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Book Week

APRIL 2, 1972

King's assassination

American society's villainy expressed in a solitary act

AN AMERICAN DEATH: The True Story of the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. By Gerold Frank. Doubleday. \$10.

By Hoke Norris

The 1960s were the decade of the riots, the decade of the assassins. Washington, Chicago, Watts, the Democratic convention; King, two Kennedys, Medgar Evers, three civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Miss., and uncounted others elsewhere in the South (and the heat and the blood of Vietnam). Was there ever such a dreary, deadly decade? If there was, who wanted it? Who wanted the 1960s?

Yet it was also the decade of great and lasting progress. The blacks marched, protested, sat in and won most of their legal battles for civil rights. The proper court judgments were rendered, the needed laws were passed, to make them legally secure in their full American citizenship. That this was a legal victory and not a complete social, economic and cultural victory remains painfully clear, but at least they got the laws that made their future struggles easier and more certain of victory. But not without a price.

Part of that price was the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King was murdered in Memphis on April 4, 1968. On the following June 8 a man who had used a number of names but whose real name turned out to be James Earl Ray was arrested at a London airport on the charge that he had committed the crime. Ray had shot Dr. King and escaped undetected from Memphis alive and teeming with police, and then had escaped from the United States and from Canada. Could he have done so — could he have planned and executed the murder and then got away not only from the scene but from the country — without the support of other persons? Was there a "conspiracy" to assassinate Dr. King?

GEROLD FRANK, PREVIOUSLY the collaborator with celebrities in their memoirs and the biographer of the Boston Strangler, has turned his considerable talents and energies as a reporter loose upon that question and has produced a book that should, but probably will not, satisfy the most skeptical, the most rabid devotee of the conspiracy theory of history. It is Frank's conclusion — based on overwhelming evidence —

that Ray acted alone, that there was no conspiracy.

This is a full-dress investigation. It explores Dr. King's history in the civil rights movement, and Ray's in the prisons of the land, and it moves with novelistic tension toward that dreadful and fatal crossing of the two paths in Memphis four years ago. It makes a good story — a story of crime and its detection, of punishment and its processes.

The unmistakable verdict — that Ray and Ray alone was responsible for the murder that set the country on fire — was rendered as a consequence of some of the best police work I have ever seen put into a book. A pair of pliers was traced to Los Angeles, and so was a bundle of laundry. Guns, binoculars, lint found in an automobile, a tiny identification on a windowsill — all were traced and analyzed and identified and set in their proper places among the links in the chain of evidence.

If there is a hero of this book, it is a policeman — a collective policeman representing all the police involved, from the Memphis patrolman and the Shelby County deputy to the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Their work on the King murder seems sensational, and yet one senses that it was in a way routine. They go through this sort of thing all the time. There can be no doubt that the FBI has no equal in the investigation of crime and the detection and apprehension of criminals. More the pity, then, that the FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover, had seen fit to disseminate slanderous information, gained through illegal wire-tapping, about Dr. King.

BUT FOR THE MOMENT he and the cops are the hero. Then who is the villain?

The quick, obvious answer is James Earl Ray, but it is not good enough. It leaves too much unexplained, too much unmotivated. The real villain, Frank makes clear, without saying so, was American society — the American people.

America was born in violence — in the conquering of the

natives and the wilderness, in revolution. The history of America's treatment of the Indians and other minorities is as dreary and bloody as the 1960s were. And the institution of slavery burned the brand of Ham upon the brow of millions of innocents. The gun was ever at hand, uncontrolled, and is still so.

More specifically, Ray grew up "in a broken home with a drunken mother, an absent father, a retarded brother, a sister who was to be committed to mental institutions — the father an ex-con, his uncle, Earl, an ex-con, Jerry and John, his brothers, ex-cons"; on a street in Quincy, Ill., "notorious for its population of gamblers, pimps, prostitutes, thieves and dope-peddlers." Furthermore, "It was not necessary for anyone to approach Ray and formally offer him a large sum of money to kill King. The urgency to strike at King and all he stood for came out of the very atmosphere in which Ray grew up and lived, particularly in his years in prison where whites were bitterly hostile toward blacks; it came from the knowledge that somewhere in the land there must be those who would 'take good care' of him if he rid the world of Martin Luther King, Jr.; and particularly from the rumor of the million-dollar bounty waiting the man who would do this."

MEMBERS OF Ray's family ran with armed racists of

the South. They were all supporters of George Wallace. Ray himself expected with good reason to be acclaimed the hero. That he was not — not at least overtly by the so-called better people — attests to the nation's sickness of violence and blood. Between Dr. King's murder and Ray's arrest there occurred the murder of Robert Kennedy. There had been just too much of killing, perhaps even for the bloodthirsty. Ray had to go.

Why then did the prosecution agree to a plea of guilty and a sentence of 99 years? It was the custom in Tennessee to offer killers that alternative to trial for their lives. Others had been given the choice. In justice — under the demands of equal treatment — Ray had to get it too. He took it, recanted (predictably) and fought a vigorous but futile legal battle from behind the bars. Frank's verdict — there was no conspiracy — is eminently plausible, despite the outcries that were raised at the time against the plea (they are hiding something that a full dress trial would reveal). Sometimes men do strange and lonely things, and Ray was a strange and lonely man, capable of silence and the solitary act.

Hoke Norris, director of public information for the Chicago Public Library, is a Southern-born novelist, short story writer and critic.

4/2/72

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JAMES EARL RAY: "The urgency to strike . . . came from the knowledge that somewhere in the land there must be those who would 'take good care' of him."

