

The Kneeling Man: My Father's Life as a Black Spy Who Witnessed the Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Leta McCollough Seletzky (Counterpoint, 2023), 304 pages, no index.

Reviewed by Darryl Lansey

In US history, three assassinations have shaken the country to its foundation: President Lincoln's, President Kennedy's, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s. All three assassinations changed the trajectory of history and civil rights in America. Dr. King's assassination also changed the trajectory of Marrell ("Mac") McCollough's life. At 6:01 p.m. on April 4, 1968, McCollough's life was transformed from that of an inexperienced undercover police officer into history's "kneeling man," as he desperately tried to save Dr. King, who laid mortally wounded on the second-floor balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. How McCollough ended up on the balcony kneeling over Dr. King's body, and his subsequent journey to become a CIA employee, is the theme of Seletzky's book.

As McCollough's daughter, Leta McCollough Seletzky's isn't a dispassionate biographer. She is the oldest child from his first marriage. Seletzky was still a young girl when her parents separated. She spent most of her life estranged from her father. *The Kneeling Man* is Seletzky's attempt to tell the story of her father's role in history, his CIA career, and her own cathartic journey to reconnect with him and learn more about his life. Seletzky gives a voice to her father's experiences, while simultaneously reconnecting with him through a series of one-on-one interviews.

Seletzky's story about her father's life is the quintessential American story. McCollough was born in Mississippi at the height of segregation in the early 1940s into a large family of poor sharecroppers. As it was for many Black Americans, McCollough's journey out of Mississippi was via the US Army. He served in the early days of the Vietnam War, though he served as a military policeman (MP) stateside.

In 1967, after his army tour, McCollough exchanged his MP experience for a job with the Memphis Police Department (MPD). He was one of the few Black officers on the force. After McCollough served a brief stint as a patrolman, MPD's Special Operations Division recruited

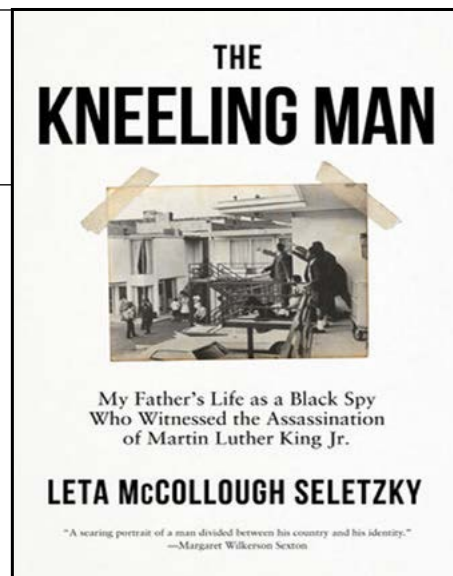
him to be an undercover officer. His first assignment was to infiltrate the Black Invaders, one of several predominantly Black "militant" groups the MPD and FBI were concerned might

fuel unrest in Memphis. The day of Dr. King's assassination, McCollough and a few other Black Invaders had come to the Lorraine Motel to meet with Dr. King to discuss how they might help with Dr. King's objectives for the Poor People's Campaign and the trash workers' strike.

By 1972, McCollough believed his five years of excellent work as an MPD undercover and plainclothes officer and the acquisition of a Bachelor's degree in police administration would lead to a promotion. He didn't get promoted as expected. However, according to McCollough, many of his white police academy classmates with less street experience and education were promoted. As a result, McCollough decided he needed to leave the MPD.

A doctor who worked with the MPD encouraged McCollough to apply to CIA, which indeed hired him into its Office of Security. His career with CIA was split between domestic security jobs and overseas assignments supporting operational activities. Dr. King's assassination haunted McCollough throughout his CIA career. Congress subpoenaed him in 1978 and 1998 to testify about Dr. King's death, including efforts to debunk multiple conspiracy theories about the assassination and McCollough's possible role.

As a biographer, Seletzky is emotionally attached to her father's recollections. This is evident as she conveys his CIA accomplishments, including his successful efforts



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to recruit more than 60 Blacks into the security profession. Her emotional attachment is also clear when discussing her father's principal career disappointment when CIA denied him a promotion into the Senior Intelligence Service. According to Seletzky, her father believed he ran afoul of the CIA system as he pressed it to do more about the recruitment and retention of Blacks and other employees of color.

I enjoyed reading Seletzky's book. Although I was only six years old when Dr. King was assassinated, his death is seared into my memory. Seletzky, with the help of her father's firsthand account, brings to life one of the darkest days in US history in ways only a few other

people could have done. Some readers may, as I did, feel a bit whipsawed by Seletzky's writing style. It jumps back and forth between the past and present as her father, and others like Ambassador Andrew Young, recalled Dr. King's assassination decades later. Additionally, there are times when Seletzky spends significant time exploring her journey to reconnect with the father she never knew, and her own thoughts about race relations in America. In both cases, these felt more like asides rather than critical elements of her father's story. Overall, I would recommend the book as an interesting addition to a reader's historical nonfiction collection.



The reviewer: Darryl A. Lansey is a retired CIA officer and author of the memoir, *A Thin Line Between Love and Hate: A Black Man's Journey Through Life and the CIA* (Bookbaby, 2020).