

Book World  
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# Conspiracy of one

## 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. Illustrated. 467 pp. \$10

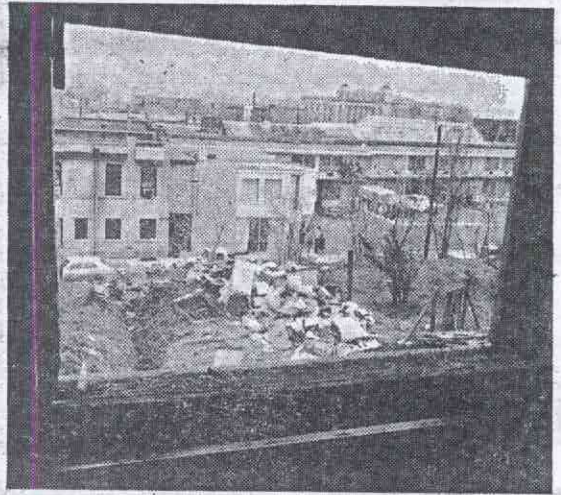
Reviewed by GERALD W. JOHNSON

In 300 pages it would have been a better book than it is in 467, and its emotional pitch tends, at times, to become strident, yet despite some prolixity and a frequently rococo style, this is the most persuasive analysis yet presented of one of the bitterest tragedies in American history, one not exceeded since the death of Abraham Lincoln. In both cases, the murder itself was merely the prologue to the great tragedy, which was the release of torrents of ignorance, hatred, and superstition that momentarily inundated the country and were checked at last only by tremendous exertion and at vast expense.

The most conspicuous, but not the only, value of Gerold Frank's study is his very effective deflation of the conspiracy theory. He is not dogmatic. He does not assert that there could have been no conspiracy. He merely takes up, one by one, all the puzzles surrounding the affair and shows how each is capable of explanation without reference to a conspiracy backed by much money and powerful influence.

The greatest of all was the puzzle of how the assassin escaped without assistance through a cordon of police officers, and surfaced months later in Lisbon. Most people, including Frank, assumed that it was flatly impossible, and continued to think so until the man himself explained it after his arrest.

*Gerald W. Johnson is a long-time commentator on the American scene.*



What Ray saw from the window

Dr. King was shot as he stood on the balcony of a motel, chatting with friends in the courtyard below. At a second-story window across the street a detective watched through binoculars; he had a direct line to headquarters and, as he saw the victim pitch backward to the floor of the balcony, he shouted, "Dr. King has been shot!" Within ten seconds the headquarters man was putting an all-cars signal on the police radio, giving the word to every patrol car in the city. Within 30 seconds the courtyard was swarming with officers. Within five minutes an officer who had run into the parallel street was told that seconds before he appeared a man had jumped into a parked car, a white Mustang, and had taken off at high speed. Within a minute after that, all cars were being warned to watch for a white Mustang traveling fast, and cars in outlying districts dashed to block every highway leading out of the city.

But despite all that, the murderer vanished like smoke. To police and public alike, it seemed obvious that a confederate had lurked nearby with another car into which the fugitive changed and drove through the police cordon, while the confederate drove the Mustang into some hiding place.

That established the conspiracy theory, which was steadily strengthened as months passed before the fugitive was located in Lisbon and was arrested when he returned to London. Plainly it was a well-planned, well-financed, well-executed plot, far beyond the ability of a two-bit hold-up man, such as James Earl Ray, who had spent most

of his life in one prison or another, and was wanted for escaping from the Missouri penitentiary.

But after his arrest, the man explained it simply enough: "I got lost." He did, indeed, head for an arterial street, but caught sight of a police car and turned the other way, plunging into a maze of back alleys, dead-end streets, boarded-up houses, and small factories all closed for the night. Eventually some obscure alley led him into a country road, and that to another, and so on. When he did hit a through highway it was far beyond the police block and near the Alabama line. So he drove all night, reached Atlanta in the morning, ditched the Mustang in a parking lot, and went on his way.

The prodigious manhunt that followed makes fascinating reading, but it is really a side issue. The significant thing in this book is its revelation of the extreme vulnerability of the American public to almost any variety of witch doctors, especially political ones. The manhunt was an urgent necessity, for the grief and wrath of twenty million blacks exploded and the next night 125 cities, including Washington, were in flames. Every disciplinary agency, including the regular army, was hard put to it to avert a horrible insurrection.

But the manhunt produced a case so absolutely airtight that Ray's original counsel, a criminal lawyer so expert that out of nearly a thousand clients he had lost only one to the executioner, saw nothing for it but for Ray to plead guilty and accept a sentence of 99 years in prison, which the state, by long-established custom in Tennessee, was virtually forced to accept.

Every day of Ray's time from the murder until his arrest is accounted for. The bulk of his money is accounted for by the known facts that he held up a Montreal supermarket for \$1,700, and a London bank for \$250, and that before the murder he had been running drugs into this country from Mexico. There is some uncertainty as to just how he worked the passport swindle on the Canadian authorities, but it is easy to believe that the Canadians know, but are not telling, lest they give ideas to other crooks. In short, the whole story is easily explained without dragging in the Ku Klux Klan, the Communists, the FBI, the CIA, not to mention the courts, the cabinet, and the president.

However, the conspiracy theory is far more thrilling than the known facts, so, in a country more addicted to thrills than a junkie is to heroin, it is probable that for the predictable future thousands of Americans will continue to believe that a muddleheaded, bungling, small-time crook was the instrument chosen for a difficult assignment by malevolent, powerful, and infinitely cunning, although not identified, forces of evil. □

# How a man with an obsession killed a man with a dream.

Almost before the echoes of the murder bullet had stopped reverberating in the courtyard of the Lorraine Motel, the most massive, most far-reaching, most expensive manhunt in history was under way.

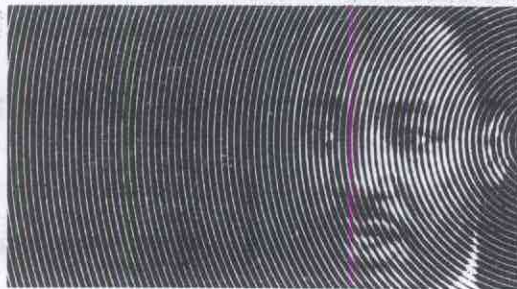
Gerold Frank was part of that manhunt from the beginning. So *An American Death* has an immediacy and suspense rare in nonfiction. You are an eyewitness: as Memphis teeters on the brink of violence in the last tension-filled days of Dr. Martin Luther King . . . as a pale, obviously non-outdoor type buys a gun "to go hunting with" . . . as a "respected citizen" shouts into a phone, "You can shoot the son-of-a-bitch on the balcony" . . . as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police discover that three of James Earl Ray's aliases are the names of real men who live in the same Toronto neighborhood, and who all look like him . . . as Ray slumps on a bench after his arrest in London Airport,

exclaiming, "I feel so trapped" . . . as his trial comes to a puzzling, swift conclusion.

Was Ray the head assassin of a group of white supremacists? Did he in fact fire the fatal bullet?

In the four years of research and writing that went into *An American Death*, Gerold Frank interviewed countless persons here and abroad who had anything to do with the case: informers, investigators, lawyers, witnesses, judges, as well as Ray's family and friends. He had access to diaries, letters, and police intelligence data. Much of the material in *An American Death* has never before been revealed.

Just as he did in *The Boston Strangler*, Frank has written a suspenseful, definitive account that answers all the questions others have left open, while taking you into the hearts and minds of the participants. *An American Death* is a masterpiece of true crime reporting.



## AN AMERICAN DEATH

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

# GEROLD FRANK

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