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view, the two girls, Yokie (Yolanda) and Bunny (Bernice), face tough odds in the marriage market. "Black women have a difficulty finding, you know, black men who are comparable," Mrs. King told us. "So many are in prison."

But to Mrs. King, there is another reason her children all remain single: "Some people would not want to be part of us, especially the way the media has tried to destroy us. Nobody wants to put their lives out there like that. They don't want to be written about and talked about."

This tinge of resentment, and defensiveness, threads through any discussion with the King family. They feel misunderstood, and mistreated, by their critics, and in recent years there have been plenty of them.

In one notable instance, Martin's younger brother, Dexter, reached an agreement with Time Warner to sell their father's words and images. Published reports said the deal eventually could be worth between \$30 million and \$50 million, though part of the profit, obviously, depends on the market.

From a legal viewpoint, the family has the right to make such a deal. The argument is more one of taste, even morality. If Martin Luther King Jr. is a national hero, worthy of a national holiday, should he also be a commodity, up for sale on the open market?

Martin III defends his family by saying nobody can spread his father's message "quicker and better" than one of the world's largest communications companies. But it's also clear the family wants and needs the money. Dr. King left them no financial inheritance, just his reputation. "That's all we really have," says his son.

And, he adds, the demands on the family are enormous. The Kings are "almost like royalty," and it's hard to be royalty "if you don't have the trappings of royalty." In one sense he's talking about expenses, from travel to security. In another he's talking about public service. Says Martin: "The bottom line is if you have dollars, you are in a greater position to help people. But if you have nothing, then it makes it kind of tough."

Critics who grimace over the family's finances gasp at the Kings' conviction that James Earl Ray did not kill their father.

Again, the lead player here is younger brother Dexter, but Martin agrees with him. When we asked if he was sure of Ray's innocence, King replied flatly: "I am convinced that he was not involved."

Pressed for an explanation, he turned evasive. The family wants Ray to have a trial, he said, so the truth can come out. What's the truth? The government was responsible, he answered. So was the Mob. And some shadowy economic elite that objected to King's proposals for redistributing the nation's wealth. "Martin Luther King Jr. was killed," said his son, "because he was threatening someone's economic interest."

Mrs. King is equally committed to a massive conspiracy theory. "I don't think America wants to know the truth," she says.

Historian and King biographer Garrow calls these theories "complete crap" fed by "wacko lawyers" and film director Oliver Stone, who wants to make a movie about the conspiracy. But the family wants to believe what they are told, Garrow says, because in their minds, "something as huge as Dr. King's death has to have a larger reason than little James Earl Ray."

Martin III was reluctant to take over his father's old job. He worried about being shot, finding a wife, measuring up. "I was concerned about this tremendous weight," he says, and so was his mother. "I knew it would be difficult for him to be his own person in that situation," she said.

He prayed and delayed for many months and finally said yes. He knows he will never achieve what his father did. But his mother always told him to "just be the best of what you are." And that's his goal. To be Martin. To be a man. Not a saint. ❧

Contributing Editors Cokie and Steve Roberts last wrote about Colin Powell.