

Putting to rest King plot, giving his message life

**A Knock at Midnight:
Inspirations From the
Great Sermons of Reverend
Martin Luther King, Jr.**
Edited by Clayborne Carson
and Peter Holloran
Warner Books
234 pp., \$20

**Killing the Dream:
James Earl Ray
and the Assassination
of Martin Luther King, Jr.**
By Gerald Posner
Random House
446 pp., \$25

**Orders to Kill:
The Truth Behind the Murder
of Martin Luther King, Jr.**
By William F. Pepper
Warner Books
558 pp., \$16 (paper)

By Richard Willing

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The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., whose sermons often meditated on life's ironies, would have made hay out of this one: Of the three books issued in conjunction with this month's 30th anniversary of his death, only one has to do with his life's message.

The other two deal with the baroque and twisted theories that do not accept that King was murdered by a lone rifleman, James Earl Ray, as he stood on a Memphis motel balcony April 4, 1968. The King conspiracy theories, some of which would stretch the credulity of a moron, seem destined to outshout if not outlive King's legacy.

Some, such as those espoused by Ray's current lawyer, William F. Pepper — that King was dispatched by a military/Mafia/FBI/CIA/Canadian intelligence plot guided by President Johnson — have attracted the support of King's

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widow and four children.

Now comes professional debunker Gerald Posner to lance such fantasies. Combining fresh reporting with a careful review of investigations, and using the common sense that is a scarce commodity in this field, Posner does for the King assassination what he did for the JFK killing in his 1994 book, *Case Closed*.

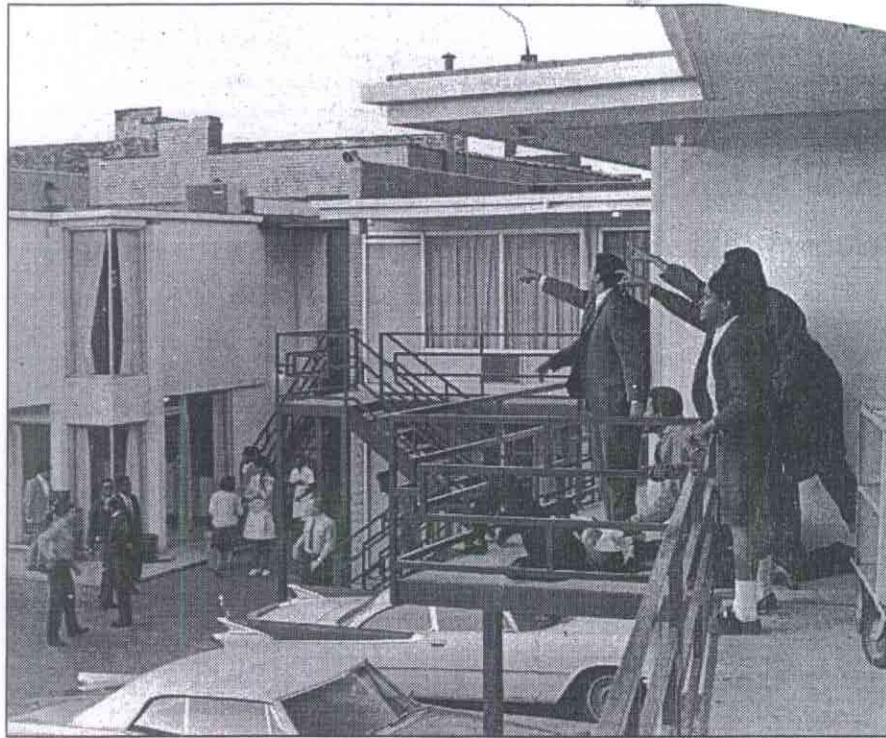
As he did with John F. Kennedy's murder, Posner doesn't merely uphold the official version of the King killing. He marches forward to expose the alternative theories as frauds.

Thus the story of Memphis rib chef Loyd Jowers, who holds that the local Mafia paid him to help set up the shooting and to dispose of the gun, is dismantled by Posner. He shows that Jowers has changed his story repeatedly, has tried to peddle it for money, has offered money to others to entice them to support his version and, most tellingly, could not have helped hide the rifle after the shooting as he claims.

The story of "Raoul," the mystery man Ray has long claimed set him up to look like the shooter, is likewise punctured. Using the testimony of a supposed old girlfriend and a database of home telephone numbers, conspiracists claim to have found the real Raoul, alive and well in upstate New York.

Posner tracks him down, too, and finds an elderly retiree, frightened and bewildered to be implicated in the deed.

Using time cards from the factory where "Raoul" once worked, Posner demonstrates that he couldn't have passed guns, drugs and money to Ray, as Ray claims, in several American cities and in Canada.



1968 file photo by Joseph Louw, Time/AP

Assassination scene on April 4, 1968: Aides to Martin Luther King Jr. tend to their mortally wounded leader on the balcony of a Memphis motel and point out to police where they think gunfire came from.

Not to mention the preposterous proposition that a man who orchestrated the King assassination would be living in retirement in the USA under his own name and would have a listed phone number.

The most interesting questions about the King killing are Ray's motive and whether he had any help setting up the shooting, which he undoubtedly did himself, or in escaping.

"That James Earl Ray has lived 30 years after the murder is persuasive evidence that professional conspirators were not involved," Posner writes.

"If they had been, they would have disposed of him."

Books of sermons or speeches, such as *A Knock at Midnight*, are a tough sell. The texts were written to be spoken, not read. The interaction of the audience, such a vital part of any black church sermon, is impossible to recover.

But this volume of 11 King sermons overcomes those burdens to take on a life of its own, both as a historical artifact and

a good read.

It follows the development of King's ministry from a sermon given in 1954, when he was 25, through one given days before his death. Some of the references are of course dated, but the message is surprisingly fresh. King's call for "economic justice," for instance, the issue that brought him to Memphis in April 1968 to support a strike by sanitation workers, clearly had its roots in his early sermons.

But it is as a soul journey that King's sermons are most useful.

"In the quiet recesses of my mind," the great civil rights leader once observed, "I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher."

Here we see him preaching sermons that get to the heart of things — death and resurrection, eternity, the necessity of living a life not dependent on things that come and go. That there is a heaven, and that Matthew 25 shows how to get there.

Speaking two months before

his death, King describes a eulogy for a life that he measures by Matthew's yardstick.

"Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize — that's not important," he says.

"I want you to be able to say that I did try to feed the hungry ... clothe those who were naked ... visit those who were in prison. ..."

"I just want to leave a committed life behind."

Of Pepper's *Orders to Kill*, the less said the better.

The most interesting part is the introduction, written by Dexter Scott King, King's conspiracy-oriented son. Dexter King praises Pepper's "exhaustive research" but somehow manages to be off by two years in calculating his own age at the time of his father's death.

Makes you wonder who wrote this for him, or at least who proofread it.

I smell a cover-up.

Richard Willing covers legal affairs for USA TODAY.

Argument against King conspiracy irrational

There is something askew in the unequivocal tone of Richard Willing's review of Gerald Posner's new book, *Killing the Dream* ("Putting to rest King plot, giving his message life," Book Reviews, *Life*, April 9).

The way Willing praises Posner for not only sustaining the "official" version of Martin Luther King's death but also for destroying all other credible theses goes beyond mere arrogance; it's cynicism of the worst variety.

The nature of any thinking person is to indeed question authority, a fact that eludes both Posner and Willing. There is no clearer proof of their irrational logic than in Posner's claim: "That James Earl Ray has lived 30 years after the murder is persuasive evidence that professional conspirators were not involved."

Isn't Posner betraying this very sentiment in his other book on JFK, *Case Closed*, when he ignores the multitude of documented deaths as evidence of a conspiracy?

This only showcases Posner's slippery relationship with truth, switching methodology from subject to subject.

Neither he nor Willing's fawning review should have been printed without stronger editorial restraint.

Oliver Stone, filmmaker
Santa Monica, Calif.

Teachers deserve recognition