

Books

Marlon James: It's bullsh*t to say there is 'high' and 'low' literature

The Booker Prize-winning author on his love of Irish crime writing, a lost Bloomsday in Dublin and his new high fantasy novel *Black Leopard Red Wolf*

✕ Expand



Marlon James: genre distinctions are essentially meaningless. Photograph: Bryan Derballa/The New York Times

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It's two weeks before Christmas and I'm in the plush library bar of the Hudson Hotel on New York's Upper West Side, waiting for Marlon James. I've garnered a sofa away from the live music and I've got my notes and a tape recorder in front of me.

I've just finished James's new novel *Black Leopard Red Wolf* which is a high fantasy novel set in an alternative history Central Africa of about a thousand

years ago. I'm bursting with questions and sipping a ridiculous cocktail. I'm one of the first people to read this book outside the publishing house and I'm excited because with this interview I can scoop the world about his new direction.

Suddenly my phone rings. It's his assistant. James has fallen off his bike and has been rushed into hospital for surgery. Would it be ok to cancel? Of course, I tell him, is he alright? He needs surgery on his foot but he'll be ok.



Marlon James: "A lot of people miss the humour in my books." Photograph: Jeffrey Skemp / Four Colman Getty / PA Wire

Cut to two months later.

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It's February 1st and James is everywhere. His face is plastered in every magazine and bookstore window, his *New Yorker* profile is the talk of the town, the *New York Times* has just released a lengthy interview and he's apparently got into some kind of war of words with HBO about the film adaptation of his Booker Prize-winning novel *A History of Seven Killings*.

Now I'm in Williamsburg, Brooklyn at the Wythe Hotel just a few blocks from his house. He walks in with a slight limp in a light suede jacket, jeans, no hat. The temperature outside is -17 degrees. I shake his hand.

Aren't you cold?

"No brother, this isn't cold. I live in St Paul for the autumn and part of the winter. They know how to do cold in Minnesota."

He sits next to me on a leather sofa in the chilly lobby of the hotel. He takes his jacket off while I rebutton my coat. James was born and grew up in Kingston, Jamaica, where frigid temperatures weren't an issue. Both of his parents were police officers, his mother rising high in the detective bureau while his father became a lawyer.

The walls are filled with quotations, ideas, pictures of African slaves

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I ask about St Paul and if he knows the poetry of John Berryman who is one of my favourites.

“He jumped off a bridge, right? The words can drive you mad sometimes.”

Indeed. So, what do you do to stop the words from driving you mad?

“I listen to jazz.”

He talks about Miles, Mingus, Coltrane, Monk. I ask if he listens to music to get himself in the mood for writing.

“All the time. During the process.”

Don't you find it distracting?

“Not at all you should see my office.”

He takes out his phone and shows a photo of his writing office in St Paul. It's amazing. There are books, journals, albums everywhere. The walls are filled with quotations, ideas, pictures of African slaves, warriors, kings, queens, witch doctors, photographs of random people from the street.

His desk faces a window. Years ago Ian Rankin said that your desk should face a blank wall so you can write without distractions. James scoffs at this concept. He likes looking out the window seeing faces, dogs, weather and sometimes slipping them immediately into his writing. He teaches English and composition at Macalaster College in St Paul and he clearly loves his gig, hanging out with students who are always bursting with ideas.

What advice do you pass on to new writers?

“Start at the end and cut the boring stuff. Do the end and its aftermath. The first rule is: don't be boring.”

In his new novel *Black Leopard Red Wolf* the hero Tracker is imprisoned, sexually awakened, kills a family member and visits the underworld in the first 20 pages. Clearly James takes his own advice.

What's the most boring book you've ever read?

"Trollope, *The Warden*," he answers immediately.

I nod in vague agreement and don't tell him that of Trollope's oeuvre it's the one I like best because it was written in Belfast.

“So, you’re a crime writer? I’m addicted to Tana French and Denise Mina. You know them?”

I do and they’re both great, I say

“I love Ireland. The Dublin Murder Squad sounds like just the Kingston Murder Squad.”

Well, they say that Ireland is a cold Jamaica, I tell him. James hasn’t heard that one and he laughs and agrees.

He tells a story about him and Colum McCann going to Dublin for Bloomsday. I wonder if he ate the Leopold Bloom breakfast of slightly burned kidneys? He says he was offered it but declined. He seems to have remembered his Bloomsday experience until about 3pm when the serious boozing took over.

James is a Joyce fanatic and we talk about various stories in *Dubliners* some of which he has read more than a dozen times. He can't resist showing off his knowledge of *The Dead* and he recites the "snow was general all over Ireland" bit with flying colours. We talk about memorisation of poetry and prose and he thinks it's a crying shame that high school kids no longer have access to poems in their heads the way previous generations had.

He asks how many Yeats poems I can do from memory and I tell him that it's probably six or seven, which seems to please him greatly.

We circle back to *Dubliners*. Which feels like the most Jamaican story in the book? James says that the sense of danger and the uncanny in *An Encounter* really impressed him as a child studying for his GCE exams in Kingston.



Marlon James after his Booker prize win for 'A Brief History of Seven Killings' in 2015. Photograph: Tolga Akmen/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

He asks if I've read Anna Burns's *Milkman* and I tell him that I'd reviewed it for *The Irish Times* and raved about it. He says it's the book he's going to read next but he got worried after the panning *Milkman* got from Dwight Garner in the *New York Times*.

I suggest that perhaps Garner missed a lot of the very black Belfast humour in the novel. "A lot of people miss the humour in my books, too!" he says with a laugh.

He's on a roll now and really wants to unpack the Ireland/Jamaica comparison; he asks if I've read Paul Murray's *Skipper Dies*. I have and he tells me that his school in Jamaica (Wolmer's Trust High School for Boys) was exactly like

Murray's fictionalised version of Blackrock College. He was viciously bullied there and called Mary instead of Marlon. "Kids are perceptive, man," he says. "They had figured out I was gay even before I had."

My only memory of Blackrock College was the hammering they gave us in a rugby friendly. I ask if his school was sports obsessed and whether he was a sporty kid. He says that the Wolmer school made him play water polo, a game he detested. I mention that Captain Archer on *Star Trek: Enterprise* is the only person fictional or real I have ever come across who liked water polo. This leads to a long, nerdy and occasionally heated Star Trek discussion which I will skip over here.

James drew all the maps himself for Black Leopard. He's been drawing maps of fictionalised worlds his whole life

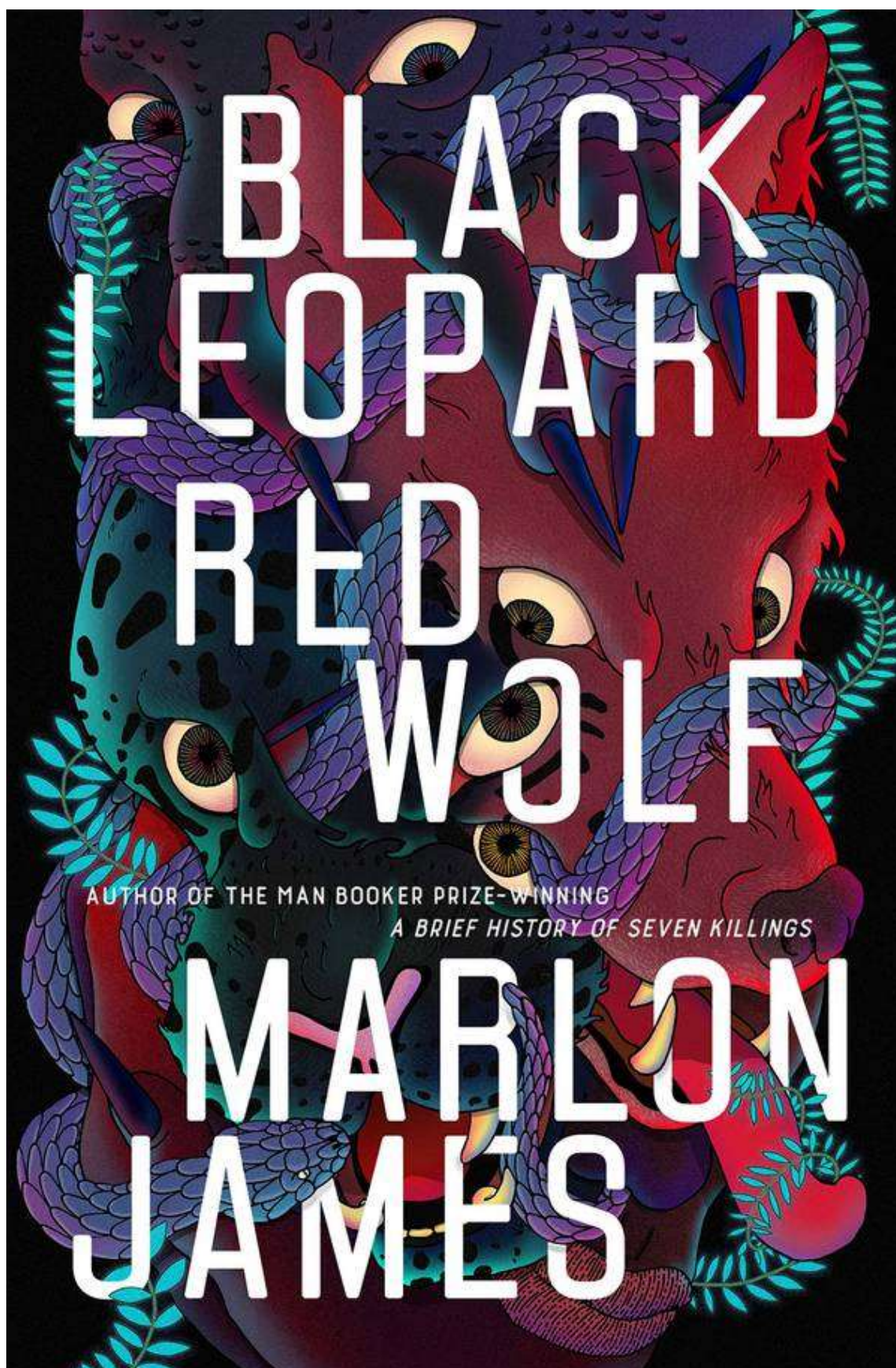
Reading and records were James's childhood escape from Kingston's violence and his growing awareness that he was different from the other boys. He dreamed of going to England or the US and meanwhile read everything he could get his hands on. Shakespeare, Dickens, Stephen King and comics, lots of comics. We discuss *Love and Rockets* and *Heavy Metal* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen*.

I steer the conversation back to *Black Leopard Red Wolf*. So, why epic fantasy?

He says that to him now, just as when he was a kid, genre distinctions are essentially meaningless. "Man, it's bullsh*t to say there is 'high' and 'low' literature. There are only good books and bad books."

I tell him I loved epic fantasy as a boy and we trade authors we loved and chat about how great it is to see a map at the start of a novel. As a graphic designer he drew all the maps himself for *Black Leopard*. He's been drawing maps of fictionalised worlds his whole life, he says.

We talk about Ursula Le Guin and JRR Tolkien. I ask him about China Mieville's famous critique of Tolkien's reactionary "whiteness" and James goes off on a very funny rant about how unhealthy and pale everybody looked to him in John Boorman's *Excalibur*. "English people do not look good with their clothes off on film," James suggests, which I attempt to disprove by offering the example of Helen Mirren from the same film.



Now that he knows I know my shit, he asks me what I thought of *Black Leopard*. I say it reads less like high fantasy and more like a picaresque novel in the mode of *Pantagruel* or *Gulliver's Travels*. James is fine with that comparison.

I ask if he was maybe influenced by Angela Carter in the writing process? He says Carter is a recent discovery – a recommendation from his friend Salman

Rushdie who knew her well in the 1980s.

We go off into a delicious fanboy sidetrack about Carter which leads naturally enough to a discussion of sex in fiction.

There's a lot of sex in *Black Leopard*, proper sexy sex with ejaculations and everything, I suggest and James is delighted that I dig this. For him French and Latin American literature is far ahead of English literature in the way it treats sex seriously.

I look at the clock. This interview was only supposed to last an hour and we've been chatting now for more than two. I thank James for his time and, again hatless, he walks me to the subway stop.

You're really not cold?

"No, man, seriously spend a winter in Minnesota and you'll know cold."

I'd rather just read about that vicariously through one of your books, I say.

"Maybe I'll write the Great Minnesota Novel," he jokes. "But I have the two sequels to *Black Leopard* to finish first."

I'll look forward to that, I say and shake his hand again, shivering my way down into the subway and wondering if the Great Minnesota Novel line can be the "scoop" that I was after.

Black Leopard, Red Wolf: Dark Star Trilogy Book 1 is published on February 28th by Hamish Hamilton

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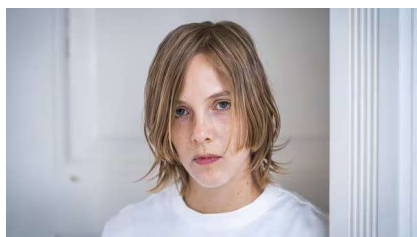
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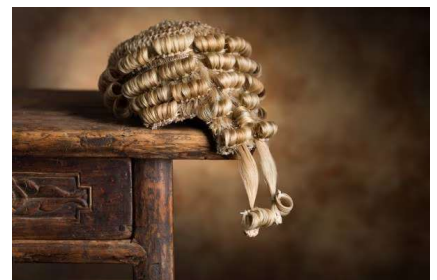
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