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The Making of an Assassin: The Life of James Earl Ray

By George McMillan. Little, Brown, 1976

BY DAVID J. GARROW | **He's** America's best-known living assassin, and the best biography of him has been out of print for almost 20 years. Just this year alone, hundreds of far-too-credulous news stories have publicized James Earl Ray's claims of innocence for the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. Ray's been making such claims for years, but until recently few people other than Ray's own media-hungry lawyers paid him much heed. Now that Ray has succeeded in scamming King's own family into proclaiming his innocence, many people who are utterly unfamiliar with the overwhelming evidence of Ray's guilt wonder whether something is amiss. It isn't.

George McMillan's "The Making of an Assassin: The Life of James Earl Ray" isn't perfect, but it's invaluable. It was written prior to the exhaustive 1978 House Assassinations Committee hearings into King's murder, but McMillan's immersion in the tightly knit world of Ray's family pointed the way toward the House Committee's own conclusion that Ray's assassination of King probably was aided by one or more of his own relatives. Ray was a racist, but his expectation of a big-bucks reward from far-right segregationists made money, not racial malice, his No. 1 motive.

If you're at all interested in Ray, look for McMillan's biography in your local library or in second-hand bookstores. And don't despair: Sometime in 1998, Gerald "Case Closed" Posner promises the same thorough review of King's killing that won him wide praise for debunking the legions of JFK conspiracy theorists. Posner's forthcoming "Killing the Dream: James Earl Ray and the Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr." ought to be the best we've seen, but McMillan's pioneering work ought to be far better remembered than it is.

David J. Garrow, Presidential Distinguished Professor at Emory University, is the author of "The FBI and Martin Luther King Jr." (1981) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning King biography "Bearing the Cross" (1986).