

The Literary Scene

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AN AMERICAN DEATH. By Gerold Frank. Doubleday. 467 pp. \$10.

It is just four years since an assassin's bullet cut short the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., as he stood on the balcony of a motel in Memphis, Tenn.

If, as Bernard Shaw has said, assassination is the ultimate form of censorship, it is equally clear that the capture, trial and punishment of the self-confessed assassin have yet to silence the voices seeking to explain the why and wherefore of the murder.

Could a single fugitive convict like James Earl Ray have done it all alone? Was it not rather a conspiracy directed by white racists against the most eloquent and charismatic of black leaders.

Short of reopening Ray's trial this book seems to lie to set the matter at rest. Ray pleaded guilty to the killing

and was sentenced to 99 years in prison in a three-hour court hearing which neither elucidated the circumstances of the crime nor disclosed its motive. What the trial failed to expose Gerold Frank now places before us in one of the most remarkable feats of investigative reporting I have yet read. Controversy over the minimal will no doubt linger on, perhaps for years, but nothing can blink the fact that Ray pleaded guilty in open court and accepted full responsibility for the murder.

Gerold Frank appears to have investigated the entire case from the beginning, pursuing the separate lives of

killer and victim from long before the crime by the moment of their fatal conjunction. This was relatively easy to do for King, whose life was lived largely in the public eye. Here his every significant word and movement are recaptured in eyewitness detail.

Ray's rendezvous with destiny was haphazard. Frank has not only explored his criminal career but also that of his family, several of whom have done time behind bars. James Earl Ray emerges as a loner, a potentially dangerous pariah from society, fairly personable in appearance, but under-sleazebag and over-pregjudiced, particularly against blacks.

But what makes the book far more than the mere catalogue of facts it could have been in other hands is the subtle sense of tragedy with which Frank invests his narrative. He opens with a brooding picture of Memphis as it was gripped by a climate of fear the previous summer. Though the nameless fear never materialized,

tragedy did strike a year later.

Frank also employs a technique he used in "The Boston Strangler," namely, the dramatization of the false leads and theories which surrounded all great crimes. Though we know the fate which awaits King and the identity of his killer, we are taken through every step of the investigation including those up blind alleys, as though we were present.

It was a murder which had to be solved—and solved fast. The assassination, coming at it did in a time of serious social unrest, was capable of setting the country aflame. The search for the killer was thus one of the most intensive ever recorded. Gerold Frank tells us that there were days when 1500 agents were simultaneously working that number enlisted on the line on the case with double search at one time or another.

At times the book reads almost like a novel with its

deliberate, evocative descriptions and triple climax of crime, hunt and trial. King is shown worrying over his plans and projects, laughing, joking and arguing with his colleagues, occasionally lapsing into melancholy as he foresees his own death. In parallel chapters Ray's course is followed from his Missouri prison break in April, 1967, through the 411 days of freedom living off petty hollars, then to murder in Memphis, the escape through Canada to England and his arrest there by Scotland Yard.

Frank meets the conspiracy theory head-on. Point by point he demolishes the so-called "proofs" that Ray served as paid gunman for unnamed white racists. No one has yet identified his alleged co-conspirators. If indeed they ever existed, nor has the FBI ever been able to track down the mysterious "Raoul" Ray named as his employer in smuggling operations. For his part Frank demonstrates how easily Ray could have acted alone in everything he did. Like those of the other assassins, Sirhan and Oswald, Ray's killing was atrocious and meaningless and served no cause.

This is the fourth book I have read on the King assassination and by far the best—a superb reconstruction of a crime that has become a part of American history. If in place of Ray's minimal a full and complete hearing had been staged in court, it probably would have unfolded an account very much like this.

Unlike the special pleading of writers of earlier books for this or that theory of the crime Gerold Frank has presented and analyzed his material with judicial impartiality. Unless and until James Earl Ray comes some day to tell his own story under oath—an unlikely contention—this book seems to me destined to remain the definitive account of the Martin Luther King assassination.