

James Earl Ray's Version of the

BOOKS

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Who Killed Martin Luther King?

By James Earl Ray

National Press, 285 pages, \$21.95

If you came away from the movie "JFK" with questions about

the government's role in assassinations, perhaps you're ready for "Who Killed Martin Luther King?" written by the so-called "lone nut" who was convicted of doing that very thing, James Earl Ray.

Of course, Ray is the last person to set the record straight on a murder for which he has served 23 years of a 99-year sentence. He hopes that a special prosecutor will be appointed to investigate

the killing and, especially, the FBI's activities before and after King's murder. In 1968, the year King was murdered, "there was no special prosecutor law," Ray says, that would have answered many of the questions he poses here.

By the same token, who else would be so painstaking and persistent in documenting what appears to be a series of mysterious errors and omissions in a federal

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investigation that should have been a model for thoroughness and credibility? Indeed, if the movie "JFK" raises questions about conspiracy at high levels, this book pushes us to wonder if, having pulled the wool over Americans' eyes about JFK, those same high-level officials thought they'd cram another "lone-nut" assassination and another bogus investigation down our throats with the

murder of Martin Luther King.

Consider a few of the points that Ray raises:

■ A ballistics test was never conducted on Ray's rifle, which was found outside Ray's rooming house, about 300 feet from the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, where King was shot. Ray's fingerprints were on the rifle, police said, but without a ballistics test, their case was circumstantial: They could not be certain Ray's rifle fired the shot that killed King.

"The FBI decided not to conduct a ballistics test on the rifle claiming that the fatal bullet was misshapen," Ray writes. Later on, he discovered, "the British Broadcasting Company consulted ballistics expert Dr. Herbert MacDon-



James Earl Ray's book documents errors and omissions in the assassination investigation

nell. McDonnell, after reviewing the land and groove markings from the bullet stated the 'FBI decision not to test fire the rifle . . . is absolutely ludicrous.' That's good research, but note the different spellings of MacDonnell and McDonnell — key typographical errors like that tend to corrode the author's credibility.

■ Charles Stephens, the only person to identify Ray as the gunman, was "too drunk to walk" minutes before the shooting, according to a cab driver who saw him, and later recanted his statement.

■ Stephens' wife, Grace, also an eyewitness, told police that Ray *wasn't* the gunman. Incarcerated in a mental hospital for nearly 10 years, she was released in 1978 through the efforts of Mark Lane, the Warren Commission critic who now was investigating the King assassination, Stephens still "claims she was confined only because of her being a witness in the King case," Ray writes.

■ Former FBI agent Frank Holloman, who once had been director of the FBI's Atlanta office, was head of both the Memphis police and fire departments in 1968. The day before the assassination, he transferred two black firemen from Fire Station Two, "which offered a fine view of the Lorraine Motel across the street," and a few hours before the assassination, he ordered a Memphis police detective "away from his position protecting King" to be guarded at home, by police, from a death threat that was never investigated.

■ FBI surveillance of King, code-named "Zorro," had intensified to

the extent of sending tapes of King's bedroom dalliances to Coretta King in hopes of disrupting the marriage. FBI agents also sent the bedroom tapes to King, "in one instance including a letter urging King to kill himself or risk exposure." Ray includes a 1964 FBI memo about "taking steps to remove King from the national picture," and he notes that after King's death, agents in the Atlanta bureau whooped and cheered, "We got Zorro."

All of this has already been published in Mark Lane's book, "Code Name Zorro," and parts of it appeared in Curt Gentry's "J. Edgar Hoover." Ray adds his own life history — that of a two-bit criminal whose flashes of brilliance led him to escape from jail twice — and concentrates on the kind of details that lend authenticity to his story.

For example, Time magazine quoted a prison cellmate of Ray in 1963-4 stating that "each time I saw (King's) image on the screen, I'd fly into a rage, clench my fist and shout, 'Somebody's gotta get him! Somebody's gotta get him!'" But the fact is, says Ray, that "in 1963-64, there were no television sets in the cells or on the cell blocks." Further, the one TV set used by the guards to which prisoners had any access was given complete attention during ballgames because "a lot of money rides on sports events watched in prison." Had somebody shouted the way his cellmate described Ray shouting, "he'd have been knocked out — not for slurring Martin Luther King, but for interrupting the show."