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## King and His Killer: In-Depth Report on American Tragedy

**"I** F YOU DONT' GET OUT of there, you're going to get yourself killed, Martin."

Prophetic words spoken by a friend to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in a telephone conversation on April 3, 1968. The next day King was dead in Memphis, victim of an assassin's bullet.

The story of the crime itself, of the massive manhunt that followed and the swift trial of James Earl Ray is recounted by Gerold Frank in the superbly documented, suspensefully constructed new book "An American Death."



**David Appel**

Frank spent four years assembling and writing this remarkable piece of crime reportage. It follows his excellent book "The Boston Strangler," and, of course, his "told-to" biographies of screen and stage personalities, and other books.

But, by any measure, this is the best of Frank. It is certainly comparable to Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood" and William Manchester's "The Death of a President" and in sheer story drive even better.

So meticulous, so comprehensive is the assembled detail, one is constantly amazed the weight of it doesn't overwhelm the basic story Frank is telling. But it doesn't, for Frank is in control as he unfolds, almost minute by minute, the in-depth account of how a semi-literate hillbilly could carry out one of the crimes of the century and then elude the police of six nations in one of the greatest manhunts of our time. Making the most of his material, Frank skillfully sets the scene—the tense Memphis of the spring of 1968, the strike of the city's

garbage collectors, the events that brought King to the Tennessee city, the concerns of the civil rights leader at that fateful hour.

Then, with stunning effect, the events of the late afternoon of April 4 in the courtyard of the Lorraine Motel, that single rifle shot from the bathroom window of a seedy rooming house.

The detail of the manhunt is here, a vast complex of police forces mustered to hunt down the killer, and the killer changing identities — Lowmyer, Galt, Sneyd — the phony passports, the "look-alikes," the trail from Canada to England to Portugal and back to England, and finally, the end of the chase at the passport desk of London's Heathrow airport on June 8, two months and four days after the murder. Ray was on his way to join up with African mercenaries.

The final act involving the change of counsel and Ray's own efforts as a "jailhouse" lawyer winds up on Ray's 41st birthday, March 10, 1969, when he pleads guilty and is sentenced to 99 years imprisonment.

Frank goes far beyond a mere recital of the facts in sequence. There is, for instance, a full-length picture of Martin Luther King Jr. himself, the Nobel winner, the civil rights leader, worried, harassed, moody, full of dreams.

And there is a revealing close-up of James Earl Ray, a shadowy figure now brought to complete visibility, a half-literate two-bit holdup man, methodical yet uniquely careless, sardonic with a strange twist of a protective smile, a thin nose, a "hideout guy" who escaped from prison in a bread box, a habitual criminal and an obsessed, vicious racist.

Throughout Frank pauses to weigh the facts, to evaluate them with insight and set them in perspective. It is like the assembling of a giant jigsaw puzzle, with each fragment finally falling into place. He examines such angles as the "conspiracy" theory and comes up with his answer. The account never loses its basic eyewitness quality, its sense of immediacy and its narrative sweep. "An American Death" sets a new definitive standard in crime reportage.

**BOOK OF THE WEEK:  
NONFICTION**



By Gerold Frank

**AN AMERICAN  
DEATH**

*Doubleday. \$10.*