

A Brief History of Seven Killings Wins the 2015 Man Booker Prize

In a group of novels that showcase a virtuosic interest in distinctive voices, Marlon James's historical epic ultimately triumphed.


By Ann Hulbert



Neil Hall / Reuters

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In a Man Booker field with one skinny, experimental novel (Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island*) and two luridly violent fat ones (*A Brief History of Seven Killings* by Marlon

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one of the middle-sized contenders would prove the consensus candidate. I was

betting on Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* (as was the mystery gambler Mr. Smith, recently written up in *The Telegraph*, who picked last year's winner by perusing reviews and the judges' Wikipedia entries, not by reading the books). It's hard to think of a subject more topical than the migrant experience; plus, here was a suitably dark entry in a generally grim shortlist, but less gory than some.

Instead, Marlon James's big and bloody *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is the winner. We'll never know, of course, whether big and verbally bloody battles edged out Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, which the bookies had pegged a front-runner. Perhaps it's worth noting that, over the past month or so, initially sensational acclaim for *A Little Life* has made way for controversy, as detractors—and doubters, like *Stephanie Hayes* in our Man Booker read-along—have begun weighing in. With Marlon James, the prize goes to a Jamaican for the first time, putting to rest for a second year the fears that Americans might be taking over. More important, a novel like his sets high standards for risk-taking ambition.

You'll find the migrant experience in James's sprawling novel, along with other daunting quests. His book is full of people "hell-bent on escaping the life that fate had all but drawn up in lines with just numbers left to color," as one of them puts it. And James leads the way in a group of novels that showcase a virtuosic interest in distinctive voices. "What's remarkable here is the polyvalency of English prose in 2015," the *Observer's* associate editor, the writer Robert McCrum, noted when the six finalists were announced. You can marvel at that profusion of dialects in James's novel all by itself, as *Katharine Schwab* did in her entry back at the start of our discussions of the lucky finalists. The Man Booker is a prize for novels written in English, and

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But let's not forget the voices of the runners-up either. As we did in our Man Booker read-along two years ago, we'll finish by leaving you with the first lines of each of the

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Ann Hulbert is the literary editor of *The Atlantic* and the author of *Off the Charts: The Hidden Lives and Lessons of American Child Prodigies*.

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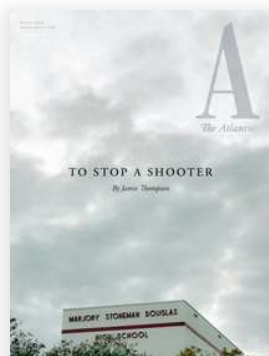


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