



# The Informant: The FBI, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Murder of Viola Liuzzo

By Gary May

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In *The Informant*, historian Gary May reveals the untold story of the murder of civil rights worker Viola Liuzzo, shot to death by members of the violent Birmingham Ku Klux Klan at the end of Martin Luther King's historic Voting Rights March in 1965. The case drew national attention and was solved almost instantly, because one of the Klansmen present during the shooting was Gary Thomas Rowe, an undercover FBI informant. At the time, Rowe's information and subsequent testimony were heralded as a triumph of law enforcement. But as Gary May reveals in this provocative and powerful book, Rowe's history of collaboration with both the Klan and the FBI was far more complex. Based on previously unexamined FBI and Justice Department Records, *The Informant* demonstrates that in their ongoing efforts to protect Rowe's cover, the FBI knowingly became an accessory to some of the most grotesque crimes of the Civil Rights era--including a vicious attack on the Freedom Riders and perhaps even the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. A tale of a renegade informant and an intelligence system ill-prepared to deal with threats from within, *The Informant* offers a dramatic and cautionary tale about what can happen when secret police power goes unchecked.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. May, whose previous explorations of American history in works such as *Un-American Activities: The Trials of William Remington* were critically acclaimed for their vivid writing and painstaking research, has turned his formidable talents to restoring a controversial episode in the civil rights struggle. While slain activist Viola Liuzzo is far from a household name today, her murder in 1965 at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan immediately after the Selma, Ala., voting rights march was a national sensation. President Johnson kept close tabs on the investigation. When suspects were taken into custody almost immediately, it seemed that J. Edgar Hoover's FBI was doing its job brilliantly; federal informant Gary Thomas Rowe, who fingered the suspects, had infiltrated the Alabama Klan five years earlier. But as May lucidly describes, Rowe's own role in the murder was suspicious, and his experiences with the KKK, which often crossed the line dividing observer from participant, linked him with other notorious race crimes of the era, including the Birmingham church bombing. May succeeds brilliantly at weaving his threads into an engrossing narrative, even while maintaining the three-dimensional humanity of both Liuzzo and Rowe. Contemporary resonance is provided by linking the FBI's handling of Rowe with the challenges today's bureau faces in the war on terror, which must also rely on unscrupulous and violent informants. This is popular history at its best and shines a long overdue light on a dark chapter in the FBI's past. (*June*)

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### Review

"Gary May's page-turner is a demonstration that truth can be stranger than fiction. His book is a cautionary tale about secret government in general and the misuse of secret agents in particular. Part biography, part history, May's book is a window on personalities and events essential to our understanding of the Civil Rights era of the 1960s."—Robert Dallek

"*The Informant* is a gripping and suspenseful account of an enormously important event in American history. Based on unprecedented access to internal FBI documents, it offers fresh revelations about the Ku Klux Klan, the FBI, and the Civil Rights movement. This is a great book and, incidentally, a real page-turner."—Richard Gid Powers, author of *Broken: The Troubled Past and Uncertain Future of the FBI*

"*The Informant* is an important book. As a wonderful storyteller and historian, Gary May uses a dramatic 1965 Civil Rights murder to tell the fascinating account of an FBI informant system that had careened out of control. Breaking new ground with his prodigious research, May takes readers back to the 1960s, inside the violent world of the Ku Klux Klan and the strife that was splitting America. May vividly demonstrates the danger of fighting today's terrorists by relying on violent informants operating in a criminal netherworld with no fear of arrest. *The Informant* is a riveting and cautionary tale for modern times."—Gerald Posner, author of *Why America Slept: The Failure to Prevent 9/11*

(Gerald Posner)

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About the Author

**Gary May** is professor of history and director of the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies Program, University of Delaware. His previous books include *China Scapegoat: The Diplomatic Ordeal of John Carter Vincent* and *Un-American Activities: The Trials of William Remington*.

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