

[PDF] Hellhound On His Trail: The Electrifying Account Of The Largest Manhunt In American History

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Description:

: It's bold to start an account of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. without a single mention of James Earl Ray. But in *Hellhound on His Trail*, Ray's absence is essential--in his place, Hampton Sides traces the alter egos Ray created after escaping from prison and beginning his haphazard

journey toward Memphis. Sides meticulously constructs parallel portraits of two very different men--one, the larger-than-life figurehead of the Civil Rights movement; the other, a nondescript loner with a spurious and violent history, whose identity was as fluid as his motives. The narrative builds to the staggering and heartbreaking moment of King's assassination, then races on through the immediate fallout: the worldwide manhunt led by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI; Ray's nearly successful attempt to flee to Rhodesia; and the riots that erupted throughout the United States as racial tensions reached a breaking point. Sides's storytelling packs a visceral punch, and in *Hellhound on His Trail*, he crafts an authoritative and riveting account of two intersecting lives that altered the course of American history. --Lynette Mong

David Grann Reviews Hellhound on His Trail

is most recently the author of as well as the #1 New York Times bestseller . Read his review of Hellhound on His Trail:

Hampton Sides has long been one of the great narrative nonfiction writers of our time, excavating essential pieces of American history--from the daring rescue of POWs during World War II to the settling of the West--and bringing them vividly to life. Now in his new book, *Hellhound on His Trail*, he applies his enormous gifts to one of the most important and heart-wrenching chapters in U.S. history: the stalking and assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., by James Earl Ray.

The book chronicles the terrifying collision of these two figures. In 1967, King was struggling to complete his monumental Civil Rights crusade and to maintain, amid the rise of more militant factions, the movement's nonviolent nobility. While King increasingly intuits his own death, Ray has begun to track him down. Through Sides' prodigious research, Ray emerges as one of the eeriest characters, a prison escapee and racist who wears alligator shoes and is constantly transforming himself, changing names and physical appearances. He is determined to become somebody, to insert himself into the national consciousness, through a single unthinkable act of violence.

Sides illuminates not only the forces that culminated in King's assassination; he also reveals the largely forgotten story of how his death led to the largest manhunt in American history. Almost unfathomably, it is J. Edgar Hoover, the person who had long hoped for King's destruction and had even spied on him, who ultimately brings King's killer to justice.

Hellhound on His Trail reconstructs this taut, tense narrative with the immediacy of a novel. Yet what makes the book so powerful--indeed what lifts it into the ranks of a masterpiece--is that the story unfolds against the larger backdrop of the Civil Rights movement and the struggle to remake the country. If Ray is able to undergo a final metamorphosis, it is King, through his life and ultimate sacrifice, who enacts the greatest transformation: changing the character of a nation.

(Photo © Matt Richman)

Questions for Hampton Sides

Q: How did the idea for *Hellhound on His Trail* come to you? What made you decide to focus on James Earl Ray?

A: So many books have concentrated on either advancing or debunking conspiracy theories about the King assassination, but few have looked hard at James Earl Ray himself. Who was this guy? What were his habits, his movements, his motives? I found him to be profoundly screwed up, but screwed up in an absolutely fascinating way. He was a kind of empty vessel of the culture. He was drawn to so many fads and pop-trends of the late nineteen-sixties. He got a nose job, took dancing lessons,

graduated from bar-tending school, got into hypnosis and weird self-help books, enrolled in a locksmithing course, even aspired to be a porn director. His personality had all these quirks and contradictions. He was supposedly stupid, but he somehow managed to escape from two maximum security prisons. Some claimed he wasn't a racist, yet he worked for the Wallace Campaign, called King "Martin Lucifer Coon," tried to emigrate to Rhodesia to become a mercenary soldier, and eventually hired a Nazi lawyer to defend him. He lived in absolute filth and squalor, but kept his clothes fastidiously laundered. And in the end, ironically, that's what caught him: A tiny identifying laundry tag stamped into the inseam of a pair of undershorts found near the scene of the King assassination.

Q: The "Notes" and "Bibliography" sections of *Hellhound on His Trail* total more than 50 pages--how did you begin to tackle the wealth of information that exists about Martin Luther King's assassination? What was your research process like?

A: The research nearly gave me an aneurysm. But in the end, *Hellhound* is a work of narrative history, not a journalistic exposé. I don't think I unearthed any massive bombshells that will change the world forever--like, say, proving once and for all that J. Edgar Hoover actually orchestrated the whole affair. Instead, what I unearthed were thousands and thousands of tiny details that make the story come alive on the page and make it possible, for the first time, to understand the tragedy as a complete, multi-stranded narrative. The book's packed full of novelistic detail--weather, architecture, what people were wearing, what the landscape looked like, the music that was playing on the radio. To get all this stuff, I had to do the usual sort of archival work--from the LBJ Presidential Library in Austin to the London newspaper archives--and I went pretty much everywhere James Earl Ray went, following in his fugitive footsteps: Puerto Vallarta, Toronto, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Birmingham, Lisbon, London. But my real ace in the hole was a retired Memphis cop named Vince Hughes who has compiled the most fascinating, and most comprehensive, digital archive about the MLK assassination on the planet: Crime scene photos, police reports, unexpurgated FBI files, audio tapes, and many hundreds of thousands of unpublished documents that proved a real godsend. Every non-fiction writer needs to find a guy named Vince. Thank God I found mine.

Q: How did you come up with the title? Is there significance to it?

A: It comes from the famous Robert Johnson blues song, "Hellhound On My Trail," which is about being pursued by fate, by the law, and ultimately by death. Johnson was the greatest of the Delta bluesmen, and he lived in and around Memphis much of his short tragic life. It was said that he'd gone to The Crossroads and sold his soul to the devil to learn to play the guitar, so he was always looking over his shoulder for his time to come. When King arrived in Memphis in 1968, he was representing black garbage workers who were mostly former plantation hands from Johnson country, from the Delta cotton fields. As a title, "hellhound" seemed evocative on twin levels: For King, who was constantly being hounded by death threats and Hoover's FBI, as well as for Ray, who became the target of the largest manhunt in American history.

Q: The King assassination, like the JFK assassination, is rife with conspiracy theories. How did you deal with them?

A: At the outset of my research, I took very seriously the idea that there might have been a conspiracy. I read all the conspiracy books, examined every angle. The only problem with the conspiracy theories that are out there, I found, is that they invariably fail the most basic test: They raise more questions than they address, they create more problems than they solve. And they're so monumentally complicated: The CIA, the FBI, the Mafia, the Green Berets, President Johnson, the Memphis Police Department, the Memphis Fire Department, the Memphis Mayor's Office, the Boy Scouts of America--everybody killed Martin Luther King! But as I got into it, it became clear that the evidence against James Earl Ray was overwhelming. He bought the rifle, the scope, the ammo, the binoculars. He checked into that rooming house three hours before the murder. He peeled out from

the rooming house one minute after the murder, in the same getaway car described by eyewitnesses. He admitted to every one of these things. His only defense was that some other guy--a mysterious man he called Raoul--pulled the trigger. Well, there's not a shred of evidence that Raoul ever existed. So in *Hellhound*, I take the clear position that Ray did it, but I leave many doors ajar as to the question of whether he had help, whether he was working in the hope of winning bounty money, whether members of his own family abetted him. When in doubt, I generally err on the side of Occam's razor: The simplest explanation is usually the right one.

Q: Can you compare *Hellhound on His Trail* to your previous books? Are there similarities among them?

A: I don't concentrate on any one period of history, I like to locate my stories in wildly different eras and places. I seem to be drawn to large, sprawling, uncomfortable swaths of American history, finding embedded within them a tight narrative that involves strife, heroism, and survival under difficult circumstances. My histories tend to be character-driven, with a lot of plot, a lot of action. I don't think you'd find me writing about, say, the Constitutional Convention or the Transcendental Movement. A friend once told me I'm interested in "human disasters"--social storms of one sort or another, and the ways in which people survive them, through courage, ingenuity, grace under pressure, luck. That's true of the Bataan Death March, with the conquest of the West, and now, here, with the end of the Civil Rights era.

Q: What made you decide to pursue writing as a career? Have you always wanted to be a journalist?

A: The first writer I ever met growing up in Memphis was Shelby Foote, the great Civil War historian, and he gave me certain ideas at an early age about what narrative history can aspire to be. My other deep influence was John Hersey, who wrote , and was my teacher in college. But really it all started when I was just a kid. By the age of nine or ten, I knew that I loved history and writing. It got hold of me and never turned loose.

(Photo © Gary Oakley)

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From Publishers Weekly Starred Review. The counterpoint between two driven men—one by a quest for justice, the other by an atavistic hatred—propels this engrossing study of the King assassination. Sides, author of the bestselling *Ghost Soldiers*, shows us a King all but consumed by the flagging civil rights movement in 1968 and burdened by presentiments of death. Pursuing him is escaped convict James Earl Ray, whose feckless life finds a belated, desperate purpose, perhaps stimulated by George Wallace's presidential campaign, in killing the civil rights leader. A third main character is the FBI, which turns on a dime from its long-standing harassment of King to a massive investigation into his murder; in Sides's telling, the Bureau's transoceanic hunt for Ray is one of history's great police procedurals. Sides's novelistic treatment registers Ray as a man so nondescript his own sister could barely remember him (the author refers to him by his shifting aliases to emphasize the shallowness of his identity). The result is a tragedy more compelling than the grandest conspiracy theory: the most significant of lives cut short by the hollowest of men. Photos. (Apr. 27)

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