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TELLS RAY'S STORY

# Author lives with murder

BY CHARLES RICHARDSON  
News staff writer

The sum total of what he did seems to be well beyond the man's capacity, but the preponderance of evidence indicates that James Earl Ray killed Martin Luther King alone and unaided in one of the Twentieth Century's more monstrous crimes.

So says visiting author Gerold Frank, here for today's Books and Author's Luncheon as part of Birmingham's Festival of Arts. He has lived with the murder — mile by mile, witness by witness, clue by clue — for the last four years.

The result is a new and exhaustive book entitled "An American Death" whose attendant research convinced Frank — who also wrote the best-selling "The Boston Strangler" — that the American appetite for conspiracies ranks right up there along with hot dogs and apple pie.

FRANK HIMSELF owns to a conversion somewhere along the line, because when he began the book his working title was "An American Conspiracy."

Then, after thousands of miles and hundreds of interviews, Frank says another Ray emerged. Not the bumbling, two-bit holdup man and ill-starred burglar, but a keen stir-wise jailhouse lawyer who was an expert marksman and work it all out, step by step, he could do it.

All alone.

### AND FOR WHAT?

For a kind of inner criminal glory, Frank believes, and because Ray hated blacks all out of proportion to garden-variety hate. And for such a man, facing life anyway if he were ever returned to the Missouri prison from where he had escaped not many months before, the prospect of becoming King's killer would

put him right up there with, say, Lee Harvey Oswald.

But the intricacies of escape? The false Canadian passport? The flight to Europe? The seemingly well-heeled wallet? Could these be the doings of a small time convict working alone?

These chiefly are the points Frank — sometimes reversing his original judgment — puts to rest. Not dogmatically, he cautions, because he lets the protracted evidence speak for itself and ventures to hope that the book, to be distributed April 4, thusly becomes

"just a mirror" for the real facts.

HERE, ALL too briefly, are the suave and urbane author's salient points:

Ray planned to kill King in Birmingham but found the Negro martyr too well guarded in Jefferson County. While here, he researched high-powered rifles and their capacity; sniper scopes and their magnifying power. How much a bullet drop at 100 yards? 200 yards?

Satisfied with the rifle purchase he eventually made in Birmingham, Frank contends, Ray then tracked King to Memphis and resolved to do his killing there because King, surrounded by Memphis plainclothesmen rather than uniformed officers seemed less well-guarded.

So he rented that dingy room in the now-famous flop house overlooking the ill-fated Lorraine Motel in a down-at-the-heels part of downtown Memphis and he pulled a chair to his grimy, lonely window.

And when King appeared on his motel balcony Ray went down the hall to a bathroom for a better angle and, with his Birmingham-bought hunting rifle, probably aimed at King's heart but hit him in the neck.

EITHER WAY, the murder

was done and America's greatest assassin was off and running.

Off and running, too, were conspiracy theories that have yet to be put to rest. Frank doesn't think his book will dispel them, either, because, he says, Americans simply refuse to believe that assassinations of such magnitude are not backed by conspiracies of comparable dimensions.

But what of Ray, the so-called hick nobody, and the clever flight that followed?

Says Frank: Everybody in the Missouri prison knew Canadian passports were — and still are — easily obtained.

What about the money?

Ray traveled 18,000 miles in nine months, Frank reminds, and who's to say how many all-night convenience stores and wayside service stations he knocked over in the meantime? That would explain his almost off-hand cash purchase of a car in Birmingham; his dancing lessons; his brief career as a student at bartender school in Los Angeles; his fling in the Laurentian Mountain resorts of Canada, and his eventual hops to Europe.

"RAY HATED blacks. He turned down a chance to transfer to a prison honor farm because it was integrated," Frank declares. "And he went to Portugal because he

wanted to catch a ship out of there to become a white mercenary (in a long-troubled, Portuguese-controlled Angola)."

Ray, Frank is convinced, "is much smarter and shrewder than one would suspect."

And in "An American Death," Frank says, "My attempt is not to prove anything—just to set a record on the facts." And I concluded inevitably that he did it alone."

MOVING BELIEFS? Frank slowly in those four years, since the assassination, Frank talked and walked and drove and visited with a methodical singleness of purpose. He talked to Ray's father, brother, sister and ex-prison friends. He talked to police, judges, policemen, special investigators, lawyers, prosecutors, judges. He even took a look at the house where Ray was born.

He concluded finally that "Ray thought he was doing a great deed, and he did it all alone."

And Frank himself: What does he think of the universal best seller that was a long time coming?

He mulls that over in long moments and then he says with a slight smile, "I'm a considerable man, I'm a little bit proud."

"It has more about it than anything I've ever seen."