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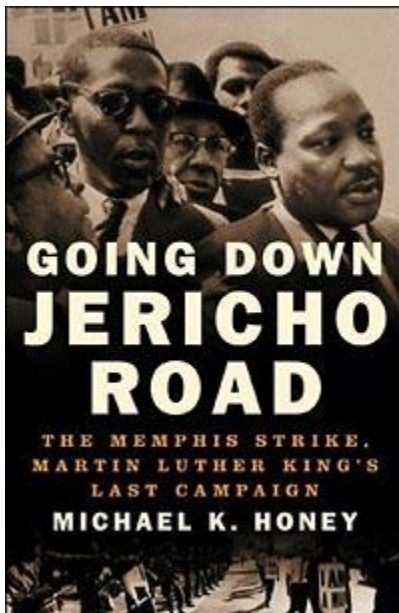
Book Review

"Going Down Jericho Road" | Rallying for workers' rights, civil rights

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"Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign"

by Michael K. Honey

Norton, 640 pp., \$35

When I first visited the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, I went in expecting the exhibits and displays to bring up emotions, and that's exactly what they did. One exhibit forces a visitor to sit in the literal back of the bus and hear taunts from a recording; another displays a life-size sit-in. But the true centerpiece of the museum affected me more than any glass display case or photograph could — it was the actual motel-room balcony where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, which is part of the structure itself now.

The idea to build the museum incorporating the Lorraine Motel was a brilliant one, but also one that forces any visitor to come to terms with his grief over the loss of King.

King was in Memphis to add his voice to protests in support of striking sanitation workers. Though King's own biography has been well told — most notably in several excellent books by Taylor Branch — the sanitation-worker strike has not been as thoroughly documented.

A new book by University of Washington, Tacoma, professor Michael K. Honey corrects that omission and details the daily evolution of the strike and what it meant to Memphis and the larger civil-rights movement. Honey writes with a novelist's skill to make this critical chapter of our national history come alive. The result is a first-rate chronicle of the events that led up to that fateful day at the Lorraine Motel, and to larger social change.

Author appearances

Michael K. Honey will read from "Going Down Jericho Road" at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Tacoma Public Library, 1102 Tacoma Ave. S., and at 4 p.m. Thursday in Smith Hall, room 102, on the UW campus. Thursday's talk and reception are sponsored by the Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies and the American Ethnic Studies and History departments.

"Going Down Jericho Road" succeeds because Honey tells the story through individuals, putting a human face to the strike, the civil-rights movement and the efforts by Memphis to stop it. Honey rightfully parallels the story of the civil-rights movement with struggles of organized labor, but he always brings the larger story back to the individuals whose choices made history.

The strike began when two African-American workers were killed by equipment that wasn't up to standards of that used by white workers, and Honey details how this one strike, by 1,300 garbage men, became a seminal moment that helped ignite a larger movement. Though it is hard to read the timely accounts of the Memphis mayor's immovable position without the judgment that hindsight provides, Honey is never preachy, even when he writes about the essential role the African-American church played in solidifying middle-class blacks to the cause.

Honey's analysis of King's role is sharp and telling. "King," he writes, "had qualities that allowed him to lead a mass movement that joined working-class people to the middle class through the black church."

Honey quotes King's speech to the Montgomery Improvement Association: "There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression." Sanitation workers in Memphis followed those words and protested by wearing placards that said, "I AM a Man."

It was also in Memphis where, on the day before his death, King made his legendary "Mountaintop" speech, which foretold his passing but also the ultimate success of the battle he was fighting. Just two weeks after King's assassination, the Memphis strike was settled, though the fallout from King's killing would have wider ramifications.

Honey calls King's death a "Crucifixion," and considering how this great loss galvanized the conscience of a nation, both black and white, those words are probably an understatement.

"King was like Moses," one of the sanitation workers recalls in Honey's book. "You can't keep treating people wrong, you gotta do right some time." This vivid and important history, along with heritage museums like the one in Memphis and the Northwest African American Museum currently under construction, help keep that vital message alive.