

Dreamer: A Novel

By Charles Johnson

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From the National Book Award-winning author of *Middle Passage*, a fearless fictional portrait of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his pivotal moment in American history.

Set against the tensions of Civil Rights era America, *Dreamer* is a remarkable fictional excursion into the last two years of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life, when the political and personal pressures on this country's most preeminent moral leader were the greatest. While in Chicago for his first northern campaign against poverty and inequality, King encounters Chaym Smith, whose startling physical resemblance to King wins him the job of official stand-in. Matthew Bishop, a civil rights worker and loyal follower of King, is given the task of training the smart and deeply cynical Smith for the job. In doing so, Bishop must face the issue of what makes one man great while another man can only stand in for greatness. Provocative, heartfelt, and masterfully rendered, Charles Johnson confirms yet again that he is one of the great treasures of modern American literature.

Dr. Charles Johnson is a novelist, screenwriter, essayist, professional cartoonist and the Pollock Professor of English at the University of Washington. He is the author of more than sixteen books, including the PEN/Faulkner nominated story collection *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* and the novel *Middle Passage*, for which he won the National Book Award.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

At the center of National Book Award winner Charles Johnson's novel *Dreamer* are three remarkable men: Martin Luther King Jr.; his aide, Matthew Bishop, an African American philosophy student; and Chaym Smith, a man who is a dead ringer for the civil rights leader. Not only does Smith resemble King, but he also shares his intellectual voracity, widely read in both Eastern and Western philosophy, proficient in Sanskrit and martial arts, and a talented painter. But where King is deeply spiritual, Smith is a cynic; where King has the full force of his strong beliefs and his strong family heritage, Smith has nothing but a lifetime of misfortune to shape his attitudes. When he offers to become King's stand-in, Johnson creates an ideal situation in which to explore issues long at the heart of the "race issue" in America: the inequality between black and white, even between black and black.

As the novel moves forward in time toward that fateful day in Memphis, Johnson concentrates on the relationship between Bishop--the narrator--and Smith, a man who, with better luck, might have been as great as King. Periodically, the author also lets us in on King's own meditations on his life and faith, and the movement to which he has given them. All in all, *Dreamer* is the kind of novel Charles Johnson does so well: a book about a big subject, chock full of ideas and populated by characters articulate enough to argue them.

From Publishers Weekly

Considering the incandescent power of his personality and the high drama of his later years, it is surprising that Martin Luther King Jr. has not inspired more fiction. It is a gap that Johnson, author of the National Book Award-winning *Middle Passage*, aims to fill with this novel, whose passages of heightened reportage alternate with scenes in which invented characters interrelate with the civil rights leader. Narrating is young Matthew Bishop, an earnest if somewhat nerdy acolyte who, one day during the terrible 1966 summer riots in Chicago, brings to King a man who looks exactly like him. He is Chaym Smith, a bitter and deeply cynical war vet who is as profoundly read in scripture and philosophy as King himself and who was once, briefly, a monk, but who seems to have given up on his life. King's followers immediately see the value in having a double for their man: he can be used as a decoy for mobs, make brief ceremonial appearances?and Smith seems eager to try it. In the end, however, although Smith is shot by a fanatic and badly injured, and although he's eventually used by the FBI for nefarious purposes apparently connected to MLK's assassination, not much is made of what could have been a fascinating plot device. And Smith remains, despite his intriguing contradictions, a shadowy creature. The strengths of Johnson's writing, and they are considerable, are best employed in showing the appalling conditions under which King struggled, his perpetual self-doubt and the ennobling quality of his vision for humanity. The meanness of the white bigots and the out-of-control hysteria of the late 1960s have seldom been better conveyed. And yet the book is ultimately unsatisfactory as a novel. The organization is haphazard, too many strings are left dangling and the assassination is almost an anticlimax. Perhaps the book would have been better cast entirely in the form in which it best succeeds: as a deeply felt, vividly realized documentary about an astounding man. (Apr.)

30th anniversary of MLK's death.

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From Library Journal

Despite Leland Gantt and Andre Braugher's capable reading of this novel, there is simply not enough of the dreamer himself to make *Dreamer* a compelling tribute. Martin Luther King Jr.'s life and times are full of dramatic possibilities and potent, timely themes, so it is therefore unclear why author Johnson has chosen to

add a distracting and banal subplot involving the hiring of a double to impersonate King. This double, less principled but no less intense than the great civil rights leader, causes predictable and artificial complications for two of King's young followers. This subplot takes up most of this abridged audiobook, and of that which remains, too much is a listing of the philosophers and theologians who influenced King's thought. Too little is devoted to the very subject that cries out for attention?the great man's words and deeds. Not recommended.?John Owen, Advanced Micro Devices Lib., Sunnyvale, CA
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Tiara Garcia:

As people who live in often the modest era should be change about what going on or facts even knowledge to make these keep up with the era which can be always change and advance. Some of you maybe can update themselves by examining books. It is a good choice in your case but the problems coming to anyone is you don't know which you should start with. This Dreamer: A Novel is our recommendation to make you keep up with the world. Why, because this book serves what you want and wish in this era.

Ann Potter:

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