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Q & A

Gerold Frank



Alex Gottfryd

The story of Martin Luther King's death, the incredible search for his slayer, and the long road a writer must sometimes travel to discover the truth

GEROLD FRANK'S new book is "An American Death: The True Story of the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Greatest Manhunt of Our Time" (Doubleday). Frank understood thoroughly that in undertaking to write the "true" story of Martin Luther King's death in Memphis on an April evening in 1968 and the subsequent manhunt that led to the capture, arrest and conviction of James Earl Ray, he would run the gauntlet of skepticism.

"Maybe," he told *PW* in a recent conversation, "we're too much influenced by television. People get the notion from crime stories—and who can forget the controversy about Lee Harvey Oswald's true role in the Kennedy assassination?—that the real story is always more than meets the eye, a conspiracy that would turn out to be a plot, in the story sense, if we only knew all the facts. It isn't necessarily so."

Mr. Frank's engrossing narrative of James Earl Ray's role in King's slaying is the most thoroughly detailed spelling-out of the case for Ray's sole guilt that any writer has yet achieved. It seems a foregone conclusion that his book will command serious respect for its measured viewpoint.

A tall, distinguished-looking man whose aura of Elder Statesman is immediately dispelled by his cordiality and easy humor, Mr. Frank sketched in detail his more than three years of work—as private sleuth and writer—in trying to solve to his own hardnosed professional satisfaction the big question about Ray's sole responsibility.

Surprisingly, he told how both he and his publisher, Doubleday, were hung up

at first on the widespread conspiracy theory surrounding King's death.

"I was between books," Mr. Frank explained, "and on the Coast watching the filming of my book, 'The Boston Strangler' when King was killed. Of course I was stunned by the tragedy."

His reputation as one of the best true-crime writers around, supported by two Edgars from the Mystery Writers of America for his 1964 book about the political assassination of Lord Moyne, British Minister Resident in Cairo, and his 1967 best seller about the Boston strangler of eleven women, led to the suggestion that he get to work immediately on a book about King's death.

"A quick letter from my Doubleday friend, Lee Barker, clinched my decision," he told *PW*, "and the contract I eventually signed even had a book title that says everything about our general notion of the murder at that time. The title is still on the contract—'Conspiracy.'"

That fact lends considerable weight to Mr. Frank's revised conclusion about the King assassination. *PW* was intrigued by the author's running description of his incredibly painstaking hunting-down of every imaginable clue and fact surrounding the apprehension and conviction of James Earl Ray.

Quoting his friend Ian Koven, chief editorial writer of the London *Daily Telegraph*, Mr. Frank described how the public's common belief in the "infallibility" of police and press leads to cynical acceptance of conspiracy theories in such cases as the King assassination. "Even the mistakes of the police and the press are taken as involuntary confes-

sions that something is being hidden."

The army of investigators—Memphis police, FBI, Scotland Yard—unleashed by the amazing number of rumors and alleged "facts" volunteered or dug up in the weeks following the Memphis tragedy inevitably drew erroneous conclusions. Frank's narrative describes the law's preliminary investigations leading piece-by-piece, through the murder rifle traced to Birmingham, left-behind shorts traced to a Los Angeles laundry, and both "eyewitness" and hearsay testimony, to the identification of John Willard *alias* Harvey Lowmeyer *alias* Eric Starvo Galt as a James Earl Ray who had escaped from the Missouri State Prison in 1961.

"It wasn't difficult at all for the investigators or anyone else to feel certain," Mr. Frank said, "that James Earl Ray had help, if not in killing King then in planning the assassination, in covering up his tracks—the two white Mustangs, for instance, his flight to Canada, then to London, to Lisbon, back again to London—how could one man do it all alone?"

Mr. Frank's own private investigations during the manhunt and after Ray's arrest as "Ramon George Sneyd" in a London airport led him into some bewildering blind pockets. He traveled around this country and in Canada and Europe double-checking with officials, studying documents, visiting places where Ray was known to have been, interviewing virtually everyone who had been associated with Ray since his prison escape in 1961—prostitutes, Ray's brothers, his family, Missouri prisoners and officials, medical and ballistic ex-

perts, even psychotic "witnesses" who had come forth with weird tales of assassins plotting in bus terminal lavatories.

"I kept a special file marked 'bizarre,'" Mr. Frank told *PW*. Like everyone else, he was simply loaded with wild shots and logical-sounding "clues" that pointed to only one conclusion—the wrong one.

Was there a single moment of truth when Mr. Frank pulled himself up short and *knew*, at least to his own intuitive satisfaction, that James Earl Ray had tricked everyone into swallowing the conspiracy theory whole-hog? Any single bit of evidence perhaps that told him Ray alone had slain King and managed, singlehanded, to outmaneuver literally hundreds of the world's best-trained sleuths for more than two months?

"It was something that grew on me slowly," Mr. Frank says. "A pattern emerged—a picture of the kind of man Ray really was began to take shape once I began to question certain 'facts' and eliminate them one by one. As soon as I realized Ray was not the stumblebum I originally believed he was—"

By the time Ray had pleaded guilty in a Memphis court before Judge Battle on March 10, 1969, and accepted a life sentence in place of the death penalty his celebrated attorney Percy Foreman had warned him was an almost certain prob-

ability. Mr. Frank was reassessing everything he knew about Ray.

"I'd spent a tremendous amount of time with all of Ray's lawyers, Hanes, Art Hanes, Jr., Foreman, Judge Battle, the prosecutor Canale, others. Not one could point to a single real person, excepting some prostitutes, who might, on the evidence, have conspired with Ray on the assassination or his escape." Ray's prison character, Mr. Frank says, was that of a jailhouse-lawyer—a definite loner who mistrusted everybody, a man with a high IQ who knew how to buy time, who undoubtedly built up that red-herring story about the Canadian, "Raoul," out of pure cloth much as he had fed back "baited" suggestions deliberately put into his mind alternately by Arthur Hanes and his son, Art Jr., before he fired both as his lawyers.

"We've grown up believing two times two makes four," Mr. Frank says. "But here, I finally became convinced, was a proven compulsive racist who, outside that one aberration, carried a cunning logic all his own and ran true-to-form to the end, firing all his lawyers one by one, throwing doubt on his lone role in King's death even after he'd confessed otherwise.

"The idealist slain by the outcast," is the way Mr. Frank sees it. "In the Boston Strangler case there were all those victims, and they ran all the evidence

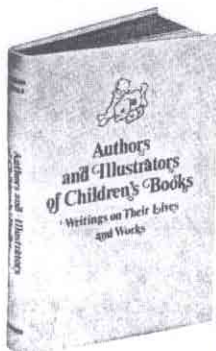
through a computer to find the criminal. Nobody will ever be able to put James Earl Ray through a computer."

ALBERT H. JOHNSTON

MEDIA

HUMAN BEHAVIOR, a new social science magazine, began publication in February. The new magazine will be published bi-monthly in 1972, and monthly hereafter, by the Manson Western Corporation, and will stress the publication of excerpts from scholarly journals as well as original material. The newsstand price is \$1.50 per issue; charter subscriptions (\$7.20) are available from: Human Behavior, Subscription Dept., P.O. Box 2810, Boulder, Colorado 80302.

McGraw-Hill has established the Robert W. Locke Memorial Film Library at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, in honor of the late executive vice-president of the company. The collection, which will include approximately 100 educational, documentary and feature titles, will be housed in the Media Division of the new Monroe C. Gutman Library, and will be available for non-commercial use by the Harvard community.



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