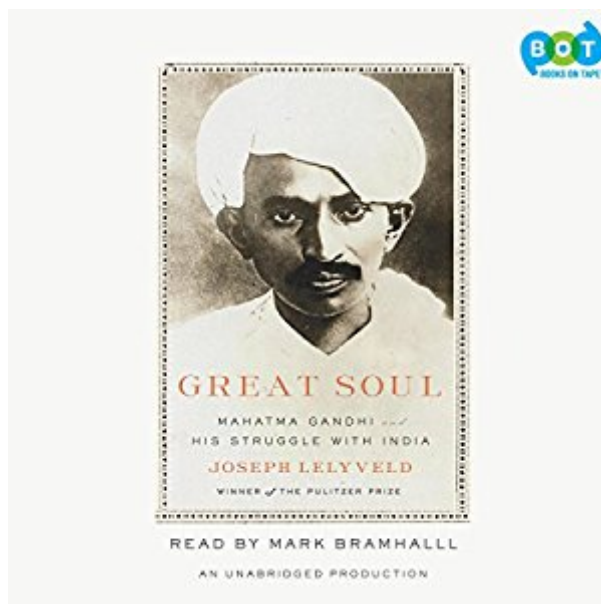


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Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi And His Struggle With India



Synopsis

A highly original, stirring book on Mahatma Gandhi that deepens our sense of his achievements and disappointments - his success in seizing India's imagination and shaping its independence struggle as a mass movement, and his recognition late in life that few of his followers paid more than lip service to his ambitious goals of social justice for the country's minorities, outcasts, and rural poor. Pulitzer Prize-winner Joseph Lelyveld shows in vivid, unmatched detail how Gandhi's sense of mission, social values, and philosophy of nonviolent resistance were shaped on another subcontinent - during two decades in South Africa - and then tested by an India that quickly learned to revere him as a Mahatma, or "Great Soul," while following him only a small part of the way to the social transformation he envisioned. The man himself emerges as one of history's most remarkable self-creations, a prosperous lawyer who became an ascetic in a loincloth wholly dedicated to political and social action. Lelyveld leads us step-by-step through the heroic - and tragic - last months of this selfless leader's long campaign when his nonviolent efforts culminated in the partition of India, the creation of Pakistan, and a bloodbath of ethnic cleansing that ended only with his own assassination. India and its politicians were ready to place Gandhi on a pedestal as "Father of the Nation" but were less inclined to embrace his teachings. Muslim support, crucial in his rise to leadership, soon waned, and the oppressed untouchables - for whom Gandhi spoke to Hindus as a whole - produced their own leaders. Here is a vital, brilliant reconsideration of Gandhi's extraordinary struggles on two continents, of his fierce but, finally, unfulfilled hopes, and of his ever-evolving legacy, which more than six decades after his death still ensures his place as India's social conscience - and not just India's.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I have been slowly and carefully reading this book over the past few months. I am drawing near to the end but have decided to set it aside. I don't plan to read all the way through the final chapter. This is a conscious decision to put away a work that has proven disappointing. The book does some things quite well. The author, Mr. Joseph Lelyveld, deserves high praise for having done diligent and extensive research. He delves into Gandhi's life and reveals many illuminating details that other biographers tend to pass over. He also avoids the mistake of portraying Gandhi in exalted terms, as a saint or an idol, and instead shows him as a flawed, fallible human being. In so doing Mr. Lelyveld provides the kind of critical scrutiny appropriate for any political figure. That type of scrutiny is somewhat unusual for Gandhi, whose biographers tend to be enthusiastic in the extreme. But while Mr. Lelyveld avoids the one extreme, he at times verges on its opposite. His critical portrayal of Gandhi goes beyond skepticism to cynicism, beyond criticism to something like disparagement. A significant portion of his narrative, perhaps even the larger part, takes the form of complaining about what Gandhi could have done better, how Gandhi could have done more for one group or another, how Gandhi was inconsistent or disingenuous on this or that occasion and could have better lived up to his ideals. A lot of this commentary arises from the author's own interpretation of Gandhi's various statements and actions, and too often that interpretation seems deliberately skewed to paint Gandhi in an unflattering light. The problem I have with this approach is that it resembles the attitude of someone who has been served an immense and incredible banquet, but who can't resist complaining that a side dish was cold or a garnish was out of place. Gandhi was a person who devoted his whole being to helping others, often at great personal cost. His life was an extraordinary demonstration of courage, kindness, and service. To dwell at such great length on the man's foibles and failures seems an injustice. It misses out the real significance of Gandhi's life, what he stood for, and what he ultimately accomplished. And it undermines his continuing legacy as a symbol for the effectiveness of nonviolence.

Big book. Lot of research seem to have gone it. Though I am liked the photos very much, the text often seems one sided. Seems to ve very critical of present day government in India in the portrayal of Gujarat. A typical left commentary from the New York Times author. I would have preferred a neutral central view.

It has been a long time since I finished reading this book, so long that I had forgotten about it. This said, this is a must-read book. Gandhi is a towering figure of our time, and Mr. Lelyveld's study helps us understand this complicated, conflicted yet truly great figure of history.

This is a carefully researched, judicious and exceedingly well written interpretive biography of Gandhi. However, it is not a biography in the usual sense- you need to be familiar with the broad contours of Gandhi's political life and India's freedom struggle to appreciate this book- the author assumes quite a bit of knowledge. If you didn't know anything about this period, you might be puzzled about why Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were massacring each other in the late 1930's to 1940's and various other issues. Joseph Lelyveld rarely stops to explain complex political issues/movements during this time, he assumes you are already familiar with the material (as I was). Here are a few other points about this book.1) Before reading this book, I believed that Gandhi was a great man. (based on my study of his life, not just because he was a national/global icon). I still do. In another book, an author (Patrick French) calls Gandhi "the most influential political campaigner of the 20th century" - that's a quick but accurate assessment. Gandhi was also a moral leader. (The author will agree with all this). But Gandhi also had significant political, personal and moral failings, so he was not a saint. Saints exist only in apocryphal religious tales or in the imagination of weak men who are looking for others to worship. In the real world, we are all human. Joseph Lelyveld doesn't want to dismiss or explain away Gandhi's flaws (as some hagiographers has done), nor does he intend to exaggerate them or take statements made by him out of context. He shows his quality as a researcher in how carefully he handles various episodes of Gandhi's life and in the judicious manner he reaches his conclusions. There isn't the slightest hint of sensationalism, nor is there any kind of personal or political agendas. Please note that the .com review of this book is needlessly negative, the author doesn't set out to trash Gandhi or destroy his reputation - if you read the book, you will find that the author admires plenty of things about Gandhi,(so the title of the book "Great Soul" is not ironical), but he doesn't place Gandhi on a pedestal. Gandhi had his failings, as all of us do.2) In India, many people were angry about the book, because allegedly Gandhi has been called "racist and bisexual" in this book! This is FALSE. However, the book is not banned in India, as one reviewer incorrectly stated. A British nationalist hack, Andrew Roberts was (very regrettably) allowed to review the book in the Wall Street Journal, which didn't help matters. Gandhi probably wasn't bisexual - and even if he was, would that reduce your respect for him, assuming you aren't an anti-gay bigot yourself? On racism, Gandhi did have

some prejudices against black Africans and made very little attempt to know them intimately or make common cause with them in spite of his two decade long stay in South Africa (with some exceptions). To me, it is not news that Gandhi initially had some of the same prejudices that many Indians or British people of his time had. (Thomas Jefferson doesn't stop being a great leader because he had slaves!). What is more important is that he was able to rise above those prejudices, both in his personal life and as a leader to write "If we look into the future, is it not a heritage we have to leave to posterity, that all the different races commingle and produce a civilization that perhaps the world has not yet seen? There are differences and misunderstandings, but I do believe, in the words of the sacred hymn- we shall know each other better when the mists have rolled away".3) Gandhi didn't think of the freedom struggle just in terms of driving out the British. He thought real freedom would also require a fight against the worst forms of caste discrimination, namely untouchability. And he also repeatedly emphasized the importance of bridging the divide between Hindus and Muslims in India. His different objectives created some contradictions in his political life which he found difficult to handle. For example, to end British colonialism, he had to unite all Indians against foreign rule - to end caste discrimination, he had to fight the Hindu upper caste orthodoxy- which will divide the Hindus. When he failed to condemn the caste system in entirety, lower caste activists criticized him for hypocrisy (they still do). We might say he had too many things on his plate. And of course, he had plenty of eccentric views on things like diet and sex! Another thing about Gandhi - as the many quotes in this book will reveal and as the author himself says - he wrote great English!4) Hate the sin, not the sinner- how many of us can even try to do that? Gandhi didn't merely try, he succeeded. He was adamant about the need for Indian freedom fighters to be completely free of ANY animosity towards the British. In fact, Gandhi even tried to convince British officials of his point of view by arguments and moral persuasion. When he was criticized by Hindu traditionalists defending caste discrimination or by Muslim/Hindu religious fanatics, he often invited them for long chats/discussions irrespective of how violent or virulent their opposition to him was. As a political leader, he established a model for non-violent political agitation that has since been followed by countless others. (Of course, it can't work against Nazis or military dictatorships which don't care at all about the rule of law). He was also pretty media-savvy in the way he devised his political campaigns and the images he used (think of the salt march) and he frequently managed to put the British on the defensive. Above all, it is his fearlessness in the face of violent threats that makes him a "great soul".5) I think Lelyveld is a little too pessimistic about India's social or economic progress since independence. (He doesn't say this, but this seems to be the case from some of his statements). I am not saying he is wrong- its a matter of different

perspectives. But there has been impressive progress in many ways- both in fighting caste discrimination and in economic development/poverty alleviation. Christophe Jaffrelot- one of the top experts on Indian politics thinks that the empowerment of the lower castes in Indian politics amounts to a "silent revolution". Think of the changes in Indian society/politics between 1900 and 2010. In very few countries have this much change been accomplished without any large scale violence. People from the lowest caste have succeeded in becoming Vice Chancellors of universities, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India and there are dozens of very rich Indian businessmen who have a lower caste background. If he was alive today, Gandhi would be happy with all the progress disadvantaged Indians have been able to make since independence. However, many lower caste activists will agree with the author that progress has been quite slow - even today 50% of the lowest caste people are below the poverty line and we continue to hear horrendous tales of discrimination and violence from rural India. Of course, India being among the few developing countries which chose to become a democracy, the kind of social change where a leader imposes his vision on the rest of the society was not possible. India's first PM Jawaharlal Nehru was a great modernizer, but even he had to struggle for eight years to get some laws passed in India's parliament which would guarantee (roughly) equal rights for women. The bills were introduced in 1951 and could only be passed by 1959. Overall, I strongly recommend this book- this is a very thoughtful biography of Gandhi, but to get a lot out of it, you have to have some knowledge of Indian history/politics in the 20th century. I had read two biographies of Gandhi prior to this, but I still learnt a lot from this biography- the other biographies were good, but this one is the best. There is no sentimentalism of any kind- only calm perceptive analysis.

I am still reading the book, about 50% through it. I am not sure what the purpose the author had in mind. It comes across as a bit of a hatchet job. But I think the problem is that analysis is by somebody who is taking western values and applying them to somebody who may have had a Western formal education but was not brought up in a western environment. I believe that the book is of limited value. It does not go into the events of Gandhi's life itself, but tries to do a psycho-autopsy of why Gandhi did/said what he did. But without a true understanding of the culture of India, he fails miserably. On top of this is a writing style in dire need of an editor. The author's use of run-on sentences with multiple dependent clauses should be used by all high school teachers as an example of how NOT to write. Clear, precise sentences with a single thought would improve this book.

If you're already grounded in the narrative chronology of Gandhi's life, this is an excellent book to read second to get a critical analysis of particular episodes.

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