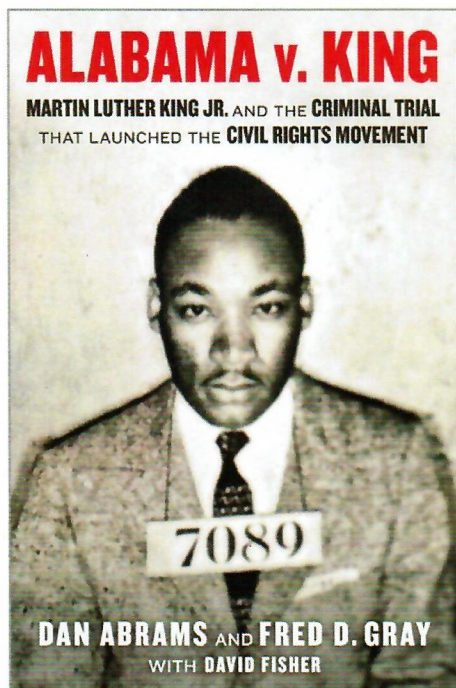


Book Review: *The State of Alabama v. Martin Luther King, Jr., March 19, 1956.*

By William Grewe, Esq.



Imagine a play where the theater audience knows the outcome, but the cast does not.

Alabama v. King, written in 2022, nearly 70 years after the events it recounts, is such a story. The telling is anchored by the trial court transcript which gives it a real-time feeling and a *you-are-there* pulse. Those present, and the public at large, had no idea who the humble defendant, seated quietly at counsel table, was or would become. But you, the reader, know before you read page one.

It is a quick read or listen which brings to life the emergence of Martin Luther King, Jr. upon the national stage.

King, the 27-year-old pastor of a small conservative Baptist congregation, selected one year earlier to replace his too-liberal predecessor, was on trial for leading a bus boycott by the Black residents of Montgomery, Alabama. Unknown beyond his modest congregation, the young pastor was not involved in civil rights causes before the events which are the subject of the book.

The story of the trial is told by authors Dan Abrams and Fred Gray. Gray, himself only 26 at the time, was counsel for King, and

also Rosa Parks. It is a gift that he is still alive today. His personal recall and insight add much to the storytelling. He should be in the Smithsonian.

The story begins with Parks refusal, on Thursday, December 1, 1955, to give up her seat. Trial was scheduled for the following Monday. A boycott of the public bus system would begin on that day to coincide with the trial. With such a short window of time to prepare and get the word out, Gray, and community leader Jo Ann Robinson, knew it could only be done from the pulpit on Sunday, December 4. A religious leader had to be tapped to do some heavy lifting. King was suggested. He was not known in civil rights circles, and had no experience in such activism. Robinson could only offer that, "He can move people with words." That would prove to be enough.

The presence of the trial transcript keeps the telling of the story pointed true north. *Brown v. Board of Education*, decided not two years earlier, created a base camp for summit tries. It is clear that the defense is focused on something more than the racist bus policy at hand.

The boycott is successful. The cause holds. Bus revenue plummets. Government leaders had to act. Come February 1956, King and 88 others are indicted under an archaic law which, the prosecution asserted, barred boycotts. The 1921 state statute had been enacted to prevent coal miners from organizing and striking. It had not been applied for more than 30 years.

The defense stipulated to individual bench trials. King would be tried first.

A parade of defense witnesses testified about ceaseless brutal and unjust treatment they received from bus drivers in tandem with Montgomery police. Testifying in court was, for many, the only way for their voice to be heard in the public sphere, with their graphic testimony being reported nationally.

At one point in the trial, there were six Black defense attorneys at counsel table, at a time when no law school in the state would admit Black students.

The story is so rich and true that the reader wants to learn more.

As the trial approaches its conclusion, it is clear that Montgomery, Alabama has been turned on its head. No one on the prosecution side seems to be able to say what the racist bus-seating policy is, exactly, or who authored it.

Someone has to make sense of it all. While the reader knows the outcome, the feeling persists that from his elevated seat above the fray, Judge Eugene Carter will be touched by the gentle breeze of justice and peace will be restored in his city. Nope.

At the outset, I wrote that King was little known. While true, he did introduce himself one evening during the boycott. In January 1956, a stick of dynamite exploded on the porch of his home. King was away speaking but Coretta Scott King and their daughter were home. Quickly, a crowd gathered in front of the home. It was prepared to take action. King raced home and spoke, asking the crowd not to respond with violence as "We want to love our enemies." The crowd obliged.

There is much more. If you are in the car, consider pressing "Play" to hear the audiobook version. *Alabama v. King* is available through Audible, Libby, the Cloud Library, and numerous other retailers in print or digital format.



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