

Assassination Buffery

CODE NAME "ZORRO"

The Murder of Martin Luther King Jr.
By Mark Lane and Dick Gregory.
Illustrated. 314 pp. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.:
Prentice-Hall. \$9.95.

By THOMAS POWERS

IN this treacherous, uncertain world of pain, conflict and failed possibility there is little of which we can be sure. But in that slender company of the reliable are two mighty rocks which reassure us that some things truly abide: These are the twin facts that the assassination buffs are never going to give up, and that we—and I mean all of us—are never going to know the truth about the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.

These dismal conclusions, and it is hard to say which sinks the spirits lower, follow from a conscientious reading of the latest book about the death

of King—"Code Name 'Zorro'" by Mark Lane and Dick Gregory, a somewhat erratic work in which there is not much to recommend and not much to criticize. On the whole it's a sober effort, free of the gaudier conjectures of many other assassination books, but it's impossible to imagine anyone reading it for pleasure—a study of Christian iconography in Edmund Spenser's "The Faerie Queene" would be thrilling by contrast. And nothing but disappointment awaits those who read it for answers. There are no answers, as Lane and Gregory would be the first to admit, only doubts, discrepancies, misleading documents, troubling lacunae, mixed or hidden motives, official malfeasance and human passions of a mean and naked kind. It is, in short, a book perfectly representative of its genre.

There are three things you ought to understand about assassination buffs before idly deciding to take a look at what they're up to. First, there are hundreds

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of them. They hold conventions, publish newsletters, run a veritable committee of correspondence, collect documents and news clippings by the cartload, know everything and have produced a literature that is stupendous in volume. Not even Scrooge McDuck's commodious money bin, three cubic acres, could hold it all.

Second, they are by no means all fools, poltroons or charlatans. They are onto something. Indeed, they are onto a great many things.

In this instance, while Gregory has written the chapters about King himself, including one of genuine feeling about King's last day, Lane tenaciously grips two troublesome facts: the unexplained, last-minute removal of Memphis police detective Ed Redditt from the two-man team guarding King on the day of his murder; and the unexplained transfer of two black firemen from the scene of the crime the same day.

The rest of Lane's substantive case is pretty thin, at times even contradictory. He goes to some length to demonstrate that the prosecution would have had a tough time proving James Earl Ray was actually in the rooming house from which he allegedly shot King, but then goes on to say that Ray himself told him he was there. I don't see how this is supposed to cast doubt on his guilt. In my case, at least, it works quite the other way.

Another Lane chapter pretty well establishes that Ray's second lawyer, Percy Foreman, never intended, and was completely unready, to go to trial in Ray's behalf. Arranging a guilty plea in return for a 99-year sentence was not exactly a brilliant defense, but that does not have much to do with whether or not Ray was guilty.

But what about the transfer of the two black firemen (who, Lane points out, might have grabbed "the killer" as he fled), and the more troubling removal of Ed Redditt? The official explanations are weak and implausible; but I do not know what the facts mean, nor do I ever expect to know. Lane doesn't know either, but he wants to know and won't rest till he does. I figure that's his constitutional right.

The third great fact about assassination buffs is that they

have an eye for the jugular. They have some pretty florid ideas about who killed Kennedy and King, but behind them is a sound instinct that branches of the American intelligence community—specifically the C.I.A. and the F.B.I.—know a great deal more about the circumstances surrounding the murders than they have ever confessed. This is not to say that the C.I.A. and the F.B.I. did it (some of the buffs think that, not I); but they know a lot and are guilty of many other things, if not the deeds themselves. They are much more interested in concealing what they know and what they did than they are in arriving at the "truth," whatever that might be. One reason for their reticence is that you can't say what you know without revealing how you know it, always the touchiest of subjects where intelligence agencies are concerned. But questions about sources and methods are not the only ones the C.I.A. and F.B.I. wish would go away.

In particular, the F.B.I. is sensitive about its campaign to harass, discredit and "destroy" King. This is now well known in outline, but the details of J. Edgar Hoover's long conspiracy are still far from being established, and the men involved have so far eluded anything like justice. This makes the assassination buffs mad and, so far as it goes, I'm with them.

Still, it is one thing to say the F.B.I. was so demonstrably hostile toward King that it might have killed him, and quite another to prove it did. Lane has his doubts and discrepancies, but in considering them I am more impressed with another trait of buff pathology: Lane's almost complete uninterest in everything about Ray except his self-serving story that a mysterious "Raoul" put him up to it. What does Lane expect him to say—he did it and hopes they never let him out of jail? It sticks in the craw that a worm like Ray could have killed King. But, after all, he talked about it in prison, he bought the only rifle discovered at the scene, he took a room overlooking King's motel, he fled Memphis right after the murder and kept on running.

I used to wonder what a can of worms was, exactly. Now I know, and the thought of all those investigators at work for the House Select Committee on Assassinations, busy with their can-openers, does not make me feel confident or curious or anything, except glum. ■