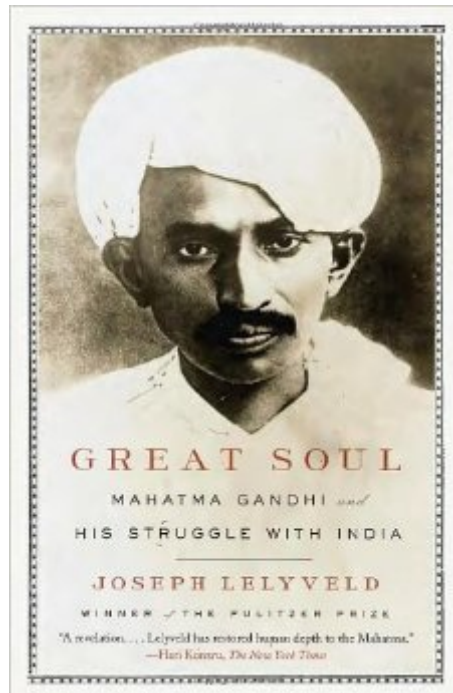


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Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi And His Struggle With India



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, 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

Paperback: 448 pages

Publisher: Vintage; Reprint edition (April 3, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0307389952

ISBN-13: 978-0307389954

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.9 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.3 out of 5 stars See all reviews (49 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #440,334 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #43 in Books > Religion &

Spirituality > Hinduism > Gandhi #95 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Asia >

Customer Reviews

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.

Reading Joseph Lelyveld's sensitive and informative biography of the life of Mahatma Gandhi is enriching in many ways: the quality of writing is first class, the manner in which he shares the entire spectrum of the life of one of the greatest contemporary philosophers of man is both learned and involving, and the ability to discuss the human aspects of a man who has been all but officially canonized takes great courage. GREAT SOUL: MAHATMA GANDHI AND HIS STRUGGLE WITH INDIA is most assuredly an apt title for this new study of the life of Gandhi because as soon as the book appeared it was banned in India and in other places where Gandhi's influence is considered akin to heavenly. And that is sad, because a careful reading of this book simply reveals those controversial aspects of a man whose life was anything but understandable as he was living it, and bringing to readers' attention the aspects of Gandhi that allow us to see that indeed he was very

human, struggling with not only attempting to unite Hindus and Muslims, but also with racism and pacifism and vegetarianism, the South African cultural influence on his thoughts and so forth. The primary reason for the censorship and reader condemnation of this book seems to center on the discussion of Gandhi's long-term intimate relationship with the German Jewish bodybuilder Hermann Kallenbach. Yes, there are 'love letters' between the two men, but Gandhi managed to cope with the central focus of his affection with a similar focus on his wife and his young nieces, etc. What Lelyveld seems to be doing is examining the relationship between Gandhi's approach to South Africa and India, working to define how this great thinker arrived at his concept of satyagraha.

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