

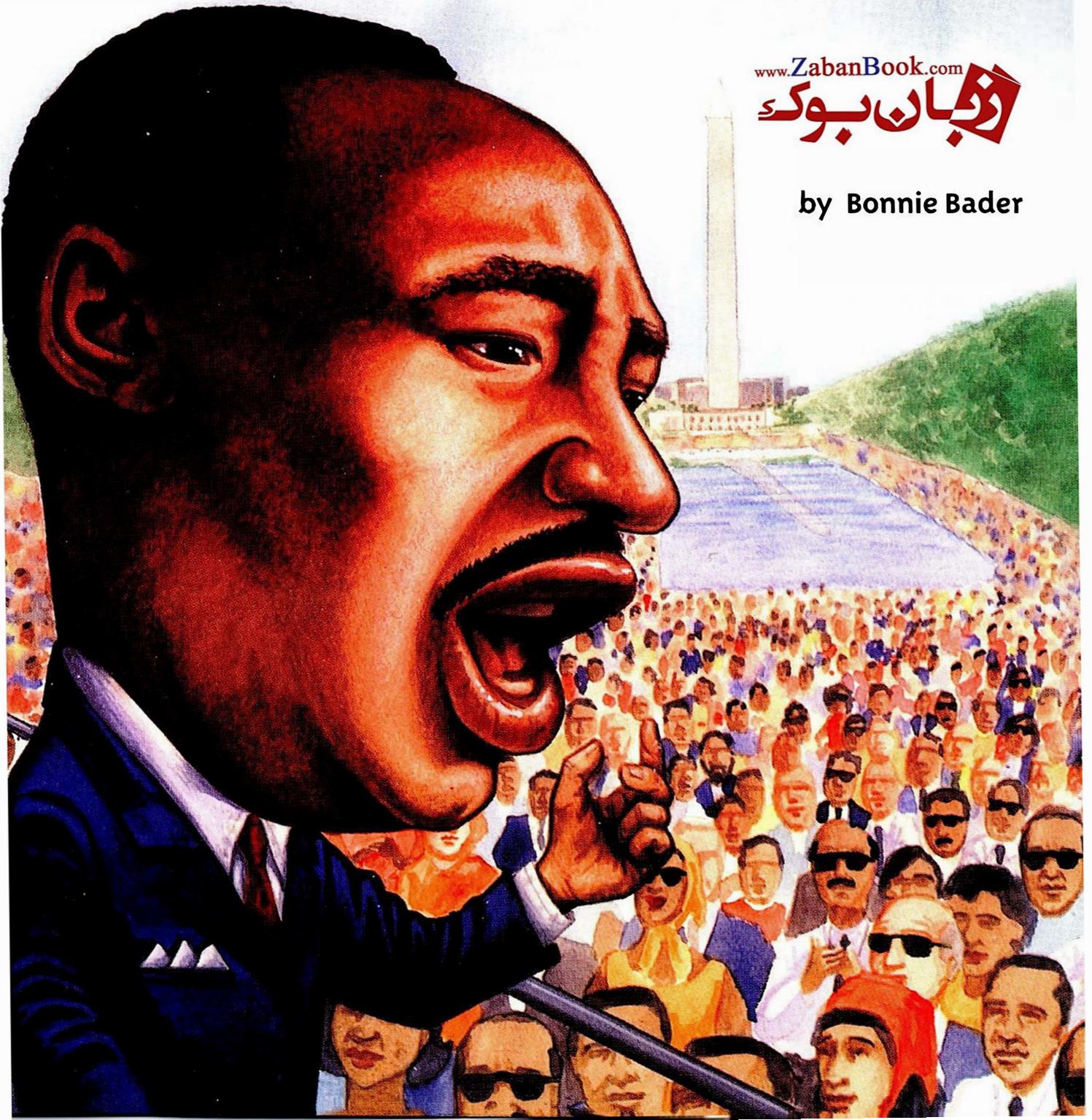
The New York Times Best-Selling Series

Who Was Martin Luther King, Jr.?

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by Bonnie Bader



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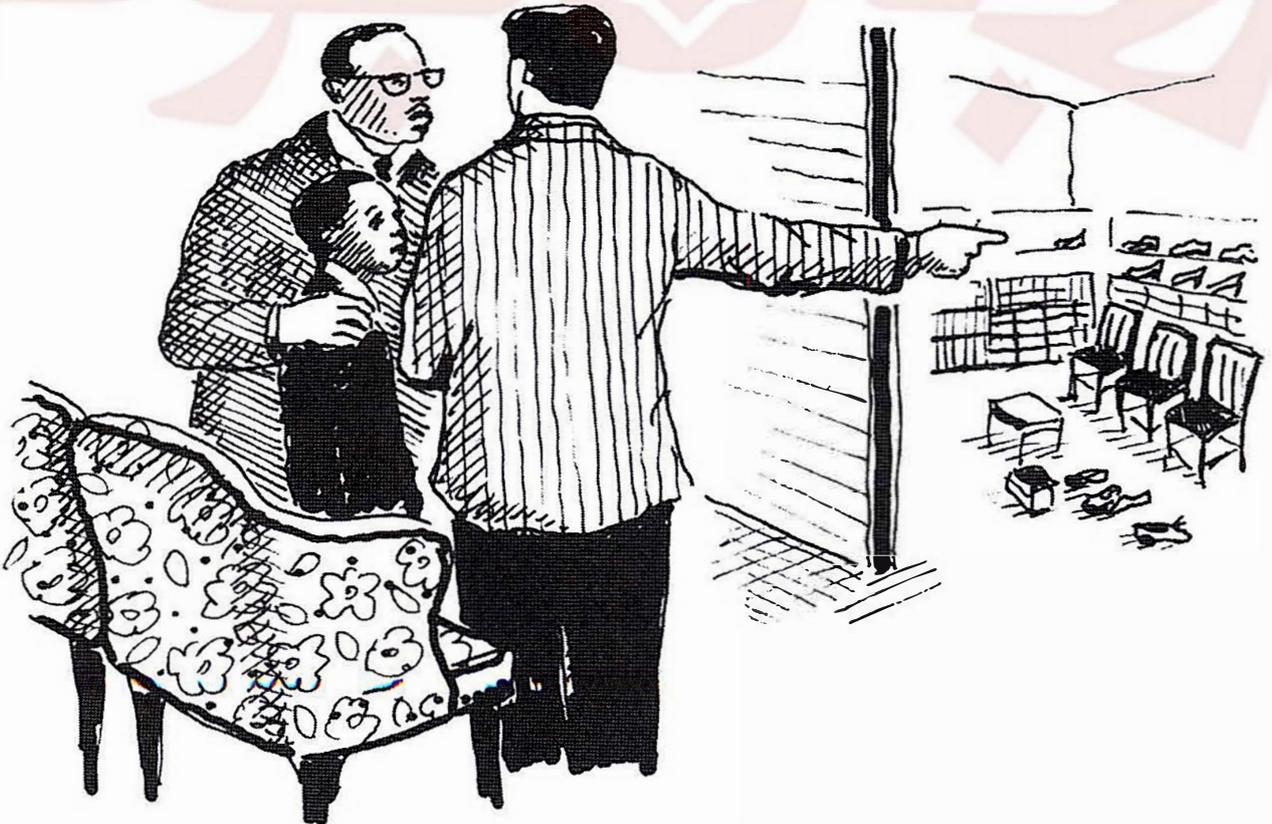
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Who Was Martin Luther King, Jr.?

Growing up in the South was not easy for Martin Luther King, Jr. He was born in 1929, when black people were treated very differently than white people. One day, Martin's father took his young son to buy a pair of shoes. The store was empty. But the white shopkeeper told them that they would have to wait in the back of the store.



Martin's father got very angry. Why did they have to sit in the back of the store? If he couldn't buy shoes for his son in the front of the store, he would not buy them at all. He took Martin by the hand and led him out of the store. As they walked down the street, his father said, "I don't care how long I have to live with this system, I will never accept it."

The "system" in the South kept black people apart from white people. It was called segregation. Black children and white children went to separate schools. Black people had to ride at the back of the bus. As he grew up, Martin decided to fight for change. But it was a peaceful fight.

Martin led marches. He banded people together in protests. He made speeches. Many people listened to his words and joined his nonviolent fight. Martin Luther King, Jr., fought using his words, not his fists.

Martin Luther King, Jr., had a dream—a



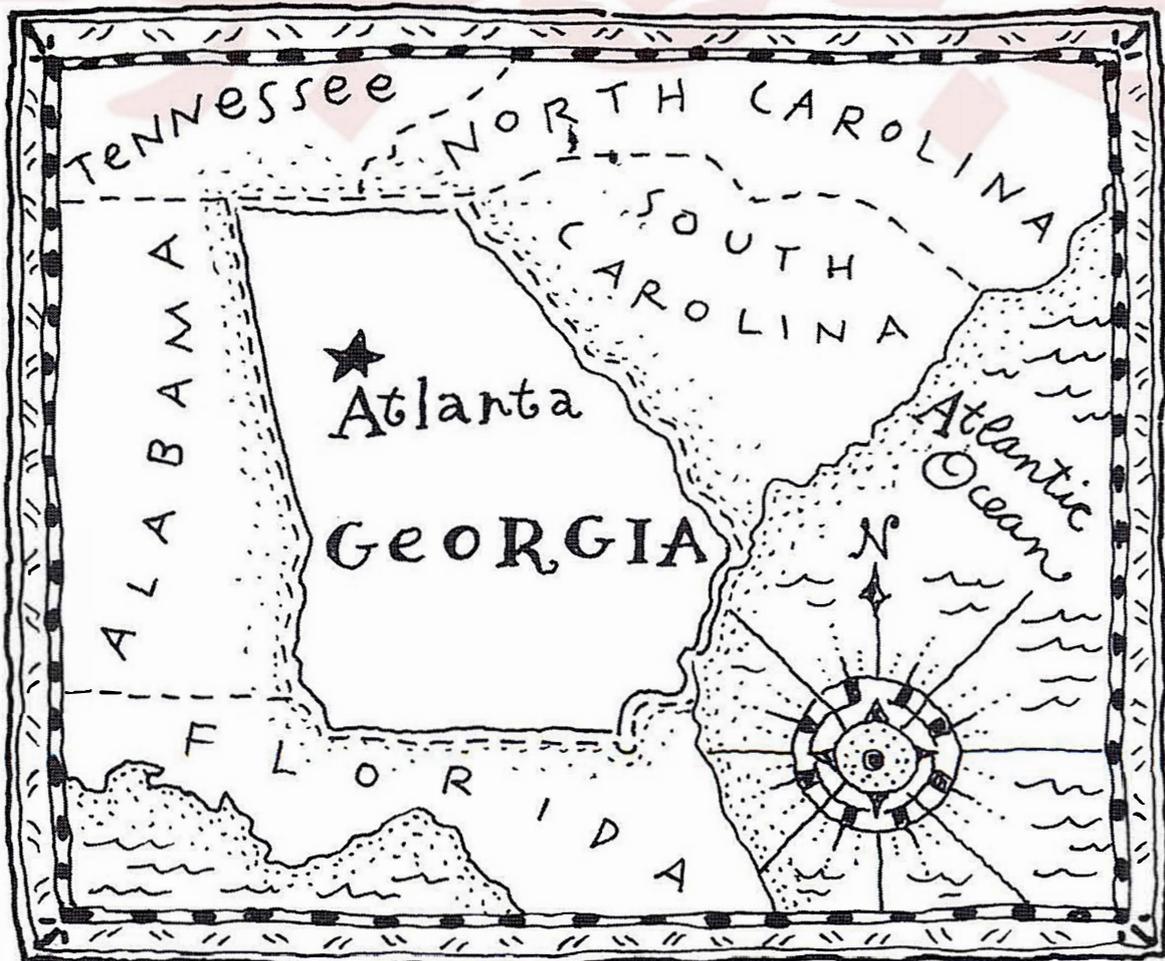
dream that all people could live together in peace and be treated equally. And though he died over forty years ago, his dream lives on.

Chapter 1 A Perfect Boy

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On January 15, 1929, a baby boy was born in the city of Atlanta, Georgia. The doctors said he was perfect. His parents were so happy. They named him Michael, the same name that his father had. But when little Michael was five, his father decided to change both of their names to



Martin. So now, the little boy became Martin Luther King, Jr.

Young Martin had a very happy home life. He had an older sister named Willie Christine. (Everyone called her Chris.) He also had a younger brother named Alfred Daniel. The Kings lived in a large house on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta. Their neighborhood was comfortable. No one was very poor or very rich.

There was a lot of love in Martin's family.



Martin never remembered his parents arguing. Martin's mother, Alberta Williams King, was very soft-spoken and easygoing. Her father was a well-known minister. After high school, she went to

college, which was something that not many black women did back then. Alberta had a warm personality, and Martin always found it very easy to talk to her.

Martin's father, Martin, Sr., was a large man in many ways. He weighed about 220 pounds and was filled with self-confidence. Martin, Jr., admired his father very much. His father's family was very poor and lived in a rundown shack. They were sharecroppers. A sharecropper is a farmer who does not own his own land. Instead, he works on another farmer's land and gets some of the crops for himself. Martin's father worked hard to get his high-school and college diplomas. After college, he became a minister of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.





Ebenezer Baptist Church

The Ebenezer Baptist Church was like a second home to Martin. He sang in the church choir. He went to Sunday school and made many friends. It was there that Martin learned to get along with all kinds of people—kids as well as teachers.



One of Martin's good friends was white. The boys had known each other since they were three years old. The boy didn't live near Martin, but his father owned a store across the street from the King home. Martin and the boy were always together. But when they turned six, they started school. Martin went to a school for black children. The boy went to a school for white children. One day the boy's father told his son that he could no longer play with Martin. Martin ran home and cried to his mother. It was the end of the friendship.



That night at dinner, the family had a long talk. This was the first time that Martin realized how many white people felt about black people. Even so, his parents told Martin not to hate white people. It was his duty as a Christian to love everyone.

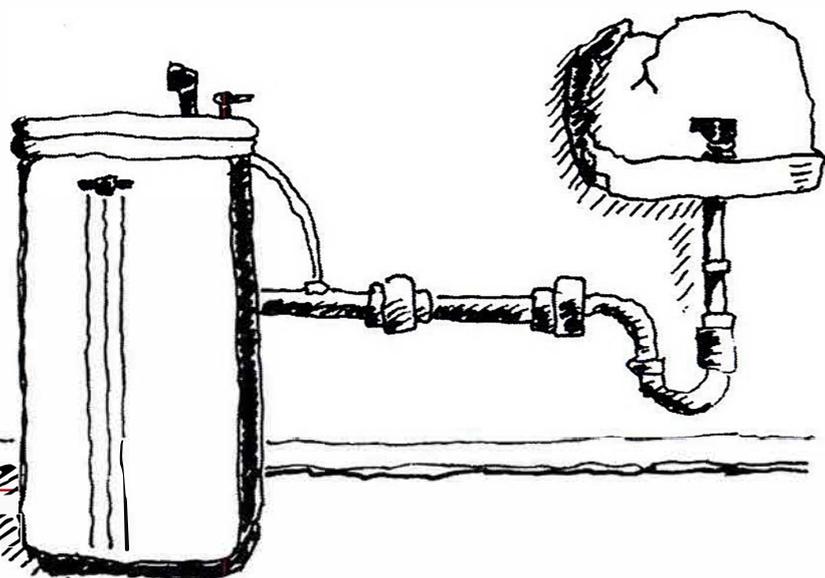
Martin's mother told him that he should always keep a sense of "somebodyness"—that he was important—even though the outside world was telling him he was not.

As Martin Luther King, Jr., grew up, he became more and more aware of the problems facing black people, especially in the South. Everywhere he looked there were "Whites Only" signs. Blacks could not go into many hotels, restaurants, and stores. Blacks could not even drink out of the same water fountains as whites. In many cities, blacks had to ride in the back of a bus. If they tried to sit in the front, they were thrown in jail. And if black people wanted to go to a movie theater, they had to sit way up in the balcony.

These rules were called Jim Crow laws. And they made Martin very angry.

WHITE

COLORED



JIM CROW LAWS

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THE TERM "JIM CROW" WAS STARTED AROUND 1830 BY A MINSTREL PERFORMER. MINSTREL PERFORMERS WERE ENTERTAINERS WHO TRAVELED AROUND THE NORTH AND SOUTH PUTTING ON SHOWS. THEY WERE MOST POPULAR BEFORE AND AFTER THE U.S. CIVIL WAR.

IN ONE SHOW, A WHITE SINGER BLACKENED HIS FACE WITH CHARCOAL TO LOOK LIKE A BLACK PERSON. HE DANCED AROUND IN A SILLY WAY THAT MADE FUN OF BLACK PEOPLE. HE SANG A SONG THAT ENDED WITH THE WORDS "I JUMP JIM CROW."

SOME PEOPLE THINK THAT THIS CHARACTER WAS BASED ON AN OLD BLACK SLAVE OWNED BY A "MR. CROW." BY THE 1850S, THE JIM CROW CHARACTER SHOWED UP IN MANY MINSTREL SHOWS.



BY THE TIME OF THE CIVIL WAR, THE TERM "JIM CROW" WAS A NEGATIVE WAY OF TALKING ABOUT BLACK PEOPLE. AND BY THE END OF THE 1800S, RACIST LAWS WERE CALLED JIM CROW LAWS.

In high school, Martin had to take a long bus ride to and from school. He always walked to the back, where the other black people sat.

Once, Martin and a teacher traveled by bus to Dublin, Georgia, for a speech contest. Martin won the contest and was very proud. On the way home to Atlanta, the bus driver ordered Martin and his teacher to give up their seats to white passengers.

When they did not move right away, the bus driver became angry. It was the law, after all. They ended



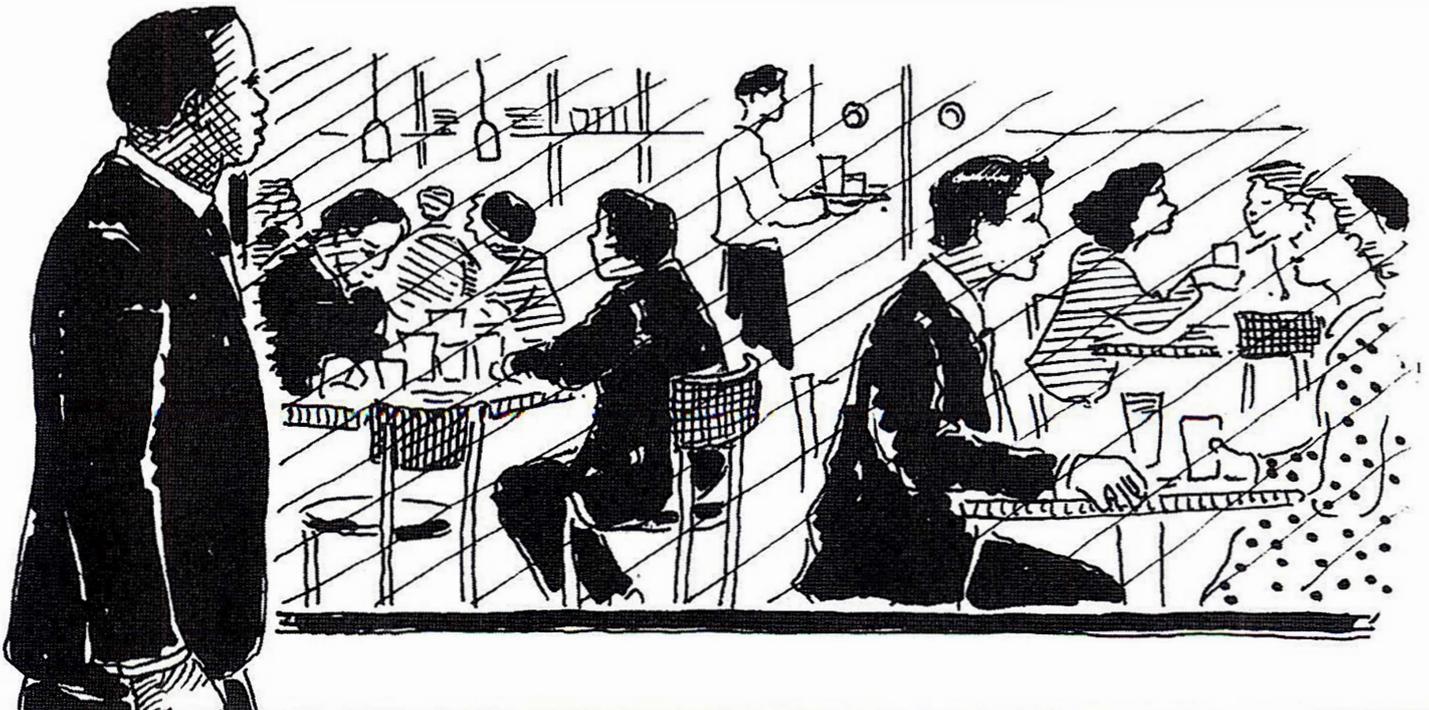
up standing in the aisle for the ninety-mile ride. But Martin told himself, “One of these days, I’m going to put my body up there where my mind is.” He knew that one day he would have a seat up front.

Chapter 2 School Days

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Martin Luther King, Jr., was always a very good student. He loved to read and make speeches. He studied very hard and skipped two grades. At just fifteen years old, he graduated from high school.

That summer, Martin worked in Simsbury, Connecticut. It was Martin's first time in the North. He had a job in the tobacco fields. He was surprised to see how different life was for blacks in the North. Black and white children went to the same schools. There were no separate restaurants.



Martin dreamed that this could happen in the South, too. If only there was some way he could make this dream come true.

Martin returned to Atlanta to attend Morehouse College. This was the same college that his father had attended. All the students at the school were black. All the teachers were black, too.

At first, Martin wasn't sure what he wanted to study. He knew that he wanted to spend his life



Morehouse College

helping black people. But what was the best way to do that? Perhaps he would follow in his father's footsteps and become a minister. Or maybe he would become a lawyer.

In college, Martin Luther King, Jr., read an essay by a man named Henry David Thoreau. The essay was written in 1849.

In this essay, Thoreau said that people have the right to disobey unjust laws. In Thoreau's time, the United States still allowed slavery.

Thoreau wanted to protest slavery. He felt the government was wrong to allow it. So he refused to pay his taxes. As a result, he was thrown in jail. But Thoreau did not mind being in jail. He was making a point. Martin liked the way Thoreau thought. He also liked that Thoreau protested in a peaceful way.



Rappaport, Doreen. Martin's Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Jump at the Sun / Hyperion, New York, 2001.

Who Was Martin Luther King, Jr.?

- A super-smart boy who skipped two grades
- A man who believed in peaceful protest
- A great leader of the civil rights movement
- ✓ **All of the above!**

Find out more in this illustrated book!

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YOUR
HEADQUARTERS
FOR HISTORY



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