

Hellhound on His Trail: The Stalking of Martin Luther King Jr. and the International Hunt for his Assassin

By Hampton Sides

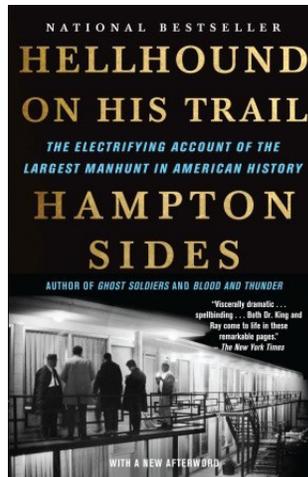
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At this time of year, in the memory of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I usually reread *Why We Can't Wait, Where Do We Go From Here*, or another of his writings and sermons in *Testament of Hope: the Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* But, earlier this year I read the amazing 400+ page account of Dr. King's murder and the search for his murderer, *Hellhound on His Trail: The Stalking of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the International Hunt for His Assassin.*

What do you know or remember about what happened in Memphis, Tennessee on April 4, 1968? Who was King's assassin? Was he ever captured? What compelled him to do it? Where did he come from and where did he go?

And how much do you really know about King? Why was he on that hotel balcony in Memphis that April afternoon? Why was he in Memphis in the first place? Through this thorough research and reporting by author Hampton Sides, you will find answers to these questions and more, in a non-fiction book that reads very much like a compelling, absorbing novel.

The meticulously detailed account begins with James Earl Ray's escape



from prison on a previous charge:

“On April 23, 1967, Prisoner #416J, an inmate at the maximum-security Jefferson City Penitentiary in Missouri, stuffed himself into a bread-filled metal box bound for the prison farm workers. He became the first man to successfully escape in the institution’s 131-year history. Fashioning himself Eric Galt [one of a series of identities Ray adopted during his bizarre journey], this nondescript thief and con man drifted through the American South, down into Mexico, and then to Los Angeles. His dream was to become a director of porn films.”

Hellhound describes James Earl Ray's growing racism and obsession with Dr. King, as well as his avid support of George Wallace's campaign for the Presidency. Ray traveled to Los Angeles, and decided to seek notoriety as the one who would stalk and kill Dr. King, who he had come to hate vehemently.

You may recall that King had come to Memphis in April 1968 to lead peaceful protests supporting the garbage workers on strike. The striking workers, all black, were driven to seek better wages and working conditions after two of their co-workers were crushed to death by the hydraulic trash compactor on



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their antiquated garbage truck. The book outlines how this march unfortunately and disappointingly ended in violence, due in large part to triangulations between King's nonviolent group, members of the Black Panthers who were frustrated with that non-violent approach, and the blatantly racist Director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, who viewed both King and the Panthers as dangerous radicals. Here, too, you will read a storyline that seems to be all too familiar today: Attorney General Ramsey Clark refused time and time again to engage in what he viewed as illegal wire-tapping and surveillance of King, despite repeated orders to do so by Hoover. Indeed, much of the rhetoric and rabble-rousing described in the late 1960s sounds far too similar to radically conservative factions today for comfortable reading.

Hellbound predominantly focuses on Ray's obsession with Dr. King and his work, pulling together details from scores of interviews and both published and unpublished documents. But the author also reveals details about Dr. King that many people today do not know. For instance, you may be surprised to learn that King was on that balcony in Memphis because he was a heavy smoker and had stepped out for a cigarette. Additionally (although perhaps not so surprisingly given similar stories of recent U.S. presidents and other international leaders), you may be disappointed to learn that King was a womanizer. Perhaps one might say these personal qualities, or shortcomings, make him all the more human, and do not negate his amazing leadership. He was one who was not afraid to risk his life for the civil rights and social justice of fellow citizens, and who was not afraid to take what some considered unpopular positions on such issues as the Vietnam War, which he came ardently to oppose. It makes his legacy even more important as we educators continue to confront racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and able-ism in our schools. Perhaps we have our own dreams of public schools where every student is cared about and known well, and every effort is made to help each succeed, becoming fully participating citizens in a democracy, a fully educated, critically-thinking, problem-solving citizenry.

After detailing the assassination halfway through the book, the narrative holds readers' attention, following Ray's narrow, daring escape from Memphis to Toronto, Canada, and from there to his flight abroad. Woven throughout is the story of the amazing work by FBI agents and others who tracked him down and captured him just in the nick of time before boarding a plane in Lisbon, Portugal. Ray was headed to seek asylum in Rhodesia, then a segregated, apartheid country.

From here you will follow Ray to solitary confinement in a Nashville prison, when in 1971 he was transferred to Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary. Then, six years later on June 10th 1977, James Earl Ray again escaped from prison, this time with five others. The six escapes had each made a piece of pipe that they linked together to make a pipe-ladder to get them over the prison wall. Within a few hours or days they all were captured, tracked down by bloodhounds in the rugged wilderness surrounding Brushy Mountain and returned to prison. Ray himself was the last to be recaptured, having survived only on wheat germ.

At last, the book relays Ray's stabbing by several black inmates, then his resulting diagnosis with Hepatitis C, causing his death twelve years later, in 1998.

Ultimately, one must consider whether the *Hellbound on His Trail* title refers to Ray's singleminded obsession, or that of the federal agents tracking Ray repeatedly. In any case, I highly recommend this book and look forward to conversing with anyone else who reads it. Please [email me](#) with your thoughts.