



Mandela: The Authorized Biography

By Anthony Sampson

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Nelson Mandela, who emerged from twenty-six years of political imprisonment to lead South Africa out of apartheid and into democracy, is perhaps the world's most admired leader, a man whose life has been led with exemplary courage and inspired conviction.

Now Anthony Sampson, who has known Mandela since 1951 and has been a close observer of South Africa's political life for the last fifty years, has produced the first authorized biography, the most informed and comprehensive portrait to date of a man whose dazzling image has been difficult to penetrate. With unprecedented access to Mandela's private papers (including his prison memoir, long thought to have been lost), meticulous research, and hundreds of interviews--from Mandela himself to prison warders on Robben Island, from Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo to Winnie Mandela and F. W. de Klerk, and many others intimately connected to Mandela's story--Sampson has composed an enlightening and necessary story of the man behind the myth.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

British journalist Anthony Sampson first met Nelson Mandela in 1951, when Sampson was editing a black magazine in Johannesburg, and his biography of the leader benefits greatly from his long familiarity with South Africa and his access to the 81-year-old statesman's unpublished letters and documents. These are particularly helpful in chronicling Mandela's political and spiritual odyssey during 27 years in prison, when the fiery anti-apartheid militant condemned to life imprisonment in 1964 evolved into a dignified, authoritative leader convinced that "reconciliation would be essential to survival." The roots of this stance lie deep in African history; Sampson's excellent chapters on Mandela's rural youth remind readers that he was the aristocratic scion of a royal family who early imbibed the tribal tradition of *ubuntu* (mutual responsibility and compassion) and the local king's emphasis on ruling by consensus. South Africa's relatively peaceful transition to multiracial democracy owes much to Mandela's ability to voice these concepts in contemporary terms. And Sampson's detailed explication of the ins and outs of revolutionary politics over five decades--though sometimes heavy going for the general reader--vividly reveals how his subject achieved the political and moral maturity that made his 1994 election as the nation's first black president both inevitable and exhilarating. --Wendy Smith

From Publishers Weekly

Perhaps no living historical figure, with the possible exception of Pope John Paul II, enjoys the worldwide honor and affection accorded Nelson Mandela. All the more remarkable, then, that Sampson, who first met Mandela in 1951, succeeds at the formidable task of writing a multifaceted portrait of Mandela as viewed through his interactions with the widest imaginable array of people, from heads of state to brutal, near-illiterate prison guards. "The prison years are often portrayed as a long hiatus in the midst of Mandela's political career," Sampson writes, "but I see them as the key to his development, transforming the headstrong activist into the reflective and self-disciplined world statesman." As Sampson sees it, this transformation was one in a series as Mandela evolved from favorite son of a minor chief to protectee of the tribal Regent, from an aristocrat accustomed to deference to a hard-working student in a missionary school meritocracy, from country boy to urban lawyer, from tribal-identified youth to committed multiracialist. Sampson makes much of Mandela's gift for befriending enemies, a gift that led to Mandela's role in South Africa's national reconciliation. Sampson notes, however, that the social and economic transformation Mandela saw as reconciliation's necessary corollary has yet to come to fruition. More than a comforting story of moral heroism, Sampson offers a gritty tale of a struggle unfinished. He manages to give readers a flawed, flesh-and-blood Mandela who is infinitely more interesting and more admirable for being real than the myth. 24 pages of photos; maps not seen by PW. (Sept.)
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From Library Journal

Sampson, a prolific British journalist, has written a richly detailed hymn of praise to the famed South African freedom fighter. While asserting that Mandela is hardly perfect, as his official biographer Sampson certainly emphasizes Mandela's enormous accomplishments. Focusing on his long incarceration from 1962 to 1990, the author concludes that Mandela's genius lay in his ability to be a master politician while retaining his profound belief in forgiveness and reconciliation. Although sometimes naive and perhaps too enamored of loyalty, Mandela, through the force of his personality and beliefs, held South Africa together as it moved to a multiracial polity. Based on hundreds of interviews and Mandela's private papers, this is the best study of Mandela yet. Recommended for college and public libraries.
--Anthony O. Edmonds, Ball State Univ., Muncie, IN
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Users Review

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