

Random Act

AN AMERICAN DEATH

by GEROLD FRANK

467 pages, Doubleday, \$10.

Every investigative reporter in the country must have written an assassination book by now. The form is a new American genre, perhaps creeping up on science fiction and detective stories. It is an honorable enough trade, as massively practiced on Martin Luther King Jr. and James Earl Ray by Gerold Frank, who seems to have graduated from his role as a semi-disembodied ghostwriter for actresses. Delving into all the details and mysteries that still surround King's murder, Frank presents evidence, conflicting reports, false leads, rumors, opinions and untruths in more or less the order in which a dispassionate insider—had one existed—might have come upon them himself.

Ray at first claimed to have received money and instructions from a shadowy French Canadian seaman named Raoul. As the case developed, the "Ray alone" theory seemed to many to have inconsistencies. In the end most are satisfactorily resolved. A false citizen-band radio report on the day of the murder, telling of a 100-m.p.h. chase after a white Mustang thought to be driven by Ray, proved to be not the work of confederates but of a teen-age prankster. There is no real mystery about Ray's source of cash either: he was a professional stickup man. It was his character, both erratic and highly methodical, that gave him the look of a man following directions. Pursuing Frank's arguments the reader comes to the conviction that there was no conspiracy.

Gerold Frank is an incorrigible gleaner. He tells of a black photographer who collected King's blood in a pill bottle and a white doctor, with no special admiration for King, who nevertheless saved the cardiograph tape of his last heartbeats. In presenting King him-

self, the author shows the man's moodiness and tension and his fears that the coming Poor People's March on Washington would fail to revive the nonviolent movement. But there is no real assessment of King as a complex man who had roiled the South but failed to stir the Northern cities deeply enough.

Frank's picture of Ray, though, is remarkable, far more than a collection of macabre bits. It will not satisfy anyone who feels compelled to believe in conspiracy. But it will delight those who think that life is meaningless and random. Ray's life, his convictions for small-time robberies, his year of wandering after his escape from a Missouri prison in April 1967 and his resolve at some point during that year to kill the black man who had won the Nobel Peace Prize, all seem virtually pointless.

Why did Ray decide to kill King? Given his predicament and character, why not? He was a savage racist. He was a 40-year-old escapee with 13 years still to serve for robbing a supermarket and with more to be added for the escape, if caught. In effect, he was a lifer, and he was convinced that no Southern jury would condemn a white to death for murdering a black. He had nothing to lose. What had he to gain? The esteem of his convict peers, Frank suggests, as well as the satisfaction of baffling the world by escaping, and then remaining an enigma after his capture.

Then why not admit that he did it singlehanded? Percy Foreman, his second lawyer, asked Ray just this, suggesting that a man acting on principle might command at least some respect from a jury. Ray was unmoved. Why? Frank reasons that Ray wanted to be thought a hired gunman, simply because gunmen are at the top of the prison pecking order. He was going back into the con world, a big man at last, and he wasn't about to step out of the pose. When Ray pleaded guilty, he avoided the trial which might have proved he did it on his own.

■ John Skow

RAY ON HIS WAY TO PRISON IN 1969



MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. IN MEMPHIS MARCH THE WEEK BEFORE ASSASSINATION

