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The Hunter Becomes the Hunted
David J. Garrow

HELLHOUND ON HIS TRAIL

The Stalking of Martin Luther King Jr. and the International Hunt for His Assassin
By Hampton Sides
Doubleday. 459 pp. \$28.95

The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, in Memphis is such an intensively studied tragedy that one must wonder whether anything new and insightful can be written about it. The gunman, James Earl Ray, appeared both pathetic and puzzling from the time of his capture in London in early June 1968 until his death in 1998 at age 70 in a Tennessee prison. An extensive investigation by a House of Representatives select committee in the late 1970s thoroughly plumbed all of Ray's contradictory claims but was unable to document whether anyone had assisted or encouraged him in his commission of the crime.

Serious students of the King assassination know the two landmark books that reach beyond the congressional probe, the late George McMillan's superbly researched "The Making of an Assassin: The Life of James Earl Ray" (1976) and Gerald Posner's impressive "Killing the Dream: James Earl Ray and the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr." (1998). Hampton Sides generously cites both of those, plus scores of other familiar sources, in his carefully constructed true-crime narrative of Ray's stalking of King, the fatal shot and Ray's subsequent getaway and capture.

Sides, a Memphis native, divides his book into four strands. The first one traces Ray's activities following his April 1967 escape from a Missouri prison through the assassination a year later and his flight first to Canada and then to Europe. A second strand follows King's road to Memphis, and a third paints the city's racial divisions. The final strand tracks the FBI's intense hostility toward King and covers its dogged investigation, including forensic success in identifying Ray and the pursuit of the assassin as he makes a bumbling effort to reach white-ruled Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

The author's depiction of his home town's role in the story is enlightening, and his efforts to present King's struggles and the FBI's behavior cover familiar ground with hardly a misstep. When Sides errs, as he does in one instance regarding King's personal life, it's because he unknowingly accepts faulty information from a respected book; when he does his own reporting -- as when, for example, he interviews a Kentucky politician who was one of King's lovers and was with him that fatal evening in Memphis -- he makes a valuable contribution to the historical record.

But the "hellhound" who rightly remains the book's centerpiece -- Sides draws his title from a 1937 Robert Johnson blues ballad -- is of course Ray. McMillan's seminal work on Ray and his troubled, crime-steeped family is the required starting point for any reexamination of his motivations and desires, and Sides draws a memorable and persuasive portrait of the amateur assassin whose motivation may be simpler to grasp than most previous investigators have realized.

At the time of his 1967 escape, Ray was facing 18 more years in prison for armed robbery. Oddly meticulous about his personal hygiene and clothes, he nonetheless slept in dingy flophouses, drank in seedy dives and patronized the cheapest whorehouses. Sides revels in

retracing Ray's steps in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, and Los Angeles, just as he also carefully chronicles Ray's stalking of King as the civil rights leader traveled from city to city. Sides skillfully emphasizes Ray's early 1968 visits to a pair of self-improvement counselors, one of whom recommended a book titled "Psycho-Cybernetics," by Maxwell Maltz, which Ray had in his possession when arrested. "You must have a goal to shoot for, and a straight course to follow," Sides quotes the book as saying. "Do the thing and you will have the power." "Hellhound on His Trail" suggests that Maltz's book, coupled with Ray's well-documented racism, gave a tragic sense of purpose to a man who was otherwise a sad and lonely drifter. Sides quotes one of Ray's lawyers as observing that "he has a strongly developed, fundamental instinct to be somebody . . . a name" rather than just a prison number. Ray's desire to achieve something in life, Sides convincingly and originally argues, was first and foremost what sent him on his deadly trail to Memphis.

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