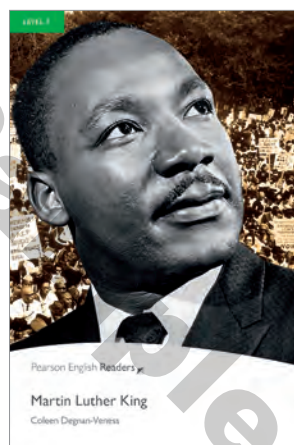


Martin Luther King

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Summary

This biography follows the dramatic life story of one of the world's most famous campaigners for peace. The writer has divided the story into the events that first brought Martin Luther King, Jr. to the civil rights movement and the many episodes on the road to a better life for blacks in America.

Pages 1–7: In 1963, more than 250,000 people listened as Martin Luther King, Jr. gave one of the most famous speeches in American history. He spoke of his dream that one day black and white children will be sisters and brothers.

Born in 1929 into a comfortable home in the southern United States, King first learned about the importance of skin color when he was five years old and could not go to the same school as his white friend. King's grandfather and father were both preachers and religion was important in his early life. At fifteen, after some indecision, he decided to become a preacher. He went to the North to study and graduated as Dr. Martin Luther King in 1955. He was tempted to stay in the North but, at 25, decided to move back to the segregationist South, to Montgomery, Alabama, to help the poor black people there. King's opinions of white people began to change. As a student in the South, he experienced racism, which made him angry, but found that in the North relations between blacks and whites were better. He also became influenced by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi.

The book describes the origins of slavery in America and how the North and South of the United States came to have very different attitudes to blacks. The first Europeans in America brought slaves from Africa to work

on their big farms in the South. Many people in the North hated slavery but it did not end until 1865, after a civil war between the North and South. African-Americans were free after the war, but were poor and could not read or write. In the South, 'Jim Crow' laws were passed to segregate black people from white people. In 1909, the NAACP was formed to fight these laws. In 1954, segregated schools were made illegal, which angered many white people in the South. But more was needed to be done to end segregation.

Pages 8–14: King married Coretta Scott, a music student, in 1953. He persuaded her to return to the South. In 1955, he became president of the MIA, a black organization in Montgomery, Alabama, that fought segregation.

King's public life began in 1955 with the Montgomery bus boycott. Rosa Parks, an African-American, refused to give her seat on a bus to a white passenger. She was arrested. King, the MIA and others began a boycott of city buses which became nationally famous. The Ku Klux Klan firebombed King's home, but in 1956, the US government made segregation on buses illegal.

King was influenced by Thoreau, who said that sometimes laws are not right and honest people must break them; and by Gandhi, who said people should fight violence with peace.

Pages 15–21: King began to teach non-violent resistance to his followers. He traveled to Africa, started making speeches all over America and fought to stop segregation in schools. Violent acts were committed against African-Americans, and politicians were divided about segregation. Inspired by King, students around the South began protests. In 1960, King joined one such protest and was sent to prison. John F. Kennedy, who was running for President, offered to help and King was freed.

Violence continued between blacks and whites in the South as blacks tried to challenge segregationist policies with direct action. Freedom Riders rode buses in the South to protest segregation. They were often beaten and buses were burned but in 1961, segregation in bus stations became illegal.

Pages 22–29: Politicians in the South tried to continue segregation in high schools and colleges. From jail in Birmingham, Alabama, King wrote a famous letter

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explaining why black people were fighting segregation. After his release, thousands of children marched in Birmingham. The police attacked them with water and dogs, which shocked America and attracted the world's attention. President Kennedy supported King and began to draw up a civil rights bill.

Then there was the march on Washington. It drew a crowd of more than 200,000 marchers including 50,000 whites, and it is where King gave his famous "I have a dream" speech. In 1964, King won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Pages 30–41: King began to fight for voting rights for African-Americans. His arrest in Selma, Alabama in 1965, was reported in newspapers and on television across the country. More protest marches and more violence followed. Finally, President Johnson signed a new Voting Rights law, as King and Rosa Parks stood beside him.

Some gains had been made, but many African-Americans still lived in terrible poverty. As they became radicalized, they stopped listening to King's message of non-violent protest. New leaders, such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, told them to fight for their freedom. This anger culminated in the Watts riots in Los Angeles in 1965.

In 1968, King made his last speech in front of an audience in Memphis. The next evening he was shot dead in a parking lot. Blacks have equal political and voting rights today, thanks to the work of Martin Luther King at the head of the civil rights campaign. On Martin Luther King Day every year, Americans celebrate African-American history and remember King and his message of equality.

Background and themes

Dedication to a cause: This biography shows that Martin Luther King, Jr. dedicated his life to his cause, and although he had a wife and four children, his time was not his own. The cause of civil rights for African-Americans was so big and his campaigns made it so active, that he could never rest. He lived a very public life in front of the world's press. His heart, mind and actions were ruled by his religious and political beliefs; he was driven. Other protest leaders who have given up their lives to their cause include Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, who has left her family and children in England to fight for democracy in her country.

Non-violence: The central theme of King's campaign for civil rights was non-violence. It worked better for King in the US than it did for Gandhi in India, where independence was accompanied by terrible fighting between Muslims and Hindus. There are lots of examples in King's campaign of non-violent protest working. His campaign brought huge publicity and because King taught blacks to meet the whites with love, not hate, it made the whites look silly and evil in the eyes of the world. For example, when students organized lunchtime protests (see page 18), the world saw white men arresting peaceful blacks because they sat in the wrong seats in a lunch bar in Woolworth's. When children marched in Birmingham, Alabama (see page 24), police used water cannons and dogs against them, arrested them and put them in jail.

Publicity: Another important weapon in King's fight against injustice was publicity. For many poor blacks, life was simply a struggle to feed their families and keep a place to live. King needed to reach all those people and show them that their lives could be better. He made speeches all over America. He held meetings. When he was arrested, it made world news. Black African-Americans became radicalized and wanted to fight. Some went further than King intended, and used violence, as in the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles. But he taught them that they could change things. Publicity then included posters, newspapers, meetings, word of mouth, marches, demonstrations, radio, and early television.

Racism: The central wrongdoing of this story is racism. The belief by one race that they are better than another or that they can rule another is behind much human conflict. The early slave traders treated black people as animals. It has taken centuries for most whites to stop believing they are superior to blacks. Many whites today still believe they are superior to blacks, in many parts of the world. Racism exists in more or less extreme forms in most cultures, and is one of the most pressing issues in world politics today.

Discussion activities

Before reading

- 1 **Discuss:** Ask the class to tell you anything they know about African-American history. Ask students to come up to the board and write a name, a date, or a fact relating to African-American history. Encourage students to mention slavery, the American Civil War, segregation, civil rights, etc.

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Introduction

After reading

- 2 **Discuss:** When students have read the Introduction (page iv) read out these sentences and ask the students to say if they are true or false. If they are false, ask students to say the correct sentence.
- Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday is a national day in the USA.
 - African-Americans suffered because of laws in the American North.
 - Segregation means that a black person can sit next to a white person on the bus.
 - King wanted all protests and marches to be violent.
 - King's dream was for a better world for everyone.

Pages 1–7

After reading

- 3 **Role play:** Students work in small groups. Ask each group to choose one of these scenes and prepare to act it out in front of the class. Encourage students to include both dialogue and action in their role play.
- King is a young boy. He has just been told to stop playing with the little white boy by the white boy's parents. Now he is at home. King's parents are now explaining to him how difficult life is for black people in the US.*
 - King is fifteen. He has started to question the church's teachings. He is telling his father, Daddy King, that he does not want to become a preacher. His father is not happy about this.*
 - King is seventeen. He has just preached for the first time in his father's church. He was nervous but he was a success. Now he is talking to Daddy King, who is proud of him.*
- 4 **Discuss:** Divide the class into groups to discuss these questions.
Imagine you are King just after he graduated from college in Boston. Would you stay in the North or would you return to the South? Why?
- 5 **Write:** Ask students to imagine they are living in the US in 1953. They should write a letter to a newspaper about the Jim Crow laws in the South. *What are some examples of these laws? Why are they wrong? What are the results of these laws? What can people do to change them?*

Pages 8–14

After reading

- 6 **Discuss and write:** Ask students to read about Rosa Parks on page 10 again. Put them into pairs. Tell them to imagine they are young reporters on Montgomery newspapers. Half of the pairs work for a white newspaper. The other half work for a black

newspaper. They prepare their reports. Compare reports across the class, looking at ways students have used to express bias and give only one side of the story.

- 7 **Discuss:** Ask students to discuss these questions in small groups.
Why was the Montgomery bus boycott successful? Do you know about any other boycotts? Do you think boycotts are usually successful? Why or why not?

Pages 15–21

After reading

- 8 **Discuss and write:** Put students in pairs or small groups. Give each pair one of the following episodes in the story. Ask them to summarize it in two or three sentences and then read their summary to the class:
King's trip to Ghana, p. 15; King's arrest on September 3, 1958, pages 16–17; Rich's lunch bar p. 18; the vote for US president, November 1960; the May 15 Freedom Ride p. 20.
- 9 **Write:** Imagine you were on the Freedom Ride bus on May 15 near Anniston, Alabama. Write a few sentences to someone in your family about what happened. How did you feel? What did you do?

Pages 22–29

After reading

- 10 **Discuss:** Divide the class into groups to discuss these questions.
King wrote a letter from Birmingham jail. Who was he writing to? Why did some white people want black people to "wait"? Why did King say that it was difficult for black people to wait?
- 11 **Write:** Ask students to write in one or two sentences why they think the following things were important in the campaign against segregation.
Little Rock High School, p. 22; the children's march, pages 24–25; the march on Washington, pages 27–28; the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, p. 28.

Pages 30–41

After reading

- 12 **Discuss:** The story of Martin Luther King, Jr. is the story of the fight by African-Americans to change a racist society into a non-racist society. Ask students to think about why we have racism and where it comes from. Invite them to talk about racism in their own culture. Have they experienced racism themselves? What is the best way to respond to racism?
- 13 **Discuss:** Martin Luther King, Jr. was a hero to young black people in the 1950s and 1960s. Who are today's heroes? What battles do they need to fight in today's world?