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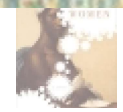
The book of James — Marlon James

His award-winning novel A Brief History of Seven Killings has earned Jamaican Marlon James the kind of acclaim most writers only dream of. But why, asks Annie Paul, have so few Jamaican authors tackled the darker twists of their history?

BY ANNIE PAUL | ISSUE 135 (SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2015)


"You know that Cormac McCarthy thing you do where you start a sentence and you add an *and*, and then add some words, and then another *and*, and then one more word, and an *and*, and before you end it you drop in one more *and*, then a final *and*, and then you're done? Stop it."

If you follow Marlon James on Facebook, this is one of many such exasperated tidbits of advice you'll be privy to, along with his outspoken commentary on music, movies, and politics. The celebrated Jamaican novelist sometimes has a hard time forgetting that teaching students to write — something he's been doing since 2007, at Macalester College in St Paul, Minnesota — is only his day job.

It's now a decade since James's first novel, *John Crow's Devil*, was published, defying improbable odds which at one point seemed set to permanently relegate it to the rejection bin. His second novel, *The Book of Night Women*, followed in 2009, and in 2014 James dropped the nearly seven-hundred-page *A Brief History of Seven Killings,* sealing his quicksilver rise to international literary attention.

But it's sobering to think that this hugely talented author might still be just the most musically sophisticated graphic designer in Kingston, designing album covers and writing brilliant music

reviews for local media, had he not signed up for a fiction-writing class in 2003. Kaylie Jones, daughter of the late American bestseller writer James Jones (*From Here to Eternity*), had been flown to Kingston to teach at the Calabash Literary Festival's writing workshops. James plainly outshone the rest of the students in her class, and Jones asked to read more of his work.

There had been a manuscript, James admitted, but the seventy-eight rejection letters it received from publishers far and wide had made him destroy it. He no longer had a copy. At Jones's insistence, James trawled through old hard drives and desk drawers, looking in vain for even a few pages of the novel. No luck. Then, miraculously, it turned up in the "sent" folder of an old email account — and voila! James's career as author was back on the cards.

Jones loved what she read, and sent the manuscript to her Brooklyn-based editor, Johnny Temple of Akashic Books. The off-the-wall independent publisher immediately recognised the potential of the manuscript.

John Crow's Devil was a game-changer in the demure world of Jamaican fiction. Unlike many Caribbean novels, which rarely detain the attention of mainstream international media, James's debut effort snagged a page in that most coveted of literary showcases, the *New York Times Book Review*, which described it as "powerful." *John Crow's Devil* was also a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. James was on the map.

No sluggard, he swiftly began working on his second novel, *The Book of Night Women*, sketching it out and starting his first draft even as he was busy working the publicity treadmill for *John Crow's Devil*. "At some point, I realised that indecipherable crowd noise was just as neutral a background as total quiet," James has said in an interview. "After that, I could write pretty much anywhere: Barnes and Noble cafés, Starbucks, departure lounges, boring live concerts, waiting for the car rental." Meanwhile, he was working on a master's degree in creative writing, completed in 2006. By the following year, he had snared a much-sought-after job teaching creative writing at Macalester College, a small and highly regarded liberal arts college.

While the fevered, hallucinatory prose of *John Crow's Devil* signalled the arrival of an unorthodox talent, James's second novel, *The Book of Night Women,* firmly established him as a writer worthy of serious critical attention. *Night Women*'s genesis was unusual, prompted by the shocking image of a female slave being branded by a white man, seen on the cover of John Henrik Clarke's *Black Heritage*. James first encountered the book as a four-year-old, clandestinely going through his father's library. "Usually, when a child stumbles across a book meant for adults, it has something to do with sex," he says. "This was violence — people committing atrocities on other people, and I didn't understand it at all."

The memory of the shocking image receded, but re-appeared with a jolt decades later, when James found himself face-to-face with the same book cover when unpacking his father's library after his death. *Night Women*, whose protagonist Lilith is an enslaved woman in eighteenth-century Jamaica, was born out of his encounters with that image: according to James, the story of the brutalised black woman was "a mystery he had to solve." It is a startlingly violent narrative, with elements of grim humour and science fiction, told in a bravura dialect voice based partly on Jamaican *patwa* but partly invented, in an attempt to imagine what a woman of Lilith's time and place would have sounded like.

Violence itself seems to be a mystery James is determined to solve. With *John Crow's Devil,* he plumbed the fervidly religious amniotic sac in which Jamaica reposes, delineating its sharp outlines as starkly and vividly as the apocalyptic visions of any of the country's well-known intuitive artists. It was a world James knew well, having belonged to a "clap-hand" church for several years in his youth. The novel foregrounded violence in ways that no other Jamaican writing has done. With *The Book of Night Women,* James took on the physical and psychic violence generated by the twisted social system of slavery. And with his third novel, *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, he tackles Jamaica as post-colony, a post-slave society floundering in the capitalist system of the late twentieth century, its abiding and exceptional violence translated into a voluble Postcolonial Gothic. It is "the sound of a gear changing and a lurch forward," according to fellow Jamaican writer Roland Watson-Grant, author of the novels *Sketcher* and *Skid*. "You read it and you go, Buckle up! Everything changes now."

A *Brief History of Seven Killings* lingers on the theme of regime change, the changing of the guard from one type of leader to another, each representative of a different imperium — the gradual eclipse of the taste, style, language, music, and zeitgeist of one by the other, reflecting corresponding geopolitical power shifts. The sun has set on the old imperial order. Brittania no longer rules the waves, or pretty much anything else, and we are in the heyday of the American empire.

The plot pivots on the 1976 shooting of Bob Marley — referred to throughout the novel merely as The Singer — by parties unknown, but widely believed to have been thugs hired by the CIA, an element that underpins this massive novel without ever occupying centre stage in its action. Nor were these just any thugs: they were reputed to have come from Tivoli Gardens, the stronghold of the Jamaica Labour Party, then in Opposition. It was an election year in Jamaica, and Marley was about to headline at the Smile Jamaica concert, where some thought he would endorse the incumbent prime minister, Michael Manley of the People's National Party.

The attempts to eliminate Marley were botched, leaving the singer and seven friends and associates injured, but crucially alive. Despite this unforeseen mayhem, the Smile Jamaica concert went ahead as planned a few days later, with a bandaged Marley performing after announcing he was not endorsing either party.

"Marlon's *Brief History* is a literary-philosophic exploration of the moral landscape of ordinary life in contemporary Jamaica," says David Scott, Columbia University anthropologist and editor of the critical journal *Small Axe*. "And it is as rambunctious and uneven and vexingly, unpleasantly, ferocious as what it is trying — courageously — to engage. Everybody who lived through the end of the Jamaican 1970s will have a vivid memory of the unfolding events, but how to fictively historicise that watershed era and connect it to the current conjuncture . . . that's the challenge."

Why had such rich local material gone unexploited by Jamaican writers for so long? And why did it take a (now) diaspora-based writer to mine such fertile cultural loam? It wouldn't be the first time such questions have been raised. In 2000, another writer from the Jamaican diaspora, Colin Channer, had taken issue with the idea that he was in "exile," a word frequently

used to describe Caribbean writers based in Europe or North America. In a combative speech, Channer addressed his literary "elders": "I was there in Jamaica in the 70s . . . Where were all our novelists then, the big men, with the big names? . . . Where were they when dem shoot Bob Marley?"

Uncannily, fifteen years before James's *Brief History*, Channer had identified Marley's shooting as a story worth retailing — but in the year 2000, at the turn of the century, Marlon James wasn't yet on the horizon to prove Channer's point, spectacularly illustrating that you didn't have to reside at Ground Zero to evoke it or channel it. James's ability to work Jamaica's tortuous history, and wring from it a story so vividly capturing the terror and permanent state of emergency many Jamaicans inhabit, once again highlights the issue Channer had raised, of what academics call "the politics of location."

James vigorously contests the orthodoxy that writers should only write what they know, arguing that empathy is far more valuable than experience, which he considers "ridiculously overrated." The world he was raised in was an edifying middle-class one, far removed from the badlands and gangsters of Kingston he writes about in *Brief History*. Indeed, he was the son of parents who were both officers of the Jamaica Constabulary Force. At home in the suburb of Portmore, James's policeman father used to engage him in Shakespeare-quoting competitions; young Marlon rarely managed to beat his dad.

The fifth out of eight siblings, James found his relationship with his father bloomed late, as an adult. "Me and my dad had a peculiar kind of close," he says. "We weren't when I was growing up — I don't think he knew anything that was going on in my life, but then children always think that. But we were close when it came to literature and history, not just with the Shakespeare-quoting competitions, but with him being the first real intellectual I ever knew. His knowledge was just astonishing. And he didn't have to go abroad to get it," James adds. "More than anybody else, he made me want a life of the mind."

In early 2015, in the aftermath of *Brief History's* acclaim, James published an essay in the *New York Times Magazine* titled "From Jamaica to Minnesota to Myself", in which he described the

stifling sense of illegitimacy he felt as a young gay man growing up in Jamaica. The subhead of the article was “I knew I had to leave my home country — whether in a coffin or on a plane.” It provoked one Trinidad-based gay rights activist to comment that “we need other narratives of the queer Caribbean than die or leave.” But the question of why those writers who have stayed in Jamaica aren’t leveraging their own stories to international attention remains a moot one. For James, it was reading Salman Rushdie’s novel *Shame*, during the years in Jamaica when he belonged to a charismatic church, that made him realise the present was something he could “write his way out of.” He promptly set about doing so, and the rest is history.

In that *New York Time*s essay, James describes a Jamaican friend visiting him in Minnesota. “She looked at my walls, covered with photos and posters, books all the way to the ceiling, four shelves of vinyl, copies of *GQ*, *Bookforum*, and *Out* magazines scattered everywhere . . . then at my face and said: ‘This is so you, dude.’” It’s a life he clearly relishes, along with the frequent book tours, award ceremonies, and even the odd television appearance. His personal style and taste in clothing draw attention, although the clotheshorse in him is nothing new. “Funnily enough, my wardrobe hasn’t changed with my success,” he says. “I’m still wearing some of the same clothes I wore ten years ago. I think with this bigger stage more people are just noticing. But yeah, I’m an unapologetic fashion nerd. And I do have a very public affection for Adidas.”

When asked if he would stop teaching if he earned enough money from his writing, he replied, “Well, I’m already making enough to stop teaching. I just love teaching creative writing, particularly to undergrads. They are always guided by a sense of discovery, which is something so-called seasoned writers lose. I walk into class, ask ‘What did childhood smell like?’ And they immediately set to writing.”

Which is also what James is up to, as he begins a sabbatical year. He’s been doing “tons of research on Central African history and culture,” he says, planning to write a book of speculative fiction based on African myths and history. “But I’m at the stage now where I talk less and less about it. The last time I spoke too much about a book I was planning to write, when I finally sat down to do it, I was already bored. That book never happened.”

And even if, like *Brief History*, his next book is five years in the works, his fans have something else to look forward to. James’s hop, skip, and jump to the literary heights may also soon propel

him to the more glitzy world of television. The HBO team behind top dramas *Game of Thrones* and *True Detective* — two of James's favourite TV series — have optioned the rights to *Brief History,* and hired him to write the script along with Oscar-winning screenwriter Eric Roth.

It will mean a kind of celebrity most writers can only dream of, and no doubt some would find the prospect intimidating. Marlon James certainly doesn't. And if the red carpet calls, he'll certainly have the right wardrobe.

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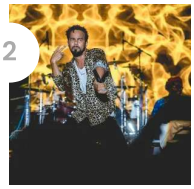
2 

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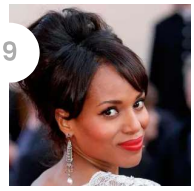

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