to start speaking out against the war in Vietnam even though he knew full well that this would seriously harm his own popularity and political reputation.

Dyson repeatedly underscores both the political courage King demonstrated during the last three years of his life and the outspoken radicalism of King's political message during his twelve final months. King's denunciations of the Vietnam War and his explicit demands for national economic policies that would redistribute wealth—demands that he privately acknowledged made him a democratic socialist—have been described by King scholars since the early 1980s. But Dyson rightly warns that the radical Martin Luther King, who is well appreciated within the academic world, is rarely if ever featured or even acknowledged at the annual birthday celebrations where his "I Have a Dream" speech is played again and again.

Dyson criticizes conservative opponents of affirmative action programs who have made use of King's "dream" that someday his children would "not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" even though King expressed his support of such programs. Dyson half-seriously proposes "a ten-year moratorium on listening to or reading 'I Have a Dream'" so that at least some popular attention will be given to "King's other writings and orations." In later years, for example, King often would tell listeners how the "dream" he had had in Washington in 1963 had turned into a "nightmare." "We really thought we were making great progress," King told a Chicago audience in July 1967, referring to the movement's pre-1966 victories. "We somehow felt that we were going to win the total victory, before we analyzed the depths and dimensions of the problem." Only after having done so, King emphasized, had he realized that "the movement must address itself to restructuring the whole of American society. The problems that we are dealing with...are not going to be solved until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power." As Dyson rightly notes, the politically pessimistic and radically

outspoken King of 1967-1968 is far less frequently memorialized than the optimistic and reassuring King of August 28, 1963.^[16]

I May Not Get There With You is sometimes marred by digressions, ranging from Dyson's harsh criticism of President Clinton's "exploitative relation to black culture and identity" to an unsuccessful, almost comic, attempt to argue that there is "a great deal of similarity between Martin Luther King, Jr., and a figure like Tupac Shakur."^[17] Dyson's most original contributions, however, come not when he discusses King himself but when he examines the ways in which King's reputation and legacy have changed during the past decade.

Reports of King's far from monogamous sex life have circulated ever since 1970, but the 1989 publication of Ralph Abernathy's memoir, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, added new stories to the public record. Abernathy got national attention when he wrote that during the night and early morning hours immediately preceding his death, King had sexual relations with two separate women, and then had angrily quarreled with his regular female companion.^[18] Dyson reviews this record carefully and tactfully, emphasizing that King, like Abernathy too, was "reared in a preacherly culture where good sex is pursued with nearly the same fervor as believers seek to be filled with the Holy Ghost." Both Dyson and his wife, Marcia, have written perceptively about what Dyson calls the "subculture of promiscuity that is rampant among clergy and religious figures in every faith."^[19] King's enthusiasm about sex sometimes left him awash in feelings of guilt; but he was also a thoroughgoing male chauvinist in his professional and political dealings with women activists. His refusal to seriously consider appointing the talented and highly experienced Ella Baker as executive director of SCLC in 1959-1960 was only the worst manifestation of his sexism. As King's closest female colleague said more than twenty years ago, King "would have had a lot to learn and a lot of growing to do" with regard to gender equality had he lived beyond 1968.

Knowledge of King's promiscuous personal life appears to have had little harmful effect upon his historical reputation. The same appears to be true with regard to the 1990 revelation that, as Dyson puts it, King in the early 1950s "plagiarized huge chunks of his [doctoral] dissertation and graduate school papers." Unlike some King admirers, Dyson does not shy away from acknowledging the scale and extent of King's plagiarism. Even well before that discovery, most King scholars had concluded that King was far more a spiritual and intellectual product of the world of the black church in which he had grown up than of the theologians whose writings he had read in seminary and graduate school.^[20] That belief was only reinforced by the revelation that much of King's academic work was little more than unoriginal regurgitation of statements he knew his professors would welcome.^[21]

More important than those revelations for a comprehensive understanding of King's life and teachings has been the work of Keith D. Miller, who was the first to show how King's sermons and speeches were heavily influenced by, and in many instances directly derived from, earlier orations by well-known preachers, black and white, of the 1940s and early 1950s.^[22] Dyson's discussion of this subject, too, is both thorough and intelligent, and his convincing conclusion is that "King was first and foremost a preacher of extraordinary skill and resources, and by comparison, at best a competent theologian." With King's writings as with King's personal life,

Dyson writes, "we need not idolize King to appreciate his worth; neither do we do honor to him by refusing to confront his weaknesses and his limitations." As Dyson rightly appreciates, King's courageous willingness to put his personal reluctance aside and serve as the movement's most visible leader and most powerful prophetic voice was a consciously self-sacrificial contribution to the cause of human equality.

I May Not Get There With You is at its most bluntly honest in a chapter that criticizes King's widow and children for the ways in which their "hunger for profit from a prophet" has led them into innumerable promotional "misdeeds" which Dyson finds "unconscionable." He writes, for example,

The King family has waged a war on several fronts: the legal battle to get the papers King produced up until 1964 returned to Atlanta from Boston; an even more aggressive legal campaign to enforce strictly copyrights on King's intellectual property and to collect fees for the commercial use of King's image; an ugly public battle with the National Park Service over its plans for a visitor center; and striking a deal with Time Warner to consolidate the King legacy in multimedia—from books and audiotapes to cyberspace.

Dyson concedes that "it certainly would not be immoral for the Kings to get rich off King's legacy, but it would be immoral for them to pretend that such a state of affairs would please Martin Luther King, Jr." He argues that King's words "should not be controlled by anyone, even his family, [who are] more interested in their commercial value than their moral appeal."

In recent months the King family has compounded their commercial missteps with their insistent public approval of ludicrous assassination conspiracy claims. Who aided and encouraged James Earl Ray in the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. is a question worthy of discussion even if at this late date no conclusive answers are possible. But no rational student of the historical record could join the Kings in their bizarre declarations that Ray was entirely innocent, that President Lyndon B. Johnson's White House was culpable, and that a multitude of US government agencies—the FBI, the CIA, and the Army—recruited New Orleans mafia figures to carry out the officially sanctioned "hit."

Dyson notes that "no one should be expected to speak well, think sharply, or act bravely because her husband or wife or mother did," ^[23] but he sadly observes that King's widow and children "no longer have (if they ever did) moral or intellectual supremacy in claiming his legacy" and that no further deference is owed them. There is no way of estimating how much damage the behavior of King's family, both in commercial ventures and in their embrace of the now-deceased James Earl Ray, has done to King's reputation and image among the wider public. Like other King scholars, though, Dyson seems convincing when he concludes that King's spiritual and political legacy will long outlive whatever bruises are inflicted by his enemies, his friends, and his family.

Notes

[1] Michael Eric Dyson, *Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. xxvi.

[2] Michael Eric Dyson, "Uses of Heroes: Celebration and Criticism in the Interpretation of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr." (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1993).

[3] In addition to *Reflecting Black*, see *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (Oxford University Press, 1995); *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1996); and *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* (Addison-Wesley, 1996).

[4] Ralph David Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down* (Harper and Row, 1989); Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden* (HarperCollins, 1996); David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (Morrow, 1986); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* (Simon and Schuster, 1988); and *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-65* (Simon and Schuster, 1998).

[5] Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (University of California Press, 1995); and John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (University of Illinois Press, 1994).

[6] Andrew M. Manis, *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (University of Alabama Press, 1999); and Stewart Burns, editor, *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

[7] Glenda Alice Rabby, *The Pain and the Promise: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Tallahassee, Florida* (University of Georgia Press, 1999).

[8] Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (University of Georgia Press, 1995).

[9] For a comprehensive and thoroughly reliable review of all the evidence and claims concerning King's assassination, see Gerald Posner's excellent *Killing the Dream: James Earl Ray and the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Random House, 1998).

[10] See David J. Garrow, editor, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (University of Tennessee Press, 1987); and Mary Fair Burks, "Trailblazers: Women in the Montgomery Bus Boycott," in Vicki L. Crawford et al., editors, *Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (Carlson Publishing, 1990), pp. 71-83.

[11] James H. Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Beacon, 1999), pp. 156-157. See also my "Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Spirit of Leadership," in Peter J. Albert and Ronald Hoffman, editors, *We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Pantheon, 1990), pp. 11-34, a shorter version of which appeared in the *Journal of American History*, Vol. 74 (September 1987), pp. 438-447.

[12] David Halberstam, *The Children* (Random House, 1998).

[13] Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Harvard University Press, 1981).

[14] See, however, Emily Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization* (Carlson Publishing, 1989; a reprinting of a 1968 Harvard University Ph.D. dissertation); Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, editor, *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (Rutgers University Press, 1998); and Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).

[15] Perhaps the greatest single irony concerning King's life is how the "logs" or transcripts of the FBI's extensive telephone wiretapping of King and three of his New York advisers (Stanley D. Levison, Clarence B. Jones, and Bayard Rustin) document with great emotional power how remarkably principled and sometimes harshly self-critical King was. Had Dyson reviewed these "logs," his portrait of King would have been greatly enriched. At no time during the years from 1962 through 1968 did anyone in either the FBI or King's inner circle ever imagine that subsequent public release of those electronic intercepts would enhance King's image and reputation, but that indubitably will be their long-term impact. See generally David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From "Solo" to Memphis* (Norton, 1981), an updated and expanded edition of which Yale University Press will publish later this year, and, more inclusively, Kenneth O'Reilly, *"Racial Matters": The FBI's Secret File on Black America 1960-1972* (Free Press, 1989).

[16] Dyson's incomplete portrait of King's experience during the 1960s omits any discussion of the extent to which King's post-1965 pessimism and radicalism, like that of other movement veterans, in part reflected deep disappointment (and perhaps rather naive surprise) at how the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 did not immediately transform black Southerners' legal and economic disadvantages.

[17] Dyson should know better—indeed, Dyson *does* know better—than to contend that both King and Shakur "wanted to be number one in their fields" and "were obsessed with their own deaths." As he correctly quotes King just a few pages later, "If I were constantly worried about death, I couldn't function."

[18] See *Naantaanbuu v. Abernathy*, 816 F.Supp. 218 (S.D.N.Y. 1993), a court ruling dismissing a libel action filed by one of the women, and Georgia Davis Powers, *I Shared the Dream: The Pride, Passion and Politics of the First Black Woman Senator From Kentucky* (New Horizon Press, 1995), an autobiographical confirmation authored by the second.

[19] See Dyson, *Race Rules*, Chapter 3; and Marcia L. Dyson, "When Preachers Prey," *Essence*, May 1998, pp. 120ff.

[20] See James H. Cone, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Theology—Black Church," *Theology Today*, Vol. 40 (1984), pp. 409-420; and David J. Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. 40 (1986), pp. 5-20.

^[21] See "Becoming Martin Luther King, Jr.—Plagiarism and Originality: A Round Table," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 78 (1991), pp. 11-123.

^[22] See Keith D. Miller, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Borrows a Revolution," *College English*, Vol. 48 (1986), pp. 249-265; "Composing Martin Luther King, Jr.," *PMLA*, Vol. 105 (1990), pp. 70-82; and *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources* (Free Press, 1992).

^[23] I believe Dyson means to add or say "father."