Trenchtown rocks to the beat of a violent rhythm: FICTION

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ABSTRACT

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FULL TEXT

A Brief History of Seven Killings MARLON JAMES ONEWORLD, $29.99
This vast book is the Jamaican-born Marlon James' third novel. It comes with extravagant praise from, among others, Irvine Welsh ("A haunting incendiary work"), Colum McCann ("Faulkner in another skin") and Dave Eggers (a "contemporary masterpiece"). According to The Boston Globe, it is a "devastating epic".

For some 300 pages of the 688 pages in this oversize novel I was inclined to agree. The opening sections are focused on the events of the night of December 3, 1976, in Kingston, Jamaica. A group of gunmen ambushed and almost managed to kill the world-famous reggae singer Bob Marley. Marley, known throughout James' novel as the "Singer", had returned to Jamaica for a concert, to be held on the following night in an attempt to heal the ingrained and violent hostility between Jamaica's criminal gangs, each ruling its own fiefdom or "ghetto", whose influence spread at times as far as the government and opposition of the island state.

The reasons for the attempted assassination - in which Marley was lightly wounded - were never clearly revealed, neither before nor after Marley's death in 1981 from a melanoma that had appeared under one of his toes. By then Marley had adopted Rastafarian beliefs and practices - including a splendid set of dreadlocks - which made him refuse his surgeons' advice that he should have the toe amputated in order to save his life. Particularly after his death - he was 36 - conspiracy theories mushroomed.

Was the CIA behind the ambush? Or the Cubans, or perhaps the Colombian drug cartels? Did organised crime in the US itself play a role in that attempted killing, or was it influential in Marley's surprising return to Jamaica in 1978 for another "peace" concert? James rehearses these outlandish events and suppositions with virtuoso brilliance in the opening sections of his novel. The story is told by a succession of voices: the inhabitants of the "ghettos" speaking in their own characteristic patois; better-educated members of the Jamaican middle classes; a CIA agent weighed down not merely by a demanding (though often tedious) assignment but also by a dissatisfied wife who wants the family to return to Vermont, now, straight away; a shady Latin American known as Doctor Love; Alex Pierce, a wannabe writer for Rolling Stone.

There's even a ghost, Sir Arthur Jennings, described in the dramatis personae as "former politician, deceased". This is, I think, an invented character, perhaps one of James' jokes: one of the Kingston thugs is called Tony Pavarotti,

bringing irresistibly together a Soprano and a tenor. The name of the chief villain, Josey Wales, was obviously borrowed from the famous Clint Eastwood movie.

These voices intertwine to depict a violent, impoverished society governed by strictly observed codes, among them the intricacies of Jamaican Rastafarian beliefs and their heady mixture of a kind of Christianity with worship of Hailie Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia. James' ear for the way people speak and his eye for characteristic and telling gestures and behaviour lead to a rich, multi-textured prose, as voice follows voice in a narrative that is far from straightforward, to say the least.

I do not have enough space to give details of how these characters - Papa-Lo; Bam-Bam; Josey Wales; Weeper; Demus; Nina Burgess (she will have other names later on) - circle around the attempted murder of the "Singer" and the appalling retribution that follows. The novel's violence is breathtaking as is, in a way, the lyricism with which James evokes the sights, the sounds and the (sometimes noisome) smells of the Jamaican landscape.

As I have said, these methods led to an outstanding achievement for some 300 or 350 pages. Then a fundamental flaw or difficulty in James' narrative strategy becomes all too evident. The novel lacks focus. For hundreds of pages, what seemed to be the core of James' concern recedes to be replaced by an equally violent, dark set of narratives that come to rest eventually in the drug-ravaged Bronx of the 1980s.

There are some unforgettable and horrible things scattered throughout these pages. A lighter moment comes when a Jamaican nurse ends up having to spend a day and a night with a WASP Manhattan gentleman who, it turns out, can't remember what happened five minutes ago.

Yet this second half, as narrative voice replaces narrative voice, struck me as repetitive and self-indulgent - too much intrigue, too much mystification, by far too many words and too little imaginative connection with the splendid poise of the opening sections. Eventually I lost count of the number of bodies, but I am sure of this: the title, A Brief History of Seven Killings, is one of Marlon James' little jokes.

Andrew Riemer is the Herald's chief book reviewer.

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