



Noted Civil Rights Scholar Authors Acclaimed Biography Of MLK

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DURHAM, N.H. — Noted civil rights scholar Harvard Sitkoff, a professor of history at the University of New Hampshire, has authored a new biography on Martin Luther King Jr. that has been called the finest brief biography of the civil rights leader. "King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop" was published Jan. 3, 2008, by Hill and Wang. Columbia University's Eric Foner says, "Drawing on his expertise in the history of the Civil Rights Movement, Harvard Sitkoff has produced the finest brief biography of Martin Luther King Jr."

It is a book, according to Sitkoff, that he was destined to write.

"Martin Luther King Jr. certainly had a far greater impact on my life than any other public figure, and there is no one I more admired than King. I well remember the excitement I felt as a boy reading accounts of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Because of that, I got involved in the movement as a college student, and then went South briefly to march and picket and take part in the movement," Sitkoff says. "As a young adult, nothing exhilarated me more than King saying hello to me and shaking my hand at a civil rights demonstration in Virginia in 1962. And I'll never forget the extraordinary jumble of emotions and thoughts that went through me as I stood in the rain on an Atlanta street as his casket went by," he says.

Unlike many notable, yet lengthy books about King, the 234-page "King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop" is written for readers looking for a relatively short book about the civil rights leader.

"I wanted to bring King alive for today's reading public, especially for those who never knew him. I wanted to breathe life back into the real, the true, King -- not the distorted King of myth, still amiably dreaming of a colorblind society and of little else -- but, rather, the King that the FBI accused of being "the most dangerous Negro in the country," the King who had become a pariah to most of those in power, the King no longer admired by the great majority of his countrymen at the time of his assassination," Sitkoff says.

In "King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop," readers will learn about King's criticism of American capitalism and his demands to end economic injustice. They will discover how King identified with nonwhite struggles worldwide against colonialism and imperialism, and why he opposed the Vietnam War before it was acceptable to do so. And they will understand why King supported striking Memphis sanitation workers and why he wanted to lead the nation's poorest citizens, regardless of race, in a nonviolent assault on Washington until the nation and its government paid heed to their plight.

One of the biography's major themes is the centrality of King's religion to his political and social activism. At heart, he identified himself as a Baptist preacher, according to Sitkoff, and the keys to his greatness -- his courage, his oratorical skill, his moral vision -- were rooted in the African American Christian folk religion.

The book, however, does not gloss over King's flaws and weaknesses. "King was a very fallible human being, not a saint. As a leader, he failed as often as he succeeded," Sitkoff says.

The biography also emphasizes that King and the Civil Rights Movement were not synonymous -- much of what happened in the movement was neither initiated nor led by King.

"And yet, it is necessary to understand King's critical role in the movement. He was its preeminent spokesperson, leader, and symbol. Accordingly, although on the stage of public affairs for barely a decade and never holding public office, King shaped more sweeping changes in habits of thought and action than any other figure of his century," Sitkoff says.

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