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Hellhound on His Trail

Hampton Sides author of Hellhound on his Trail, does an amazing job weaving together the story on James Earl Ray and Martin Luther King Jr. leading to that fateful day that Martin Luther King was assassinated. He then tells the weaving tale of James Earl Ray and his quest to continue to live freely, and avoid the police. He is able to send you back in time and travel along side with each of these men as they were on a crash course that would affect American society and leave a huge smear on American race relations following the events that occurred on a April evening in 1968.

Sides begins his book by introducing the reader to the villain in this amazing narrative. As the book tells this story you read about James Earl Ray by his many aliases. Sides introduces this man at the beginning as #416-J. As the story unfolds you learn about his other names, Eric Galt, Harvey Lowmeyer, and John Willard. James Earl Ray uses many names to hide his true identity.

As we are introduced to #416-J we find out that this man has some psychological issues, and has a history of recidivism. As we follow this mans routine in prison, the author does an amazing job setting the stage for this man's escape. The author begins to foreshadow some of the events this man will be involved with by explaining some of the issues that affect this man.

Sides then introduces us to our tragic figure, Martin Luther King Jr. we are introduced to him not in the glory of him leading massive Civil Rights demonstrations in Selma, or Washington D.C. Rather we are introduced to a man that is tired, worn and looking for direction. King is planning his most important campaign yet, and it is ripping him apart. He is planning a “Poor people’s campaign.” This campaign that he is planning is going to be a massive assault on Washington similar to the Bonus Army taking over Washington following World War I. His plan was to bring poor people from all over the world, India, Africa, Central America, and force it down the throat of America. He wanted to push for a social and economic change in America. Not a communistic overhaul, but more of a better distribution of wealth to spread to disadvantaged Americans and disadvantaged people from around the world. “The Poor Peoples campaign would address the lengthened shadow of slavery, the *economic* shadow.” (p.24) King had a tough time convincing the other members of the SCLC to support this action, but King did get them to support it.

From here on the book weaves these two destined characters through a dramatic series of events. We follow Galt through Mexico, California and many other southern states. We learn of his addiction to pornography and his obsessive anti-African American actions. He wasn’t out burning crosses and dressing in all white robes, but when he saw African Americans doing something he did not like, he would blow his top. We follow Galt through his graduation of Bartending school ,and we learn about the phot he takes with the teacher of the class, the photo that will ultimately lead to his capture while running from authorities and seeking refuge over seas. This photo which he purposely closes his eyes during will end up leading to his capture by Scotland Yard.

We also learn about King and the many important figures in American History that tried to bring this man down. From Hoover head of the FBI to Lyndon Baines Johnson, President of the United States many US officials had soured to Martin Luther King Jr. Hoover was obsessed with King. He constantly tried to find ways to smear his character. He tried endlessly to wire tap him and dig up evidence of King's affiliation with communists. The FBI was constantly searching for anything to damage his reputation, his Drinking, smoking and carousing with women made him a target. FBI agents constantly mailed him boxes of incriminating behavior pleading with King to kill himself. But King was not destined to take his life; sadly the pieces were already moving putting in to motion the plan to assassinate a person that had inspired so many. I was also intrigued to find out their reactions to the news of King's death, Hoover was not really moved by his death, where as Johnson was saddened by his murder.

Sides does an amazing job taking you from one place to another seamlessly. He introduces to you characters that will play a major role in the unfolding events that would lead to the loss of such an inspiring figure. As you travel with Galt across the country you can feel the tension as he heads to Memphis. As he purchases the weapon that will eventually fire that fate full shot, you feel like you are in the store watching these events unfold. When Galt checks in to the boarding house where the shot will be fired you feel like you are in the room as he stakes out the Lorraine. And when he is in the bathroom, standing in the tub you feel like you are standing there with him as he takes aim and murders one of the most important figures of the 20th century. I found my self welling up with tears as I read these events unfolding. It was truly an heart wrenching series of pages.

As King lay dying the author puts you on the balcony, I could see the blood, the wound and the look in King's eyes. Sides did an unbelievable job recreating these heart-wrenching moments. I felt the terror of the events as they were unfolding, the uncertainty to whether or not King was going to survive, if anybody else were going to get shot.

I also could feel the tension as Galt tried to get away and was successful for as long as he was at avoiding the police, state police, and FBI. It is amazing that the photo taken when he graduated bartending school would be the photo that would lead to his capture in by Scotland yard. But Ray would not stay in prison, he would soon escape only to be found about a week later. He would return to jail to finish out his sentence.

Hampton Sides does an amazing job telling this story. He backs up his story with countless notes at the end of the book. Sides takes the reader on a journey that tells a story of a tragic figure that tried to make the world a better place for all people, he also tells the story of a deranged man that would take his life. You read about the events leading these to figures to that tragic day, and the manhunt that would cost American taxpayers over two million dollars, in order to catch the murderer of Martin Luther King Jr. An assassination that threatened to rip the fabric of America, and create a race war that would permanently stain America. The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. was a horrible event. The man hunt for James earl Ray took many long hours of work, and millions of taxpayer's dollars. Luckily they finally caught King's assassin.

I truly enjoyed this book and would recommend it to anyone that has any interesting Civil Rights, Martin Luther King, American History, or true crime. Sides writes an amazing narrative of the events leading to the assassination and the events that lead to the capture and re capture of James Earl Ray.