The New York Review of Books

Ambush, Night & Day

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November 19, 2015 issue

Reviewed:

A Brief History of Seven Killings
by Marlon James
Riverhead, 688 pp., $28.95; $17.00 (paper)

If hell were a place on earth, a Bob Marley concert in Jamaica isn't the first place you'd expect to find it. But perspective is everything. Bam-Bam, the first character to die in Marlon James's new novel, has been running for two days when he reaches the show, held in the park where he sleeps. He is covered in dog spit, desperate for cocaine, and relentlessly pursued by his partners in a failed assassination. The crowd around him is moving to the "Positive Vibration," but Bam-Bam is alone, hemmed in by nightmarish visions. Invisible flames lick at his ankles, three-eyed, bat-winged babies swarm around his head, and ghostly "duppies," the revenant spirits of Caribbean folklore, take aim at him from trees. But more frightening still is the man he tried to murder, not only still alive, but before him on stage—a Rasta Orpheus, risen from the grave. Marley's lyrics crash down upon him like damnation: "*So Jah say*."

Bam-Bam is the author's invention, but the concert really happened. "Smile Jamaica," held on December 5, 1976, in Kingston's National Heroes Park, was one of the biggest shows Marley ever gave, a turning point in his life and the history of the island. It was a peace concert organized by Michael Manley, Jamaica's socialist prime minister, in the lead-up to a nasty, violent election. The two parties were skirmishing over swing districts in West Kingston—lawless ghettos that they controlled using posses of local gunmen. The situation was especially crucial because of what Marley called the "ism schism," and which most people know as the cold war. Afraid that Manley's Jamaica might become another Cuba, the CIA provided the opposition Jamaica Labour Party with weapons and training. What is called in patois *hataclaps* ensued.

More than seventy people died in the resulting violence, which reached the world's ears when it almost killed Bob Marley, the country's most famous citizen. On December 3, gunmen stormed his Hope Road residence and recording studio, shooting him, his manager, his wife Rita, and members of his band. Everyone survived the attack —which inspired the song "Ambush in the Night"—and Marley gave a

legendary performance only two days later. But he was shaken enough to leave Jamaica for England, where he would stay for most of the rest of his life. The gunmen were never captured.

And you almost have to be glad they got away. If they hadn't, Marlon James might never have written his grisly and mesmerizing new book. *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is a glittering slice of Gehenna, something Roberto Bolaño might have written after watching the Jamaican film *The Harder They Come* with Hieronymus Bosch. A merciless, many-voiced epic, it is less a crime novel than a meditation on violence—on the way it feels to those who live it, and the way it spreads in the world. You won't find much of the sunny Marley of "One Love" in this story. (Or, for that matter, much Bob Marley—"The Singer," as James obliquely names him, is essentially a plot device.) *Seven Killings* is more like "Concrete Jungle"—a spiraling groove of crime and violence that reverberates from 1970s Kingston to 1990s Miami and New York.

The novel picks up where the record leaves off, beginning with the Hope Road gunmen and their brief, desperate lives. These characters are invented, but the frame of the story is real crime history. The gunmen belong to an organization based on the Shower Posse, a Kingston group that started in local political enforcement, then graduated to the international drug trade. Their leader, Lester Lloyd Coke, inspired the novel's lead antagonist, the crime lord Josey Wales. But all this international intrigue is secondary—background for the lives of people caught up in it.

Among them are people like Nina Burgess, a middle-class woman who flees Kingston after the gunmen see her witness the attack. *Seven Killings* follows Nina out of Jamaica and across four assumed identities —a picaresque exile that takes her, among other places, to Manhattan, where the "God Bless Employment Agency" hires her to nurse the aging parents of rich New Yorkers. (One client greets her by saying, "You must be the new girl they hired to wipe my ass.") At the periphery of the action, Nina is like the gravedigger in *Hamlet*—a character whose bitter humor both relieves and reflects the violence of the larger story. She laughs because she can't stop looking over her shoulder, anticipating the day the gunmen might arrive. "Even if it never comes," she explains, "the point is I'll be waiting for it."

It isn't any easier for the gunmen. They, too, are running away. The one who gets closest to freedom is the complex and ruthless Weeper. Weeper, who likes to read Bertrand Russell and plans to go to school, is swept up in a police raid while still an adolescent. Locked up, electrically tortured, and sexually abused, he emerges from prison Josey Wales's protégé and the posse's most capable enforcer. But the trauma follows him for two decades and all the way to New York, where Josey Wales puts him in charge of cocaine distribution. There, he glimpses the possibility of another life. He cruises the East Village

for sex with young men, one of whom he begins to care for. In one of the novel's only tender scenes, Weeper lies in bed admiring this man, wondering whether or not to wake him up. He thinks about what it might mean to embrace what he has spent so long avoiding—a terror of relaxing his masculine vigilance.

Weeper's story brings out one of James's most evident strengths: a keen feeling for how violence marks the sexuality of men. There is a story like this behind every "rudeboy" in the novel. Demus joins the posse after he is snatched from his morning standpipe shower by the Kingston police, who are in pursuit of a rapist. The officers make Demus and a line of other men, all naked, hump the ground of a glass-littered street. The one who looks like he knows how "fi fuck the dirt," they reason, must be guilty. Bam-Bam joins the gang at fourteen, after watching a local enforcer sexually assault his father. These violations background each murder the gunmen go on to commit—a continuity James doesn't make explicit, but instead works into the ways they function as a group. All this gives an erotic undercurrent to *Seven Killings*' Downtown Kingston, where almost every male relationship is founded on the shared nightmare of suffering, or the fantasy of inflicting, sexual violence.

If *A Brief History of Seven Killings* can be said to have a main idea, it's that nobody escapes, at least not entirely, from violence. Because violence isn't an event, but a kind of potential—a force, like gravity, that lurks in every curve of space. Uptown or Downtown, Boogeydown or Jamdown, you can't really get away from it, something Bam-Bam captures in a description of the Kingston ghetto where he grew up. He pictures it as a shadow with a moving edge, lengthening more quickly than he can get away:

> And the little room get smaller and smaller and more sisterbrothercousin come from country, the city getting bigger and bigger and there be no place to rub-a-dub or cut you shit and no chicken back to curry and even when there is it still cost too much money and that little girl get stab because they know she get lunch money every Tuesday and the boys like me getting older and not in school very regular and can't read Dick and Jane but know Coca-Cola, and want to go to a studio and cut a tune and sing hit songs and ride the riddim out of the ghetto but Copenhagen City and the Eight Lanes both too big and every time you reach the edge, the edge move ahead of you like a shadow until the whole world is a ghetto, and you wait.

A Brief History of Seven Killings advances with this shadow's edge—cutting, with depth and precision, into violence and its inner worlds. It has less in common with most recent literary fiction than it does with *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire*. (And it may soon join their company—HBO optioned an adaptation of the novel in April.) Like these shows, *Seven Killings* is surprising, suspenseful, and, when it stirs from its sinister languor, fast, with action sequences as finger-curling and eyelid-lifting as anything onscreen. But as much as it resembles the

best of today's television, the novel conveys violence with an interior nuance perhaps only achievable in prose. Its intensity comes less from the story's underworld glamour than it does from James's style and syntax—a language that gives texture to danger and its psychic terrain.

Few shows or films can match the intensity of *Seven Killings*' unworldly death scenes, rapturously long and so well executed that you might suspect James of having gone through the experience. One character, executed by the posse, narrates his own live burial in the first person, delivering a long monologue that ends, chillingly, with "ring around the rosie"—a regression to childhood that completes his inner unraveling.

The novel has many such spectacular deaths, as well as gunfights, car chases, and interrogations. But it is more concerned with the ordinary ways that violence is lived. James brings this out in the novel's narrating voices—a taxonomy of ways the mind copes with danger and death. There's the ruminant gravity of Papa-Lo, oldest don in the ghetto, whose proverb-strewn meditations retreat from the streets he no longer knows how to control. Or the psychopathic alertness of Josey Wales, a crime lord so prudent that he remembers secrets by setting them to nursery rhymes in his head. (It would be too dangerous, he explains, to write anything down—"Bad man don't make note in a book.") Or the thin machismo of Barry DiFlorio, the CIA station chief for Jamaica, in over his head and anxious about ending up like the embassy hostages in Iran.

Some of these voices are stronger than others. But such unevenness is probably inevitable in a novel with more than a dozen narrators, the best of whom cling to the ear with an intimacy that is almost parasitic. They sound almost unbearably close, like a record with all the reverb removed. What makes this work is James's talent for ventriloquizing vulnerability—to speak from his characters' sense of their own mortality. The novel is written with an unstinting awareness of death, most explicitly present in the story's surreal beginning. Sir Arthur George Jennings, a murdered politician, narrates the prologue from hell. There, the violence of death replays itself forever, and the only freedom left is observation: "Living people wait and see because they fool themselves that they have time. Dead people see and wait."

Marlon James is no Dante, but he shares at least three things with the author of the *Divine Comedy*. He artfully blends fantasy and nonfiction, writes unapologetically in his regional patois, and is fixated on hell—less as a literal location than as a way of illustrating how malice and violence entangle human lives. He has published three novels, all set in Jamaica. The first, *John Crow's Devil* (2005), is a supernatural thriller, the story of two ministers warring over a backcountry village called Gibbeah. It begins when the devilishly handsome "Apostle" arrives in the town's church and dramatically

ejects the “Rum Preacher,” its drunken, unloved minister. Once installed, the Apostle leads his flock the way of ISIS, drawing the whole village into a murderous, fundamentalist frenzy.

The Book of Night Women (2009) has the same spiraling shape. Set in the eighteenth century on the huge Montpelier plantation, the story is centered on a slave girl named Lilith. Around the time she comes of age, Lilith kills a man who tries to rape her, setting off a chain of violence that upends Montpelier and earns her an invitation from the “night women”: a secretive group of rebel slaves steeped in the Caribbean spiritual traditions of *myal* and *obeah*. What unfolds from there may be the most graphic slavery fiction ever printed—a merciless modern update of plantation gothic with an almost unbearably gory ending.

You can see the view of violence in *Seven Killings* emerging in these two novels. But they are nowhere near as good. Brilliant at points, and certainly never boring, they sometimes veer off into monotonous pornography—pileups of carnage that disrupt the tension of the narrative. The violence in *Seven Killings* isn’t easier or more tasteful—and it shouldn’t be. But it is so much more artfully paced and placed that it puts the novel in a different class, less a spectacle than a revealing illustration of the characters’ lives.

Perhaps this has to do with the way the story is told. *John Crow’s Devil* and *The Book of Night Women* are narrated by outsiders to the action—spectators or collective eyes that put the reader in the same position, relative to the spectacle of violence, as a mob. But *Seven Killings* is a first-person panorama, giving many intimate angles on its dangerous world. We see, feel, and suffer Kingston with the young rudies, the old rudies, the Uptowners, the corrupt politicians, the CIA, and even the reporter on assignment from *Rolling Stone*. The overall effect is close to *The Wire*’s group-by-group, top-to-bottom view of Baltimore.

If television shows keep offering themselves as comparisons, it is perhaps because *Seven Killings* goes so much against the grain of what is generally considered, at least in America, to be literary. It is driven by plot and voice, rather than what Elif Batuman mocks, in the introduction to her essay collection *The Possessed* (2010), as the “ideal of ‘craft’”—a cultish compulsion toward observation and detail that turns much contemporary fiction into “a nearly unreadable core of brisk verbs and vivid nouns.” The novel is also a kind of social encyclopedia, its many voices a catalog of its place and time.

Both of these qualities are at once strangely of the moment, and somehow old-fashioned—cable drama, but also nineteenth-century serial. Indeed, James told *Guernica* that the first set of novels he read seriously were Victorian: “Lots and lots and lots of Dickens. And Dickens is, ‘Make them laugh, make them cry, make them wait.’”

And, perhaps, make them hurt. Violence has become the norm in American film and television; it is less evident in our literary fiction. Our entertainment and our politics rely on the spectacle of violence, yet we rarely consider the lived experience. This omission is related to the domestic bent of most literary fiction—which still considers the ironies, insecurities, and understated epiphanies of "ordinary" (white, comfortable, first-world) lives the most appropriate subjects of artful writing. Anything more intense tends to get banished to a subliterary setting.

Which isn't to say that violent fiction is rare. What's rare is fiction that is actually about violence, concerned not so much with how it strikes the witness (with pity, pleasure, or political outrage, for example) but with how it feels. And *Seven Killings* is fearlessly faithful to that experience, written as though with indifference to its readers' arousal, outrage, sympathy, and disgust. For James, this is as much a moral as an artistic choice. "I have a problem with understated violence," he told *Guernica*. "I know people who have suffered from violence and there's nothing tasteful or beautifully written or wonderfully wrought about it." Readers "cannot get off easy," or look down as though from above the story. "You don't get to have a bigger sense of perspective than [the characters] do," he goes on. "Because they don't get it, so why should you get it?"

There is a wicked parody in *Seven Killings* of this "bigger sense of perspective" in the character of Alex Pierce. A *Rolling Stone* writer who comes to Jamaica to report on Mick Jagger's vacation, he ends up investigating the gunmen who ambushed Marley at Hope Road. A would-be narrator, Pierce can't stay out of the story. It follows him all the way to New York, where enforcers of the Storm Posse invade his apartment. There, in a macabre amplification of every writer's nightmare, Pierce is tied up and "edited" by the gunmen of a crackhouse shooting he is covering for *The New Yorker*. Tied up, pants wet, and teeth broken, Pierce takes line-by-line criticism from subjects who truly have "jumped off the page." In one of the novel's darkest moments of humor, the gunmen object to Pierce's racist description of a woman their don has killed:

> —Why you have to describe her so ghetto?
>
> —Huh? I don't unders—
>
> —Short, chubby, and I remember the rest, "dark with hair that looked like the extensions were just removed." What the fuck, white boy, you think she going like to read that?

So it goes for anyone who thinks they stand beyond the story. And if you read it right, *Seven Killings* will leave you exactly where it leaves Alex Pierce—struck, at close range, by lives you expected to see from a distance. It will hit different readers according to what they expect

from violence in fiction—if anything at all. Some will be frustrated by its lack of "larger comment," the usual hall pass for dangerous art. Others will find it too painful. People who think good writing should always be graceful won't like it at all.

But to make certain things beautiful would be to lie about them—something one character, Tristan Phillips, discovers in the Riker's Island prison library. There, he reads V.S. Naipaul's *The Middle Passage*, a book much denounced for its contemptuous representation of the author's native Caribbean. But Tristan finds something to agree with:

> Brethren, the man say West Kingston is a place so fucking bad that you can't even take a picture of it, because the beauty of the photographic process lies to you as to just how ugly it really is. Oh you read it? Trust me, even him have it wrong. The beauty of how him write that sentence still lie to you as to how ugly it is. It so ugly it shouldn't produce no pretty sentence, ever.

There are plenty of pretty sentences in Marlon James's new novel. But it refuses to be beautiful. Not because it can't, but because certain extremes of human experience ask for something else.

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