

Book review in *Fellowship* magazine, 6-05 of
**Mahatma Gandhi, Nonviolent Liberator: a
Biography** by Richard Deats, New City Press, 2005

What kind of courage does it take to attempt a new biography about Mohandas Gandhi?

There are already so many good introductions to Gandhi's life and thought that you can choose your focus, length, and orientation, and still have several options:

- Biographies by Judith Brown, Eknath Easwaran, and Louis Fischer, not to mention the deeply informed new full-length *Gandhi's Passion* by Stanley Wolpert,
- Anthologies that serve as good introductions to Gandhi such as those edited by Thomas Merton, Raghavan Iyer, Louis Fischer, Rudrangshu Mukherjee, and Homer Jack (again, to cite only a few widely accessible collections).
- Volumes on particular aspects of Gandhi's contribution including Joan Bondurant's tour de force on the power of satyagraha, Gene Sharp on tactics and strategy, and Jonathan Schell on nonviolence in contemporary life
- There is also a shelf of writing in various religious traditions applying Gandhi to contemporary concerns by such authors as Merton, Wink, Soelle, Yoder, and Harris.

And I've limited myself to titles on which our Resource Center has received especially positive feedback from teachers, activists, and reading circles. So what is our response to the question: What was Richard Deats *thinking* to write yet another book on Gandhi?!

For one thing, by all the evidence it's hard to write a *short* book on Gandhi. Only two of the books I've mentioned are under 200 pages) many are twice that length. Deats' superb new biography is barely 100 pages of text.

Second, to do justice to a figure like Gandhi requires genuine expertise in at least a half dozen disparate and complicated subjects – Indian history and culture, Hindu and Muslim religion in South Asia, nonviolence theory and practice, British colonial politics, not to mention a grasp of what the typical American reader understands – and misunderstands – about each of these subjects. (This is why there are so many flawed or second-rate treatments of Gandhi.) Deats matches the best of the available introductions in his knowledge of each of these areas.

Deats is particularly good in precisely the areas that are most often weak in those second rate volumes. His development of Gandhi's understanding of nonviolence is

careful and precise without ever feeling pedantic, in fact, it positively sings.

His treatment of the religious dimension of Gandhi's search for truth is equally impressive, especially since that's a strength of another leading brief biography, Easwaran's *Gandhi the Man*. Deats again brings a light touch to the task and does a better job of addressing the various religious skeptics of today.

Fourth, it's amazing what new windows Deats finds to illuminate specific aspects of Gandhi's life. He quotes widely from the weekly newspapers Gandhi edited for most of his life. He also offers anecdotes from the ashrams Gandhi organized and lived in throughout his life – the communities that played such a central role in testing Gandhi evolving thinking about how nonviolence is lived and not just thought. (And if you're interested in more, check out *Vows and Observances* in the Berkeley Hills Books series on Gandhi and spirituality.)

What Deats does with this material is nothing less than breathtaking. For anyone who knows Gandhi even a bit, Deats' use of such materials is so assured and so unpretentious as to approach mastery.

If you're thinking, how does Deats manage all this in 100 pages? I'm pleased to report, there's even more! He concludes with not only a helpful glossary, chronology, and bibliography, but also 20 pages of selected writings – over four dozen illuminating quotations in a volume already noteworthy for letting Gandhi speak for himself.

So here's the short answer to my opening question. Hold onto your hats! This book could re-energize thinking about Gandhi as few others have done in our lifetime. Richard Deats has now twice attempted the impossible -- he also won our hearts with his fresh new biography of King.

Mahatma Gandhi, Nonviolent Liberator is quite simply the best book available for folks who don't know Gandhi. It's also a great terrific refresher for those who haven't read him in a while or could stand to be re-inspired. So if you'd like to give your compassion and activism a brisk lift, Deats' new book is just the thing.

Reviewer: Glen Gersmehl has shared nonviolence in colleges and universities, 100's of workshops and forums, and many articles. He has worked on numerous nonviolent campaigns and was representative for the U.S. and Canada to the UN Decade for Peace and Nonviolence planning meetings held in India. Glen is national coordinator of Lutheran Peace Fellowship and directs the Peace & Justice Resource Center: pjrcbooks@hotmail.com 206.720.0313
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