

The King Assassination

AN AMERICAN DEATH: The True Story of the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., By Gerold Frank. (Doubleday, \$10)

Reviewed by Hoke Norris

The 1960s were the decade of the riots, the decade of the assassins. Washington, Chicago, Watts, the Democratic convention; King, two Kennedys, Medgar Evers, three civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Miss., and uncounted others elsewhere in the South (and the heat and the blood of Vietnam).

Yet it also was the decade of great and lasting progress. The blacks marched, protested, sat in, and won most of their legal battles for civil rights. The proper court judgments were rendered, the needed laws were passed. But not without a price.

Part of that price was the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Dr. King was murdered in Memphis on April 4, 1968. On the following June 8 a man who had used a number of names but whose real name turned out to be James Earl Ray was arrested at a London airport on the charge he had committed the crime. Ray had shot Dr. King and escaped undetected from Memphis, teeming with police, and then had escaped from the United States and from Canada. Could he have done so — could he have planned and executed the murder and then got away not only from the scene but from the country — without the support of other persons? Was there a "conspiracy" to assassinate Dr. King?

Gerold Frank, previously the collaborator with celebrities in their memoirs and the biographer of the Boston Strangler, has turned his considerable talents and energies as a reporter loose upon that question and has produced a book that should, but probably will not, satisfy the most rabid devotee of the conspiracy theory of history. It is Frank's conclusion — based on overwhelming evidence — that Ray acted alone, that there was no conspiracy.

This is a full-dress investigation. It explores Dr. King's history in the civil rights

movement, and Ray's in the prisons of the land, and it moves with novelistic tension toward that fatal crossing of two paths in Memphis four years ago. It makes a good story — a story of crime and its detection, of punishment and its processes.

The unmistakable verdict — that Ray and Ray alone was responsible for the murder that set the country on fire — was rendered as a consequence of some of the best police work I have ever seen put into a book. A pair of pliers was traced to Los Angeles, and so was a bundle of laundry. Guns, binoculars, lint found in an automobile, a tiny identification on a window sill — all were traced and analyzed and identified and set in their proper places among the links in the chain of evidence.

If there is a hero of this book, it is a policeman — a collective policeman representing all the police involved.

The real villain, Frank makes clear without saying so, was the American people.

More specifically, Ray grew up "in a broken home with a drunken mother, an absent father, a retarded brother, a sister who was to be committed to mental institutions — the father an ex-con, his uncle, Earl, an ex-con, Jerry and John, his brothers, ex-cons" — on a street in Quincy, Ill., "notorious for its population of gamblers, pimps, prostitutes, thieves and dope-peddlers."

Furthermore, "It was not necessary for anyone to approach Ray and formally offer him a large sum of money to kill King. The urgency to strike at King and all he stood for came out of the very atmosphere in which Ray grew up and lived . . ."

Ray expected to be acclaimed the hero.

Frank's verdict — there was no conspiracy — is eminently plausible. Sometimes men do strange and lonely things, and Ray was a strange and lonely man, capable of silence and the solitary act.

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