

Stay one step ahead

Save up to 40% on a Standard subscription.

SAVE NOW

Life & Arts

Imagine... The Seven Killings of Marlon James, BBC2

Documentary refers to a prize novel based on the attempted political murder of Bob Marley in 1976



New and sometimes jolting visions: Marlon James © Colin Threinen/BBC

Martin Hoyle OCTOBER 28 2016

Stay informed with free updates

Simply sign up to the Life & Arts myFT Digest -- delivered directly to your inbox.

Enter your email address

Sign up

It is not too fanciful to see a continuation of blood-bolstered Jacobean drama in the Caribbean fiction of Marlon James. The first Jamaican to win the Man Booker Prize (in 2015) is celebrated in BBC2's **Imagine . . .** (Saturday 9.30pm). Alan Yentob praises the vividness of James's writing, mixing praise with shudders at the blend of beautiful and horrible (his words) in James's gift for brutal, unsparing descriptiveness of physical cruelty, much of it true. Another admirer is Salman Rushdie.

James himself is a reassuringly genial presence whose conversation betrays a middle-class suburban upbringing near Kingston, which intriguingly contrasts with the violence — gangland killings used in politics as much as drug wars — that ravaged Jamaica in recent decades.

The full title of Colette Camden's documentary, *Imagine . . . The Seven Killings of Marlon James*, refers to his prize novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, based on the attempted political murder of Bob Marley in 1976 as he rehearsed with his band in his home. But 48 hours later the injured Marley gave his scheduled 90-minute concert and showed off his wounds. In his most successful novel James would trace the fate of the young men who attempted to kill the national hero: they were shot, hanged, buried alive. The whole saga is worthy of a revenge tragedy unfolded with Jacobean panache.

James's personal evolution is as absorbing as his literary blossoming (78 refusals for his first work!). He has come out as gay in one the most viciously homophobic societies in the world, though his schooldays' scarcely comprehended emotional churnings are recounted without self-dramatising — as is another youthful influence, the evangelical church: happy, clappy, given to exorcising (or not) unwanted feelings.

He is cheerful, humorous, companionable, now an academic in the US (New York seems to have witnessed his personal blossoming). He has much to say about Jamaican gayness and the heritage of the longest and harshest enslavement in the British empire. All of which promises further writing, mixing history and fiction and new, sometimes jolting, visions.



Photograph: Colin Threinen/BBC

