James Earl Ray Book Blurbs Anger King's Son, Associates

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By David Streitfeld
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Martin Luther King III, Andrew Young and Carl Rowan yesterday denounced the publisher of assassin James Earl Ray's autobiography for using quotes by them on the back cover.

The blurbs, the three men said in separate interviews, look like endorsements, which they emphatically are not.

"I'm somewhat shocked," said King, who is a commissioner of Fulton County in Georgia.

"More than somewhat," he amended. "I'm totally shocked. It can be construed that I'm advocating the book."

"Who Killed Martin Luther King?," a professional rewrite of an earlier autobiography, is the latest ingredient in Ray's long-running campaign to get a new trial. He is serving a 99-year sentence for kill-

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ing the civil rights leader. Although he pleaded guilty to the 1968 crime, he has said for at least the last decade that he was framed. The book presents his case.

On the back of the book, alongside a photograph of Ray in a sweater, National Press Books has affixed quotes from King's son, the former Atlanta mayor and the syndicated columnist, whose name is misspelled "Rowen."

King's quote, taken from a 1986 speech, says, "In my opinion it had to be a conspiracy. . . . It's probably a fact that the intelligence community played a role."

"I'm trying to be cordial, but I'm totally incensed," King said. "I don't want to have my name attached to anything by James Earl Ray."

Blurbs are standard fare on hardcover books. Almost invariably, the route by which they get there is the same: The publisher sends out either a copy of the manuscript or an advance galley to other writers, soliciting comments.

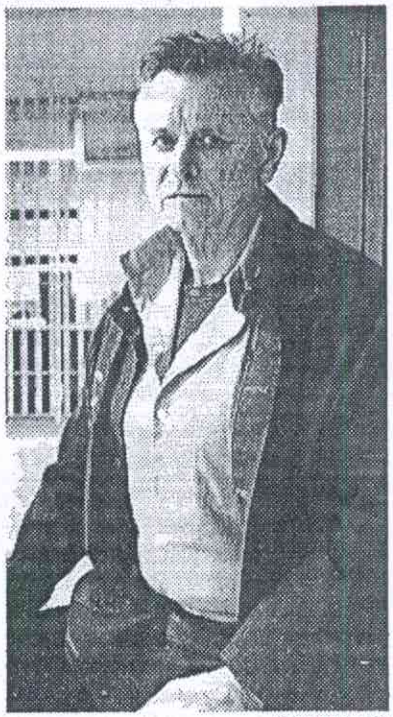
None of that went on here. Rowan, Young and King did not know they were touting Ray's book until contacted by The Washington Post.

Joel Joseph, publisher of the Bethesda-based National Press Books, acknowledged that none of the three knew his words were on the jacket. "In the main, that's correct," he said.

As for King involuntarily lending his credibility to a book written by—and profitable to—the man jailed for murdering his father, Joseph said, "I don't think it's in bad taste. Someone might think so, but I don't."

Ray's royalties on the book will go to pay his legal fees, Joseph added. A law designed to prevent criminals from profiting from books about their crimes, the "Son of Sam" law, was passed after Ray was imprisoned.

Young's blurb reads as follows: "There remain so many unanswered questions that we cannot say we know who killed him and we have the right to know."



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James Earl Ray in prison in 1988.

Yesterday, Young said: "I can't recall ever having said that to anybody. My feeling is that James Earl Ray is guilty. I've always felt there were other people with him, but I never had any question of his guilt. That's the reason I've opposed his retrial. If he knows anything about the assassination all he has to do is say it."

He added that he felt he was being unfairly used by the publisher to hype the book, "but I don't know what you can do about it. I have no interest in the book, and I have no interest in James Earl Ray."

Rowan's blurb says, "Very clearly the FBI is suspect . . . We may never know the truth, but we must search for it."

The columnist yesterday said, "Some jerk has used my name, improperly spelled, to try to give respectability to a book with which I might disagree 95 percent. It's not

James Earl Ray I would point the finger of shame at. It's the publisher who's money-grubbing and unscrupulous in this case."

Publisher Joseph said, "We think [the quotes] add credibility to the book, and that's why they were used . . . I don't see anything improper. Oftentimes people give you quotes on a book and they haven't even read it."

"Who Killed Martin Luther King?" received a bit of publicity earlier this fall when it was revealed that Jesse Jackson had written a foreword.

A spokesman for Jackson's National Rainbow Coalition said Jackson would have no comment beyond a statement issued Nov. 19. "My purpose in writing the foreword is to press to get to the truth," Jackson said in the statement. "That, I believe, can best be done by attaining a fair trial for James Earl Ray."

"Who Killed Martin Luther King?" has a peculiar history. It was originally published in more primitive form as "Tennessee Waltz: The Making of a Political Prisoner" by Saint Andrews Press in Saint Andrews, Tenn., in 1987. That fact is unacknowledged anywhere in the 1991 version.

A note in the earlier edition from Publisher Frederick Tupper Saussy said he ended up with the book because "James has learned that the assets of most of the big publishing houses are controlled by the same dark powers that keep him imprisoned."

Saussy, who expressed an extreme form of anti-government bias in an afterword to the book, practiced what he preached. Shortly after the book's publication, he went underground to avoid a prison sentence for income tax evasion. (In letters to Tennessee newspapers in 1987, Saussy said he had tried to report to prison, but was defeated by a "No Trespassing" sign out front.) About this time, Saussy also said he was being persecuted because of Ray's contention of innocence.

Ray basically says he was set up and that the real villain is the FBI. He says his confession 23 years ago, which eliminated the need for a jury trial, was coerced.

David J. Garrow, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his King biography "Bearing the Cross" in 1987, read the first version. He hasn't yet seen the second, but listened with interest to various allegations made on the dust jacket.

"There is nothing in any of the cited specifics that was not examined and resolved by the House assassinations committee more than 12 years ago," Garrow said. "Anyone who thinks there is should acquaint himself with the committee report."

Rep. Louis Stokes (D-Ohio), who chaired the House committee, also dismissed Ray's conspiracy theory.

"While we found the actions of the [FBI] Director, [J. Edgar] Hoover, to be despicable, reprehensible, illegal, immoral, unconstitutional, both in terms of the actions that he took against Dr. King and other organizations within the civil rights movement, there was no evidence that they were involved in the actual assassination of Dr. King," Stokes said. "James Earl Ray's book does not reveal any new clues, leads or any type of exculpatory evidence related to him."

In dismissing the book, biographer Garrow said that "people don't have a good mechanism for recognizing that this isn't the first time we've seen this schlock . . . One thing I've come to realize over the last 10 years is that a large majority of the American people do believe in assassination conspiracies. That allows events to have large, mysterious causes instead of small, idiosyncratic ones. They like that."

Staff writer Lynne Duke contributed to this report.