

Sun 11/9/99

BOOK REVIEW

Abernathy book remains worth reading

By Jacqueline Thomas
Knight-Ridder News Service

If your only reason for buying "And the Walls Came Tumbling Down" is to read more details about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s sex life, don't bother; you'll be disappointed. You probably already know from the TV talk shows and newspaper stories all there is on that subject in Ralph David Abernathy's autobiography.

Because of the publicity, some who should read the book or might otherwise want to may shy away from it. What a pity that would be.

Mr. Abernathy's is an entertaining, and sometimes quite moving, firsthand account of what to many of us are some of the most important events of the 20th century. Equally fascinating is the tale of his childhood in rural Alabama and his young adulthood, including his stint in the military during World War II.

If Mr. Abernathy — now 63, senior minister of Atlanta's West Hunter Street Baptist Church and in declining health — sometimes inflates his role in events, that's the nature of such books. And who can

And the Walls Came Tumbling Down.

Ralph David Abernathy.
Harper & Row.
638 pages. \$25.

blame him?

Mr. Abernathy, confidant and trusted lieutenant to King, has endured efforts in recent years to write him out of the history of the civil rights movement and of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference for such offenses as endorsing Ronald Reagan. Playing down his role has been more easily accomplished because, as he notes, "I had stood in his [King's] shadow for most of the years, choosing to act as his counselor and sounding board rather than as a public presence or press spokesman."

It was because he was so close to King, of course, that recent criticism of him has been so vehement. Although you wouldn't know it from the level of outrage expressed by some critics, only about three of the book's more than 600 pages are devoted to his account of King's activi-

ties the evening before and the morning of his assassination.

For those who don't expect their leaders and heroes to be saints, there's no cause for great upset. Do Mr. Abernathy's disclosures in any way diminish King's accomplishments? I think not.

Eyewitness accounts by participants often are flawed — either by ax-grinding or sugar-coating. Mr. Abernathy has avoided some of those pitfalls. The book, though, is annoyingly flawed by minor errors. Those helping to prepare the manuscript for publication should have been more scrupulous about double-checking dates and names. For example, Viola, not Violet, Liuzzo was the civil rights worker from Detroit who was murdered in Alabama, and James Parsons, not Pearson, was a black federal judge in Chicago.

But Mr. Abernathy's autobiography doesn't exist in a vacuum. If read in conjunction with other accounts of the civil rights movement and black life in the South earlier in the 20th century, it's a valuable book, especially for younger people with no firsthand memory of the events and era it describes.