

Teaching American History Seminar

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Hampton Sides - the author of **Hellhound On His Trail**, has described his book about the tragic intersection of the lives of James Earl Ray and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, as his way to make history come alive through storytelling. Sides is successful, in my view, not only because of his skill in telling the tale - but because he has done the hard work of thorough historical research. In doing his research - Sides comes to the conclusion that James Earl Ray stalked Dr. King, with the intention of assassinating him and that there is no evidence to prove otherwise. This runs counter to many who believe that the King assassination was the result of some sort of a conspiracy. Some have held that J. Edgar Hoover and the government were responsible - while others have thought that a variety white-power groups could have played a role. Even members of the King family have made statements over the years indicating that they were unsure of James Earl Ray's ability to act alone, or that he bore any responsibility at all. In his efforts to prove his theory that James Earl Ray was the man responsible - Hampton Sides provides a remarkable and riveting close-up of Ray's clandestine wanderings through a series of seedy environs in Mexico, Los Angeles, Memphis, and more. While doing so - Sides helps the reader to discover who Ray is and what internal forces could have driven him to do something so horrible. The story Sides tells, carefully weaves several threads together at the same time - not only following James Earl Ray - but also Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his inner-circle, and to some extent - other important players in the story, including J. Edgar Hoover, Clark Clifford, LBJ, George Wallace and others.

Hampton Sides extensive research for his book included interviews with people who were present at many of the actual events - from individuals at the Missouri State Penitentiary (that Ray escaped from in April 1967) - to the members of Scotland Yard (who captured Ray in London, in June 1968). In putting his narrative together - Sides not only used lots of interviews, but also made use of a variety of archives, other authors' research, and the FBI files from the case. His views of the historical events are compelling.

As a result of reading Hellhound On His Trail, I have learned a great deal that I had never known before. I had known that James Earl Ray had been convicted of the murder of Dr. King and I was familiar with his image. I knew that the assassination had taken place at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis and had seen the iconic picture of King's inner-circle standing over his body on the balcony - all of them pointing towards where the shot was fired. I have been to Memphis and walked down Beale Street and along the Mississippi River and traveled on a streetcar past the former Lorraine Motel - which is now the National Civil Rights Museum. That was (for the most part) the extent of my understanding, before Hampton Sides allowed me to step back in time. What were some of the discoveries made? I found the fact that Ray had been able to escape from a prison thought to be impossible to break out of - an indication of what someone referred to as his "rat intelligence". He was so skilled at blending into the background and not being noticeable - that even a doctor who performed plastic surgery on him in Los Angeles couldn't describe him. Those who had had contact with him who were able to give a description often stated the same things - that he was of average height and build and was neatly dressed and fairly quiet. (In fact, it makes him sound a lot like the descriptions that neighbors and co-workers often seem to give to the press about the person who turns out to be a murder.) The fact that he was able to maintain a number of aliases and by using them - to gain a drivers license and a valid passport (which allowed him to travel to Europe) - were examples of the criminal skills he had developed a genius for. James Earl Ray's support of the presidential ambitions of George Wallace and his interest in living in the white-minority ruled country of Rhodesia; make his feelings about Martin Luther King come into clearer focus. He must have believed that he would be seen as a hero among whites and given the groups that raised money on his behalf after he was arrested - it seems that to some white extremists - he was.

One of the results of reading Hellhound, has been that I have been moved to look into the King assassination and the events of 1968 further. I had lost track of the fact that President Johnson had made his famous statement (during a speech about the war in Vietnam) that he would not be seeking re-election; that King had been assassinated; that Robert Kennedy had been assassinated; and that the Poor People's Campaign had encamped in

Washington D.C. - all within a few months of each other. (Any study of this important time period would of course also include - the Democratic National

Convention in Chicago and the election of Richard Nixon, as President and the first orbit around the Moon by the Apollo 8 astronauts - when they took the famous picture now known as "Earthrise".) The significance of this pivotal year in American history could easily be the basis for an entire history course. (If only most public schools saw the value of more history!)

I have felt energized by what I've learned. I have so many ideas about how I could incorporate what I've learned - that I've begun by making lists of resources and have been exploring them.

Among the websites that I have investigated thusfar, are the following:

**National Civil Rights Museum (at the Lorraine Motel)

<http://www.civilrights museum.org>

**PBS.org's "Learn and Explore" section, search "Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970's)"

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/teachers/index.html>

**The King Center

<http://www.thekingcenter.org>

**photos from day Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. died (Life Magazine images)

<http://www.life.com/image/51419416/in-gallery/24651>

**"Roads to Memphis" American Experience Film

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/introduction/memphis-introduction>

**Southern Poverty Law Center/Teaching Tolerance

<http://www.splcenter.org/what-we-do/teaching-tolerance>

Through these sites I can create biography projects; newspaper and/or magazine projects; powerpoint presentations utilizing the wide variety of amazing black and white photographs from the civil rights era; speech projects; opportunities for debate and/or mock trials and more. The possibilities are almost endless.

