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Democracy Dies in Darkness

‘A Brief History of Seven Killings’ cuts a swath across Jamaican history

By John Domini

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Exploding with violence and seething with arousal, the third novel by Marlon James cuts a swath across recent Jamaican history. It leaves its Kingston ghettos strewn with victims, a few of them lovers, all of them spattered with blood. Seven killings? That's just for starters. This compelling, not-so-brief history brings off a social portrait worthy of Diego Rivera, antic and engagé, a fascinating tangle of the naked and the dead.

As "A Brief History of Seven Killings" opens, the ghost of a Jamaican politician describes his own murder, made to look like an accident. Two closing sections, each with its own narrator, show us a mob boss first poisoned and then incinerated, so his death will seem like bad luck. Between these assassination coverups, both fictional, the key event is an actual failed assassination. In December 1976, an armed gang overran the Kingston compound of reggae superstar Bob Marley, referred to only as "the Singer" in these pages. "Seven Killings" relates this extended episode, like all the rest, through a kaleidoscope of imaginary speakers. Whether ghost politicos or CIA spooks, all concur on Marley's real-life good fortune: The Singer survived — a miracle and, in a book rife with secret murders, a stinging irony.

Around the failed ambush, the crazy-quilt narration reveals malevolent patterns. A couple of the Singer’s confidants, like the gunmen themselves, appear to be Cold War pawns. Jamaica’s ruling party leans socialist, while U.S. intelligence seeks to “neutralize communist influence.” The Agency, that is, strives to make the island’s rulers look helpless, and so slips weapons into criminal hands. One aging warlord describes the results: “Freelance bad boy have machine gun, M16, M9 and Glock, and nobody can account for where they come from. Woman breed baby, but man can only make Frankenstein.”

The monster feeds not only on American firepower but also on Caribbean corruption and cocaine. The book’s first extended portraits are of decent kids tortured by police, then maddened by coke. In time, the attack on the Singer emerges as a watershed, when local crime became international, and so the story claims a broader reach than James’s previous novel, “The Book of Night Women.” That 2009 prizewinner concerned a Jamaican slave and her trials; the new one updates the machinery of oppression and ships it north. A good third of the novel takes place years after Marley’s 1981 death from cancer. By the ’90s, Kingston’s gangs hold sway in Brooklyn and the Bronx.

But the New York material sounds redemptive notes, too. One murderous “rudeboy” embraces his homosexuality and, in scenes both lubricious and scorching, finds love. Still, others want his head, and similar threats hang over two relative innocents, a reporter and a refugee.

In short, the epic sweep of “Seven Killings” never feels cartoonish. James takes us deep into his criminal power dynamics, in monologues laced with breathtaking obscenities. He’s receptive to gangbanger poetry:

“Green light. We coming coming like lightning and thunder. I want another line, just one more line and I fly. . . . The car is the Piper and we is the rat. . . . Red light say stop but green light say go.”

His command of patois is so reliable that Americans will swiftly catch on: “sufferah” bad; “kriss” good. Better yet, the ventriloquism doesn’t falter when the author transcribes a phone conversation between CIA officers. Their give and take bristles with macho posturing, both horrifying and hilarious. So, too, an indelible description of the ghetto, “a rusty red chamber of hell,” is drafted by a white American reporter.

In those lines, the reporter is rephrasing V.S. Naipaul’s “The Middle Passage,” which serves as a touchstone, often turning up where you’d least expect it. Yet “Seven Killings” doesn’t wither in the shadow of the Nobelwinner’s nonfiction; rather, the younger author updates his elder’s unblinking compassion.

James’s storylines often end with a bullet, but they never shortchange shooter or victim. The outstanding example would be the woman who travels a hard “middle passage.” She starts out as Nina Burgess of Kingston, a one-time lover of the Singer, but she winds up under a fake name on a visa in New York. The geopolitics that afflict her island tear apart her family. To find sanctuary, Nina has had to barter her body. Can she overcome the fear and shame? Can she reconnect? What most distinguishes “The Brief History of Seven Killings” isn’t the outrages, but rather the odyssey.

Domini’s latest book is a selection of criticism, “The Sea-God’s Herb.” A set of stories, “Movieola!,” will appear next year.

Marlon James will be at Politics & Prose, 5015 Connecticut Ave. NW, at 5 p.m. Oct. 5.