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Rowan breaks no barriers in cheap-shooting memoir

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"Breaking Barriers: A Memoir" Carl T. Rowan. Little, Brown, \$22.95

Two years ago, Carl Rowan gained brief, dubious national celebrity after shooting an intruder with an unregistered handgun.

Now the syndicated columnist (whose trial resulted in a hung jury) has fired off a purposefully provocative autobiography. It includes an explicit discussion of whether the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was bisexual and had a homosexual relationship with the Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy, and an equally gratuitous contention that Dr. King was assassinated as a result of an FBI conspiracy.

"Breaking Barriers" is in all other respects a wholly unremarkable book, but it no doubt will receive considerable attention simply because a former U.S. ambassador and U.S. Information Agency director wrote about such subjects.

To date, "Breaking Barriers" has created a major stir only in the gay press. As one black gay activist said in the Dec. 12 issue of Outweek, "It would be nice to know someone as respected as Dr. King would have had gay relationships." The response of Mr. Rowan's publisher to gay press queries: "We're hoping this does create a bit of a stir because that will create readers."

Three things need to be said about Mr. Rowan's treatment of Dr. King:

First, at least two King biographers, as far back as 1970, have been aware of King-Abernathy rumors but have not written about them.

Second, the late Bayard Rustin, a civil rights figure who was a close colleague of Dr. King's and openly gay, said privately that he knew of no reason to believe such stories.

Third, Mr. Rowan's memory, frequently the sole source for "Breaking Barriers," is so often demonstrably undependable when compared with the historical record that a discerning reader will accord some stories little credibility.

Mr. Rowan writes that the King-Abernathy matter was detailed for him in early 1964 by Brooklyn Rep. John Rooney, a staunch J. Edgar Hoover ally who chaired the House subcommittee overseeing the FBI. Mr. Rowan says that Mr. Rooney told him "a lot of congressmen had been inflamed" when Mr. Hoover played a surveillance tape in which Dr. King is heard suggesting oral sex with a man Mr. Hoover identified as the Rev. Abernathy.

Mr. Rowan presents the suggestion as a direct quotation attributed to Dr. King, but it actually is only Mr. Rowan's 26-year-old recollection of Mr. Rooney's own memory. Mr. Rowan acknowledges that the alleged King statement might have been humorous joshing rather than a literal request, but he appears later to reject that interpretation.

Quite independently, however, the two surviving members of Mr. Rooney's 1964 subcommittee told a newspaper columnist they never heard any such tape. Even more notably, Mr. Rowan immediately follows his rendition with a statement that several days later, he read about Dr. King's deploring the Vietnam War. Since the earliest news item mentioning Dr. King's anti-war sentiments appeared on March 3, 1965 - well over a year after the February 1964 Rowan-Rooney meeting - Mr. Rowan's recollection is more than a little off target.

Most regrettably, any more detailed analysis of the King-Abernathy- Rooney matter inescapably leads further down the slippery slope to the position advocated by Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.): Only by playing all of the court-sealed FBI bedroom recordings of Dr. King for the entire world can accounts like this be finally dismissed or corrected.

A faulty memory alone does not account for all Mr. Rowan's missteps. He introduces his highly inaccurate, distorted discussion of Dr. King's death by saying, "The record be damned!" And he never refers to the persuasive, extremely detailed findings accumulated by the House Assassinations Committee led by Walter Fauntroy, a former King aide.

"Breaking Barriers" lamentably is also scarred by the author's overwhelming sense of self-importance. It regrettably lacks the self-critical perspective that helps make some autobiographies, such as James Farmer's excellent 1985 "Lay Bare the Heart," enjoyable reading and valuable history.

A sad, disappointing book, "Breaking Barriers" is unlikely to endear its author to readers.

David J. Garrow won the 1987 Pulitzer Prize in biography for "Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference," which also received the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award.