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Reflections on Dr. King

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Reflections on Dr. King

Frady's latest examines civil rights leader's life, legacy

Marshall Frady '63 is the author of acclaimed biographies of Billy Graham, Jesse Jackson and George Wallace. His latest work, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Viking Penguin, 2002), is part of the Penguin Lives series, which the publisher describes as "great writers on great figures." Marian E. Strobel, William Montgomery Burnett Professor of History and department chair, offers this review:

The Martin Luther King, Jr., who emerges in this biography is a tortured soul and a man of many contradictions. What Frady accomplishes in his brief volume is not so much a detailed biography of King as a meditation on the man and the South which produced him.

As portrayed by Frady, King is an individual striving for autonomy both for himself and for his race. Raised in a privileged household as the son of the eminent pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, King early on developed a seriousness and moodiness that Frady attributes to his fears of his father's high expectations for him. Frady points out that, from a young age, King exhibited "an inordinate compulsion to take on himself great cargoes of guilt." In addition, King rejected the idea of "belonging in any way to white Southerners' minstrel caricature of blacks as loud, slovenly, childishly emotional, witless of discipline and dignity." King became determined to avoid negative racial stereotypes and to emphasize his own dignity and self-worth.

At first rejecting the emotionalism of his father's religion, King eventually surprised his family by electing to train for the ministry, by pursuing graduate study in theology at Boston University, and by accepting the pastorate of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala. Such a path laid the groundwork for his work in civil rights, which Frady follows closely in chapters with such biblical sounding titles as "Out of Egypt," "The Wilderness Time," "Apotheosis," and "The Far Country."

However, Frady refuses to paint the

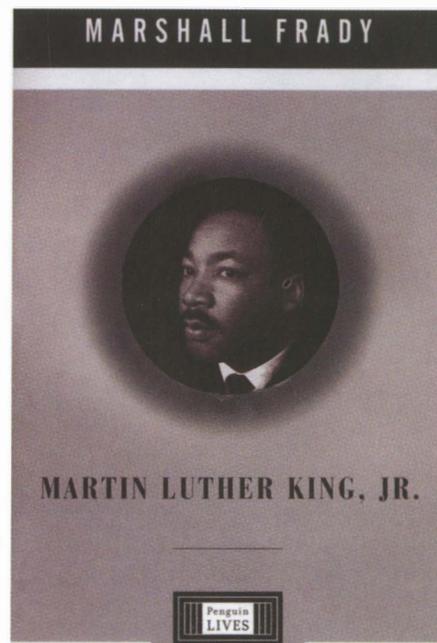
Moses of the civil rights crusade as a saint. Like so many prophets who preceded him, King was a deeply flawed individual. Frady details King's frequent plagiarism, his enjoyment of smoking, drinking and off-color jokes, and his womanizing tendencies, both before and after his marriage to Coretta Scott, who gave up her dreams of a career as a classical concert soloist to become the wife of a Baptist preacher.

But the civil rights movement is Frady's primary focus, and here the author is at his best. Himself a reporter in the South during those turbulent years, Frady provides firsthand insights into King's activities — and does so with sensitivity, balanced judgment and passion.

One of Frady's themes is King's mission to redeem the soul of America and to make the nation understand the evil nature of its ways. To Frady, King in a sense pitted himself against the prevailing norms of his age by fighting segregation, racial bigotry, the poverty of the ghetto masses, and the growing conflagration in Vietnam. In doing so, he witnessed both successes and failures.

While the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-56 set the stage for King's rise to fame, he suffered failures in Albany, Ga., in 1961 and in St. Augustine, Fla., a few years later. King aimed to bring racial tensions to the surface, which he did in Birmingham (1963) and Selma (1965). But he faced constant challenges: from conservative whites who suspected his actions were motivated solely by self-interest, from the NAACP which saw him as competition, and from young black members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who became disaffected from his pacifist stances.

Even John and Robert Kennedy, according to Frady, did not fully appreciate King, and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover tried to paint him with "red" stripes because of his friendship with Stanley Levinson, an alleged Communist sympathizer. Hoover's FBI made numerous attempts to blackmail King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and to undermine the widespread support both enjoyed.



Frady shows that King fully understood the motives of those who disliked him and, as a consequence, constantly feared for his life. The author also suggests that, at the time of his death, King was moving out of the mainstream and was assassinated at the point where he was becoming marginalized from American life.

Frady leaves the reader with a question: Would King have become irrelevant in light of the momentous changes occurring in the United States in the late 1960s? Such a query seems an exaggeration, but it nevertheless reminds readers that King's reputation was not always as stellar as it would become after his death.

This work is informed by a historical perspective which could not be included in biographies written closer to the time of King's death or in such magisterial works as David Garrow's *Bearing the Cross* or Taylor Branch's multi-volume biography. Relying on the research of those who preceded him, Frady makes few attempts to incorporate path-breaking primary research into his biography. Instead, like the other volumes in the "Penguin Lives" series, he provides interpretation and highlights of his subject's life in a readable, accessible format, and his writing is finely crafted and visually evocative.

In Frady's mind, King was first and foremost a flawed human being who reached for greatness and translated his own ideas, and those of others, into lasting social and political change. As King stated early in his career, "I can't stop now. . . . History has thrust something upon me from which I cannot turn away."

Clearing the record

To correct a mistake in the winter issue of *Furman* magazine:

Craig, Gauden & Davis of Greenville is the architectural firm responsible for the design of Herman N. Hipp Hall, Furman's newest academic building which will open this fall. The building, located between Riley Hall and the University Center, will house the departments of economics and business administration and education, the divisions of Continuing Education and Graduate Studies, and the Rushing Center for Advanced Technology.