



AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

< A 'Post-Post-Colonial' Take On The Violent Birth Of Modern Jamaica

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ARUN RATH, HOST:

Jamaican writer Marlon James grew up in suburban Kingston in the 1970s, when political tensions, gun violence, gang warfare and Cold War fears ruled the city. With each passing month, it seemed the city grew more tense and more violent, all leading up to the general election in December of 1976.

MARLON JAMES: The last thing the prime minister said, in response to all these – the crime going out of control, and the economy sort of going in toilet – was that, you know, there are five flights to Miami a day. So anybody who wants to skip the country can do so.

RATH: In the midst of the turmoil, a growing international audience was turning onto Jamaican reggae music. Bob Marley and others set up a free peace concert, hoping to ease the tensions in Kingston.

JAMES: Two days before the concert, these gunmen – around seven or eight – burst into Bob Marley's house on Hope Road, machine guns blazing. They shot nearly everybody. Bob Marley got shot in the chest and the arm. His wife got shot in the head. Miraculously, everybody survived.

RATH: The attempted assassination of Bob Marley is at the center of Marlon James' new novel, "The Brief History Of Seven Killings." He told me that period of violence and turmoil created modern Jamaica.

JAMES: And it's also important to know that part of that was also good. It wasn't all a nightmare. In fact, some incredibly progressive things came out of that time. It was also the time when reggae started to become a huge commercial force. And because of that, a lot of young people who would never have had opportunities otherwise went into music. It was also a really vital period and a very successful period for the Jamaican middle class.

So there was a lot of good that was happening in the '70s. There was just so much bad. And it was just so bloody, and the stakes were so high. And the gunmen were running, certainly, west Kingston, bringing it to its knees. And politicians got involved because whoever won Kingston won Jamaica, and they fed into it. And they gave these men guns, and they had them fight over turf. And it was - it was pretty bloody. In 1980, over 800 people died.

RATH: Your mom was a police detective, and your father was also a police officer and later, a lawyer.

JAMES: Yeah.

RATH: I - a little - was surprised to find out about that because in this book, the police don't come across very well.

JAMES: No, they really don't, do they? I mean, my mother would be the first person to be supercritical of the police force. And certainly, back then, it was an extremely corrupt force, and sort of self-serving and self-protecting. Certainly, when violence exploded, they just didn't have the means to deal with that. So they were to huge extent, I mean, just astonishingly incompetent.

And corruption - bribery is something that's - you just consider it a fact of life. It's - you just think it's one of things that just makes the third world, quote-unquote, the third world. So no, they don't come off - they don't come off well at all in the book. I'm sure my mom will - my mom would be the first to agree. You know, when they weren't corrupt, they were inept.

RATH: Marlon, I was hoping we'd have you do a reading now from the book. There are a lot of different styles of speaking in this book.

JAMES: Yeah.

RATH: This is sort of a budding young member of one of these gangs that we were talking about. His name is Bam-Bam.

JAMES: It's a hell of a thing when a gun come home to live with you. The people who live with you notice it first. The woman I live with talk to me different. Not cold, but now she weigh word, measure it before talking to you.

But a gun talk to the owner, too - telling them first that you can never own this, that outside is plenty people who don't have a gun, but know you do. And one night, they may come like Nicodemus and take it.

And he don't sleep until he gutted because he can't sleep. Gun hunger worse than woman hunger. For at least, maybe a woman might hungry for you back. At night, me don't sleep. Me stay up in the dark shadow, looking at it, rubbing it, seeing and waiting.

RATH: I'm speaking with Marlon James. His new novel is "A Brief History Of Seven Killings." You know, in the 1950s, '60s, '70s, there was a generation of celebrated writers from the Caribbean that were termed post-colonial, like Derek Walcott, V.S. Naipaul. I've seen you've described yourself post-post-colonial. I'm wondering what you mean. Is there a bigger - something deeper than time that separates you from writers like Walcott and Naipaul?

JAMES: There is. Post-post-colonial - and that's because I just can't think of something wittier right now - I think, is a new generation of - well, no, not - newish generation of writers where we're not driven by our dialogue with the former mother country. The hovering power for us when growing up in the '70s and '80s was not the U.K. It was the States. It was America. And it wasn't an imperialistic power. It was just a cultural influence. I'm sure if this book was written in the '70s or the '60s, the characters would have ended up in London. They wouldn't have ended up in the Bronx. For us, for example, identity is not necessarily how to define ourselves in the relation of colonial power - colonial oppressor. So now it's a matter of defining who you are, as opposed to who you are not.

RATH: Finally, Marlon, I've got to ask you - I don't mean to sound glib, but the book is called "A Brief History Of Seven Killings." It's not brief. It's about 700 pages, and there's more than seven killings in there.

JAMES: You know, it's funny. It's - the real reason - main reason of course is probably just how the novel started, which is about seven of the men who tried to kill Bob Marley and what happened to them. It's funny. This is the loosest novel I've ever written, but in a way, it was pretty disciplined. I did stop as soon as killing number seven happened. It just took me 700 pages. I told everybody, it's

about seven killings, and as soon as killing number seven happens, I'm done with the book.

RATH: That's Marlon James. His new book, "A Brief History Of Seven Killings," is out now. Marlon James, thank you so much.

JAMES: Thanks for having me.

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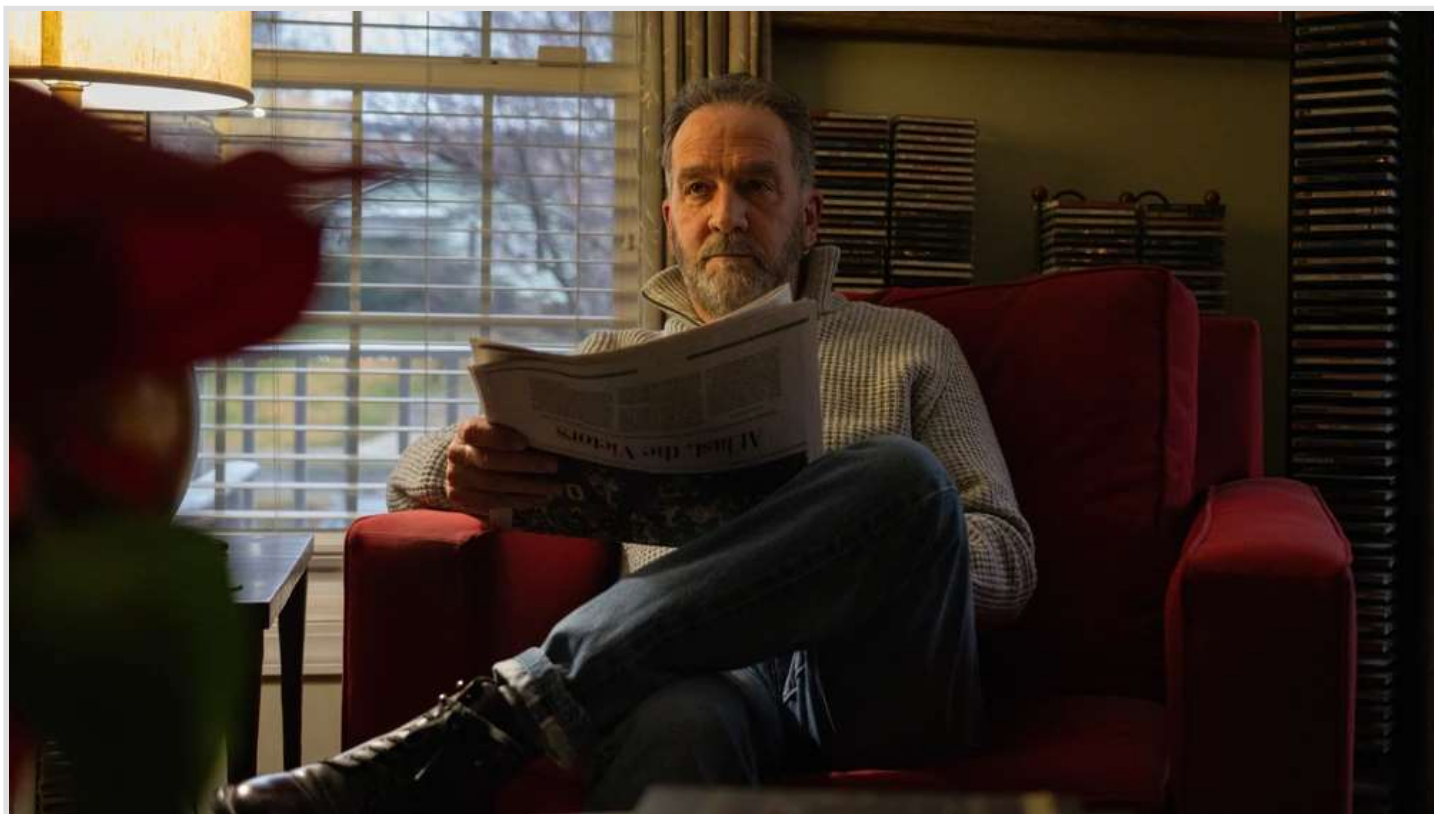
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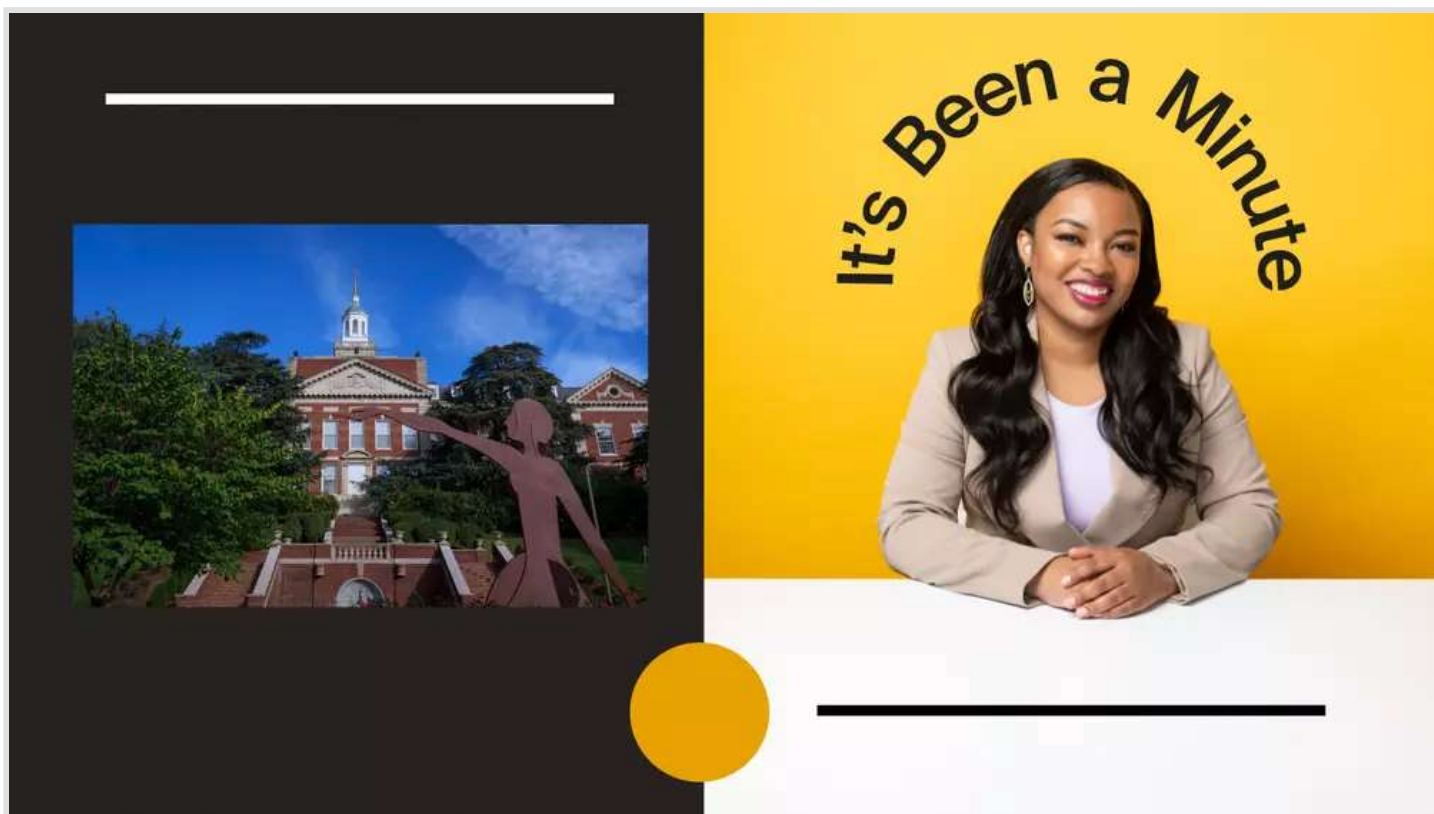
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