

## Questions for Hampton Sides

<http://www.amazon.com/Hellhound-On-His-Trail-ebook/dp/B0036S4BX0>



**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 *Hiroshima*, 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.

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