

# Gang stories; Fiction: Jamaica gangs

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## ABSTRACT

The book *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, by Marlon James, is reviewed.

## FULL TEXT

*A Brief History of Seven Killings*. By Marlon James. Riverhead; 688 pages; \$28.95. Oneworld; Pounds 18.99

A strange and wonderful novel

WEIGHING in at nearly 700 pages and spanning three decades, there is nothing "brief" about Marlon James's third novel, *"A Brief History of Seven Killings"*. What's more, before readers get to the start, they have to wade through a four-page cast list which would be forbidding were it not so useful. But Mr James's chronicle of late 20th-century Jamaican politics and gang wars manages consistently to shock and mesmerise at the same time.

The story is told through various points of view. Bam-Bam, Demus and Weeper are gang members under the tutelage of Papa-Lo, "the don of the dons". They all safeguard their turf and, as Jamaica's tense national election looms in 1976, "remind people how to vote". Barry Diflorio the local CIA station chief, is given the task of monitoring the spread of communism on the island after "that Bay of Pigs flop show". Alex Pierce, a reporter on assignment for *Rolling Stone* magazine, smells a bigger story and sets out to discover "what's ticking in this country, right about to boom". Nina Burgess, an unemployed receptionist, disappears after a clash with her family, only to reappear in later chapters in a series of different guises. And the ghost of Sir Arthur George Jennings, who dies after being pushed off a balcony, reappears after each significant killing, offering meditations on death like some benign reaper.

The author ventures into the hardscrabble streets, jails and ghettos of 1970s Kingston and the crack houses of 1980s New York before revisiting a dramatically reborn Jamaica in the 1990s. His fictional recreation of the attempted assassination of Bob Marley results in bloody clampdowns, savage reprisals and the rise of a psychopathic enforcer, Josey Wales. As the narrative unfolds, it reveals a network of murky alliances.

Mr James's *"Brief History"* is a brutal one. Robberies, rapes and beatings are constant. The bodies pile up as coke-addled, god-fearing, bullet-scarred gangsters turn their adversaries "from is to was". Only a scattering of sympathetic characters and the book's ironic title provide anything resembling light relief.

And yet once you grow accustomed to the dark, you adapt to the rhythm of Mr James's muscular prose and the visceral close-ups of Kingston's ghettos, where people are "so poor that they can't even afford shame". Best of all is the dialogue. Mr James's Jamaican patois occasionally borders on impenetrable ("Then hi, a wah dis deh 'pon we?"), but with careful reading you get it, especially when its musicality is tinged with menace: "We be top ranking bad man."

*"A Brief History of Seven Killings"* could have done with more of the redemptive shading that tempered the horror of slavery in his earlier work, *"The Book of Night Women"* (2009), a finalist for National Book Critics Circle Award. For the most part, though, this tale of a country and its people ravaged and transformed by tragedy packs quite a punch.

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