

'True Story' Of King

By THOMAS BEVIER
Staff, The Commercial Appeal

"An American Death" may very well be what author Gerold Frank intends for it—"the true story of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the greatest manhunt of our time."

But something else is required of this book. Others—Jim Bishop and William Bradford Huie, for instance—profited from the journalistic moment by coming out quickly after the event with their books.

MR. FRANK CHOSE, instead, to labor four years. His challenge was to provide a masterful account of a tragedy of historical proportions. But what we have smacks rather of detective magazine journalism, albeit the best of what that genre suggests.

The publisher, Doubleday, has chosen to release "An American Death" with its \$10 price tag this week because it is the anniversary of the April 4, 1968, death of Dr. King.

In a note to the reader, Mr. Frank, writes:

"It is important for us to know the truth about the assassination of Dr. King, who murdered him, why he was murdered, and what took place from beginning to end. We want to know this, if not for the sake of our

own sanity in the world where the bizarre all too often becomes the commonplace, then at least in the hope that, by knowing and understanding it, perhaps in some way — still unfathomable to us—we can help prevent such things in days to come."

BUT, ONE ASKS after reading the book, didn't we already know that truth? and how could anything told here prevent such things in days to come?

The foregoing criticism is not meant to suggest that "An American Death" is not a worthwhile book. It is filled with wonders of detail. One learns, for instance, that after Dr. King's death, an attending doctor tore off the paper cardiograph tape to give it to his children.

IT MAY BE niggling to point out that the detail is not always accurate. Mr. Frank writes, for instance, that many sanitation workers belonged to Centenary United Methodist Church of which the Rev. James M. Lawson Jr., who invited Dr. King to Memphis, is pastor. None belonged.

And the characterizations Mr. Frank draws of principal personalities such as former Sheriff William Morris, sometimes tend to be a little much. This is the way he describes Morris when the sheriff was preparing to escort James Earl Ray, Dr. King's

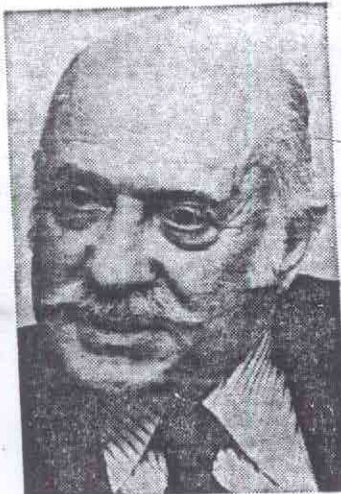


Martin Luther King Jr.

assassin, from the airport at Millington to the county jail:

"ONE HAD THE impression that Morris would be prepared to do away with himself — commit hara-kari were that the sort of a thing an American did — if anything happened to Ray; that if an attack came, he would willingly throw himself in front of the prisoner to take the bullets in his own

Death Shy Of Goal



Gerold Frank



James Earl Ray

body. The sheriff was the kind of man who would walk alone down the center of the street in 'High Noon.' "

If Mr. Frank's writing sometimes borders on the cornball, his skills as a reporter cannot be denied. It is especially with his treatment of Ray, that the book excels.

EVEN THOUGH he never met

Ray, Mr. Frank provides us with a portrait of the assassin which dispels any lingering doubts one might have about whether Ray was part of a conspiracy.

The life of Ray is painstakingly reconstructed—his childhood in poverty, his hatred of Negroes, his life of petty crime and—perhaps most impor-

tantly—an almost macabre self-discipline.

"What must be understood about James Earl Ray," Mr. Frank writes, "is that he is a man utterly alone who made up for his isolation from others by living in a private world of fantasies and, sadly, enacted one of them when he assassinated Dr. King . . ."

"HE WAS COMFORTABLE, therefore, only in a society in which his life was structured for him: That is, in prison. He kept to himself, he was rarely involved in fights, he got along with fellow prisoners, his jailers, needing no one to talk to, to exchange opinions with, to confide in, to lean upon, for he was supported by his own fantasies, which never failed him and allowed him to tolerate even isolation and solitary confinement . . ."

Mr. Frank uses his reporting skills to detail the manhunt for Ray. The efforts of law enforcement were fantastic.

In checking out a lead in a hotel, officers checked registration cards for everyone who had been staying in the 1,000-room hotel, examined all hotel stationery, menus and desk blotters.

It is this sort of detail which makes "An American Death" worthwhile.

But history has yet to be served.

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