

# **The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr Study Guide**

**The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr by Martin Luther King, Jr.**

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# Plot Summary

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s autobiography is the story of one of the great social and political figures of the twentieth century. The famed civil rights leader was also a preacher, philosopher, and orator. King never wrote an official autobiography. Instead, the manager of his papers, Clayborne Carson, reconstructed an autobiography from King's autobiographical sketches, notes and speeches.

King was born in the late 1920s to a long line of ministers. Much of his early life was spent in church and experiencing the injustices of segregation in the Atlanta, Georgia of the 1930s and early 1940s. He lived well for a black person at the time and often thought deeply about religious issues, struggling with his Christian faith on many occasions. In college, King discovered social and political philosophy, along with theological liberalism. King came to realize that his commitment to follow Jesus Christ required fighting for social justice, particularly for racial equality. He was particularly influenced by the works of Mahatma Gandhi, and became an ardent adherent of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence resistance to injustice.

King receives his PhD from Boston University after going to seminary at Crozer and marries Coretta Scott. They will eventually have four children together; she is his constant ally in the struggle for racial equality and social justice. King becomes pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. King quickly becomes a major figure in the NAACP in Montgomery and the struggle for racial equality there. After Rosa Parks's arrest, the Montgomery movement begins in earnest and leads to an expanding civil rights movement all over the south. The Montgomery movement leads to the desegregation of busing all over the South after King and his allies run a successful, extended bus boycott. King's fame increases and he travels the world. The new Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) organizes civil rights struggles across the country. The agitation of the civil rights movement leads to the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act which end legal discrimination against blacks and secure black voting rights respectively. King travels to India to learn more about Gandhi, to Ghana to witness their independence from Britain and to Oslo, Norway to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. King's challenges never end, however. Often the strategy of nonviolence is successful, but as time wears on and young blacks became more confident in their ability to bring about social change, many want to fight racist whites with violence. This leads to the increasing prominence of Malcolm X and the Black Power movement generally. However, King remains deeply committed to nonviolence as the SCLC organizes marches and sit-ins in Selma, Birmingham and across Mississippi. As time progresses, the SCLC turns its attention north to Chicago and towards anti-poverty activism, focusing on the connection between economic poverty and racial inequality. King also begins to oppose the Vietnam War. On April 4th, King is assassinated at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee.



# Chapter 1: Early Years, Chapter 2: Morehouse College

## Chapter 1: Early Years, Chapter 2: Morehouse College Summary and Analysis

Martin Luther King, Jr. is born in the late 1920s. He does not remember the Depression, but only has vague memories of standing in bread lines. He is born and grows up in Atlanta and his family is a member of Ebenezer Baptist Church, of which King becomes co-pastor. He goes to public school and ends up in Booker T. Washington High School. King's community is black, religious and lower-middle class. No one is rich or particularly poor, and King is always healthy, mentally and physically. King's parents are kind and loving, which makes it easier for him to understand the love of God.

Albert Williams King is Martin's mother; she is a preacher's daughter, grows up in comfort and goes to college. She is the one who explains segregation to him at a young age. Martin Luther King, Sr. is Martin's father, a dynamic and strong man who is very congenial. He grows hating segregation and refusing to submit to it. He is president of the NAACP in Atlanta and is pastor of Ebenezer Baptist.

The reader discovers that King has doubts about the reliability of the Bible in his early teenage years. He also cannot understand how he is supposed to love a group of people (whites) that hate him. King always resents segregation, despite growing up with it. In his early teens, he participates in an oratorical competition where he gives a speech on the evils of poverty and segregation. King also recounts a story where he and his family were forced to stand for a ninety mile bus trip because of segregation laws. King's hatred of segregation is further increased when he spends a summer working in Connecticut; returning to segregation appalls him.

King goes to college at fifteen; he is the third generation in his family to do so. His high school has not effectively prepared him for college but he still has an exciting time. He is already interested in racial and economic justice and runs across Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience in 1944. He comes to believe in resisting cooperating with evil and that doing so is high duty; he begins working with organizations pushing for racial equality. His interest in justice pushes him into the ministry as well.

When studying for the ministry, King loses "the shackles of fundamentalism" and learns something new in college. Science seems to conflict with religion and he comes to reject the "emotionalism" of black religious practices. He laments that most black pastors are "unlettered." However, as he continues to study, he finds that behind the "legends and myths" of the Bible are profound moral factors. Dr. Mays—the college president—and Dr. Kelsey—a philosophy professor—make him think because they are profoundly religious. His father's example also moves him to enter the ministry. At age 19, King enters seminary.



# Chapter 3: Crozer Seminary, Chapter 4: Boston University

## Chapter 3: Crozer Seminary, Chapter 4: Boston University Summary and Analysis

In 1948, King enters Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. He becomes convinced that his duty is to fight evils in society. He is deeply moved by his study of the great philosophers, Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Hobbes, Bentham, Mill and Locke. He reads figures in the late 19th century American social gospel movement but thinks that their belief of bringing about heaven on earth is a mistake. Nonetheless, he comes to believe that "the gospel deals with the whole man" which includes his "material well-being." Religious convictions must concern the conditions of poverty and economic inequality.

In 1949, King reads Marx so as to understand why communism is attractive. These writings influence him, but he rejects their moral relativism, secularism and materialism—it rejects God. Further, in King's view history progresses through primarily spiritual rather than materialistic forces. He profoundly resists their totalitarianism. However, communism moves him because of its concerns with poverty and the inequality of wealth.

At Crozer, King is influenced by pacifism and opposes war, but still thinks that we cannot surrender to totalitarianism. He worries about the ability of love to solve social problems; he cannot apply the Christian idea of love to institutions. Further, Nietzsche shakes his faith with his attack on Christianity's "otherworldliness." He then hears a lecture on the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi at Harvard. King begins to become interested in Gandhi's implementation of nonviolent resistance. This helps King become more confident in the social power of love because Gandhi raises the idea of love to become a social force. At Crozer, he comes to accept a liberal understanding of Christianity that helps him be intellectually satisfied, but he begins to worry about the liberal ideal of man as naturally good and having the great power of natural reason. He becomes more orthodox and concerned about human sin; reason often rationalized corrupt modes of thought. Faith must purify reason. He next reads Niebuhr and come to understand the role of sin "on every level of man's existence." Niebuhr rejects nonviolent resistance but King ultimately rejects Niebuhr's conception of it.

King graduates from Crozer in 1951; he wants to teach initially and wants to go to graduate school at Boston University.

King goes to Boston University for graduate school and learns about nonviolence. He learns more about social justice, now knowing that it can be achieved not by a simple optimism about human nature but by possibilities for social change made possible by God. King is still theologically liberal but comes even closer to neo-orthodoxy; further,



he realizes that human corruption can be overemphasized. He continues to study philosophy, particularly personalism. He studies Hegel as well. He writes his dissertation on the concept of God in the thought of Tillich and Wieman and ends his training in 1954.



# Chapter 5: Coretta, Chapter 6: Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

## Chapter 5: Coretta, Chapter 6: Dexter Avenue Baptist Church Summary and Analysis

In Boston, King falls in love with Coretta Scott; his friend Mary Powell introduces them. He calls her on the phone for a date and on their first date talks about racial and economic justice and peace. She is a social activist. He is impressed by her and decides that they will be married. In 1953, they are.

Coretta is from Marion, Alabama and goes to college at Antioch in Ohio. She is musically talented. Her father is very good to her. Coretta has her own struggles with racism and segregation as well.

King tells us that Coretta is always a source of peace for him; she is his rock and has more strength than he does; she also hates being away from him. They have four children: Martin Luther III, Dexter Scott, Yolanda Denise and Bernice Albertine. King always feels torn between his fight for justice and his family.

King nearly finishes his PhD and considers what his job should be. He wants to teach, but also wants to be a pastor. Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama calls him to the pastorate there. In 1954, he moves his things from Atlanta to Montgomery. He has to preach the next day. The church is practically across the street from the Alabama State House, where the Confederacy was born and the first confederate flag flown. He does not know how to fight the social injustice there.

King is nervous to give his first sermon being considered for a pastorate. The sermon, however, goes well. He tells them he will accept the pastorate if offered it and flies back to Boston. A month later, he gets the job. He has to decide between several offers, among them teaching. Coretta and King come to believe that they can be of the greatest service to God in Montgomery. He spends the next few months finishing his dissertation while preaching.

When King finishes, he and Coretta live in Montgomery full time, dealing with segregation but growing their church. King wants to build a classless church. King becomes pastor officially in September 1954. King continues his social activism and joins the NAACP, aiming to bring its activities to the streets. King finds that many people believe his dual emphases on education and activism to be in tension with one another; he tries to show them another way.





# Chapter 7: Montgomery Movement Begins, Chapter 8: The Violence of Desperate Men

## Chapter 7: Montgomery Movement Begins, Chapter 8: The Violence of Desperate Men Summary and Analysis

December 1st, 1955 brings the resistance of Rosa Parks. The evening of her arrest, only a few know about it, including the man who signs her bail, E.D. Nixon. Nixon calls King the next morning. They organize a boycott and protest with another Montgomery pastor. King offers to host the boycott meeting at his church. They decide to encourage all black people in the city not to ride the buses. King is excited.

The bus operators are particularly nasty to blacks. They demand blacks move seats when whites board the buses and hurl racial epithets at them. King begins to have doubts about the use of boycotts, but later quells them. The boycott expands over the next several days. No blacks get on the bus. King and Coretta are ecstatic. This continues. Many blacks have to walk but they bear the pain. That morning King goes to Rosa Park's trial. The judge fines her, which is unusual. However, this inspires the racial equality movement. That evening the black community elects King to the presidency of the Montgomery Improvement Association. King is worried about splitting his time but accepts the position. They decide the protests should continue. That evening, King must write a speech to keep the people energized and has only twenty minutes to do it. He called this the 'most important speech of his life'; he is on television. He tells the story of what occurred and gives the speech. The crowd erupted in continuous applause. King believes that the Holy Spirit inspired the speech.

The next day King must engage in careful social organizing. They organize a committee to move bus boycotters around the city. Ralph Abernathy stands behind him during this time. Roy Bennett is the next president of the MIA, and Abernathy succeeds him. At the time, transportation is their major concern. The police commissioner orders the taxis not to give free rides, which makes things even more difficult for them. They call on volunteers to drive, distribute pamphlets, and many walk anyway. Many white housewives also help, ironically because they want their maids.

Nonviolent resistance is the key to the movement, the ideal of Christian love. Jesus is one influencing the Montgomery blacks to protest. Gandhi influences them as well. Rainy days keep the buses empty and city officials motion to negotiate. King is the spokesman for the MIA. He demands desegregating the buses. Jack Crenshaw, the attorney for the bus company, opposes King and argued that King's demands violate the law. King realizes that the fight will be harder than he initially thought. Over time, the



MIA committee starts to question him, but King tells them that the city official whites are trying to divide them. Racist whites in fact engaged in many tactics to divide the protesters and city officials led to newspapers about coming to an agreement with black ministers. King and others spread the news that the protest is still on.

Some white police offers arrest King. He becomes nervous that the cops are taking him away from the jail to kill him. However, he is going to the Montgomery City Jail. Even in jail segregation persists. The living conditions are horrible. King's allies free him. As time pushes forward, threatening calls and letters increase. Some of these threatens are serious. After receiving a death threat at night, King prays and asks God for strength. He feels that God is telling him to stand up for righteousness. After this, King's uncertainty vanishes.

Three days later King's house is bombed; he is at church and does not know if his wife and child are safe. King remains calm due to his religious experience. He drives home and finds many of his allies armed. He finds his family is uninjured and continues to calm. The police commissioner blames King for bringing the bombing on himself. King calms the crowd and word of the bombing gets out to the media. King receives bodyguards but worries that they contradict his message of nonviolence. King disposes of his only weapon.



# **Chapter 9: Desegregation at Last, Chapter 10: The Expanding Struggle**

## **Chapter 9: Desegregation at Last, Chapter 10: The Expanding Struggle Summary and Analysis**

The police resort to mass arrests. A jury finds the boycott illegal. King is indicated. King is worried the movement will end. A day or two later, King flies to Atlanta to pick up his family and his parents are worried for him. King, Sr. and his colleagues do not want him to return to Montgomery. King does anyway and goes to jail. Many go voluntarily and a trial is set. The Montgomery blacks are not about to give in and some whites ally with them. They appeal the case and continue the boycott, which is subject to further legal action. The US District Court and then the Supreme Court on Tuesday, November 13th, declare Alabama's bus segregation laws unconstitutional. Whites and particularly the Klan are ready to revolt with violence. December 1956 sees the order to integrate buses. The protest is successful.

The organization of protest expands outside of Montgomery. Many churches are destroyed through bombings. Many of the black community ask President Eisenhower to give a speech in the South encouraging people to obey the new law. The leaders of the burgeoning civil rights movement form the Southern Leaders Conference (the early version of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference/SCLC). The "wave of terror" continues to spread. The movement tries to keep its spirits high and maintain its commitment to nonviolence. In 1957, Time publishes a cover story on their movement. The opinion of the country is turning towards the civil rights movement. The leaders of the movement realize that broad social change is required, and an improvement in the material well-being of the black population is necessary. Blacks begin to fight for self-respect and an actual enforcement of the right to vote. In 1957, the "Crusade for Citizenship" begins.



# **Chapter 11: Birth of a New Nation, Chapter 12: Brush with Death, Chapter 13: Pilgrimage to Nonviolence**

## **Chapter 11: Birth of a New Nation, Chapter 12: Brush with Death, Chapter 13: Pilgrimage to Nonviolence Summary and Analysis**

King flies to Ghana to visit Africa which is struggling against British rule; they win their independence in 1957 and become their own nation. King and many major figures in the civil rights movement are there to see it, along with the vice-president of the United States. They meet with Nkrumah, Prime Minister of the Gold Coast. 90% of the people are illiterate. The country has a lot of work to do.

In 1958, King is stabbed with a letter opener at a book signing in Harlem by a woman named Mrs. Izola Ware Curry. Had King sneezed he would have died, but he survives. He continues to maintain high spirits.

Gandhi continues to inspire King, so King decides to go to India. He has already met the Indian prime minister but is not able to make the trip until 1959. They are received well there, particularly bound by their common dark skin. India, King notices, has vast social problems, particularly with poverty and classism. King is impressed by Prime Minister Nehru and the movements for social justice there. The Gandhians accept them openly. Indian society in some ways seems more amenable to social change; they atone for injustices against the "untouchables" with reparations.



# **Chapter 14: The Sit-In Movement, Chapter 15: Atlanta Arrest and Presidential Politics, Chapter 16: The Albany Movement**

## **Chapter 14: The Sit-In Movement, Chapter 15: Atlanta Arrest and Presidential Politics, Chapter 16: The Albany Movement Summary and Analysis**

King moves back to Atlanta and becomes co-pastor at Ebenezer. King continues to expand operations of the SCLC across the South. King is torn between too many obligations. In 1960, black students begin to stage sit-ins on college campuses. The sit-ins throughout the South catch the national attention. An all-white Southern jury try to put King in prison for ten years, but they eventually acquit him.

King meets John F. Kennedy as a Senator and meets him again after his election. They talk about the new needs of the country and Kennedy's support for civil rights. Kennedy is only intellectually but not yet morally committed to civil rights. King is arrested yet again on the spurious charge of a traffic violation, and must again deal with a trial; he spends time in jail. Robert Kennedy calls to get the judge to let King out on bail. King is disappointed that Nixon, who he has known for some time, does not stand with him. King never endorses either Nixon or Kennedy.

The Kennedy administration garners a majority of the black vote. The civil rights movement sets its sites on discrimination in Albany, Georgia. Albany in 1961 sees the rise of the Freedom Riders, who trigger a non-violent protest in Albany. King is jailed once again with the Freedom Riders. King's diary entries from his days in that jail are reprinted in the book. King is let out of jail to avoid bringing attention to Albany. His sentence is suspended. King wants the federal government to do more to protect constitutional rights. The Albany protests fizzle, however. King acknowledges some of his mistakes. They should focus on integrating buses. The movement continues to take the offensive.



# **Chapter 17: The Birmingham Campaign, Chapter 18: Letter from Birmingham Jail**

## **Chapter 17: The Birmingham Campaign, Chapter 18: Letter from Birmingham Jail Summary and Analysis**

Birmingham, Alabama is a notoriously racist town. Life for black people is difficult there, and full of oppression. Birmingham has banned the NAACP from doing civil rights work there. Violence against blacks is the norm. The white supremacy of Birmingham is threatened by the freedom fighters in Birmingham and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, who form the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACHR). In 1962, the SCLC decide to focus on Birmingham to achieve a major victory there. So the SCLC set to organize. Many join the planned sit-ins and sing "freedom songs."

People begin to be arrested in large numbers. The major gets a court order to stop the protests and the protestors disobey the order. King and Abernathy offer themselves to be arrested. The SCLC runs out of money to bail people out of jail. King is held for twenty-four hours in solitary confinement. Robert and John Kennedy look into the matter and place calls to Birmingham. The money is raised while he was in prison and he is released.

While in jail, King receives a newspaper and reads an article about eight clergymen condemning the marches. King decides to write a reply. This is how the famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is written. It is reproduced in the chapter. It argues, in brief, that the tactics that King has used to bring about justice are right because (a) they do not compromise with injustice, (b) they disobey laws that are unjust laws, (c) the protesters accept the legal consequences of the law, and (d) white moderates are largely indifferent to their suffering. He argues further that innumerable figures in Christian history share his beliefs.



# Chapter 19: Freedom Now!, Chapter 20: March on Washington

## Chapter 19: Freedom Now!, Chapter 20: March on Washington Summary and Analysis

King is released from jail after eight days. The protests continue. Whites from the North are coming down to aid them and the young people of the city help them too. Everyone continues to practice nonviolence. The movement has the sense that it is going to win. Eventually, business leaders want to negotiate, but some hold out. Violence flares. President Kennedy addresses Birmingham in a press conference. The negotiations are successful in achieving large swaths of desegregation, nondiscrimination, release of prisoners of the movement and the publication of the agreement.

However, many racist forces in Birmingham resist and react with rage. King's brother's home is bombed, as is King's hotel room. The bombers want to provoke black people into a riot, and Governor Wallace's police are brought in; they club blacks, including women. Some are injured. Kennedy orders three thousand troops to Birmingham and the racists are stopped. The Supreme Court removes Bull Connor, the police commissioner, from office.

Birmingham shows what protest can accomplish. The subtler forms of Northern discrimination are beginning to be criticized. A March on Washington is proposed in 1963. A debate takes place but it is decided that the March should take place. They want to pressure Kennedy to pass Civil Rights legislation. A quarter of a million people go to Washington on August 28th, 1963. White churches participate, but the AFL-CIO refuses to support the march, but local unions support them anyway. King prepares his speech and gives the "I have a Dream" speech on the morning of August 28th. The speech is reproduced in the chapter. After the march, the conscience of white American is awakened.



# Chapter 21: Death of Illusions, Chapter 22: St. Augustine, Chapter 23: The Mississippi Challenge

## Chapter 21: Death of Illusions, Chapter 22: St. Augustine, Chapter 23: The Mississippi Challenge Summary and Analysis

Unfortunately, things do not get easier. In Birmingham, a church is bombed and four young black girls are killed. Two black children are killed. These children are martyrs. King and his allies cannot understand why God would allow this to happen. King looks to the White House for help and that the President summons the leaders of the movement to the White House convinces them that something good will occur. However, many of those who are on their side ignore them. Blacks know that their leaders will be killed, but not their children. When Kennedy dies, everyone is thrown into a mourning confusion. King believes that the Kennedy of 1963 believes in genuine, moral change.

1964 arrives and it is time to fight for the Civil Rights Act. It is instigated by events in St. Augustine, Florida, where the Klan beats four blacks unconscious. The Florida governor does not react justly. The SCLC wants to force St. Augustine to change. Thirty-seven hundred blacks march in St. Augustine, suffering brutality. Their protests are successful; the events help to pass the Civil Rights Act on July 2nd, 1964. The passage is incredible to King. King finds that Lyndon Johnson—prior to the Civil Rights Act—supports their cause but is pessimistic, politically, about passing protections for blacks. However, Johnson steps up and King is present when he signs the bill. Demonstrations work to bring about genuine social change.

The battle for civil rights does not end with the Civil Rights Act. The Republican Party decides to garner votes by stoking racial tensions and calling it "law and order." King is disgusted at the nomination of Barry Goldwater, particularly on foreign policy and while Goldwater was not a racist, King thinks his policies give aid to racists. King visits Mississippi, where he discovers an assassination plot on his life. Various organizations in Mississippi are fighting for racial equality and for voter registration.

The election of 1964 undermines the two-party system in the United States, which King laments. King wants Johnson to continue the Great Society programs, but the Vietnam War distracts him.





# **Chapter 24: The Nobel Peace Prize, Chapter 25: Malcolm X, Chapter 26: Selma**

## **Chapter 24: The Nobel Peace Prize, Chapter 25: Malcolm X, Chapter 26: Selma Summary and Analysis**

King wins the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. King is shocked and humbled; he believes that the prize is won by the movement, not by him. As a result of the award, King becomes prominent all over the world. King wants to learn from the Scandinavian tradition of democratic socialism. The Prize does not end the fight for justice, however, as Mississippi needs to be forced to respect black voting rights.

King only meets Malcolm X one time; he disagrees with Malcolm X's political views very strongly. Malcolm X's followers mock King's tactics as soft and conciliatory; Malcolm X prefers violent resistance. King sees Malcolm X as a preacher of hate and violence. But Malcolm X eventually reforms and his assassination is tragic.

Next the civil rights movement turns to passing the Voting Rights Act. Johnson thinks he cannot get it passed. King thinks they should push for it anyway. They picked Selma, Alabama to focus their attention. Selma is almost as bad as Birmingham. This time, the movement focuses on registering voters. 15000 blacks are eligible to vote in Selma and only 350 are registered. Voting rights are restricted not in principle, but in fact. King is thrown in jail once more. Three thousand blacks are to be prosecuted but the federal government steps in to stop it. Violence is always a possibility. Governor Wallace issues a ban on the March 7th march in Selma. They use brutal methods to repress the march, and King regrets not being there. They decide to march again on March 9th but a federal district court judge upholds the ban on the march because it is expected to bring about more violence. They decide to march anyway but avoiding pushing forward when the state troopers display their willingness to use force. On March 11th, the SCLC won the right to stage a similar March in Montgomery on behalf of voting rights. On March 21st, many decide to march from Selma to Montgomery, which takes them four days. On March 25th, they reached Selma. Fifty thousand Alabamians sign a petition to Governor Wallace for voting rights for blacks.

Acquiring genuine voting rights proves difficult. Many want to resort to violence, but the ranks of the protestors swells, particularly from the ecumenical church movement. Labor unions, civil rights organizations, students, professors and many others joined together. The work the civil rights movement does in Selma helps to pass the 1965 Voting Rights Act.



# Chapter 27: Watts, Chapter 28: Chicago Campaign

## Chapter 27: Watts, Chapter 28: Chicago Campaign Summary and Analysis

The movement entered the Watts area of Los Angeles; there have been riots and the National Guard occupies the area. King thinks the riots arise from the despair many feel about their economic difficulties. King sees that fighting against poverty is inextricably linked with racial justice. Police brutality is also a concern. The poor in Watts see the riots as their only method of getting noticed. However, violence hardens the white resistance. The nonviolent movement hits a crisis. Further, California repeals its law preventing racial discrimination in housing. Many believe that nonviolence is no longer effective.

In 1965, King is invited by black leaders in Chicago to fight for integrated public schools. The SCLC decides to focus their efforts in Chicago and turn their focus North. The battle has already been waged for five years. Integration is about providing black children with equal opportunity to succeed. In 1966, King more or less lives and works in Chicago. The civil rights movement has not fully penetrated there, particularly in the slum areas. King is appalled by the poverty he sees there. The Northern ghetto is basically an economic prison for black Chicagoans. In the protests, many resort to violence because they do not believe nonviolence can work in the North. Riots grow, as they usually do, out of desperation. After the Chicago riot, many try to discredit the nonviolent movement. In mid-1966, Northern racism erupts into violence. The Chicago racists are as nasty as any in Mississippi. No one in the marches retaliates.

Since King believes that the desperation of the Chicago blacks is due to poverty, he organizes a drive to end the slums. They push for public housing. The organizations for decent housing prove successful, as do pushes for rehabilitating neighborhoods. They also organize a boycott against businesses that will not employ blacks. King briefly raises the concern that they often protest against Jewish landlords and that some blacks are anti-Semitic; King sees anti-Semitism as an almost exclusively Northern problem. King condemns this racism in a small number of his movement.

In early 1967, King writes his book *Where Do We Go from Here, Chaos or Community?* He takes his activities in Chicago back up in 1967. The city remains inactive. The movement wins open housing only as a formality. The task of reforming Chicago is very difficult.



# Chapter 29: Black Power, Chapter 30: Beyond Vietnam

## Chapter 29: Black Power, Chapter 30: Beyond Vietnam Summary and Analysis

James Meredith is shot and King visits him. They take up the march that he was leading when he was shot. The nonviolence movement is faltering. Blacks want to fight. King argues that opposing violence is also pragmatic, as violence will create a back-lash. Some begin to oppose white participation and the concept of Black Power begins to coalesce. As a rally, the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) begins asking the people to support Black Power; that is where the phrase gains prominence. King has reservations about the term and worries about splits. The press fans the flames of the debate and it becomes part of the black community. Black Power, though, derives from political disappointment. It wants blacks to focus their political and economic strength to fight back. Further, Black Power calls black men to dignity and manhood. It is a psychological reaction to an inferiority complex. The Black Power idea also does not easily transmit into a constructive program for positive change. King is not worried about losing prominence for opposing the use of violence; he does not want to lead consensus. Black Power is hypocritical because it advocates using the same tools of oppression that had been used against them.

King had always stood against war and he had won the Nobel Peace Prize. He decides to oppose the Vietnam War. He is always against militarism, but initially does not protest the war. When he starts to do so, some criticize him. But he is convinced he must criticize the actions that are killing American soldiers and Vietnamese children. King is already committed to defending the innocent no matter who they are. Newspapers all over the country criticize King for opposing the war. He pays the political price, and people start a myth that he wants to build the civil rights movement with the strength of the peace movement and that this is why he starts speaking out against the war. King is upset with the Johnson Administration for losing its moral leadership.



# **Chapter 31: The Poor People's Campaign, Chapter 32: Unfulfilled Dreams**

## **Chapter 31: The Poor People's Campaign, Chapter 32: Unfulfilled Dreams Summary and Analysis**

In November 1967, the SCLC decides to push for more help to the poor, to give jobs to all and guarantee a decent guaranteed income. They want to bring out the materialism of the United States for criticism. They use tactics that do not depend on waiting on the government for help. They find ways to pressure political leaders. King gives dozens of speeches in Memphis in March 1968 on behalf of anti-poverty policies and the aid of government employees, like sanitation workers. King argues that a Christian must be committed to helping the poor.

The last chapter of the book is a string of speeches and writings of King on unfulfilled dreams of the civil rights movement. He wants his legacy to be one of justice and of striving to do the right thing even when he was wrong, that he was good to the poor and the oppressed, that he did his Christian duty of loving the other.



# Characters

## Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. is, understandably, the main character of *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* King did not write a full autobiography; instead, the manager of his papers, Clayborne Carson, has compiled a group of his autobiographical pieces, notes and speeches. King was born in the early 20s and grew up during the Depression and World War II in Atlanta, where he grew up a minister's son in a lower-middle class neighborhood. Despite his safe and secure upbringing, King was subject to discrimination and segregation; King was always theologically and philosophically thoughtful; he studied philosophy at Morehouse College, theology at Crozer Seminary and philosophy again at Boston University, where he earned his PhD. King retained his Christian faith despite struggling with it during his education; he came to believe that one could only take the gospel seriously if it was practiced in daily life and if the Christian acted on behalf of the weak and the oppressed. Further, his study of Gandhi influenced him to pursue a strategy of nonviolence resistance to make justice a reality. Thus, right out of graduate school, King took up a pastorate at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, where he became prominent in the racial equality activist community. After Rosa Parks' incident on segregated buses, King organized a boycott of segregated busing until the law was lifted. The success of his demonstrations led to the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and many other organizations that protested segregation laws throughout the South, and eventually led to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and a Nobel Peace Prize for King. Eventually King's interests turned towards fighting against poverty and the War in Vietnam before his untimely assassination.

## Coretta Scott King

Coretta Scott King was Martin Luther King, Jr.'s wife. King met Coretta in 1952; his father married them six months later in Coretta's hometown of Marion, Alabama. Coretta and King talked in detail about social philosophy and activism on their first date, and when they were married she became his constant companion in his social activism. She also had a beautiful mezzo-soprano voice. Coretta grew up in Marion, but she went to college at Antioch College in Ohio and studied to become a concert singer at the New England Conservatory in Boston, where King met her. Coretta's parents were very good to her and protected her from as much racism as they could; she was always a loving wife, and was emotionally stronger than he was. She always had faith that things would turn out alright in the end for their movement. King regrets that he was often away from her.

Martin and Coretta had four children, Martin Luther III, Dexter Scott, Yolanda Denies and Bernice Albertine. King was not always around his family due to his activism and often felt guilt for not being around them as often as he would have liked. He believed



they understood but that it was still difficult for them. This became increasingly true as King's prominence increased; many civil rights leaders were being assassinated and King's family, Coretta especially, feared for his life. Sadly, on April 4th, 1968, their fears became a reality when King was assassinated.

## **Martin Luther King, Sr.**

King's father and Pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.

## **Alberta Williams King**

King's mother. She and his father often feared for his safety in his activism.

## **The NAACP**

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was one of the most important organizations in the civil rights movement.

## **The SCLC**

The Southern Christian Leadership Council was King's primary organizing body for racial justice activism and later activism on behalf of the poor.

## **King's Children**

King had four children he was unable to spend much time with: Martin Luther III, Dexter Scott, Yolanda Denies and Bernice Albertine.

## **Mahatma Gandhi**

The Indian revolutionary figure who practiced nonviolent resistance to British rule. Gandhi's philosophy was crucial to King's activism.

## **Jesus Christ**

The founder of the Christian religion and believed by many to be God Himself, King believed that Jesus was behind him in his struggle for racial and social justice.

## **Professors Edgar S. Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf**

Two of King's professors at Boston University who inspired him.



## **Rosa Parks**

The famous woman in Montgomery, Alabama who refused to change seats in accord with Montgomery's segregated busing policy.

## **The MIA**

The Montgomery Improvement Association coordinated the bus boycott that follows Rosa Parks's arrest.

## **Malcolm X**

The famed activist for racial justice and one time leader of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X strongly rejected King's philosophy of nonviolent resistance.

## **John Kennedy**

President of the United States from 1961 until 1963, when he was assassinated. King believed that Kennedy evolved into a president that, had he lived, would have fought for racial justice more than he did.

## **Robert Kennedy**

Kennedy's brother, attorney general of the United States, who often directly aided King in getting released from jail. Kennedy was assassinated in 1968 along with King.

## **Richard Nixon**

President of the United States from 1968-1974, Nixon was also Vice-President under Eisenhower. King initially believed that Nixon would fight for racial justice, but was later disappointed.

## **Lyndon Johnson**

President of the United States from 1963 to 1968, Johnson was pivotal in passing the Civil Rights legislation that King fought so hard for.

## **Ralph Abernathy**

One of King's closest friends and president of the MIA after King and Roy Bennett.



## George Wallace

Governor of Alabama during the fight against segregation, Wallace was one of segregation's most prominent defenders.

### The

King attributed all of his success to his fellow "Negroes" (his term) in the South who fought with their lives to be treated as equals.





# Objects/Places

## Atlanta

King was born in Atlanta and his father was Pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church there while King grew up.

## Washington, D.C.

King often traveled to Washington, D.C. to speak with political leaders; he also led the famous March on Washington on behalf of racial equality.

## Oslo

In Oslo, Norway, King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

## Vietnam

The Southeast Asian country where the United States fought a war against the North Vietnamese communists and their communist allies. After some time, King came out against the war, which earned him great criticism from many, even allies.

## Selma

The Alabama town where King staged a famous march.

## Birmingham

In King's mind, the most segregated city in the country, Birmingham, Alabama saw a vigorous fight against segregation and on behalf of voting rights. King spent twenty-four hours in solitary confinement during this time and wrote his famous Letter from Birmingham Jail there.

## Montgomery

The site of King's first pastorate at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where his civil rights activism began, and the site of his first organized boycott.



## **Black Power**

A concept of black empowerment that King believed arose as a violent reaction to oppression. He had many doubts about and criticisms of the idea.

## **Nobel Peace Prize**

King won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts on behalf of racial equality.

## **The Birmingham Jail**

The jail in Birmingham where King was placed in solitary confinement and where he wrote Letter from a Birmingham Jail.

## **Ebenezer Baptist**

King's church in Atlanta where he grew up. King's father was pastor, and King, Jr. was also at a later time.

## **Dexter Avenue Baptist Church**

King held his first pastorate at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where he also organized blacks to fight for racial equality.

## **Marches**

King and others led various marches, particularly in Selma, Birmingham and across Mississippi for racial equality.

## **Stride Towards Freedom**

King's first book



# Themes

## The Social Implications of the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Martin Luther King, Jr. grew up a religious man. He was a Christian from an early age, but in his teenage years developed various doubts about the fundamentalist faith in which he was raised. In college, he became concerned that science conflicted with religion and became inclined towards theological liberalism. As time progressed, however, he was led towards neo-orthodoxy while still remaining in the liberal theological camp. He still believed in God and the literal resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that men could be saved by believing in Jesus' atonement for their sins. However, King came to see Jesus' Gospel of loving one's neighbor as a call to social activism on behalf of justice, particularly for the poor and oppressed. He believed that if a man called himself a Christian and did not fight for justice as he best understood it, that he was a hypocrite. King rarely doubted that Jesus Christ was with him during his struggle for racial equality and his efforts on behalf of the United States' poor. He even recounts several religious experiences where he felt that Jesus was with him and telling him to remain strong, to believe that the Holy Spirit was working through him, and that his movement was about Christian love, not hate or the edification of King himself. King strongly wanted to be remembered as a man who loved God and fought for justice on his behalf.

## Racial Equality

Perhaps the most prominent theme of King's autobiography is that of racial equality. King grew up in Atlanta in the 1930s and 1940s. While he was not impoverished himself, he was denied opportunities due to segregation. His father taught him that segregation was not only unjust but degraded the dignity of God's children. King became interested in racial equality as a teenager and began to involve himself in civil rights activism in college, seminary and graduate school. After King finished his seminary degree and had nearly completed his dissertation, he accepted a position at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in the heart of Montgomery, Alabama. He knew this was a dangerous position to take, and he had offers to go many other places. However, King felt drawn to fight against racism and racist policies like segregation and the prevention of blacks from registering to vote.

King was constantly organizing and agitating for racial equality from the 1950s to his assassination in 1968. He first fought against the segregation of busing in Montgomery, leading a boycott. The boycotts expanded across the South as did sit-ins, protests and marches. King was eventually able to bring down segregation in many states. Over time, his activism led to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which gave blacks new rights and secured other ones. All through his life, King knew that blacks should be treated as equals because all human beings were created in God's image and therefore had a dignity. Racial inequality destroyed and

degraded that dignity, it degraded human personality and for that reason it had to be obliterated.

## **Nonviolent Resistance**

King was a strong believer in Christianity and in racial equality. However, he had a special philosophy for how to make Christian love and racial equality a reality. King was deeply influenced by the civil disobedience writings of David Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi. Both believed that social change could be achieved through non-violent resistance to evil. Over time, King came to realize that his Christian faith required him not to cooperate with evil but also to not use violence to destroy evil. For this reason, he organized nonviolent forms of protest against racial inequality. The use of boycotts, sit-ins, marches and protests were all non-violent and King strongly encouraged his followers to never return violence for violence when racist whites attacked them. In many cases, blacks were murdered, including leaders and even children, yet King continued to encourage his followers not to retaliate in kind. He also embraced nonviolence for tactical reasons. Using violence would only incense the white population and make their cause more difficult to achieve.

Malcolm X provided a powerful challenge to King's methods of nonviolent resistance. As the civil rights movement grew, it inevitably faced failure. Often these failures were attributed to forgoing the use of violence. Malcolm X argued that King's methods were "soft" and that blacks had the right to defend themselves against oppression with force. This led to the development of the idea of "black power," a concept King believed was dangerous and born out of hatred due to oppression. Despite this challenge, King continued to believe in the method of nonviolence until his dying day.



# Style

## Perspective

The perspective of the book is King's but he did not really write his autobiography. The manager of his papers, Clayborne Carson, combined various autobiographical sketches, speeches and notes from King's writings and books in order to produce a chronologically accurate story of King's life in his own words. Thus, the perspective of the book is King's, but the King of many different times, places and emotional states. There is still a striking continuity, however. King has many biases; the book expresses clear religious, political, social, economic, cultural and philosophical opinions. King was a (largely) theologically liberal Christian who believed that Christianity should use reason more than it does and that fundamentalism was often destructive; however, King strongly believed that God was with him during his struggles and prayed often. He even believed that God spoke to him in times of trouble. King was an ardent advocate of racial equality, aid to the poor and peace. He thought of himself as speaking for the oppressed, particularly for black people. King considered himself something of a socialist socially and economically and he was a strong advocate of non-violence. These opinions fill every page; the reader should be aware of the nature of King's ideas in order to understand his actions and motivations. In particular, while many may be inclined to skip over King's discussions of his philosophical influences, they are crucial to understanding his perspective. Unlike many writers, King explicitly lists his influences, opinions and biases.

## Tone

The tone of the book is one of the times and trials of a man who spent his life fighting for justice and who is regarded by many as a saint or something close to it. King comes off as honest, passionate, learned, inspired, confident (in places), and humble. The reader sees King's honesty in his discussions of his own lack of confidence, his fears, and his moments of despair. We read about tears he shed and his grief over the assassinations of friends in his movement. We also see his honest struggle with the world of ideas. The reader sees King's passion throughout the entire book. As a teenager, King is passionate about religious truth and indignant about segregation. As a college student, King reads voraciously and thinks hard about moral issues. He also becomes involved in civil rights activism. When he leaves graduate school, he takes a position in a dangerous place in order to fight for justice and faces jail and the danger of assassination on many occasions. We see King's intelligence in the early chapters where he discusses his foray into the world of ideas, why he rejects both capitalism and socialism, how he comes to endorse nonviolence, how his faith and his reason are reconciled, and so on. His inspiration comes from his faith, which we see displayed throughout by King's reliance on God for guidance. We see King's confidence grow as time progresses, his willingness to face death, his conviction that his cause was right, that his side would win in the end and that lies cannot endure forever. His humility

comes through as he claims that his inspiration came from the Holy Spirit and his success through the goodness of the black community.

## Structure

The structure of King's autobiography is complex, because as mentioned above, King did not write a full autobiography. Thus, the autobiography was compiled from King's various writings, from his autobiographical sketches, his retelling of various events, his speeches, notes and letters. Photos are even scattered throughout the book. The book has thirty-two chapters with an introduction by the editor, Clayborne Carson. Each chapter covers some core event or period in King's life and contains a brief time-line, a usually lengthy autobiographical sketch from King and very often a speech or letter that King wrote. Telegrams are included as well. In Chapter 10, "The Expanding Structure" we find a time-line, autobiographical writing, a letter, a telegram, a quote in the New York Post, and an excerpt from a speech, all from King. Carson believes that it is better for autobiographical purposes to group the different media King used to express himself according to the relevant event or period in King's life. The combination reads effectively. It is as if one is sitting at a desk full of King's varied writings. One gets a better sense for King's life and times.

The first several chapters tell us the story of King's early life, his teenage struggles with religion, his experience at Morehouse College, Crozer Seminary, and Boston University. We discover how he met Coretta and acquired many of his most important ideas and commitments. Most of the remaining chapters cover events or particular struggles, such as King's imprisonment in Birmingham or King's worries about the Black Power movement. The final chapter is a compilation of speeches by King around the time of his assassination.

## Quotes

"You are as good as anyone." (4)

"Truth is found neither in Marxism nor in traditional capitalism." (19)

"I am convinced now, as I was then, that man is an end because he is a child of God. Man is not made for the state; the state is made for man. To deprive a man of his freedom is to relegate him to the status of a thing, rather than elevate him to the status of a person." (20)

"As a young man with most of my life ahead of me, I decided early to give my life to something eternal and absolute." (30)

"And then, the bus boycott began." (49)

"That night was Montgomery's night in history." (62)

"I'm not walking for myself." (66)

"The United States Supreme Court today affirmed a decision of a special three-judge U.S. District Court in declaring Alabama's state and local laws requiring segregation on buses unconstitutional." (93)

"Freedom is never given to anybody. Privileged classes never give up their privileges without strong resistance." (111)

"You would be living, in fact, in the most segregated city in America." (173)

"I must go." (183)

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." (226)

"Black Power was a psychological reaction to the psychological indoctrination that led to the creation of the perfect slave." (326)

"We have moved into an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society. We are still called upon to give aid to the beggar who finds himself in misery and agony on life's highway. But one day, we must ask the question of whether an edifice which produces beggars must not be restricted and refurbished. That is where we are now." (346)



## Topics for Discussion

How did King struggle with his faith? What were his major challenges? How did he come to keep his faith?

What exactly was King's philosophy of nonviolent resistance? Who did he learn it from and what were some challenges made to it?

Please explain the events that led up to Montgomery desegregating buses.

What does King think that connection is between racial equality, aiding the poor and fighting for peace?

Do you think King was right to pursue nonviolence? Or do you think Malcolm X had the right idea in advocating for violent resistance?

Please give one of the main arguments of Letter from a Birmingham Jail. Explain its context and its force. Do you agree or disagree with it?

Was King right to return to Birmingham against his family's wishes? Defend your answer.