Culture

Man Booker Prize Winner Marlon James: An Interview with GQ Magazine

Update: Marlon James won the 2015 Man Booker Prize for A Brief History of Seven Killings. This interview was originally published last year

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Photography by Jeffrey Skemp

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If you haven't yet read *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, by Marlon James, we'll forgive you. It's not a history in the mega-successful style of a certain Fox News anchor, or a murder mystery with the pedigree of Brown or Grisham. It's spent the month since it came out winning over book critics, but it has yet to take its place on the bestseller list. And that's a shame, because *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is a big powerhouse of a book, confident and fast-paced, as page-turning as any supermarket-aisle thriller. It's time to read it.

The novel centers on a crucial bit of Caribbean and musical history. On December 3, 1976, a group of four gunmen tried to kill Bob Marley. Marley, by the sheer force of his fame, had become involved in Jamaican politics, his popularity harnessed by one political party in a country deeply divided along partisan lines. His would-be killers were driven by a variety of motives—politics, gang alliances, drug schemes—and the messiness of their motives was emblematic of the mess the country was already in.

James, a Jamaican novelist who teaches at Macalester College, traces the incident from the perspective of some fifteen characters. None of whom, by the way, are Bob Marley. Instead they are Jamaicans and in some cases, Americans, who happened to be kicking around Kingston at the time. That includes the would-be killers, most of whom end up underground themselves, in bloody-but-lyrical fashion.

We spoke to James about Bob Marley, the golden age of television, and how to tell a story about Jamaica better than *Cool Runnings*. ****

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The book never refers to Bob Marley by name. He's just "The Singer."

** **Yeah.

Why did you decide to keep him offstage like that?

** **One, I didn't want it to overwhelm the story. And also, certainly by 1976, he was already a symbolic figure, even in Jamaica. He was an international icon. When he got shot, most people didn't even know he was in the country. I wanted to sort of define him by what he symbolizes. It's just like calling someone The Prophet, I guess. Marley was different in terms of what he meant than what he was.

What do you mean by that?

** **A lot of things! For our people he was a symbol of struggle, self-determination and the fight for freedom. But he was also a human being, someone with baby mother trouble. He was a contradiction in the world, fighting for freedom while wanting to be a successful rock-and-roll artist. That's the kind of contradictions that make people human, and why when icons fall from grace we have such trouble with it. We have such trouble adjusting to it, when that was in them from the get-go.

The multi-vocality of the book is just stunning. How did you choose and formulate all these different voices? I have an image of a spreadsheet.

** **There was a spreadsheet that went into it, there really was! It was the only way to keep track of everybody. And I have to, because if I don't I'll start playing favorites with characters.
I knew from the beginning that it would be a book that was told by its characters, that me as an author had no need to appear at all. The only time I appear in that book is as opinions that Nina Burgess [a sex worker character] has, especially about Jamaican society.

I liked the idea of the multiple viewpoints, which is something I got from Faulkner. And even Orhan Pamuk! It's something you see sometimes in celebrity biographies, actually, where it's a group biography of different people, adding in their different things. It's also something you see in Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*, the many people hovering around a single event.

I was also inspired by Gay Talese's famous article "Frank Sinatra Has A Cold," which is probably the closest to what I was thinking. Like him, I was hovering around a major subject. But I was more interested in the people around him. By seeing how they saw him.

It feels like literary trends are moving away from the sort of larger political-historical novel you've written, more towards Karl Ove Knausgaard and Edward St. Aubyn's more personal work.

** **I mean, God bless people who don't think they have issues in their society to write about! That's wonderful.

One of the best things ever said about U2's album *War* is that it was an album hoping for the day that no albums like that would be needed. And that sounds kind of pompous but also understanding. Only in the sense that I'm not trying to make a big statement or a message, but I am trying to make sense. I am trying to make sense of something my country went through. Because it makes no sense!

And you know& I think people sometimes also misread Knausgaard. I thought that was a very political novel. I think his books are very engaged with society. In fact, I empathized with the first volume so much I thought he was writing about me! And I am certainly not a Caucasian postmodern writer living in Sweden.

The funny thing is my characters are just telling their own personal stories. Even the CIA guy is kind of bummed out that his wife is pissed off, and he can't remember where his second kid was conceived, so it's still personal stories. I just don't think people – certainly not in Jamaica – get the luxury of escaping politics. In fact one of my characters in the book responds to that! Nina Burgess says, I hate politics and I hate that I am supposed to know. She says that, but she kind of has to [know.]

What else would you say your work is engaged with?

** **I'm really interested in how non-American countries process race. In Jamaica they say, it's class, not race, which is utter bullshit. If it's not race, then Jamaica has had the most unfortunate series of coincidences in modern history.

I tried not to fall into Caribbean stereotypes. None of these characters will appear in *Cool Runnings*.
And I'm interested in taking this perspective and applying it to other areas of American life. A bit like *True Detective*: same format, multiple characters, twenty years. I just use a whole different set of people.

The multiple perspectives thing did make me think of both *True Detective* and *The Wire*, a little bit.

** **So I've only seen the first season of *The Wire*, and everyone who knows me, my friends, my students, they all talk about their love of it. And they say when I watch the rest of it I'll be ashamed that I kept avoiding the rest.

I'm very familiar though with all the people who write for The Wire. And this book was very influenced by crime fiction. I like to call it "grit fiction." Richard Harris, Dennis Lehane, loads of James Ellroy. And Elmore Leonard, because Elmore Leonard is the best dialogue teacher in America. When you need dialogue practice, just read *Blitz.* And *Get Shorty*. You'll have it covered.

Were you concerned, in using a lot of dialect, that you might put readers off?

** **I've never had problems with American readers. It doesn't surprise me that the first reviewers that have criticized the language were British reviews. Which has struck

many people as strange because between Jamaica and Britain, there's still a postcolonial thing. It's still pretty pronounced, just not with me!

There are compromises to make. A lot of time I'd spell things in standard English, instead of phonetically, because I want people to understand what's going on. It's also very lyrical, and the great thing about lyrical prose is even when you're not totally sure of the words, you can be swayed by the musicality of it. Which is one reason why a lot of people, were they to read Bob Marley's lyrics as poetry they would not understand what the hell he's saying. But the lyricism will mean people will end up getting it.

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