



AN AMERICAN DEATH:
The True Story of the Assassination of
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the
Greatest Manhunt of Our Time

by Gerold Frank

Doubleday, 467 pp., \$10

Reviewed by Fred J. Cook

■ It was the evening of April 3, 1968. Lightning crackled, thunder crashed, rain drummed in a steady deluge on the roof of the meeting hall in Memphis, Tennessee. And Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., seemed to defy the elements and fate as he made his last great, impassioned speech—during which he described a number of threats against his life. Gerold Frank, who recreates that scene and the atmosphere in a city almost hysterical with tension, probes the minds and describes the emotions of many who heard Dr. King that night. Later they recalled that they had never known King to speak that way before, almost as if he were in

another world looking down at his past on earth.

This is Gerold Frank's account, quoting Dr. King:

"Like anybody I would like to *live* . . . a long life; longevity has its place." He sounded cool, reasonable now, stating what any reasonable man would wish to say and feel. "But I'm not *concerned* about that now . . ." His voice began to rise. "I just want to do God's *will!*" He was carrying his audience with him. "And *He's* allowed me to go up to the mountain . . ." His voice continued rising, its cadences greater, more rolling. "And I've looked over—and I've *see-eeen* . . ." He lingered on the word, his voice high-pitched, tremolo-like, the high singing voice of a violin, it pierced one, "the-*Promised Land.*" Cheers and applause, and cries from the audience. "I may not get there with you, but I want you to *know, tonight, that we-as-a-people-will-get-to-the-Promised Land!*" Each word intense and high, and building up again, after a pause in a quick rush, a torrent of words: "So I'm happy tonight I'm not worried about *anything* I'm not fearing *any* man!" To a crescendo that swept everything before it: "Mine eyes have *seen the glo-ry* of the *com-ing* of the *Lord!*"



In Harlem on September 20, 1958, a demented woman stabbed Martin Luther King, Jr., with a letter opener, seen protruding from his upper chest (top left); in Oslo December 10, 1964, Dr. King holds Nobel Peace Prize gold medal (top, right); in Memphis March 28, 1968—flanked, on left, by Bishop B. Julian Smith and, on right, by the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, Dr. King (below) leads civil rights march: "Like anybody I would like to live . . . a long life; longevity has its place. . . . But I am not concerned about that now . . . I just want to do God's will!"

At 6:01 the next evening, Dr. King, standing on the balcony of his room outside the Lorraine Motel, was slammed violently backwards by a high-powered rifle bullet which, according to the official reconstruction, was fired from the bathroom of a rooming house across the street. A man who called himself John Willard and who was later identified as James Earl Ray had registered there in mid-afternoon. A small-time crook, Ray had failed at almost everything he undertook, his only notable success having been his escape from the Missouri State Penitentiary the previous year.

Gerold Frank reveals a flair for drama, as well as a solidly researched familiarity with local moods and events, as he sets the scene. The summer of 1967 had been a nightmare in Memphis: wild rumors had swept the city until almost everyone waited in dread for the incident that would spark an explosive racial war. The spark had not been struck then. Now, in 1968, a garbage men's strike, the refusal of the city administration to reach a sensible agreement, a march led by Dr. King that got out of hand and turned into a riot had revived and intensified the old fears. Dr. King returned to lead another march, a peaceful one—and was assassinated.

All of this is told with the sweep and excitement of a novel. The weakness of *An American Death* comes later, when Frank takes up the vital question: Was the murder the work of a psychotic loner or the product of a conspiracy?

Frank handles this issue much like a detective story writer who gives the reader a number of clues which lead to only one conclusion, then in the final chapter knocks the props out from under all of them. Thus, in the end, Frank comes down on the side of the official verdict: The murder was the work of a lone assassin; no conspiracy was involved.

To arrive at such a verdict one must resort to a host of rationalizations. Where did Ray, never in the past much more than a nickels-and-dimes holdup man, suddenly get the \$7,000 he spent in his months of liberty? Ray insisted that most of it came from a mysterious contact named Raoul, whom he couldn't or wouldn't identify further. Frank theorizes that Ray must have pulled a number of successful holdups; but, though thousands of FBI agents worked on every aspect of the case, there is not one iota of evidence to support this. How did Ray, the bungler, suddenly become a wily expert at smuggling diamonds, heroin, marijuana across U.S. borders? Frank does not answer this question, but it would seem only logical that Ray must have had contacts and guidance.

Frank's handling of another sensitive issue—Ray's use as aliases of the names of four Canadian citizens who were remarkable look-alikes—is especially suspect. Frank pictures Ray, after his escape from Tennessee to Canada, as hunting through old newspapers for birth notices, then hanging around the homes of the men he identified in this fashion to determine whether they looked like him. This has to be pure imagination, and it does not explain how Ray had come to use *previously* the names of two such look-alikes, Eric Starvo Galt and John Willard.

The assassination investigation was

much muddled, both here and abroad, by some indications that two men were using Ray's aliases. Ray's arrest at Heathrow Airport in London on June 8, 1968, resulted in vast confusion. Scotland Yard announced that the arrest was made at 11:15 A.M., as Ray was transferring from an incoming Lisbon flight to one bound for Brussels. But subsequent investigation had Ray leaving a London rooming house at 9:30 A.M. to go directly to the airport to catch a Brussels flight. Had two men, using the same unusual Canadian alias, Ramon George Sneyd, been picked up? Frank brushes off the question, ignoring the fact that Scotland Yard six months later (as Harold Weisberg demonstrated by reproducing the correspondence) was insisting on the accuracy of its original Lisbon-transfer announcement.

Frank concludes there just never were two men in London using the Sneyd alias. Yet Bernard Fensterwald, Jr., former counsel to U.S. Senate committees and head of the Committee to Investigate Assassinations, had obtained from London landladies through on-the-spot interviews descriptions of two Ramon George Sneyds. One of them, according to his landlady, had left behind the paraphernalia of a drug addict—and James Earl Ray was not an addict. The landlady added that when she told official investigators of this discovery they warned her quite crossly never to speak about it.

Gerold Frank's book, then, while a fascinatingly written tale, is something less than the whole "true story" about the murder of Dr. King.

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