

# A Brief History of Seven Killings is shocking but not gratuitous

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## FULL TEXT

As its title suggests, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* contains violence. But although the bloodshed in the novel isn't unexpected, it's still shocking. Within three pages of the opening, we get this:

You get the idea. Marlon James is not messing around. There's plenty more pain in the first part of the book, alongside allusions to brutal sexual violence, gun-running, kidnapping, and cocaine psychosis. This section culminates in the description of the death of a fireman who is trying to put out a blaze:

It's so matter of fact and free of sentiment that it took me a few beats to realise exactly what I'd just read. Children burned. Children shot and then burned. Firemen shot while trying to save the children.

Such material is tough to read. But necessarily so. When he was on *Desert Island Discs* Marlon James answered those who complain about such vivid horrors by saying: "Reading about abuse is probably hard ...but it's probably nicer than getting abused. You don't have to endure these things but you should know what they are."

This violence isn't gratuitously shocking. It's shockingly real. James has set his novel in a fictional part of Kingston called Copenhagen, but many of the events have real-world equivalents. In May 1976, for instance, there was a huge tenement fire on Orange Lane in the Jamaican capital. The *Daily Gleaner* reported:

"Fifty men set fire to tenement buildings and blocked escape routes ...Barrages of gunshots were heard as the gunmen prevented the police and firemen from entering the premises to put out the blaze. This incident left 10 people dead and 500 homeless."

The Netflix documentary *Who Shot The Sheriff?* goes further even than James and details fires where not only were firemen shot but children were thrown back into the flames.

Such horrors were a regular occurrence in Jamaica in 1976. Kingston was split into different territories controlled by warring gangs. These gangs in turn received legal protection (and more) from the two warring political parties, the leftwing People's National party (PNP) under the prime minister, Michael Manley, and the rightwing Jamaica Labour party (JLP) under Edward Seaga. These parties, in turn, received money (and more) from cold-warring communist countries and the US. The CIA, in particular had a strong presence on the island. They have even been forced to admit they were active there –although the extent to which they helped shape the murders committed in the name of the JLP is still hotly disputed.

The events of 3 December 1976 are equally contentious. We know that armed men broke into Bob Marley's house where he was rehearsing for a peace concert intended to unite the warring factions. Marley was in his kitchen about to drink fruit juice. The would-be assassins sprayed the room with bullets. Miraculously they only lightly wounded the singer and his wife Rita, but sent his manager Don Taylor to intensive care. Then they fled. The attackers have never been identified, or faced criminal charges, although a famous article written by Timothy White in *Spin* magazine says they were hunted down and killed by "Rasta vigilantes".

That article details plenty more conspiracy and violence. We are told, for instance, about two men who were: "poisoned with a powerful herbal hallucinogen that drove them insane. One of them was later hung in an open field; the other was never found. He is reliably reported to have been buried alive."

It's this kind of living nightmare that James recreates. His novel plunges us into a world where gangsters, politicians, pro-Castro Cubans, anti-Castro Cubans, anti-establishment Americans and the CIA are all trying to influence and

out-maneuvre each other. Where all of them are losing control of their underlings and themselves. All are at imminent risk of being betrayed, beaten, kidnapped, drugged, raped, shot, blown up, or facing various combinations of each act. If it seems out of control that's a measure of how well it reflects reality. Or at least, how well fiction can help us understand what must have happened and how it must have felt to live through that frightening period of Jamaica's history.

## DETAILS

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