Mother Emanuel: Two Centuries of Race, Resistance, and Forgiveness in One Charleston Church

The Book in 60 Seconds

Mother Emanuel is the story of one Charleston church — Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church — told across two centuries, from its roots in a breakaway by free and enslaved Black Methodists in 1818 to the murder of nine worshippers there on June 17, 2015, and the forgiveness some of their families offered two days later. Kevin Sack argues that the forgiveness at Emanuel was not a sudden, inexplicable act of grace, but an inherited practice: a religious discipline and a survival tool forged under enslavement, carried alongside an equally long tradition of resistance. Resistance and forgiveness, in this history, are not opposites. They are twin traditions that helped a community endure.

That is the central promise and the central challenge of the book. Most Americans who know Emanuel at all know it for a single night: a Wednesday Bible study, a young white supremacist welcomed in to pray, and then gunfire that killed the pastor, the Reverend Clementa Pinckney, and eight members of his congregation — the people now remembered as the Emanuel Nine. Many also remember what happened at the bond hearing on June 19, when six family members spoke directly to the killer and offered forgiveness, and a week later, when President Barack Obama delivered the eulogy for Pinckney and ended by singing "Amazing Grace."

Sack, a journalist who spent thirty years at The New York Times and shared in Pulitzer Prize–winning work, refuses to let that night stand alone. He treats June 2015 as the latest chapter in a much older American story, one that begins in a port city where nearly half of the enslaved Africans brought to North America first disembarked, in a country whose Civil War began in that same harbor. To understand why those families could say what they said — and why other families could not, or did not — you have to understand what this church had taught, practiced, buried, and survived for two hundred years.

The result is a large book, 480 pages, published by Crown in June 2025. It was named a New York Times Editors' Choice, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction, and appeared on best-book lists from NPR and Kirkus, as well as the New York Times 10 Best Books of 2025 list. Its deeper value is in the proportion it restores: the shooting matters enormously in these pages, but so does everything that made Emanuel Emanuel long before the cameras arrived.

The Story and Central Argument

Charleston is not a backdrop in this book. It is a cause. Sack begins with the city itself — beautiful, historic, proud of its architecture and its manners, and built on a brutal foundation. Charleston was one of the central ports of the North American slave trade. Nearly half of the enslaved Africans who survived the crossing to what became the United States came through its harbor. Slavery there was not distant or abstract. It was the labor system, the wealth system, and the social order, visible in the streets, the markets, and the churches.

The church that would become Emanuel began in defiance of that order. In 1817, free and enslaved Black Methodists broke away from white-controlled Methodist churches in Charleston, where Black worshippers were segregated, subordinated, and denied full dignity in the very places that preached a gospel of salvation. In 1818 they organized the African Church, allied with the African Methodist Episcopal denomination founded in Philadelphia by Richard Allen. It was the predecessor of Emanuel and, in time, Emanuel would become the oldest AME church in the South. Among its founders was Morris Brown, who would become a major figure in the AME Church itself. To found a Black-controlled church in a slaveholding city in 1818 was not simply a religious decision. It was an institutional act of self-determination under conditions designed to deny exactly that.

For people whom the law treated as property or as permanently unequal, a congregation was also one of the few places to meet, organize, educate, bury the dead with honor, and imagine a different moral order. It gave its members a language — Exodus, deliverance, a God who sees suffering — and a practice of gathering week after week as a people.

The danger of that independence became clear almost immediately. Denmark Vesey, a literate, free Black carpenter associated with the church, was accused in 1822 of plotting a large-scale insurrection of enslaved people in Charleston. Vesey and dozens of others were hanged. Sack is careful here, and readers should be too: historians still debate the scale, the details, and even the existence of the plot as prosecutors described it. The surviving evidence comes heavily through the records of a white court determined to make an example, under conditions where testimony was extracted in terror. What is not debated is the consequence. The original church was destroyed, its leaders were punished or scattered, and the congregation was driven underground. For more than four decades, until after the Civil War, Black Methodists in Charleston worshipped in secret, in defiance of a city that understood perfectly well what an independent Black church made possible.

Sack returns to that pattern throughout: Emanuel is born in resistance, crushed for the threat it represents, preserved in hiding, and reborn in freedom. When the church was formally re-established in 1865, it rose on Calhoun Street, where it still stands. Its first post–Civil War pastor, the Reverend Richard Harvey Cain, embodied the possibilities of Reconstruction: a church leader who went on to serve in Congress. For a brief, embattled period, the church that had been forced underground could send its pastor to the legislature of the nation that had enslaved its members.

That period did not last. Reconstruction collapsed, Jim Crow hardened, and Charleston settled into a long century of segregation. Yet Emanuel remained a civic as well as a spiritual institution. Its pulpit tells the story. Booker T. Washington spoke there in 1909. W. E. B. Du Bois spoke there in 1921 — two names that map a famous argument within Black America about strategy, and Emanuel hosted both. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke there in 1962. In the 1960s the Reverend Benjamin J. Glover served as both pastor and a leader in the local NAACP. In 1969, Coretta Scott King came to Charleston in support of striking Black hospital workers, mostly women, whose fight for union recognition and decent pay became a defining labor and civil rights battle of the era. Emanuel stood close to the center of that history too. This long middle matters to Sack's argument: if Emanuel were only a place of quiet piety, the forgiveness of 2015 might look like submission. Instead, the same congregation that practiced forgiveness also sheltered protest, hosted organizers, and produced political leaders — often the same people, in the same week.

Then comes June 17, 2015. Sack reconstructs the night with restraint and with attention to the nine people who were killed, not only to the man who killed them. Clementa Pinckney was forty-one, the church's pastor and a South Carolina state senator, a man who moved, like Cain before him, between pulpit and legislature. He had welcomed the visitor into the Bible study that evening, following the church's practice of hospitality. The visitor was a twenty-one-year-old white supremacist who had chosen Emanuel precisely for its symbolism — a historic Black church in a historic slave port — and who murdered Pinckney and eight worshippers after sitting with them in study and prayer.

Sack does not treat the killer's ideology as an inexplicable aberration. He places it in the same Charleston history the book has been tracing: a city where white supremacy was once the explicit law, where the first shots of the Civil War were fired to preserve a slaveholding republic, and where Confederate symbols retained public honor well into the twenty-first century. The massacre was modern, and it was also old. The book insists on holding both.

What made the story travel around the world, however, was the bond hearing two days later, on June 19, when family members were given the chance to speak. Six of them offered forgiveness to the man who had just destroyed their lives. Their words were broadcast everywhere, and for many viewers they seemed almost superhuman: grief and grace in the same sentence, less than forty-eight hours after the killings.

Sack's central argument is that those words should not be treated as a miracle that fell from the sky, nor as a requirement that other grieving people failed to meet. Forgiveness at Emanuel was an inherited practice. Inside the Black church tradition that Emanuel carried, forgiveness had been taught for generations not as a feeling that arrives when pain subsides, but as a discipline that believers practice before the feeling comes — a way of refusing to let the person who harmed you occupy your soul, a way of handing vengeance to God, and, under enslavement and its aftermath, a survival tool. If hatred consumed the community, the community might not survive. Forgiveness, in that frame, was never about excusing the crime. It was about preserving the people the crime was meant to break.

The book is equally clear about the limits of that story. Not all of the families forgave — not on that day, in that room, or in public at all — and Sack treats that difference with respect rather than as a problem to be explained away. Felicia Sanders, who survived the shooting, lost her son, Tywanza Sanders, and her aunt, Susie Jackson, that night. Her presence corrects any tidy version of events. Survival is not serenity. A person can share the faith of those who forgave and still experience grief as anger, exhaustion, and a wound that does not close on a news cycle. Forgiveness at Emanuel was real, profound, and rooted in tradition — and it was neither universal nor owed to anyone.

The final movement follows what happened after the world's attention moved on. Obama's eulogy for Pinckney, delivered on June 26, 2015, forms a public climax: the president traced Pinckney's life, spoke of grace as a gift rather than an achievement, addressed the Confederate flag and the unfinished work of racial justice, and then, in one of the most remembered moments of his presidency, began to sing "Amazing Grace," with the congregation rising to join him. Sack treats the moment seriously without treating it as an ending. A hymn can name a truth; it cannot do the work of the years that follow.

Those years were hard. Donations poured in from around the world — generosity that also became an administrative and emotional burden for a congregation deciding how memorial money should be handled and shared. Longer pressures did not disappear: members moving to suburbs, younger generations less bound to their grandparents' denomination, a historic and expensive building to maintain, and a Charleston transformed by tourism and gentrification, where the descendants of the people who built the city were increasingly priced out of it. A book that ended in 2015 with a hymn would be a tribute. A book that follows the congregation into its struggles afterward is a history.

Key Ideas, Explained Plainly

The first key idea is that a church can be a country in miniature. For Black Charleston in the nineteenth century, the independent church was one of the only institutions the community controlled itself. It kept records, raised leaders, educated children, cared for widows, and preserved a counter-narrative: that its members were children of God and citizens in waiting, whatever the law said. When Sack spends hundreds of pages on pastors, schisms, and denominational politics, he is not padding a parish history. He is showing how freedom gets institutionalized — how an idea survives because a building, a budget, a choir, and a membership roll carry it from one generation to the next.

The second idea is the twin-traditions thesis, the heart of the book. Resistance and forgiveness are usually presented as opposites: you fight back or you let go, you demand justice or you show mercy. Emanuel's history suggests they are better understood as two disciplines practiced by the same community for different purposes. Resistance addresses the world: it says the conditions that produced the harm must change. Forgiveness addresses the interior life and the community's future: it says the harm will not be allowed to dictate who we become. A congregation could march against segregation in the afternoon and pray for the souls of segregationists at night without experiencing that as a contradiction, because the two acts answered different questions. Sack's achievement is to make that logic legible to readers who did not grow up inside it, without flattening it into a Hallmark sentiment.

Third, forgiveness here is a practice, not a personality trait. This distinction matters. If forgiveness were simply something especially saintly people feel, then the families at the bond hearing would be exceptions with nothing to teach anyone. But in the tradition Sack describes, forgiveness is closer to a craft learned through repetition: through prayers said when they are hard to say, through sermons heard since childhood, through watching elders bury loved ones lost to violence and still refuse hatred as a way of life. That does not make it easy, and Sack never claims it does. Discipline is precisely what people rely on when ease is unavailable. Understanding forgiveness as practice also changes how readers should judge those who did not offer it. A practice can be honored without being demanded on a schedule, and grief does not keep liturgical time.

Fourth, the book is an argument about how memory works in America. Charleston sells its history beautifully, while its central fact, slavery, was for generations treated as an embarrassment to be mentioned quietly or not at all. Emanuel kept a different memory; its very survival testified that the city's story could be told from the perspective of the enslaved and their descendants. The fight over the Confederate flag after 2015 is one episode in a much longer contest the book traces: whose suffering counts as history, and whose version of the past gets cast in bronze.

Fifth, Sack insists on the ordinariness of endurance. Between the famous dates lie decades of budgets, roof repairs, funerals, and declining attendance — work done faithfully by unglamorous people, without which no institution survives two centuries. That respect doubles as a warning: the Emanuel celebrated in 2015 was already fragile, pressed by the gentrification and demographic change reshaping Black institutions across American cities. Admiration is cheap; preservation costs money, members, and attention long after the cameras leave.

Sixth, and most uncomfortably, the book asks what the wider culture wants from Black forgiveness. The bond hearing footage was shared so widely, and praised so extravagantly, partly because it offered a grieving nation absolution of its own: if the victims' families could forgive, perhaps the rest of the country could feel that grace had settled the account. Sack does not accuse the families of anything — their words were theirs, freely given and rooted in their faith. But he allows readers to notice the appetite that received those words, and to ask whether a society that celebrates forgiveness this intensely is equally committed to the justice that should accompany it. Forgiveness given freely by the wounded is a gift. Forgiveness expected of the wounded, as the price of public sympathy, is a burden. The book lives in the space between those two sentences.

How to Approach Reading It

Come to this book as a work of history first and a work about a famous crime second. Readers expecting a true-crime reconstruction of June 2015 will spend a long time in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries first, and some will feel impatient. That impatience is worth examining rather than obeying, because the long build is the argument: Sack believes the night cannot be understood without the centuries.

A useful way in is to read it in four movements and pause between them. The first runs from Charleston's role in the slave trade through the African Church, the Vesey crisis, and the underground congregation. The second covers rebirth in 1865, Reconstruction through Cain, and the long Jim Crow century of Washington, Du Bois, King, Glover, and the 1969 hospital workers' strike. The third is 2015 itself: Pinckney, the Nine, the shooting, the bond hearing, and the eulogy. The fourth is the aftermath — donations, decline, and gentrification. That map keeps the 480 pages from feeling like one undifferentiated march.

Keep a light note of names and dates as you go; the cast spans two centuries, and a simple timeline in the margin will repay the effort, especially in the dense middle chapters. Read the Vesey chapter slowly and skeptically, in the way Sack invites: the archive was created by the persecutors, and certainty is the one thing an honest reader cannot have. What matters most is why white Charleston believed it had to destroy the church either way — and why Black Charleston remembered Vesey as it did.

It also helps to decide in advance how you will handle the forgiveness material. Resist two temptations: romanticizing the families as symbols rather than people, and explaining their words away as social pressure. Sack's reporting supports neither shortcut. Take the statements of those who forgave at face value, sit with those who did not with equal respect, and let the tension stand. That tension is the most honest thing in the book.

Finally, pace yourself. At 480 dense pages, this is not a weekend skim for most readers; it is a two-week companion. Readers who finish it tend to find that the length, initially daunting, is what makes the ending matter.

Memorable Lines

Sack is a reporter first, and the book's most powerful lines are more often spoken by the people of Emanuel than coined by its author. Two short, attributed moments carry the book's meaning better than any summary can.

President Obama, in his eulogy for Clementa Pinckney, described grace in words that have been quoted ever since: "this whole week, I've been reflecting on this idea of grace." The simplicity is the point — a president, in a pulpit, thinking aloud about a gift his office could not command, before he began to sing "Amazing Grace" and the congregation joined him.

From the bond hearing itself, the words that traveled furthest were those of Nadine Collier, daughter of Ethel Lance, who told the killer, in part: "I forgive you." Two words of that sentence, heard in context — a daughter speaking days after her mother's murder, through tears, as an act of faith rather than a feeling — explain why the hearing became the moral center of the national story. Sack's reporting is at its best in showing what it cost to say them, and in reminding readers that other families in the same room, with the same faith, were not able or willing to say them then.

If a single phrase from the tradition itself sums up the book, it is the hymn's own opening — "Amazing grace" — not because it resolves anything, but because Emanuel's people kept singing it in circumstances that gave them every reason to stop.

Fair Criticisms

The most common criticism is also the simplest: the book is long and, in places, dense. Four hundred and eighty pages is a serious commitment, and the middle sections on denominational politics, pastoral successions, and Charleston civic detail will test readers whose interest is mainly in 2015. Some reviewers and readers have wished for a tighter narrative, and the wish is understandable even if accepting it would have changed the book's nature. Sack chose completeness — a full institutional biography — over momentum. Different readers will judge that trade differently, but no one should start the book unaware that it was made.

A second criticism concerns framing, and it applies as much to the book's reception as to the book itself. Coverage inevitably centers the shooting, because the shooting is why a national audience picks it up — yet a book arguing that Emanuel is far more than the site of a massacre has to fight its own marketing. Many readers will skim the two centuries to get to the one night, reproducing exactly the imbalance Sack set out to correct.

Third, the forgiveness framing carries a danger that Sack knows about and that critics have pressed anyway. To celebrate forgiveness as Emanuel's inherited genius is to risk implying that forgiveness is what Black victims owe — that the proper response to racist violence is grace rather than rage, and that those who cannot forgive have somehow fallen short. The book works hard against that implication: it gives space to families who did not forgive, it treats Felicia Sanders' grief as testimony rather than failure, and it roots forgiveness in a tradition that also produced protest. Still, a frame can escape its author's care once it enters public debate, and readers should stay alert to how easily this story can be misused by audiences who want absolution more than they want change.

Fourth, the Vesey material rests on contested evidence, and honest readers have to hold it as contested. The documentary record of the alleged 1822 plot was produced by a slaveholding court with every incentive to exaggerate, and modern historians disagree sharply about what Vesey actually planned. Sack presents the debate, but any narrative built on such sources involves judgment calls that specialists may dispute. The right response is not to discard the chapter — the repression that followed is documented beyond argument — but to read its reconstructions with the uncertainty flag flying.

Finally, the book can occasionally turn sermonic. Sack admires Emanuel, and at moments the reporter's voice yields to the eulogist's. For many readers that warmth is earned; those who prefer their history at a cooler distance will notice passages where admiration does work that analysis might have done better. It is a minor flaw in a major book.

Why It's on the List

The New York Times placed Mother Emanuel on its 10 Best Books of 2025 list, and the choice explains itself once you see what the book attempts. Each year that list tries to identify not just enjoyable books but consequential ones — works that change how readers understand a subject they thought they knew. The Emanuel shooting is one of the most covered American tragedies of the past decade. Sack's book demonstrates that almost everything the national coverage emphasized — the shocking evil of the murders, the shocking grace of the forgiveness — becomes deeper, stranger, and more instructive when set inside two centuries of institutional history. It is a book that takes a story the country consumed in a week and gives it back as a story the country has been living for two hundred years.

The critical record backs the selection. The book was a New York Times Editors' Choice, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction, and a presence on best-book lists from NPR and Kirkus. Sack's credentials matter: a thirty-year career at the Times and a share in Pulitzer-winning reporting signal shoe-leather reporting joined to an instinct for the large public story. Here that instinct is turned toward an institution rather than an event, which is rarer and harder. A biography of a church that can hold slavery, Reconstruction, civil rights, labor struggle, massacre, and gentrification inside one continuous narrative, without losing the human thread, is not common.

Timing played a part as well. The book appeared in June 2025, the tenth anniversary of the shooting. Sack offered something better than commemoration: a reckoning with what the decade since had actually brought the congregation — continuing grief, hard questions about money and memorialization, and the unglamorous pressures facing historic Black churches everywhere. It is the rare anniversary book built to outlast its occasion, and it leaves its largest questions open deliberately: what a society owes the institutions that carried its most oppressed citizens, and what the rest of us should do with a story of forgiveness we find beautiful — admire it, learn from it, or examine why we need it so much.

What to Read Next

Readers who finish Mother Emanuel usually want three kinds of books next: more about the tradition Emanuel belongs to, more about Charleston and the world slavery made there, and more — carefully chosen — about 2015 itself and the meaning of forgiveness.

For the tradition, start with biographies of the AME Church's founders. A life of Richard Allen, the formerly enslaved preacher who founded the denomination in Philadelphia, shows how national the vision was from the start: independent Black churches as a network of freedom institutions across a slaveholding republic. Pair it with a life of Morris Brown, Emanuel's founder who became the AME Church's second bishop. A biography of a minister-legislator in Richard Harvey Cain's mold opens up the brief, astonishing Reconstruction period when Emanuel's pastors could plausibly become congressmen — and how violently that period was ended.

For Charleston itself, seek out a modern history that centers the slave trade rather than treating it as preface, and a history of the Denmark Vesey affair read with the scholarly debate in mind — two accounts with different conclusions will show how much depends on sources generated by a court of enslavers. For 1969, look for histories of the Charleston hospital workers' strike, where Black women workers, the labor movement, and the civil rights movement met, and where Coretta Scott King's presence linked Charleston to the national movement.

For 2015 and its meaning, choose with care, because the shelf is uneven. The strongest companions are works grounded in the families' and the congregation's own voices — accounts that spend time on who the Emanuel Nine were in life rather than only in death, and that follow the survivors into the years after the funerals. Felicia Sanders' story, wherever you find it told at length and with her participation, is essential counterweight reading: what recovery actually looks like when the world has cast you in a story about grace. On forgiveness itself, turn to writing from within the Black church tradition that treats it as discipline — and to its critics, including Black writers who have questioned the expectation placed on Black grief, so Sack's twin-traditions argument can be tested against the liveliest available disagreement.

Finally, consider reading forward rather than back. Histories of gentrification in Charleston and of the broader crisis of historic Black churches — shrinking congregations, landmark buildings with landmark-sized repair bills, neighborhoods transformed around them — show why Sack's final chapters matter beyond one city. Emanuel's question is now the question of hundreds of congregations: how does an institution built to survive slavery and segregation survive success, sympathy, and rising real-estate prices? Mother Emanuel does not answer it. After two centuries in its company, it makes you understand why the answer matters — and why it will be written, as the rest of this story was, mostly by the people who keep showing up.