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Interview

Marlon James: 'You have to risk going too far'

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In 2015, James became the first Jamaican writer to win the Man Booker. His new novel is a hotly anticipated African fantasy epic and here he talks about loving the X-Men, coming out and writing about violence

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It's two days before the US release of Marlon James's much-hyped fourth novel, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* and the prizewinning Jamaican author has an air of baffled, exhausted ebullience about him. He's no stranger to critical success: he won the 2015 Man Booker prize for his violent, multi-voiced epic,

A Brief History of Seven Killings. But it feels like this new book will propel James into a new galaxy of literary stardom.

We've arranged to have lunch - on a balmy Sunday in early February - at the Commodore, a carefully shabby Williamsburg diner near his Brooklyn apartment. Brawnily broad-shouldered, his dreadlocked hair tied back in a ponytail, James has arrived before me. We're shown to seats at the bar where low winter sun slants through the blinds on to the bar top. James tells me it feels like summer to him - he spends much of his time teaching creative writing at Macalester College in Minnesota - and as if to prove it asks the waiter for an Aperol spritz.

We order and I pull out my tattered proof of the book. I've read it twice already, I tell him, and love it as much as any book I've read for a long time. James's UK publisher, he says, was worried that it would be "too literary for fantasy fans, too fantastical for literary fans". But the best novels defy the narrow clannishness of genre labels and *Black Leopard*...is one of them. It's complex, lyrical, moving and furiously gripping. The critics, whose panegyrics have been appearing over recent weeks, seem to agree. Ron Charles of the *Washington Post* said that "James has spun an African fantasy as vibrant, complex and haunting as any western mythology and nobody who survives reading this book will ever forget it"; the notoriously sniffy Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* declared that "with Tracker and the Leopard, James has created two compelling and iconic characters, characters who will take their place in the pantheon of memorable and fantastical superheroes"; there was also a rave on the revered speculative fiction website Tor.com, with the reviewer, Alex Brown, getting himself into a right tizzy: "Y'all, Marlon James's *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is a miracle. It's a gift from Anansi himself. This book. This book. THIS BOOK."

"I read whatever cheap crap got dumped on the third world. I didn't have a community telling me, 'Read this, read that'

Black Leopard, Red Wolf is the first instalment of the *Dark Star* trilogy, with each novel in the series telling the same story from a different perspective (James tells me he's planned the next two, but has been too busy promoting this book to start writing them yet). Set in a version of Africa that feels at once ancient and fantastical, *Black Leopard*... is narrated by Tracker, a flawed, wounded, beautifully nuanced protagonist who has the uncanny ability to scent out people wherever they might be in the various kingdoms he travels through. It's a quest narrative - the search for a missing child - but one whose result is established in the book's very first lines: "The child is dead. There is nothing left to know." At almost 700 pages long, with a vast cast of characters both human and mythical, and with a plot whose labyrinthine divagations are dizzyingly complex, it's not an easy novel, but then that's not why people read Marlon James.

We speak about Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*, a fantasy novel that literary critics only seemed able to embrace by viewing it through an allegorical lens. "I don't write allegory," James says. "Many critics can only process fantasy as a

commentary on the now. Do you review *Wolf Hall* looking for modern-day parallels? Well if you do, then that's on you. There are other things to be said about humanity than the contemporary experience." I ask him why he thinks the literary world's apparent animus against genre writing persists. "Make no mistake, there's formula detective fiction, there's formula science fiction," he says, jabbing his finger on the bar top, "but there's formula literary fiction too. It's genre snobbery that we're only ready to acclaim stuff that's of the genre but different in some way. It's sci-fi but, it's fantasy but… I didn't want to write a but."

The central event in James's Man Booker-winning third novel, *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, is the 1976 assassination attempt on Bob Marley, in which the singer was shot in the arm and his wife, Rita, through the head. The novel is unflinching in its portrayal of the violence that swept across Jamaica at the time, the gun-toting criminals who segued from political thugs into murderous drug gangs. James was six at the time, his parents both police detectives.

He must, I reason, have had some sense of this turbulent atmosphere as a child, particularly given his parents' occupation. "Even then, given everything that was going on in Jamaica, my childhood was frustratingly middle-class," he tells me. "But what I remember about when Bob Marley got shot was that I rarely saw my parents get scared for long, but they were afraid after that. They were always chill, they were always in control. Marley changed all that. The fact that the most untouchable man in Jamaica could get shot was what threw them off." There was another event that stuck with him. "I remember election night 1980, gunmen shot up my mum's workplace. She was in there. She was so matter-of-fact about it. 'Yeah, they shot up HQ.'"

Marlon James poses with his award at the 2015 Man Booker prize ceremony. Photograph: Getty

Against this dramatic backdrop, the bookish, reclusive James lived out an adolescence that mixed solitude with bullying from the jocks at his Kingston high school, who called him "sissy" and "Mary".

"My teenage years before college, I spent pretty much all of my time in my bedroom," he tells me. "I spent so much time there that my neighbours thought I did high school in America. I'd go to class, then I'd disappear. I'd just basically come home to eat dinner, sleep, draw comics." He had few friends. "This made a comic like *X-Men* really resonate," he says. "They're outcasts, they're outsiders, they're disliked by a world that they're still a part of. Even other heroes didn't trust the X-Men. And that connected with me in a really, really major way." He drew his own comics, then started writing a fantasy novel. "I was a very pretentious teenager and I was trying to write something heavy."

While *Game of Thrones* has been the go-to cultural reference point for *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, it feels like there's also a good deal of Tolkien in there. He shakes his head. "I never read any of the foundational fantasy novels when I was a kid. Not the pantheon. Those fantasy novels that you might have thought would be everywhere, like *Dune* and *Lord of the Rings*, really weren't. I read whatever cheap crap got dumped on the third world. I didn't have a community telling me, 'Read this, read that.' A lot of what I write about in terms of the fantastic I picked up from comics, particularly Marvel comics. And even that idea of a group of people banded together, which people think I got from *Fellowship of the Ring*, it's more like X-Men or one of those anti-teams like Doom Patrol or Suicide Squad. Because comics were easier to get hold of than books."

James went from high school to the University of the West Indies, still living at home, still writing, but now reading whatever novels came his way, from Fielding - "Oh my God, *Tom Jones* was so much fun" - to James Clavell - "I'm sure that hasn't aged well." He studied literature and accounting - "that was a terrible idea" - but it was writing that made his trips to campus worthwhile. "One of the absolute great things about college was creative writing classes. I didn't even know they existed until I got there. The teacher was John Hearne, one of the first great novelists of the 20th century in Jamaica. It was a game-changer for me. Here was a class where I was going to be judged on the thing I was doing so much at home anyway."

On leaving UWI in the early 90s, James found himself a job at an advertising agency, figuring that it would be a continuation of the creative, geeky world he'd built around himself at university.

"When I hit advertising it was nothing like I'd imagined. It was like going back to high school. People were narrow, not open-minded, homophobic. But people gotta eat. And I was good at it."

I ask him if he's kept any of his work from this time. He laughs. "Salman [Rushdie, who is a friend, also worked in advertising] talks now and again about the one or

two of his that survive, but I really hope none of mine do. When I went into advertising, yes, I was being creative, but it was writing for committee, which is not the same thing at all. To be a writer, you have to write for yourself. When I wrote my first novel, I didn't write it to be published, but to prove that I could write it for myself. I needed an avenue to write darker stuff. There's no place for that in writing that's selling eggs."

It was while at the advertising agency that James found himself drawn into a local evangelical church. Alongside a ready-made community, it seemed to offer a means of dealing with the fact that it was becoming increasingly clear to James, who'd lived a monkish life thus far, that he was gay. He described in horrifying detail in a recent *New Yorker* article how he underwent exorcism at the church. It was during this traumatic time, though, that he wrote *John Crow's Devil*, his lowering Faulknerian debut, which tells of two rival priests, each with a guilty sexual secret to hide, competing for primacy in a fictional Jamaican village in the 1950s. It's a fabulous book, dark and angry and experimental, every page bearing traces of the linguistic daring and visionary imagination that would later characterise James's work.

In that same *New Yorker* article, he said that he was sceptical of pop psychology and trying to read too much of his personal life into his books, but he concedes that his first novel plays out the conflicts he was going through at the time.

"I was trying on being a writer for size," he tells me. "I was trying on writing about things that are close to me for size. Like sexuality. At the time, I wasn't in any form of gay relationship. It's funny that I've gone from hating pop psychology to being way too Freudian. I can see all my fears and desires in it. Ones I could never give in to because I was deep in the church and I was a super-suppressed gay dude."

He left the church and sent his novel out to a selection of New York agents. When the first handful said no, he sent it to more, and more, and more, 78 in all. Each of them rejected it. "I remember that somebody said it was the subject matter - that nobody wants to read about the Caribbean, that it was because it was super dark, because there are no white people in it. At that time, dark had to be couched in a certain way. It had to be *The Lovely Bones*. It had to have a redemptive narrative. I think we're still in a place where we want a white person to play a part, even in a black story. I briefly toyed with putting my [white] friend Gerard's picture in my biog and sending the book back out," he says with a laugh.

In the end, James's novel was read by an American author, Kaylie Jones, who passed it on to the indie press Akashic Books in New York. *John Crow's Devil* was published to a warm critical reception in 2005. The narrative from here is often painted as an inexorable rise to literary stardom, but James reminds me that his second novel, *The Book of Night Women*, a brutal 18th-century slave narrative that takes place on a Jamaican sugar plantation, was also turned down almost 20 times, before being picked up by Riverhead Books and published in 2009.

It was his next book, *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, which established James as a major literary force. When Michael Wood, the Man Booker chair that year, was asked how long deliberations about the winner had taken, he replied carefully that they'd been in the room for two hours. Someone else who was there tells me - on the assurance of anonymity - that it was barely 10 minutes before they agreed on James's extraordinary novel. "Even among these enormously sophisticated readers, they had never read anything like this... everyone was blown away."

"It changed everything," James says of the prize. "I visited countless countries. I'd started thinking about this novel [*Black Leopard*...] well before I won the Booker, so I wasn't consumed with expectations about what I was going to do next."

He suggested to his agent a "quiet, literary" novel about Jamaicans in New York. Then he began to speak about fantasy. "There are people who follow the Booker with over-ambitious books that fail. I worried that this -" he taps *Black Leopard*... - "might just come across as me going bigger, harder, faster. It was more reason for me to choose the quiet, literary, observant, contemporary novel. The mature and wise follow-up instead of a book with flipping monsters in it. But I was still thinking of myself as a kind of underdog writer, someone who'd be able to get away with it."

One thing the new novel shares with its predecessors is a uniquely intense presentation of violence. I ask him whether he ever feels that his work strays close to gratuitousness, to a kind of wilful lingering over scenes of pain.

"You have to risk it or you won't get close to the power or the horror of it," he says. "You have to risk going too far. Man, I sound like Foucault. I actually think this kind of antiseptic, clipped, edited version of violence I see in literature sells it short. If you don't read the scene of the murder of a child and find it unbearable, then that scene failed. I think people are used to violence, but they're not used to suffering. In Hollywood films, we see violence, but we don't see suffering. In my writing of violence I do not escape suffering and I think one of my violent scenes is equivalent to 30 of someone else's. I get this rap of being too violent, but actually what I'm saying is that violence comes with consequences and suffering and I don't blink at either. So it's going to reverberate longer in my books."

It feels like there's something particular about the fact that a Jamaican relocated to the US (James left Jamaica in 2007) should be writing this great syncretic African epic, that both his distance and his closeness to the cultures from which he draws at once give the novel the perspective and authenticity it requires. I ask if there were any authors whose work inspired the vision of *Black Leopard*...

"I really wasn't reading a lot of other people. I was reading a lot of the original myths and legends. That's one of the reasons I wanted to write a fantasy novel. I wanted the ability to pick and choose and do what Tolkien did with Scandinavian and British culture. I wanted this pool of ideas and legends and building something out

of it. I read enough and researched enough that I could have written three historical novels. I could easily have written an Ethiopian *Wolf Hall*. Or a Ghanaian *Fifth Queen* [Ford Madox Ford's unjustly forgotten trilogy about Katharine Howard]."

As far as other literary inspirations, there is always Salman Rushdie, he says - *Shame* is one of his favourite novels. I email Rushdie on my return and he says he hasn't read the new book yet, but that James is "a writer of prodigious imaginative gifts and, judging by the advance praise, he's about to have a monster hit".

There's also Ben Okri, whose *The Famished Road*, also one of a trilogy, won the Booker in 1991. "When I read *Famished Road*," James tells me, "the urbanity of it is distinctly African. It's the noise, the cacophony, the spirits and the magic. You can smell the groceries, the shit, but you can also see the zombies. I actually reread *The Famished Road* while I was writing this. The one thing we all have in common is that we recognise that realism can't express what we're talking about. We've all at some point reached the end of ourselves in realism. Our reality can't be expressed by the Victorian novel. Okri is such an influence on me. I've read *Famished Road* like four times."

Marlon James photographed in New York. Photograph: Mike McGregor/Observer

Okri speaks to me on the phone when I'm back in England. "What he's trying to do is amazing," he says. "Particularly given the context of the Caribbean/African relationship. The depth of culture is historically very important, that we have this reciprocity, this dialogue in our literature through history. We all have this rich,

unacknowledged African past. This is something that has been felt by many writers and we've been looking for a means of articulating it in a universal way, looking for those deep myths, those deep histories. There's been a lapse of a generation in the literary relationship between African, Caribbean and American writers, and what Marlon is doing seems to signal to me the return to something that's important for all three linked cultures and is therefore a sign of hope."

As we leave the bar, James speaks to me about the Windrush scandal, which he'd been following closely. "It struck me as very British-colonial," he says. "I was reading in the *Guardian* today where it was talking about British people living in Spain who are really apprehensive about losing their benefits and yet they support Brexit. They want Spain to support them but they don't want to support Spain. Such entitlement to something that you have no intention of returning. Windrush hit me in the same way. You're talking about the descendants of people who fought in both world wars. If anything, they should be giving them subsidies. You made so much money colonising all of these countries, leaving each one in far worse shape than you found them, but you can't bring yourself to accept any of these people in your country, people whose parents and grandparents helped build it."

A couple of days after the interview, it's announced that Michael B Jordan, one of the stars of *Black Panther*, has bought the rights to the new novel. I call James, who's at an airport on his way between book signings, to congratulate him. He loved *Black Panther*, he tells me. "I saw it five times. I started this book in 2015, so I don't know that they'd even announced that it was going to be made. But from the moment they announced it I was super-excited. I've known the comic since the 70s, since Denys Cowan used to write for it." There was no concern that it might seem too close to the material in the novel James was halfway through writing by the time the film came out? "I didn't think about *Black Panther* when I was writing the book. I knew it was a different story, I think we still expect the same story. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie speaks about the danger of a single story. There are a million stories that can be told about Africa - that was one and what I was writing was another."

There was an instant rapport between James and Jordan. "We spoke on the phone for nearly two hours, about what we want to achieve with our work and representation and what stories need to be told. We were on the same page in that regard before we even talked about movie deals. We were so much on the same wavelength as to what stories we want to see.

"As people of colour in the diaspora, we're particularly interested in stories that go beyond slavery. I'm tired of that being seen as the furthest in the past we can go or that swords and sorcery aren't available to us."

I ask James if he's going to write the script - he worked on a screenplay of *A Brief History*... that is yet to be aired. "I'm too busy," he says with a laugh. "I've got part two and three of this series to write."

Black Leopard, Red Wolf by Marlon James is published by Penguin (£20). To order a copy for £15 go to guardianbookshop.com or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £15, online orders only

Marlon James discusses Black Leopard, Red Wolf with Ekow Eshun at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on London's Southbank on 25 February

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