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How the Dream Unfolded

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., By Marshall Frady, Viking/Lipper: 216 pp., \$19.95

DAVID J. GARROW

Martin Luther King Jr. was a vastly different person than many people realize. At no time during or before his civil rights leadership career did King ever want to be any sort of public figure or celebrity; King's emergence in the national and then international limelight was wholly the result of others pushing him forward as a symbolic African American leader and not of any egotistical desire or self-promotion on King's own part.

King's initial reluctance to become a "leader," coupled with a lifelong ambivalence toward praise and honors, shaped a most remarkable and commendable man. King not only never reveled in or gloated over his press clippings and media celebrity but, as more and more awards came his way, he became more self-critical and self-demanding.

The best source for appreciating King's deep humility is also the most deliciously ironic: the hundreds and hundreds of King's telephone conversations that J. Edgar Hoover's FBI secretly taped and that have been publicly available for more than 15 years, thanks to the federal Freedom of Information Act. The FBI's intent was to damage King's reputation through evidence of either communist-affiliated advisors or sexual indiscretions, but instead the agency generated a documentary record that time and again attests to King's selfless nobility.

Among biographers and civil rights movement scholars, a virtual consensus has marked understandings of King for more than a decade; no major interpretative disagreements separate me from Taylor Branch, or Clayborne Carson from James H. Cone. Indeed, the last truly original book on King, Keith D. Miller's "Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King Jr., and Its Sources," appeared in 1992.

Against this backdrop, Marshall Frady's slim new contribution to the Penguin Lives Series breaks no new ground but does a commendable job of presenting an accurate and easily digestible account of King's life in just a few more than 200 footnote-free pages. Frady met King in 1964, when, as a neophyte reporter for Newsweek, he was sent to cover a protest campaign King was heading up in the historic but intensely segregated town of St. Augustine, Fla.

Frady describes King then as "a startlingly unprepossessing figure--a short, chunky man, with a manner of unremitting and ponderous gravity" such that he could well have been "a comfortably prosperous funeral home director." King was chunkier and looked far less youthful than he had been when the remarkable success of the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott of 1955-56 had catapulted the 27-year-old pastor to sudden fame. King had been selected as the black community's spokesman in part because the women who had launched the boycott were vulnerable to white retaliation in their jobs as publicly paid teachers and because, as someone who had lived in Montgomery for just over a year, King was not closely aligned with any existing community factions.

But King was far from thrilled about his selection, and almost two months passed before he underwent a private spiritual experience in the kitchen of his parsonage--the "kitchen experience," King scholars often call it--that led him to accept that this was the role and mission that God was calling upon him to undertake. Frady, like others before him, refers repeatedly to this "kitchen experience" as looming very large indeed in King's own understanding of himself, and Frady's portrait of King's inner life is consistently on target.

Frady's brief account is less copiously detailed on the public events in which King was caught up from 1956 until his assassination on April 4, 1968. Throughout those years, King found himself flying hither and yon, from speech to sermon to courthouse protest march, at a pace that Frady correctly describes as resembling "some sort of interminable campaign tour." Frady's account does brief justice to King's major protest campaigns, including Birmingham and Selma, as well as to other heralded events, such as the 1963 march on Washington, but a reader of Frady's book may not realize the extent to which the breadth and depth of the civil rights movement, especially in the Deep South, far exceeded King's own intense peregrinations.

Within civil rights history, the most important books of recent years--titles such as Adam Fairclough's "Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972" and Charles Payne's "I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle"--focus upon relatively unheralded events and rarely receive review attention outside the scholarly community. It may seem shocking that among scholars, King's star has been in eclipse for more than a decade, but there is no gainsaying that as more years go by, King's historical import will likely continue to slowly shrink as scholars concentrate upon the movement's grass roots rather than on its leading public personas.

But that evolution in no way diminishes King's remarkably impressive leadership character, and Frady's modest biography is an excellent introduction to that man who was King.

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'I'm Tired of Violence'

I've decided that I'm going to do battle for my philosophy. You ought to believe something in life, believe that thing so fervently that you will stand up with it till the end of your days. I can't make myself believe that God wants me to hate. I'm tired of violence. And I'm not going to let my oppressor dictate to me what method I must use. We have a power, power that can't be found in Molotov cocktails, but we do have a power. Power that cannot be found in bullets and guns, but we have a power. It is a power as old as the insights of Jesus of Nazareth and as modern as the techniques of Mahatma Gandhi.

--From "The Words of Martin Luther King Jr.," selected and with an introduction by Coretta Scott King (Newmarket Press)

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David J. Garrow, presidential distinguished professor at Emory University Law School in Atlanta, received a 1987 Pulitzer Prize for his biography of King, "Bearing the Cross."

"King and Gandhi, 1966" by Bob Fitch PHOTOGRAPHER: From "In the Spirit of Martin: The Living Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr." by Gretchen Sullivan Sorin and Helen M. Shannon (Tinwood Books: 224 pp., \$39.95)