

Review: King: A Life

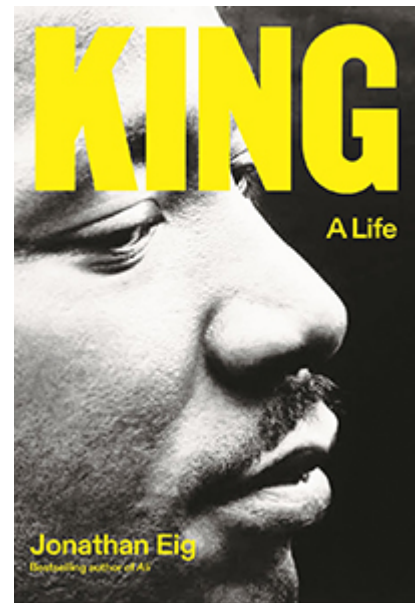
August 10, 2023

King: A Life

By Jonathan Eig (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)

Readers who think they already know everything about Martin Luther King Jr. will discover new insights about one of the most influential figures of the 20th century in this comprehensive new biography. Jonathan Eig paints a richly textured portrait of a complicated and conflicted man who answered a divine calling that eventually led to his death by assassination.

In the most complete biography of King to emerge in the past three and a half decades, Eig begins at the beginning—with his family of origin, childhood and adolescence. Without falling into the trap of armchair psychoanalysis, he presents enough evidence to let readers draw their own conclusions about the lasting influence—positive and negative—the formidable figure of “Daddy King” had on his son’s life and ministry.



Some King biographers have focused almost exclusively on the personal, political or religious aspects of their subject. Eig skillfully weaves together the sometimes-contradictory threads of King’s life into a magnificent tapestry.

He gives overdue attention to Coretta Scott King and her own contributions

to the Civil Rights Movement. He explores King's complex relationship with President Lyndon Johnson, from their close partnership in passing key civil rights legislation to their sharp differences over the war in Vietnam.

He also grants due regard to theologians who helped shape the ministry and personal faith of his subject—particularly Rauschenbusch, Tillich and Niebuhr—while noting the points at which King differed from each in his understanding and application of the gospel.

Eig deals honestly with the high points and low points of King's life. The list of individuals Eig interviewed fills three and half pages, and his documentation includes not only published materials, but also newly discovered archival sources. With access to previously classified FBI files and other documents, Eig frankly acknowledges King's moral failures, notably in terms of marital infidelity, while also pointing to the burden of guilt King carried for his shortcomings.

Above all, Eig points to King's deep faith in a personal God revealed in Jesus Christ, his unswerving commitment to nonviolence as taught in the Sermon on the Mount, his convictions about the transforming power of unconditional love, and his clear sense of God's calling on his life.

Ken Camp, managing editor

Baptist Standard