Marlon James and the Spirit of '76

By Jeff Vasishta

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ABOVE: MARLON JAMES

In his new novel, *A Brief History Of Seven Killings* (Riverhead), Jamaican author Marlon James places us in Kingston during the tumultuous events of 1976. It's an all-enveloping, almost suffocating immersion in violence, fear, intimidation, sun-baked poverty, politics, and drugs. Ghetto dons play the dual roles of political henchmen and underworld crime bosses. The CIA is growing increasingly concerned about Prime Minister Michael Manley's flirtation with Castro and communism. Also worrying them is Bob Marley, a national superstar at the height of his powers and influence who appears to endorse Manley. U.S. funds—and thus, guns—are thrown behind conservative opposition leader Edward Seaga, with all points converging on 56 Hope Road, Marley's home and the scene of his attempted assassination on December 3rd 1976.

To call this dark, dense, raw, and exhilarating novel ambitious is to call Kingston dangerous. All its events are related in a series of first-person accounts, told in profanity-laden patois, with a dizzying cast of gangsters: a groupie turned fugitive,

CIA and ex-CIA operatives, a *Rolling Stone* journalist, and even a Grim Reaper-like dead policeman speaking from the grave. For a lesser writer, the end result could be a tropical, bloody mess. However, this fictionalized retelling of well-known events in Jamaica's much storied past works so well because of the deft characterization of the novel's principal players. The constantly turning, unraveling plot, which ends up in New York in the early '90s and spans three decades, weaves fact with fiction in an enthralling fashion.

JEFF VASISHTA: For a middle-class English professor, you do an amazing job of inhabiting the minds of some of the most ruthless killers Jamaica has ever known.

MARLON JAMES: Some of these people I actually know. I come from a very big family from every economic background. Some of the streets I talk about I've actually walked on, because I have family from there. Jamaica has so many contradictions. Here's one. I went to the oldest school in the country. This school is older than America. It was built in 1729. It's a posh school, but it was in a very depressed area. Just across the street is Heroes Park,

which is the first place where I was ever robbed. Violence was never far away. That's what makes Kingston Kingston. I had an aunt who lived in one of these very depressed places with the rusted zinc standpipes and shit running down the streets, so I can internalize this.

VASISHTA: This novel is possibly one of the most violent in Caribbean literature. Did you have a threshold to your violence?

JAMES: I'm a big believer that violence should be violent. That's the problem with a lot of with a lot of PG-13 violence. Violence has consequences. People bleed and people die, and so it should be violent. You can end up in a sort of pornography of violence, but you have to risk pornography. If your depiction of loss doesn't make the reader feel loss, then you didn't depict it right.

VASISHTA: The dialogue is so real. The air is always pregnant with danger. It's not an easy read by any standard. I'm sure people will put this book down thinking you must have seen some pretty rough things in your life.

JAMES: I did my homework. I used produce photo shoots and video

shoots for reggae artists who wanted to come down to Kingston and shoot, so I had to negotiate with a lot of these kind of characters, with the gunmen, so they wouldn't intimidate the film crew. Also my mother was a detective assigned to downtown, so I grew up learning a lot just from over hearing her. It also gave me a police procedural view. The key is to have all that information and still be able to write something convincing. In Updike's novel *Terrorist*, he clearly did a lot of research, but you don't believe a single line in it because none of the characters are real.

VASISHTA: Writing the whole thing as a series of first-person narratives was a pretty brave undertaking. Did you ever get to a point where you wished you had a third-person perspective to give you a break?

JAMES: No, not for this novel. The closest I come to the third person is Arthur Philips, the dead guy, because I wanted to represent an aural biography. A lot of the books I was reading at the time, like Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, influenced me. I wanted to get into the inner lives of the characters—the aspect of their lives that's not concerned with a forward-moving

plot. It always struck me as something I'd write in a series of first-person voices.

VASISHTA: I'm sure this novel will be a huge talking point in Jamaica, not least because of the amount of homosexuality in it, particularly with the hardcore gangster, Weeper. Obviously the Buju Banton homophobic mentality is still quite prevalent in Jamaica. Are you ready for the reaction?

JAMES: I'm sure the reaction is going to be horrible! Those scenes aren't meant to set an agenda. But there's a projected image and then there's reality. In hip-hop, the projected image is everybody's straight. Everybody knows who's gay in hip-hop. It was a great way to complicate characters. One of the things that has to be a plus sign for one the most violent characters, Josey [based upon real life Shower Posse crime boss Lester Lloyd Coke, aka Jim Brown], is that he really doesn't care [if someone's gay]. Sending Weeper to New York where he'll be freer is Josie's idea. Far from me making a statement, I thought that confronting the very simplistic view that Jamaicans have about homosexuality would help me complicate a character. In a lot of

ways, Josey Wales is a Jamaican male archetype. You don't get any more macho than gang boss who killed plenty of people. But he's actually a one-woman man. He loves his girlfriend. I did want to challenge a very narrow idea of masculinity and fearsomeness. Weeper is complicated, too, because he's really not that deep. I didn't want this wonderfully three-dimensional villain who's gay. I wanted a dumb thug. Not every gay person recites poetry or has read Keats. You can get readers through anything if the characters are complicated. You can't dismiss Josey Wales' quite liberal worldview.

VASISHTA: I found the Josey Wales character completely absorbing. He's a psychotic killer, but there's also something so charismatic and compelling about him. I think Jim Brown would be flattered by this depiction.

JAMES: I'm using a real event as a springboard and I know that one of the consequences of using a real event is that people are going to play, "Spot the real person." Is Josey Wales this guy or that guy? To reclaim it as fiction, a lot of the characters I combine. People may say that Josey Wales is clearly Jim

Brown, but Jim Brown has no Chinese features. There are so many aspects of this story that we'll never know. A lot of the real players are dead. A lot of the others are not talking. The internal life of these characters, including the ones that did the shooting, we'll never know, and that's what I'm interested in. So yeah, I did make it deliberate to throw people off because I didn't want the conversation to be just about that.

The thing about Josey is—yes, he's a psychotic murderer who will kill pregnant women—but at the same time, he has such a fantastic worldview. He has a chill worldview. I always tell my students to complicate your characters, never make it easy for the reader. Nobody is ever one thing. That's what makes characters compelling.

VASISHTA: The scope of characters is quite astounding, from street kids like Bam Bam through to CIA agents and wealthy Upper East Siders. Did you have any kind of template other than Faulkner for putting this together?

JAMES: One of my formative influences as a writer is Dickens, and I still consider myself a

Dickensian in as much as there aspects of storytelling I still believe in—plot, surprise, cliffhangers. I still believe you should make them laugh, make them cry, make them wait. In many ways I'm an old-fashioned novelist. I have a rule when I'm writing, which comes from my love of Victorian novels, that at the end of a writing day [I ask myself,] is there anything that made me go, "Wow, I did not see that coming"? And if there's not I continue writing until there is. The risk you run is melodrama. But you have to risk it.

VASISHTA: Getting back to Bam Bam. His life is probably the most pitiful and tragic of all those you portray.

JAMES: Bam Bam has haunted me for years. His voice has appeared in other short stories. Horrible is not just the gun violence but surviving the violence only to die of a drink of polluted water you had the next day. It's like the Flannery O'Connor character in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find." He has nothing but meanness. Sometimes when you think of writing fully rounded characters, you think they should have a mix of good and bad; but they can be bad and worse. To me, he's the personification of a kid in the ghetto

who never got a break or the opportunity to get out, but he sees other people that do. The Singer [based on Marley] becomes a foil to him. He's the focus of everything he hates, largely because he cannot see what's the big difference between the two of them. He came of age at such a time when political parties realized that violent garrisons can swing elections. I wanted to relate how dark and nightmarish it really is. Sometimes I think we're used to a Tarantino type of gun violence, which is violence without consequences or violence without a root to it. The scene that captures the world he grows up in is where his dad is on the floor and he's on the floor and they have to stay down there because any minute there will be a shoot-out and they're gonna get hit. That's something I remember coming across in real life.

VASISHTA: Mick Jagger crops up surprisingly often. I wondered if he realized that his life was in danger when he was in Jamaica?

JAMES: The thing about 1976 in particular was that Jamaica was on a world stage on so many levels. On one, Henry Kissinger was in the country, and on another, so were Mick Jagger and Keith Richards.

That little idea to kidnap Mick Jagger for two million dollars really did happen. I don't think he knows, but they really did consider kidnapping him. I can't imagine him knowing that story. I had to do my research to find that one out. One thing I did find out was that they did 18 reggae versions of "Start Me Up." All of them bad, of course! Every now and then you like to have recurring motif in a story. Some of them big and thematic and some of them silly.

VASISHTA: I was looking at your Facebook page and people may be surprised to discover that you have an affinity for Brit indie-pop and are a big Smiths fan.

JAMES: In my high school yearbook it says, "My ambition is to work for Prince." So now my friends know I work in Minneapolis, and they think that's hilarious. He was such a formative influence for me. The first record I brought was *Purple Rain* and I played it so much both my parents could sing the lyrics. People come to me with this whole narrative about reggae, asking who I grew up listening to, and when I tell them I was into the Pet Shop Boys, New Order, Def Leppard, Prince, and The Smiths they are so

disappointed. I grew up an alternative kid. One of the biggest turning points for me was when I first heard Guns N' Roses. Of course I love reggae, but it's like a family member.

VASISHTA: You live and teach in Minneapolis, which is quite a change from Jamaica. Ever think about going back?

JAMES: In Jamaica, there's a sense that even though you're middle class, you're always hustling. By 2005 when I left, I said to myself, "Either I'm leaving on a plane or I'm leaving in a coffin." I don't want to sensationalize how bad it was, because most of my friends still live there and most are pretty damn happy. But as a writer and an artist, there's only so far how you can go. At the time, the country didn't have a base to support writers. Also I don't want to say that there was a sense that if you step outside your door you will be killed today, but there was a feeling that you never know, and sometimes that uncertainty can be worse. The volatility is scary. When I got my first full-time job in America, it was only a one-year posting, but I was so desperate to leave, I knew I wasn't going back. There are half a million Jamaicans

in New York. There just aren't enough opportunities in Jamaica. There never were. The University of West Indies is only one place. They can't hire everyone with an English degree.

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