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DREAMER

By Charles Johnson

Scribner. 236 pp

On the last night that he lived, April 3, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. told a Memphis audience, "I've seen the promised land."

National Book Award winner Charles Johnson's reverent documentary novel begins in July 1966 with King in an earlier promised land, Chicago, where the promise had not been kept. By then, this Canaan to the thousands who'd migrated from the Mississippi delta had become a place "where every particle of your physical surroundings induced shame."

Told by Matthew Bishop, 25, like his namesake both disciple and chronicler, we see the last two tragic years of King's career and the end of nonviolence as a force for societal change.

By 1966, King was already in doubt. Previous supporters "now saw his methods as outmoded, his insistence on loving one's enemies as lunacy." In Birmingham and Selma, the white man's warning was "Do not rise too high." In Chicago, the rule was "Do not come too close," and the black man was even more a despised exile in his own land. Here, as King marched, law-abiding citizens held signs saying THE ONLY WAY TO END NEGROES IS EXTERMINATION. King said, "I've never seen mobs as full of hate."

So, when Matthew brings Chaym Smith before King, Smith seems useful. Exactly King's height, weight and age, Smith appears his identical twin. He even chews Doublemint gum. And he's almost as extraordinary as King himself.

Smith had been wounded in Korea, studied zen and Tai Chi, quotes Husserl and Mencken and has a protean "shape-shifting ability." But he's a risky person to have stand in for King. With a tenuous hold on lucidity, he's a heroin-using cynic who believes, "You reach down to pull somebody up, he's liable to drag you down to the bottom with him." Nor does he share King's vision. "You got to remember that nobody on earth likes Negroes," he lectures Matthew, "not even Negroes. We're outcasts. And outcasts can't never create a community."

Smith's Hebraic name is a variant of Cain, and that myth of the first outcast becomes a strong subtheme of the novel. King—Abel to Smith's Cain—provides Smith's hope for redemption. Helping King is Smith's last chance to matter, to transcend his Ellison invisibility. One of this novel's gravest disappointments lies in how this character so rich in possibility simply disappears near the end.

Narrator Matthew offers more slender potential but proves one of the story's triumphs. Bookish and mild, he believes, "I was a nobody. A man reminded of his mediocrity...nearly every moment of the day." Even the beautiful co-worker he pines for "once told me that in a movie I'd make a good prop."

But one person's mediocrity is another's humility. More than a good prop, Matthew provides the ideal voice for Johnson's own reverence for King. Unlike that mix

of respect and envy King inspires in Smith and even in Roy Wilkins and Ralph Abernathy, Matthew can follow King without the burden of ego needs.

In interspersed passages of Jean Toomer-like lyricism, even King wonders how much is left by 1966 for Matthew to follow. He was already surrounded by Black Power advocates, "modern-day Zealots eager to pick up the gun." How much longer could grassroots blacks follow a saintly prophet with the mission of Moses and gentleness of Jesus when "a new black cat was on the scene...represented by the fierce black masculinity of Stokely"? This hunger for "masculinity," the very word that first pops to mind when we remember Malcolm X, appeals to Matthew too, who knows he can't have the love he wants until he's overcome "all that painful history...the centuries of black men and women hurting and betraying and possibly hating each other since the days of slavery when a Negro risked death if he defended his family."

External enemies threaten King too. Under J. Edgar Hoover, who called King "the burrhead," F.B.I. agents gloat at the \$50,000 bounty on King's life. Johnson dismisses as Hoover propaganda the reports of King's sexual transgressions, which grow only stronger in our era of scrutinizing heroes for clay feet. Johnson's King has utter devotion to his family and bottomless piety and humility. Echoing Paul's most mystical moment (Galatians 2:20), King goes about his worldly business believing, "Not I, but the Father within me doeth these works."

Johnson's veneration makes this far more an homage than an objective portrait of King. Still, it is thick, if sometimes obtrusively so, with closely researched details. We see the home King lived in as a boy and the smoking and careless diet of a man who knew he wouldn't live long anyway. We learn his G.P.A. at Moorehouse (2.48) and even his blood pressure when he met Coretta Scott (134/64). We're told which philosophers he read and what he thought of them. Both Matthew and Smith become vehicles for Johnson's own erudition, straining their fictional credibility yet enriching the book.

Fictional credibility seems low among Johnson's priorities, as he often shows a Shakespearean disregard for fact in minor plot details. King gives Smith an envelope of \$200 bills, which were never minted, and Matthew lusts for an actress who was still in high school in 1966. Less excusable is Johnson's citing as part of King's final Memphis speech lines he spoke at the 1963 March on Washington.

Though flawed, particularly at its hasty end, this novel marks a major achievement. As usual, Johnson writes with compelling profundity and power (when he was a high school junior, my son wanted to attend the Univ. of Washington just to study under him). Like Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and the gospel writers, Johnson takes us to a time, one within living memory, when a "dreamer" among us saw love as our redemptive principle and strongest weapon before he "died for our collective racial sins."

In the opening scene, Matthew says of King's sermons, "His conclusions were never merely closures but always seemed to be fresh starting points." That would serve as an apt metaphor for both King himself and this haunting tribute to him.